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The Break through Experience: Literary Origins in Franz Kafka and W. G. Sebald

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Abstract

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By Naomi C. Beeman

This dissertation explores the intersection of autobiography and literary production in the works of two writers: the paradigmatically modern Franz Kafka, and contemporary writer of mixed-media prose, W. G. Sebald. The two cases are complementary. While Kafka's story "The Judgment" has been identified as his decisive literary breakthrough, critics maintain that Sebald, over the course of sundry publications, is always working on the same long novel. I ask why it is important for the critical reception of modern literature to situate an author's oeuvre with respect to its literary origins. In keeping with the modern uncertainty regarding what counts as literature, I examine how both writers undermine our ability to discern where the literary begins and ends. Many of Kafka's fragmentary fictions are recorded in his *Diaries* amidst autobiographical and theoretical passages which themselves have been canonized. Sebald's hybrid works unsettle the fictional in several ways: they are generically similar to his earlier pieces of literary criticism, and incorporate alien elements, such as unmarked quotations from European literature of the past several centuries, photographs, and images without captions. I argue that Kafka's and Sebald's mingling of autobiographical, literary-historical and documentary elements with fiction disturbs our ability as readers to 'place' their writing in literary history. Modern acts of literary production scramble chronological approaches to the history of literature by revealing the way in which the history of writing fiction is always a fictionalized history.

I locate the emergence of each project in its 19th-century French literary sources. Flaubert's work guides my reading of Kafka. Via Kafka's fantasy of reading aloud Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale*, I explore how the thematics of sound, acoustics, volume, breath and voice mediate the transactions between Kafka's fictions and his autobiographical writings. My Sebald chapters focus on a section of his debut novel, *Schwindel. Gefühle.*, devoted to the life and works of the French novelist and autobiographer Stendhal. I uncover the aesthetic foundations of Sebald's project in the theory of occulted "realism" (both literary and pictorial), which he articulates anachronistically in response to Stendhal, as well as in response to the history of realisms in modern painting.

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INTRODUCTION

Overview

My dissertation asks why it is important for the critical reception of modern literature to situate an author's oeuvre with respect to its literary origins. The dissertation is divided into two halves; it explores the intersection of autobiography and literary production in the works of two writers whose careers flank the period of modern through post-modern German literature: the paradigmatically modern Franz Kafka, and contemporary writer of mixed-media prose, W. G. Sebald. The two cases are complementary. While Kafka's critics have identified his 1912 story "The Judgment (*Das Urteil*)" as his decisive literary breakthrough and "first complete fiction," Sebald's critics, to the contrary, have obscured the beginnings of his literary project by claiming that Sebald, over the course of sundry publications, is always working on the same long novel.

My dissertation as a whole inhabits the margins of literature: firstly, it worries the points at which narrative fiction is indistinguishable from autobiography, history, reality, or literary works by other authors; secondly, it identifies places where Kafka's and Sebald's texts dissemble their textuality, for instance by thematizing acoustic, visual and sensual experience or by incorporating references to and reproductions of artworks in other media. In keeping with the modern uncertainty regarding what counts as literature, I examine how both writers undermine our ability to discern where the literary begins and where it ends. Many of Kafka's fragmentary fictions are recorded in his *Diaries* amidst autobiographical and theoretical passages which themselves have been canonized. Sebald's hybrid works challenge the limits of the fictional in several ways: they are

generically similar to his earlier pieces of literary criticism, and incorporate alien elements, such as unmarked quotations from European literature and autobiography of the past several centuries, photographs of unknown origin, reproductions of paintings, film stills, and other images without captions. I argue that Kafka's and Sebald's mingling of autobiographical, literary-historical, visual and documentary elements with fiction disturbs our ability as readers to 'place' their writing in literary history. Both halves of the dissertation demonstrate that modern acts of literary production scramble historiographical approaches to literature by revealing the way in which the history of writing fiction is always a fictionalized history.

My dissertation is comparative and inter-disciplinary in several respects: it is inter-textual, inter-medial, and deals in the second half with artworks from the 15th- through 21st-centuries. I complicate the question of Kafka's and Sebald's "literary origins" by interrogating the concept of "literature" and the concept of "origins." I do so by doubling, and then multiplying those origins. Rather than tracing the fictional oeuvres of these writers exclusively to their autobiographical roots, I also locate the emergence of each project in its 19th-century French literary sources. Flaubert's work guides my reading of Kafka. Via Kafka's early fantasy of reading aloud Flaubert's anti-*Bildungsroman*, *L'Éducation sentimentale*, Part I (Chapters 1-8) explores how the thematics of sound, acoustics, volume, breath and voice mediate the transactions between Kafka's fictions and his autobiographical writings.

The first half of Part II (Chapters 9-12) focuses on a section of Sebald's debut novel, *Schwindel. Gefühle.*, titled "Beyle, oder das merkwürdige Faktum der Liebe," devoted to the life and works of the French novelist and autobiographer Stendhal. I

consider the importance of Stendhal as the first inter-textual source in Sebald's prose-fiction career (although, as the first of countless extrinsic sources that he weaves into his prose, Sebald's modified transcription of Stendhal in the "Beyle [...]" section of *Vertigo* already unsettles the concept of literary originality). I uncover the aesthetic foundations of Sebald's project in the theory of occulted "realism" (both literary and pictorial), that he articulates anachronistically in response to Stendhal.

The second half of Part II (Chapters 13-17) doubles the first half; in it, I show that Sebald rearticulates in response to the long history of realisms in modern painting the postmodern revision of 19th-century realist ideology that he first develops in response to Stendhal. The dramatically condensed history of painterly realism I discover scattered across Sebald's critical and fictional writings is punctuated by three painters: Matthias Grünewald (1470-1528); Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606-1669); and Jan Peter Tripp (1945-). Although a longer study might include Sebald's many references to other painters, the three painters I focus on are bound together by the special function of 'detail' in Sebald's critical response to their work.

Enlargement

Most broadly, my dissertation examines the trajectories of two writers learning to write literature even as their works reflect the breakdown of experience in a modern, post-*Bildung* world in which it no longer seems possible to learn, to grow, or to progress; and in which the position once occupied by 'originality' in aesthetic theory has been replaced by repetition, copying, imitation and reiteration. I fold the versions of anti-experience depicted in their works back upon Kafka's and Sebald's experience of

learning to write. This is to say that I draw the key concepts of anti-experience that inform my critical analysis of each author out of his own fictional works.

The proximity between Kafka's autobiographical and fictional writings is both the greatest inspiration and the primal anxiety of Kafka criticism. In Part I, I aim to rearticulate the relationship between these two fields. I begin with a longstanding convention in Kafka criticism: namely, the story we tell about Kafka's artistic development, according to which his composition of "The Judgment" separates his amateur from his mature fictions. According to this literary-historical myth of origins, "The Judgment" marks a clean break with the contamination that threatens, for instance, the incomplete fictions that Kafka begins and aborts between autobiographical passages in his diaries. This canonized myth about Kafka's "first complete fiction" (distinguished, that is, from his autobiographical writings) relies on his autobiographical testimony of his experience of writing the story in one uninterrupted sitting.

I challenge this Kafkan myth of literary origins on two fronts. From the perspective of autobiography, I argue that Kafka's repeated attempts over the course of his life to sever "The Judgment" definitively from his other writings belies the critics' claim that the story represents a complete, insular, self-sufficiently "literary" achievement. Although Kafka "gives birth" to the story, in his own words, I show that this birth is uncannily (and endlessly) repeated: by Kafka's oral delivery of the story to his sisters the following morning; by subsequent recitals of the story to his friends; by his wish to re-publish the story in a separate volume apart from his other works; and by Milena's translation of the story from Kafka's German into Czech. In Chapters 5-7, I further question the myth of Kafka's "first fiction" from the side of autobiography by

identifying a series of idiosyncratic terms and expressions Kafka uses in his letters and diaries to describe writing that is simultaneously “original” and contaminated by alterity in the form of outside influences, other writers and other texts. These concepts include: involuntary imitation, original copying, inverse plagiarism, translation, and ‘wounding/wounded’ words.

Secondly, I challenge the myth of Kafka’s original literary achievement and developmental breakthrough from the side of his fictions. In Chapters 1-4, I analyze the critical discussion surrounding Kafka’s “literary breakthrough” by reinterpreting the image of “breakthrough” in Kafka’s fictions. Additionally, in Chapter 8, I make a series of observations about temporality in Kafka’s fictions before applying my findings to a discussion of Kafka’s artistic biography. Specifically, I trace the non-progressive, non-chronological temporality that governs the theme of aging, growth and change in Kafka’s novels and stories. I locate the influence of Flaubert’s anti-*Bildungsroman*, *L’Éducation sentimentale* in the repetitive, cyclical unfolding of Kafkan plots, and in Kafka’s collapse of structuring oppositions.

Lastly, I draw a concept of ‘habit’ out of this Flaubertian/Kafkan obscuring of temporal origins, in order to align repetitive experience with the writer’s project of constructing meaning. In light of the fact that many of Kafka’s fictions famously begin with a disruption of habit or routine in the opening line, I use the economy of habit to rethink “origins” in relation to Kafka’s famous first sentences. I argue that habit in Kafka is indistinguishable from the disruption of habit (or more broadly, old from new, repetition from original, expectation from surprise). I reread the Kafkan trope of metamorphosis (*Verwandlung*) in the context of the mutually conditioning relationship

between habit and learning from experience in the anti-*Bildungsroman*. The structures of repetition that Kafka inherits from Flaubert, I argue in closing, must inform our critical assumptions about Kafka's literary biography. Over the course of these close readings, the critical concept of Kafka's "literary breakthrough" with which Part I begins is gradually distorted. I question historiographical and developmental approaches to Kafka's bibliography, therefore, on both fictional and autobiographical grounds.

In Part II, the relationship between autobiography and fiction is even more complex. Unlike Kafka critics, Sebald's readers have tended to overlook his first prose fiction in favor of his later works. On the one hand, countering this critical trend, I identify the "origin" of Sebald's fiction rather straightforwardly in the first section of his debut novel.¹ However, this origin is complicated immediately by Sebald's overwhelming intertextuality and loose citational practice, as well as by questions about the divisions between fiction, autobiography, biography, history, and reality. Aside from the obvious issues raised by Sebald's minor, unmarked—though transformative—alterations of the autobiographical and theoretical texts by Stendhal that he transcribes, Chapters 9-12 are concerned with the question of how to locate "the autobiographical" in the "Beyle [...]" section of Sebald's *Vertigo*. I argue that Sebald's tendentious reproduction of Stendhal's writings is not really a literary portrait of Stendhal, but a disguised self-portrait. When Sebald rewrites Stendhal, he is introducing himself; he is announcing to readers the principal concerns and aesthetic foundations of his own incipient project in prose fiction.

¹ Sebald in fact refers to his literary works as "prose fictions" to distinguish them from "novels," a point which I will elaborate in Part II.

Sebald derives from Stendhal's work an image of the model writer: a consummate hypocrite, whose self-betrayal carries the double sense of 'hiding one's true nature' and 'outing oneself' or 'giving oneself away.' It is Sebald himself, I argue, who is 'outed' in this rather skewed portrait of Stendhal. Beginning with Stendhal's uneasy status as the first realist, I show that Sebald repeats Stendhal's original gesture of rejecting Romanticism and rhetorical manipulation in favor of a sober prose style that is truer-to-life—but that Sebald reenacts this gesture only to reveal its limits. Like the 19th-century master genres of historical writing, realist fiction, autobiography, and any form of prose that advertises its ties to life in the world, Sebald's unique variety of postmodern documentary fiction has no special resources of its own; if it is committed to history, the best it can do is to expose fiction by means of writing fiction. Self-betrayal is its ideal form.

The history of literary and pictorial realism on which Sebald so frequently draws (e.g. Stendhal, Balzac, Courbet, Flaubert, Stifter) provokes the questions I raise about the relationship of Sebald's literature to what is outside or beyond literature. However, I perform a sequence of close readings that render the term "realism" progressively stranger. The vast array of terms from disparate linguistic and historical origins that Sebald appears to conflate in his discussions of realism suggests that "realism," here, is not a generic descriptor, but a set of questions or a field of inquiry in which the relationship between the work of art and the world may be interrogated.

In Part II, I move from autobiography (literary self-portraiture) to painting (visual portraiture). I read Sebald's essay on Jan Peter Tripp as a second self-portrait in occulted form. Here, Sebald's critical dismantling of the ideology of the realist aesthetic is at its

most extreme. Sebald warns critics against reading Tripp's paintings in a realist vein. I ask whether Sebald's rejection of 'realism' as a critical term is meant to warn his own critics against reading his prose fictions with reference to realistic genres of prose. However, I propose that Sebald's rejection of 'realism' is itself a rhetorical move. His interpretation of Tripp's career as a gradual departure from the realist aesthetic (a deviant reading of a deviant realist) aims to reveal the intrinsic deviance of a 'realist' desire. Realist artworks, Sebald suggest, diverge from their real-life models; realism reflects not 'reality' so much as the viewer's desire to transform it, to turn away from it and to take flight.

Analyzing Tripp's aesthetic in the context of the mental institution in which it originated, I show (following Sebald) that the ideology of realism prevents a realist art from being able to distinguish between the normal and the pathological case, between objective and subjective points of view. Sebald brings Tripp's work and realism into a pathological relationship with each other in order to expose realism as a pathological enterprise. However, rather than excluding the history of realisms from our collective discussion of Sebald, I argue, the essay on Tripp shows the centrality of realist strategies and questions in Sebald's work. Tripp's 'asylum' is a cipher for the modern world. Sebald's essay on Tripp, I argue, therefore suggests that realism is the only aesthetic that responds to—and is capable of surviving—the contemporary world.

Intervention

My dissertation is unique with respect to existing secondary sources, in spite of the countless books, articles, and creative projects that Kafka and Sebald have inspired in such humanities disciplines as literature, literary theory, social and political philosophy,

cultural studies, media and visual studies, history, and so forth. In Part I, I outline the main, opposing trends in the reception of Kafka's "breakthrough" story before overturning the critical assumptions on which those responses are based. I offer a close reading of sound, voice and breath in Kafka by synthesizing several leitmotifs that have been considered by other critics in isolation; furthermore, my interpretation ranges freely across Kafka's diaries, love letters and fictions. I focus throughout on little-known and overlooked passages, especially from the autobiographical writings. While many scholars have written on Kafka and music from a cultural studies perspective, little has been written on the acoustic dimension of his work that is un-aesthetic or less-than musical. In keeping with my interrogation of the limits of the literary in general, I attend to the fluidity between cultural and natural, human and inhuman sounds in Kafka's writing.

In Part II, similarly I offer close readings of Sebald's lesser-known works, including his first prose fiction, *Schwindel.Gefühle.*, his early, un-translated volumes of literary criticism, and his late essays. I underline the polemical, combative element in Sebald's reasoning that has been widely overlooked by critics of his prose fictions; I argue that this logic of paired opposites counteracts the more often remarked 'integrating' tendency of Sebald's narratives. My work is unique in synthesizing Sebald's scattered remarks on "realism" in narrative and visual art. Focused through a discussion of reading/viewership and empathy or affective identification in relation to the realist aesthetic's ideology of objectivity, I uncover the logic behind Sebald's interpretations of paintings from radically disparate points in art history: from Grünewald's *Entombment of Christ*, to Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson*, to Tripp's contemporary portraits and

landscapes. My close readings of paintings in Sebald's texts are of particular interest with respect to the vast body of scholarship on Sebald's more familiar use of photography—a field of study which my dissertation illuminates from a new perspective. Lastly, little work has yet been done on Sebald's relationship to psychoanalysis, in spite of the fact that his early volumes of literary criticism are stimulated by psychoanalytic concepts and interpretive moves. In Chapters 11 and 13-17, I address his implicit 'psychoanalysis' of the realist aesthetic by uncovering the essentially pathological aspect of realism for Sebald.

Expansion

Many of my chapters point to the directions in which this work will be expanded. In a longer version, I would incorporate several chapters that have been excluded from this version: Part I could accommodate parallel readings of the theme of breathing in Kafka's fictions, on the one hand, and autobiographical remarks about his progressing tuberculosis on the other, a rich topic that is left out of account here. This would sharpen the initial remarks that I have offered on breathing by differentiating the function of voice in Kafka's early and late fictions, corresponding to the onset and progress of his disease. An expanded version would also elaborate my analysis of voice by devoting a chapter to "translations" of Kafka into other media, such as Philip Glass's opera *In the Penal Colony*, or the many short and feature-length films that have been made on the basis of Kafka's writings.

In an expanded version of Part II, I would include a chapter on the 19th-century German realist author, Adalbert Stifter, who most influenced Sebald (though he figures more obviously in Sebald's literary criticism than in his fictions). Stifter, who is famous

for his many lists, would contribute to the transition between my earlier chapters on Stendhal and autobiography, and my later chapters on the status of detail in aesthetic realism. As it stands, I make this link via the scene of listing from Stendhal's *The Life of Henry Brulard* that Sebald rewrites. Fuller consideration of enumeration in Sebald's work, however, would analyze the relationship between narrative and listing in Stifter as well. Secondly, the argument forwarded here about the function of detail in Sebald's postmodern prose, which I support with a close reading of the teas-maid in *The Emigrants*, would be expanded. In an auxiliary chapter on the teas-maid, I would elaborate the temporal dimension of detail in Sebald. It is no accident, I suggest, that the teas-maid, as an emblematic Sebaldian detail, is a time-keeping device equipped with an alarm. An expanded analysis of the disruptive temporality of detail in Sebald, moreover, would differentiate Sebald's post-modern, temporalized details from the spatial, freeze-frame quality of detail in 19th-century realism. It would also show to what extent Sebald's revision of realist strategies takes seriously the instability of detail reflected for instance in Sigmund Freud's theory of screen memories or Roland Barthes theory of photography.

Projected expansions aside, the openness of these chapters to supplemental analyses is a deliberate structural feature of my dissertation; it is a formal reflection of what the work pursued here presupposes: the fundamental incapacity of modern literature to secure its boundaries against what is extrinsic to or beyond the literary—be it truth, fact, reality, history, or experience.

PART I: FRANZ KAFKA

1. “*Nur so kann geschrieben werden...*”

Nowhere in his published diaries, letters, or fictions does Franz Kafka refer to his supernatural experience of writing “The Judgment” (“*Das Urteil*”) as a “breakthrough” (*Durchbruch*). The first person to deem “The Judgment” a breakthrough in writing is Max Brod, Kafka’s friend, advocate, editor and critic. Leaning on Kafka’s diary entry of September 23rd, 1912, which is preceded by the full text of the story composed the night before, Brod declares that “[‘The Judgment’] shoots out like a jet of flame”; he speaks of Kafka’s “breakthrough” in the past tense: “the writer succeeded in breaking through to the form that suits him, and a powerful genius . . ., unique in his genre, finally found his freedom.”² Prominent Kafka critics since Brod have echoed and canonized the term *breakthrough* to characterize Kafka’s ecstatic writing of “The Judgment,” which Kafka indeed describes as a unique experience of writerly production “at one sitting [*in einem Zug*] during the night of the 22nd-23rd, from ten o’clock at night to six o’clock in the morning.”³ Given Kafka’s glorification of the experience in his diary—“only *in this way*

² Brod, Max, *Franz Kafka: A Biography*, trans. G. Humphreys Roberts and Richard Winston (Da Capo Press: New York, 1995), 106. Referenced hereafter as *FK*.

³ Kafka, Franz, *The Diaries: 1910-1923*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Joseph Kresh and Martin Greenberg with the cooperation of Hannah Arendt (Schocken Books: New York, 1975-6), 212. Referenced hereafter as *D*. The German original is cited from: Kafka, Franz, *Tagebücher: in der Fassung der Handschrift*, Band 2 (Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag: Frankfurt am Main, 1994), 101. Referenced hereafter as *TB*, followed by the *Band* number (1-3).

can writing be done, only with such coherence”⁴—one might well ask what possible objection can be raised to Brod’s now-famous term.⁵

Nevertheless, the idea of a Kafkan “breakthrough” relies on a certain myth of authorship whose metaphors are drawn from religious and naturalist fantasies of creation *ex nihilo*, the birth of texts, and the emergence *sui generis* of new species in the evolution of literary forms. Brod speaks of Kafka’s “sudden break-through” and “*final* break-through”⁶; Kafka reports similarly that “the story came out of me like a real birth”—yet these two descriptions are not equivalent. While “breakthrough” for Brod represents a decisive and, as it were, *clean* break from the earlier prose fragments in which Kafka’s still imperfect writing process clings to its imperfect, incomplete products, Kafka calls his

⁴ Kafka, *D* 213; *TB*, Band 2, 101. “Nur so kann geschrieben werden, nur in einem solchen Zusammenhang...”

⁵ It is impossible to list all of the references, both casual and serious, to Kafka’s “breakthrough” in the secondary literature. One of the early critics to have canonized the term is Heinz Politzer, whose book-length study of Kafka, *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), uses the notion of a Kafkan “breakthrough” as its organizing principle. Politzer’s chapter Two, “Juvenilia,” is followed by a chapter entitled “The Breakthrough,” which Politzer opens by declaring that “with one stroke [Kafka] brushed aside his previous *literary exercises* after having experienced the fearful bliss of *authentic inspiration*” (48, my emphases). Another early critic, Wilhelm Emrich, on the other hand, does not refer to Kafka’s “breakthrough” except in a brief afterward to his book, *Franz Kafka* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum Verlag, 1957), in which the following biographical detail is given: “Am 12. September 1912 entstand die Erzählung ‘Das Urteil’, die von [Kafka] als *Durchbruch* empfunden wurde im Gegensatz zu der noch von Dickens beeinflussten Erzählform seines Romans ‘Der Verschollene’” (415, my emphasis). Curiously enough, minor references to Kafka’s writing of “The Judgment” mythologize Kafka’s experience of writing as much as Politzer’s central discussion of the event does. Critics who, unlike Politzer, do not rely on the “breakthrough” to organize Kafka’s entire oeuvre and prioritize the “mature” over the “juvenile” writings, tend to bracket the word “breakthrough” casually with scare-quotes—implying that the term is Kafka’s own without citing its source. Scanning through the copious literature on Kafka today, one encounters the word “breakthrough”—quoted without citation—over and over again, giving the impression that our collective belief in Kafka’s “breakthrough” is guaranteed by an anonymous authority. This begs the question of who is talking when we speak of Kafka’s “breakthrough” in prose.

⁶ Brod, *FK* 127 and 126 respectively, my emphasis.

writing of “The Judgment” a “birth” because the story is “covered with filth and slime.”⁷ The product of “breakthrough” is contaminated by the experience of writing through which it emerges. Kafka even provides us with an interpretation of the story in his diary, fearing that no other reader will be able to “reach . . . the body itself” through the “filth and slime” obscuring it.⁸ One wonders whether the story is finished being born. Most troubling is that Brod’s notion of a sudden revolution in Kafka’s development defies a pre-modern, Enlightenment conception of gradual, progressive, uniformly developing (literary) history only to replace it with a suspiciously romantic conception of authorship as “poetic inspiration” of mysterious origins, in which divine inspiration mingles with demonic possession—and all this to describe the invention (or in Brod’s imagery, the discovery) of a brand new and precisely *modern* literary form.

Kafka’s writings demand a critical re-examination of the so-called “breakthrough” experience, as well as a careful distinction between Kafka’s language for it and accepted critical paraphrasing of the same. When Max Brod refers to “The Judgment” as Kafka’s “breakthrough” and “first complete story,”⁹ he means to suggest that “The Judgment” is a clearly delimited fiction that has succeeded in excluding everything that is *not* fiction by detaching itself from the non- or extra-fictional writings of the *Diaries* in which Kafka’s previous, fragmentary fictions are still mired. The

⁷ Kafka, *D* 214.

⁸ *Ibid.* Though many of Kafka’s fictions can be said to initiate the process of their own interpretation, on no other occasion does Kafka consider it necessary to interpret his fiction for us from a position *outside* the text in question.

⁹ Brod writes: “In the context of the diary there are . . . many fragments of short stories which have got thus or thus far; they pile up, until suddenly out of the through the *first finished story* of considerable length, ‘The Verdict,’ shoots out like a jet of flame” (Brod, *FK* 106, my emphasis).

Diaries can be viewed generally as a field of fictionalized autobiography and autobiographical fiction. “The Judgment” therefore represents a “breakthrough” insofar as it successfully defends against the ubiquitous threat of contamination between autobiographical experience and fiction in Kafka’s *Diaries*. Although the story is recorded in Kafka’s diary, it “shoots out” of the diary, according to Brod, “like a jet of flame.”

If “The Judgment” as “first fiction” is supposed to mark a turning point in Kafka’s career because it *severs* itself from Kafka’s autobiographical writings, however, it is curious that the story has become a central focus of Kafka criticism only based on Kafka’s testimony of his experience of writing it. The diary entry in which Kafka describes how he wrote “The Judgment” is as famous as the story itself. Kafka critics identify the story as unique in the first place not because of anything internal to the story, but rather because of Kafka’s belief that his experience of writing “The Judgment” is unique among his experiences of writing and compares favorably to them. Kafka’s preeminent authorial “experience” is supposed to vouch for the purity and completeness of the first (and only) pure and complete fiction Kafka ever writes. In a major collection of essays devoted to the story, Peter Beicken notes that “critical interest was focused for a long time on Kafka’s other works [other than ‘Das Urteil’], until the publication of the *biographical materials* gave new impetus to the process of interpretation.” His next remark inadvertently challenges the critics’ elevated regard for the story: “another factor very likely played an important role in delaying appropriate consideration of ‘The Judgment’: *although the story marks Kafka’s breakthrough to his mature writing, it does*

not yet possess the full authority of his later works."¹⁰ How can Kafka's "breakthrough" story signal the ideal independence of "fiction" from "experience"—indeed the "shooting forth" of the former from the context of the latter—if the work of fiction must be supplemented by the testimony of experience to prove their disjunction? The "coherence" of Kafka's experience of writing vouches for the "coherence" of the story and vice versa.

The critical oversight we are guilty of in referring to "The Judgment" as Kafka's breakthrough story is twofold: not only do we overlook the way in which fiction's purity is supported by (and therefore indivisible from) this writer's experience; we also overlook the way in which Kafka's famous testimony of September 23rd, 1912 *fictionalizes* his experience of writing "The Judgment." Neither from the side of fiction nor from the side of Kafka's experience of writing can the one "find its freedom" (as Brod puts it) from the other. Kafka's collective writings prevent readers from identifying any point at which his "breakthrough" into fiction, if there is one, might be located. In the close readings which follow, I hope to show how the hopeless entanglement of fiction and autobiography characterizes the uniqueness of Kafka's prose.

In the many years since critical attention first became focused on the story, critics of course have identified striking and unique features of "The Judgment." The tendency of early critics to justify the importance of "The Judgment" with reference to Kafka's experience of writing it motivates Thomas Strack's claim, in 1994, that "the turning point [*Wende*]" marked by Kafka's "Durchbruchsgeschichte [breakthrough story]" from his

¹⁰ Beicken, Peter U., "'The Judgment' in the Critics' Judgment," in *The Problem of "The Judgment": Eleven Approaches to Kafka's Story*, ed. Angel Flores (New York: Gordian Press, 1977), 238, my emphases.

“early” to his “mature” works still “has not been explained.”¹¹ Strack validates the story as a “breakthrough” without appealing to Kafka’s “literary autobiography”¹²; according to Strack, “The Judgment” exhibits the evolution of Kafka’s interest in faulty perception from a simple physiological to a complex social-psychological domain. The story marks Kafka’s shift from his early concern with the accuracy of an isolated subject’s perception vis-à-vis a world of objects, to his mature concern with a social subject’s capacity to observe and communicate social relationships.¹³ Evelyn Beck similarly identifies a “Stilwandel [change of style]” in “The Judgment,” which she attributes to Kafka’s contemporaneous appropriation of the “dramatic-theatrical medium” as well as “themes, symbols and motifs” from plays staged by the Yiddish theatre troupe in Prague.¹⁴

Walter Sokel’s reading of Kafka’s poetics achieves a synthesis of intrinsic and extrinsic critical approaches to the “breakthrough” story. Although Sokel discovers the

¹¹ Strack, Thomas, “Physiologie und Kommunikation als Parameter der innerlichen Befindlichkeit. Ein Versuch zu Kafkas ‘Durchbruch,’” *The Germanic Review* 69.3 (Summer 1994): 118 and 119, my translation.

¹² See footnote 1 in Strack’s “Anmerkungen” (129).

¹³ Strack 124-6. Strack’s general argument that the question of “seeing clearly,” after “The Judgment,” is no longer merely literal, flattens the complexity of Kafka’s later works by ignoring the way in which what appear to be “psychological” or “moral” problems often collapse without warning into questions of “perception” (e.g. does Josef K.’s ignorance of the law in *The Trial* indicate figuratively his moral weakness, or literally his inability “to see”—to lay eyes on—the unavailable text of the law?) On the other hand, Strack’s discussion of whether or not it is possible “to see” social relationships “clearly” clings to Kafka’s metaphors of impaired vision in a way that reduces the psychological complexity of Kafka’s texts. His observation that even *after* the “breakthrough,” Kafka’s heroes rarely succeed in grasping an intelligible social context in which interpersonal relations can be elucidated (Strack 125), seems superfluous. Can “social relationships” ever be “viewed,” much less “clearly”? The theme and rhetorical figure of “distortions” or “tricks” of perception with respect to objective reality versus social reality may be a false way of navigating the relationship between physiology and psychology in Kafka’s texts. Strack’s argument takes for granted that Kafka’s readers can judge the difference between “physiological” and “psychological” (social or moral) questions in Kafka’s works.

¹⁴ Beck, Evelyn Torton, “Kafkas ‘Durchbruch’: der Einfluss des jiddischen Theaters auf sein Schaffen,” *Basis: Jahrbuch für Deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur* 1 (1970): 205, my translation.

“optimal possibility” of Kafka’s poetics in his “experience of writing ‘The Judgment’ in a single trancelike sitting,” he does not access this experience exclusively by way of Kafka’s famous diary entry of September 23rd. Rather, Sokel shows how “The Judgment” stages a confrontation between several experiences of writing. In Sokel’s view, “The Judgment” is precisely a story about writing in which the “optimal” experience of writing judges and condemns a lesser, flawed experience of the same activity. Kafka’s breakthrough experience, on Sokel’s reading, is recorded not only in the autobiographical diary entry, but also in the breakthrough story itself: “writer and character are . . . carried along by the same flow.”¹⁵

Still, one might ask whether Kafka’s diary entry of the following morning is rendered superfluous by the story’s internal portrayal of an ideal form of writing. Sokel’s synthesis of the extra-literary and intra-literary justifications of Kafka’s “breakthrough” relies on his interpretation of *which* experience of writing “triumphs” in “The Judgment.” We can dispute whether the final judgment of Georg’s father at the end of the story really represents an “authoritative” form of writing that conquers the “weak” form of writing exemplified by Georg’s letter correspondence with his friend in Russia in the story’s

¹⁵ Sokel, Walter, “Frozen Sea and River of Narration: The Poetics Behind Kafka’s ‘Breakthrough,’” *New Literary History* 17.2 (Winter 1986): 357. Following Sokel, others have suggested variations on the idea that “The Judgment” is a story about competing ways of writing. Stanley Corngold, for instance, separates the germ of Sokel’s interpretation from the psychoanalytic framework in which Sokel elaborates it. For Corngold, “The Judgment” is a story that “put[s] on trial the mode of writing that issues from the alliance of the woman and the writer”; Georg must choose between a form of “writing that takes the woman hostage and . . . writing that flows from solitude” (Corngold, Stanley, “The Hermeneutic of ‘The Judgment,’” *The Problem of “The Judgment”: Eleven Approaches to Kafka’s Story* 53). For Corngold, as for Sokel, Georg is the representative of an inadequate and faulty form of writing; Georg’s perspective is eschewed finally by the story’s anonymous narrative voice: “Georg is an impossible figure; writing, *this* act of writing, cannot proceed through his perspective. The narrator has in fact been steadily withdrawing from his persona in moving from identification to dialogue. He must now definitively withdraw, must *assert his autonomy* and find its narrative form. [‘He’? ‘It’?] The autonomy of the narrative is the key issue for Kafka” (*Ibid.* 56-7, my emphasis).

opening lines.¹⁶ When Kafka exclaims in his diary that writing can be done “*only with such coherence*,” he refers not to the coherence of “The Judgment”—a story he elsewhere calls “meaningless” and of which he wonders “how, being so short . . . it could have so many faults”¹⁷—but to the coherence of *his experience of writing the story* “at one sitting [*in einem Zug*].” Leaving aside the question of what exactly a “coherent experience”

¹⁶ Sokel writes: “Writing is also the authority that judges and condemns Georg. Within the text it is the father, also a writer, who pronounces the death sentence over his son. What father and son have in common is not so much the friend per se . . . but the letters each addresses to him. The crucial difference between their writings is this: Georg’s letters are conscious, the father’s are, from Georg’s point of view, literally unconscious. . . . His father’s judgment against him is the verdict which unconscious writing through its medium pronounces over conscious writing” (Sokel 359). The famous image of “endless traffic [*Verkehr*]” with which the tale closes, however, calls to mind writing in the form of *letter correspondence*, rather than the “authority” of a final judgment’s “last word.” Sokel’s interpretation relies, then, on the notion that Georg “dies,” which in his view symbolizes the “death” of writing in the inferior form of an “endless trafficking” in signs. The story, however, does not record Georg’s death explicitly; further, *Georg* speaks the last words of dialogue, after his father has fallen silent. Georg’s “fall” over the bridge is an echo of his father’s prior “fall” back down onto the bed from which he so authoritatively rose (“. . . the crash with which his father fell on the bed behind [Georg] was still in [Georg’s] ears as he fled”). It would be difficult to equate Georg’s implicit death with the “death” of writing as letter correspondence (trafficking in words), given that the “unending stream of traffic” in the last sentence of the story promises to “cover the noise of [Georg’s] fall.” “Death” in the story is not the death of *traffic*; rather, death is *softened* and *obscured*—weakened and, as it were, made fuzzy—by the flow of traffic that survives it. Cf. Kafka, Franz, “The Judgment,” *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 87-8. Sokel’s reading moreover involves an implicit reading of Kafka’s so-called “Last Will and Testament”—a document that takes the form of an undelivered letter addressed to Max Brod, in which Kafka names his “last request”: “Everything I leave behind me . . . in the way of diaries, manuscripts, letters (my own and other’s), sketches, and so on, [is] to be burned unread” (this document appears in the postscript to the first edition of *The Trial* in 1925, and has been included in subsequent editions of the novel). Kafka’s “last will” was not kept separately from the lesser writings it condemns to flames, but was discovered tucked in amongst the very “diaries, manuscripts, letters, sketches, and so on” it claims to “judge.” The history of the reception of this strange note belies Sokel’s interpretation of “The Judgment”: the “authoritative” writing of Kafka’s “last will” has not triumphed over all those forms of writing it judges as *inferior*; rather, the will has been read both as a “legal document” and as a sort of parable with the same status as *fiction*. This instance of “authoritative writing” therefore has been subject to—and divided by—the same splitting it would enforce.

¹⁷ Kafka, Franz, *Letters to Felice*, ed. Erich Heller and Jürgen Born, trans. James Stern and Elisabeth Duckworth (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 87. Referenced hereafter as *LF*. In June 1913, Kafka writes to Felice asking whether she “can . . . discover any meaning in the ‘Judgment’—some straightforward, *coherent* meaning that one could follow?” Kafka confesses: “I can’t find any [coherent meaning], nor can I explain anything in [the story]” (*LF* 265, my emphasis).

would be and whether such an experience is possible in principle, we can observe that Kafka's ideal writing has less to do with the resulting fiction than with the writer's experience of composing and transcribing it.

All critical justifications of Kafka's "breakthrough" to a new and modern form of prose share in common their assumption that certain of Kafka's works must be prioritized over his marginal, personal, overlookable and unfinished writings. In the spaces between this writer's "failures" and his "authoritative works," critics have interpolated the story of a real-life Kafkan *Bildungsroman* from the inauspicious beginnings of his literature to its ripened form. And yet in spite of these claims, Kafka has been associated with literary modernism because his narratives appear *not* to progress; because it is unclear whether his characters learn or grow; because his fictions reflect the violent, unrelenting exertion of writing for Kafka, denying the possibility of a timeline in which every point separates "before" from "after"; and because, just one year after his revelatory experience of writing "The Judgment," Kafka notes in his diary: "I almost deny experience"¹⁸—and more famously, five years later: "Believing in progress does not mean believing that any progress has yet been made."¹⁹ Following this logic, one might conclude that Kafka's own *belief*, in 1912, that he has discovered "the only way in which writing can be done" does not entail the belief that this experience is repeatable, or even that it has been uniquely realized on the night of its discovery. Kafka's diaries and letters signal the

¹⁸ Kafka, *D* 244.

¹⁹ Kafka, Franz, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (Exact Change: Cambridge, 1991), 28. Referenced hereafter as *BON*.

inadequacy of the term “(final) breakthrough” to segregate the early from the late phases of his writing.

Kafka’s reflections on his literary efforts can be interpreted as a lifelong struggle with the *insufficiency* of a term like “breakthrough” to convey what happened to him on the night of September 22nd-23rd, 1912. Max Brod intends this notion to divide nineteenth-century prose from modern fiction, and likewise Kafka’s “youthful experiments” from his “mature style,” but to observe such a holiday on the Kafkan calendar requires us to disavow all we might have grasped from reading Kafka. If there is any Kafkan “breakthrough,” it may be only his delayed awareness—disclosed and revised over the course of many years—that in the cathartic experience of September 22nd-23rd, nothing was broken through or overcome; Kafka escapes his “immature style” only to find himself still on the same familiar threshold, or worse, on another threshold indistinguishable from the first.

My intention in what follows is to *demythologize* Kafka’s experience of writing “The Judgment,” along with his experience of writing in general. There can be no doubt that Kafka, to the contrary, endlessly mythologized his writing of “The Judgment”—an effort that many of his critics not only have traced, but have inherited with varying levels of self-awareness. In his most recent book, Stanley Corngold begins acutely with the following proclamation: “The importance for Kafka of writing his first great story ‘The Judgment’ cannot be overestimated.” Corngold proceeds to list passages in which Kafka “commemorates” the story in his other writings—passages that Corngold aptly refers to as inscribing a “mythic autobiography of the writer.”²⁰ Given the mythologizing venture

²⁰ Corngold, Stanley, *Lambent Traces: Franz Kafka* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 13-4.

Corngold discovers in Kafka's many references to his "breakthrough" story, it is my contention that the importance of "The Judgment" can be and has been overestimated, both by Kafka and by his critics. My work echoes Corngold's insight that the importance Kafka assigns the story should be read as a rhetorical move.

In what follows, I will read several early and late passages from the diaries and letters *surrounding* Kafka's breakthrough story; no reading of "The Judgment" will be offered, firstly out of deference to the numerous interpretations of the story published to date, and secondly out of fidelity to my hypothesis that Kafka's literary upheaval cannot be localized in 1912, except at the expense of grasping the experience of radical disruption his *Schriftstellersein* alternately celebrates and suffers—a disruptive experience of writing that has been falsely quarantined by the term "breakthrough."

Writing. Reading Aloud. (*Schreiben. Vorlesung.*)

The basis and thrust of my argument can be indicated provisionally: on the morning of September 23rd, 1912, Kafka extols the miraculous "coherence" he achieves by writing "The Judgment" "at one sitting."²¹ Kafka offers Brod a rare commentary on the final sentence of "The Judgment" in private conversation: "When I wrote it, I had in mind a violent ejaculation."²² Brod identifies the "violent ejaculation" expressed in the story's final sentence with the *act of writing* by which "suddenly out of the throng [of story fragments in Kafka's diaries] the first finished story . . . shoots out like a jet of

²¹ Kafka, *D* 213 and 212 respectively. "Nur so kann geschrieben werden, nur in einem solchen Zusammenhang..." (*TB*, Band 2, 101).

²² Brod, *FK* 129.

flame.”²³ There is clearly a connection between Kafka’s writing process and the content of the story; still, the identification Brod draws unequivocally between the “violent ejaculation” expressed in the final line and Kafka’s *act of writing* is over-hasty. Kafka’s account of writing the story “in einem Zug” introduces an ambiguity that doubles and splits the scene of his “violent ejaculation” of the story, calling into question its reference; the German phrase *in einem Zug* means not only “at one sitting,” but also “in a single breath.”²⁴ The double valence of this key phrase—which is supposed to explain *how* the story’s miraculous “coherence” or “continuity (*Zusammenhang*)” is achieved—acquires significance only when we learn that immediately upon finishing the story, Kafka enters his sisters’ room to read it aloud. The diary entry of September 23rd effaces transitional activities (stretching; speaking to the maid) between the *scene of writing* and the *scene of reading aloud* by reporting intervening actions only after these lines: “The trembling entrance into my sisters’ room. Reading aloud [*Vorlesung*].”²⁵ *Vorlesung*, the only word in the entry of September 23rd to command a sentence of its own: this “complete” sentence fragment is the shortest “ejaculation” to be found in Kafka’s telegraph-style announcement of his ideal act of writing, and appears to be the true climax of his account.

²³ *Ibid.* 106.

²⁴ The Duden Stilwörterbuch gives the following synonymous phrases for *in einem Zug* in the sense of “at one go”: *mit einem Mal*; and *ohne Unterbrechung* (without interruption). One can drink something *in einem Zug* (in one gulp), *ohne abzusetzen*; *Zug* also refers to the inhalation of air or smoke: *das Einatmen der Luft*; *das Einziehen des Rauches*. The compound word *Atemzug* (breath, respiration) can similarly be used in this phrase: *in einem Atemzug* means “in one breath.” Cf. *Duden: Stilwörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, Band 2: Die Verwendung der Wörter im Satz (Mannheim: Dudenverlag, 1988), 849-50.

²⁵ Kafka, *D* 213; *TB*, Band 2, 101. One wishes Kafka had written *laut lesen*, condensing into two words the lovely lilt readers have listened for in the first long line of Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Lolita*—though by Kafka’s standards, *laut lesen* is too wordy by half.

Kafka concludes that writing can be done “only in this way,” *in einem Zug*, but his description of the ideal writing process already refers us to the scene of reading aloud. Is the perfectly “continuous” fiction continuous because it is written “at one go,” or because it is read aloud “in one breath”? Perhaps the story must be written in one sitting precisely so that it can be read aloud in a single breath; the two possibilities are indivisible. Only a continuous reading-aloud of the “coherent” fiction *proves* its uninterrupted composition.

Kafka is compelled to repeat the “real birth” of “The Judgment” by reading it aloud to various audiences in rapid succession. Most remarkable is the difficulty Kafka has getting the story, so to speak, out of his bedroom. First he reads it to an audience of sisters, and the next day to an expanded audience of sisters, the Baum family, and several of the Blocks: “There were tears in my eyes. The indubitability of the story was confirmed.”²⁶ Two weeks later, he reads the story aloud to Brod. He gushes about a *fourth* repetition of this intimate lecture in his letter to Felice of December 4th-5th, 1912: “...if [‘The Judgment’] didn’t express some inner truth (which can never be universally established, but has to be accepted or denied every time by each reader or listener in turn), it would be nothing.”²⁷

²⁶ Kafka, *D* 214.

²⁷ Kafka, *LF* 87. A closer reading of this striking letter is pursued in a subsequent section of this chapter, “Pulsions of the Plastic Voice...” There is yet a *fifth* reading-aloud of the story at the home of Felix Weltsch in February 1913. Hartmut Binder notes the strangeness of these repeated acts of reading-aloud without explaining their significance. He remarks that in the period of “increased productivity” following his composition of *Das Urteil*, “Kafka, quite in contrast to his usual habits, would read his work aloud immediately after finishing it” (Binder, Hartmut, “The Background,” *The Problem of “The Judgment”*: *Eleven Approaches to Kafka’s Story* 13).

The instrumental role of reading aloud in Kafka's breakthrough experience is confirmed by a comparison of this doubled act with his single acts of writing. With the exception of his "breakthrough" experience, writing for Kafka is neither characterized by nor productive of "coherence" [*Zusammenhang*]. To the contrary, the act of writing threatens to fragment what is written and to dismember the one who writes. "The tremendous world I have in my head," Kafka writes, "but how free myself and free it without being torn to pieces."²⁸ He worries perennially about how to transport the world in his head out onto the page, or conversely, how to disentangle himself from the world of writing without demolishing either himself or his fictions. Already in January of 1911, Kafka perceives the need to avoid writing *except* "when it can be done with the greatest completeness [*Vollständigkeit*]."²⁹ In November of the same year, he concludes: "everything I have conceived in advance . . . appears . . . *full of holes* [*lückenhaft*] when I try to write it down at my desk." To explain the impossibility of writing with "completeness," Kafka tenders the following image: "...I conceive something good away from paper only in a time of exaltation . . . but then the fullness [*Fülle*] is so great that I have to give up. Blindly and arbitrarily I snatch handfuls out of the stream so that when I write it down calmly, my acquisition is nothing in comparison with the fullness in which it lived." Writing is essentially destructive and fragmenting; it is "incapable of restoring this fullness..."³⁰

²⁸ Kafka, *D* 222.

²⁹ Kafka, *D* 35; *TB*, Band 1, 113, my emphasis.

³⁰ Kafka, *D* 118; *TB*, Band 1, 195, my emphasis. The English translation renders "lückenhaft" (full of holes) as *incomplete*.

What emerges from our reading of Kafka's diaries and letters is that there is not one, but *two* scenes of Kafka's "breakthrough" experience. A second scene shadows and doubles the first; this "other" scene—the scene of reading aloud—is inseparable from Kafka's idealized act of writing as he originally reports on it in 1912. Moreover, the *original* splitting of the ideal scene of writing here indicated is only the first of several divisions through which the Kafkan experience of writing is further fragmented. Kafka's act of reading aloud "The Judgment" defends against the fragmentation that threatens and is threatened by the scene of his writing. Reading aloud gives fiction the illusion of "coherence." Nonetheless, Kafka's mending act of reading aloud also *doubles* the writing process; it enacts *the first splintering* of the scene of writing—and this in spite of how it also glosses over the gaps in Kafka's experience of writing.

Before we trace Kafka's multiplying accounts of his experience on the night of September 22nd-23rd, 1912 through the diaries and letters, we must note the importance, the merits and indeed the legacy of Brod's reading. To illuminate the "other" scene of Kafka's breakthrough is after all merely a shift of emphasis; our intention is not to contest all that follows from careful study of the *first* scene, in which the "bachelor of writing" labors alone in his room at night for precisely eight hours, severing all connections with family, future fiancée and friends, negating the eight-hour work day and even the power of the sun through an insomniac's imitation of life... These observations are well-known. Kafka criticism has focused almost exclusively on the first scene of Kafka's breakthrough—the lonely scene of writing—a focus whose influence on Kafka scholarship, both explicit and implicit, cannot be exaggerated.

What is so intriguing about the overlooked scene of reading aloud is the way in which Kafka's seamless movement from writing "at one sitting" to reading aloud "in one breath" doubles the special accomplishment of the "bachelor of writing" while *reversing* its action and charge. Kafka's compulsion to "confirm" the "indubitability" of his story by reading it aloud does not conspire with the act of writing to *sever* the writer and his perfect story from their social context (*Zusammenhang*) and from what Kafka often calls "the world." Instead, Kafka rushes to *re-connect* himself and the story to an audience of sisters. Writing must be done alone; the bachelor must choose writing over marriage, friends, profession and health. Yet what is written must be read aloud in the presence of others immediately and without pause. The story's *Zusammenhang* (coherency, continuity, *connectedness*) is proven only by way of a second "birth." It is not enough to have delivered a story onto the page. What Kafka calls the "real birth" of "The Judgment" is repeated and confirmed through its oral delivery. Only when Kafka reads his story aloud is its "body" cleaned of "filth and slime."³¹

Brod's focus on Kafka's isolated act of writing has enriched our grasp of central Kafkan themes—not least of all Kafka's writings on bachelordom and on the bachelor's threadbare existence. Nevertheless, a new focus on the scene of reading aloud—which is continuous with and even *consummates* Kafka's "breakthrough" experience of writing—

³¹ Kafka's anxiety about whether "The Judgment" has *succeeded* in severing itself from the context of the *diaries* is expressed in a 1916 letter to his publisher, in which Kafka agrees that "The Judgment" perhaps should not be published in a volume together with "The Stoker" and "In the Penal Colony" as originally conceived (to be entitled *The Sons*), but should appear alone "in a separate format." Kafka explains: "'The Judgment,' which means a great deal to me, is admittedly very short, but it is more a poem than a story; *it needs open space around it...*" (Kafka, Franz, *Letters to Friends, Family, & Editors*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 125, my emphasis). Four years after writing the story, Kafka is still busy clearing a space in which to present it "free" of his other writings.

exposes the significance of several Kafkan themes which have yet to be explored in such depth.³² The two scenes are intimately related in Kafka's imagination: the scene of reading aloud is supposed to mend and lock lesions in the horizon of a world that falls to pieces under the very force of writing.

When Kafka criticism reflects on itself, few themes are more prominent than the incalculable risk of contamination between Kafka's fictions, autobiographical writings, and his biography; it is the critics' resistance against just such unchecked contamination that one detects in their appropriation of the term "breakthrough."³³ The image of "breaking through" emerges in Kafka's own writings at the points of contact (and division) between his fictions and his theoretical or autobiographical writings. It marks a *breach* in the barrier between Kafka's autobiographical experience and his fictions, and *names the point at which it is impossible to discriminate between them*. It is therefore troubling that critics have borrowed the image of "breaking through" from Kafka in order to fend off and deny the incalculable risk of contamination between autobiography and fiction that this very image *names* and *arbitrates* in Kafka's diaries.

The critics' attempt to limit the risk of "contamination" between Kafka's life and his writings is itself a defensive and symptomatic response to the troubling indeterminacy

³² Bearing the scene of reading aloud constantly in mind, it is possible to pursue the following themes through Kafka's fictional writings: voice, breath, acoustics and live performance vis-à-vis the requisite assembly of sisters and beloved women. At several junctures, I will indicate the direction such a reading would take. For an excellent reading of several of Kafka's short fictions that thematize "voice" in the context of art and artists, cf. Dolar, Mladen, "Kafka's Voices," *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2006), 312-335.

³³ It is my working assumption that no absolute distinction between Kafka's fictional and autobiographical writings can be made. His *Diaries* feature plain descriptions as well as stylized, parabolic ones; fragmentary fictions; and theoretical reflections on writing. His fictions, for their part, refer helplessly to his biography, which has become increasingly familiar to most readers with the public availability of Kafka's journals and letters.

of contamination, rupture, and breaking through in Kafka's fictions. The reader is ever unsure *whether any rupture has taken place*, and if so, what sort of contamination might be threatened by a breach in the world's "coherence."³⁴ In order to question the defensive critical appropriation of Kafka's language of "breakthrough," I will first trace its emergence in Kafka's *diaries* at the points of contact (or contamination) between what might loosely be called "autobiographical" and "fictional" fragments.

I will contrast the abused image of "breakthrough" with the multiplying series of words Kafka himself uses to describe his experience of writing: words like *magic*, *breakdown*, *imitation* (or plagiarism), and *wounding* (or translation). These words comprise a secret vocabulary for Kafka's experience of writing; they will be drawn from a series of passages in his *diaries* and *letters* so unassuming in their claims to importance that they have been overlooked by the greater part of the secondary literature. Each of these words offers a new way of thinking about Kafka's literary experience.

Readers should be warned that my readings of these privileged words will take the form of a parallel series of terms with equal status. My method therefore opens itself to a certain sense of stagnation—to a lack of forward momentum—insofar as it contests a reading of Kafka's "breakthrough" that is founded on the progressive logic of *Bildung* and artistic development. Through these close readings of marginal passages from

³⁴ In Kafka's story "The Metamorphosis," for instance, Gregor Samsa's family is horrified by his so-called transformation, yet they go on living as though nothing surprising has happened. Gregor is treated initially as a human invalid rather than as a real vermin of monstrous proportions. The reader is left unsure of whether the Samsas' daily routine has been disturbed profoundly, or has *accommodated* the disaster given in the story's opening line. And *what* has been "contaminated"? Is it the Samsas' domestic space (which can be "cleaned" again), or their concepts of "human" and "son" (which may well be irrecoverable)? Is it that Gregor's room has been invaded by vermin from outside their home, or that one of *them* has been "transformed" into an insect within the presumed safety of his bedroom walls? The reader's uncertainty mirrors that of the Samsa family. Cf. *The Complete Stories* 89-139.

Kafka's literary-autobiographical writings unfolded in parallel, I will attempt to offer a fresh rereading of the most famous, most familiar entry of all: Kafka's September 23rd, 1912 account of his experience of writing "The Judgment." With special emphasis on the one-word climax of this entry—*Vorlesung* (reading aloud)—I will show how Kafka's act of recitation, with limited possibility of success, is a defensive attempt to render whole an experience of the world that is fragmented in the act of writing.

2. The Magical Wholeness of the World

The ongoing critical discussion of Kafka's "breakthrough" draws on spatial metaphors of imprisonment versus escape, and conversely, of safe versus vulnerable enclosures; the term has survived because it resonates so well with Kafka's preferred metaphors in the *Diaries* for his experience of writing. Furthermore, spatial imagery provides a useful way of meditating on the economy between domestic spaces and foreign lands, the familiar and the alien, intimacy and estrangement, as well as between habit and its disruption in Kafka's fictions. Our refusal to limit Kafka's breakthrough experience to the single night on which he writes "The Judgment" means in this sense only to *unleash* the concept of "breakthrough," which readily consumes Kafka's life of writing along with his complete works.

The imagery of breaking through, into, and out of spaces is of central importance in Kafka's fictions; it is also a recurring figure Kafka uses in the *Diaries* to convey his (mostly negative) experiences of writing. The image of breaking through the enclosure of the real world into a fictional world or the reverse is moreover no straightforward description of Kafka's writing process, but a literary image by which Kafka fictionalizes his experience of writing. The pervasiveness of such imagery should make us wary of outside claims about Kafka's "real" literary breakthrough, for the language of "breakthrough" that is used to explain this writer's formal and stylistic triumph has been drawn straight from his fictions. The imagery of "breakthrough" does not come from beyond fiction, nor does it originate with Kafka's critics; it lies at the origin of Kafka's project of fictionalizing and writing fiction. Kafka's breakthrough *to* a new form of fiction is at the same time a breakthrough *in* fiction—a *fictional* breakthrough.

As noted in the previous section, critics who write about Kafka have often worried about the incalculable risk of “contamination” between Kafka’s fictions, autobiographical writings, and his biography. The convention of referring to Kafka’s “The Judgment” as a “breakthrough” has functioned as a blockade against the invasion of Kafka criticism by the extra- or non-fictional. In light of this critical resistance, it is remarkable that the image of “breaking through” emerges in Kafka’s own writings precisely at the points of contact (and division) between his fictions and his theoretical or autobiographical writings; it marks a *breach* in the barrier between Kafka’s “autobiographical experience” and his “fictions,” and *names the point at which it is impossible to discriminate between them.*³⁵ In order to question the defensive critical

³⁵ Kafka imagines himself to be straddling two worlds, insecurely poised with one foot in the world of his lived experience and the other in a fictional world that is still under construction. Thus he complains in 1911: “Wrote badly, without really arriving at that freedom of true description which releases one’s foot from the experienced” (*D* 80). In his diaries, Kafka worries constantly that he or his incomplete writings—that parts, pieces, and limbs of himself and of his writings—may be dangling down into “emptiness.” Thus in November 1913, he faults his own writing in the *Diary* as a “miserable observation . . . the result of something artificially constructed whose lower end is swinging in emptiness somewhere” (*D* 238). In 1914, it is *Kafka* who swings in emptiness when he writes: “I am not so completely protected by and enclosed in my work as I was two years ago [i.e. when he wrote ‘The Judgment’] . . .” (*D* 303). As the author of fragmentary fictions (one might even say *as a writer*), Kafka inhabits a world full of holes that he labors to patch up and make whole. Its atmosphere is broken through. The word *world* gradually acquires significance in Kafka’s secret vocabulary, suggesting the incredible stakes that writing has for him. In its attempt to make “inner” and “outer” worlds available to each other, writing calls into question the relationship between these two worlds, as well as their exclusive integrity. The meaning of “world” for Kafka is never stabilized, though the binary division between *two* worlds is a red thread running through his diaries and letters. Writing seems to be something else altogether. Of primary importance—and what *can* be observed in the midst of this confusing imagery—is that writing for Kafka is not secondary to “the world”; nor is it an activity contained *by* “the world” (whether by a real or fictional world). Writing strives to constitute a world of its own; more precisely, *it breaches the boundaries of this world*. What lies beyond the world violated by writing is unknown. This puts the writer in an awkward position. Insofar as he delivers “the world” by writing (cf. *D* 387), it is unclear where the writer lives, how he exists, and quite literally what ground the writer stands on when he writes. Kafka’s rhetoric of the “circle” figures largely in his early diary entries on bachelordom (“if we move to the side just once [away from the ‘circle’ that ‘belongs to us’] . . . we have already lost [our circle] into space . . . now we step back . . . and are lost” [*D* 24]). The writing bachelor risks breaking out of the only world he has; there is no guarantee that writing will compensate him for his loss. By “circle,” Kafka means something like a world whose surface,

appropriation of Kafka's language of "breakthrough," I will first trace its emergence in Kafka's *Diaries* at the points of contact (or contamination) between what might loosely be called "autobiographical" and "fictional" fragments.

In the months and years leading up to his momentous writing of "The Judgment," Kafka's diary is littered with images of fictional realities full of holes. Kafka's September 11th, 1911 account of a traffic accident is betrayed as a series of "disconnected starts" when Max Brod reads it aloud; the sound of its "disordered sentences" provokes Kafka's complaint that the story is riddled "with holes into which one could stick both hands."³⁶ The abortive fictions of this period call attention to the provisional status of their enclosures, which gape open like theatre sets into which the author peers, and collapse as easily around him. Kafka's fear of a world full of holes borrows its imagery from the Yiddish theatre with which his diaries of 1911 are thoroughly preoccupied. The traveling troop of actors in whose company Kafka spends much of his time are so poor that they cannot afford a curtain large enough to block the audience's view of their dressing rooms beyond the stage.³⁷ The dramatic world of the Yiddish theatre is partially realized and provisionally enclosed. Reality encroaches on it from all sides.

figuratively speaking, has not been broken through. A world full of holes—a world whose "circle" can be stepped *beyond*—is in the final analysis no world at all. Kafka's imagery of "breaking through" directly compromises the "coherence" or "holding together" [*Zusammenhang*] that characterizes his ideal experience of writing and his ideal composition.

³⁶ Kafka, *D* 105. The text of the story is published in Kafka's *Travel Diaries* (*D* 462-5).

³⁷ Kafka notes after attending a performance: "View through the back curtain into the dressing-room, directly to Mrs. Klug, who is standing there in a white petticoat and a short-sleeved shirt" (*D* 153).

The influence of the Yiddish theatre on Kafka's work points forward through literary history to Samuel Beckett's "impoverished theatre." Yet the theatrical pedigree of Kafka's "world full of holes" lacks analytic force. In 1920, Kafka's diary presents an unnerving image: "A segment has been cut out of the back of his head. The sun, and the whole world with it, peep in. It makes him nervous, it distracts him from his work, and moreover it irritates him that just he should be the one to be debarred from the spectacle."³⁸ When the *whole world* has been focused into one great gawping eye, *Kafka alone sees nothing*. This is an image of the writer's impotence. He is moreover so disbarred from the spectacle that he cannot even report on his blind banishment in the first person. With respect to Kafka's imagery of "holes in the world," the theatrical analogy is limited by the following general truth: when Kafka's world splits at its seams, there is rarely any question of *seeing* or *being seen*, of vision, visibility, or exposure. When fissures crack the horizon of the world, it is rather a matter of something *being born*.³⁹

Birth imagery—which Kafka first uses to describe his writing of "The Judgment"—represents a great innovation in Kafka's conception of his own writing process: it preserves the wholeness and integrity of *two separate beings* (or in this case, two separate "worlds") *in spite of the rupture or "break" through which one emerges out*

³⁸ Kafka, *D* 391.

³⁹ The limitations of the theatrical analogy apply specifically to the image under consideration here (the image of a "world full of holes"). On Kafka's general engagement with the Yiddish theatre, cf. Beck, Evelyn Torton, *Kafka and the Yiddish Theater: Its impact on his work* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1971). For a seminal investigation of the formative influence of theatrical structures on Kafka's writing, specifically with reference to questions of *narrative perspective* and acts of viewing, cf. Rolleston, James, *Kafka's Narrative Theater* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1974).

of the other. Thus Kafka's exclamation that "[The Judgment] came out of me like a real birth" is a way of solving through imagery a problem that is raised by imagery in the first place.⁴⁰ The rhetoric of "birth" improves upon the rhetoric of "breakthrough" by lending purpose and meaning to the very "holes in the world" that otherwise compromise its integrity and therefore its ability to provide a meaningful context (*Zusammenhang*, or literally, *holding together*) for what transpires within its bounds. In December 1914, two years after composing "The Judgment," Kafka clings to the rhetorical innovation realized by his 1912 introduction of birth imagery. He allays the enduring fear of fragmentation and the fragmentary through a fresh appeal to the analogy of giving birth:

The beginning of every story is ridiculous at first. There seems no hope that this newborn thing, *still incomplete* [*unfertige*] and tender in every joint, will be able to keep alive in the *completed organization of the world* [*in der fertigen Organisation der Welt*], which, like every completed organization, strives to close itself off [*sich abzuschließen*]. However, one should not forget that the story, if it has any justification to exist, *bears its complete organization within itself* even before it has fully unfolded; for this reason despair over the beginning of a story is unwarranted; in a like case parents should have to despair of their suckling infant, for they had no intention of bringing this pathetic and ridiculous being into the world.⁴¹

Kafka eagerly applauds this image as an advance over previous representations of his writing process in the diaries; "in the past," he concludes the analogy, "I have suffered from the lack of this knowledge."⁴²

⁴⁰ Kafka deems it necessary to interpret his own story because "die Geschichte ist *wie eine regelrechte Geburt* mit Schmutz und Schleim bedeckt aus mir herausgekommen und nur ich habe die Hand, die bis zum Körper dringen kann und Lust dazu hat" (*TB*, Band 2, 125, my emphasis).

⁴¹ Kafka, *D* 322, my emphases, translation modified; *TB*, Band 3, 65.

⁴² Kafka, *D* 322. It is not my intention to claim that Kafka has truly "advanced" his writing by introducing a new image to convey his experience of writing; I merely note that in this particular diary entry, Kafka's *fantasy* of "progressing" is attached to the new image of writing as giving birth. Contrary to his hope, here recorded, that the analogy with childbirth will prevent him from suffering in the future as he has suffered in the past, Kafka's diary in the following years testifies to his continuing struggle with *incompleteness* and *fragmentation* by and of writing. My concern, however, is with the way in which Kafka attempts to

It is strange that Kafka's writing of "The Judgment" should be referred to as his "breakthrough," since what is at stake is just as much a *sealing-off* of and by writing—a sealing-off of the fictional world from the biographical trials of its author; a sealing-off of fiction from reality. "Every completed organization" fictional or real, Kafka believes, "strives to close itself off [*sich abzuschließen*]" ; Kafka alone has "the hand that can reach to the body [of his story 'The Judgment'] itself."⁴³ Kafka imagines himself as the medium through whom an imaginary world breaks the limits of the real world and is locked away. The writer's magic hand pulls a rabbit out of a hat or makes a clown disappear down a deep chasm—all without injuring the unbroken surface of *this* world. As proof that "something can come of nothing," Kafka summons an example from one of his fictions, "A Country Doctor," in which "the coachman and his horses . . . crawl out of the tumble-down pig-sty" built low to the ground.⁴⁴ The magic of writing is that of an interior space whose dimensions impossibly eclipse those of the external space in whose compass it nests. Like a magician or a clown, the writer can pack all his earthly belongings into a small traveling case he carries easily in hand. There is only one possible response to the rhetorical question Kafka raises earlier in his diaries: "Who has *the magic hand* [*die Zauberhand*] to thrust into the machinery without its being torn to pieces and scattered by a thousand knives?"⁴⁵ The writer has this magic hand.

address these problems precisely by way of innovations in the imagery through which he describes and understands his experience of writing.

⁴³ Kafka, *D* 214.

⁴⁴ Kafka, *D* 406.

⁴⁵ Kafka, *D* 239; *TB*, Band 2, 205, my emphasis.

Kafka's "breakthrough" is best understood as a magical birth by which writing simultaneously breaks through and seals off. The magical act of writing is feared as much as desired. One year before writing "The Judgment," Kafka describes "the difficulties of bringing to an end even a short essay"; these difficulties arise "from the fact that even the shortest essay demands of the author a degree of self-satisfaction and of being *lost in himself* out of which it is difficult to step into the everyday air [*die Luft des gewöhnlichen Tages*] without great determination and an external incentive."⁴⁶ Before the writer can "slip away" quietly from an essay that is "rounded to a close" or "locked [*rund geschlossen*]," he first "bolts, driven by unrest," so that "the end [*der Schluß*] must be completed from the outside with hands which must not only do the work but hold on as well."⁴⁷ The holes in Kafka's fictions once again represent points of entry—or contamination—between Kafka's experience and the fictional world. If the author is not sufficiently "lost in himself," he cannot close and lock his essay from the safety of its interior; if the author *is* "lost in himself," however, he has no incentive to "step into the everyday air" and may circle endlessly in the world of writing, unable to round it to a close. The difficulty in finishing is not a problem internal to a given piece of prose; it is a problem intrinsic to *writing*. Kafka's suggestion that the writer "finishes" only by bolting his fiction to lock it clumsily from *without* voices his fear—were this leap not made—that he might be trapped inside a perfectly polished fiction no longer able to escape, entombed in the womb.

⁴⁶ Kafka, *D* 156, my emphasis; *TB*, Band 1, 255.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

One suspects that “the difficulty in closing” is also a function of Kafka’s ambivalence with respect to the world full of holes. Kafka never decides whether he wishes to be *inside* or *outside* his writing when it finally “rounds to a close.” He “quietly steals” back and forth, bolts from unrest, or else is ejected and injected against his will. In 1919, he reports on this oft-repeated passage that lacks the comforting rhythm of a habitual action: “*Again* pulled through this terrible, long, narrow crack; it can only be forced through in a dream. On purpose and awake, one could certainly never do it.”⁴⁸

Numerous passages from the diaries confirm the notion of a *rupture* or *breakthrough* that paradoxically seals off and makes the world whole. A story recorded in Kafka’s diary on June 25th, 1914 can be interpreted as an allegory for his experience of writing.⁴⁹ Here, the first-person narrator is a writer who experiences writing characteristically in the third person, or passively: he does not “write,” but *undergoes* the event of writing. Kafka allegorizes writing as the miraculous receipt of a message from an angel—an intrusion of the unknown and unexpected that penetrates even the familiar enclosure of the writer’s own room, “every trifle” of which he knows “from having looked at it in the course of . . . pacing up and down” from “early morning until twilight.”⁵⁰ This writer has memorized “the pattern of the rug to its last convolution,” and has measured the table by spanning it with his hands—yet the room is not therefore

⁴⁸ Kafka, *D* 390, my emphasis.

⁴⁹ Kafka gives no indication that the character in this episode is a writer. Readers may be cued to this connection by the unique relationship of the protagonist to the interior of his room—which is violently ruptured by the delivery of a message; this relationship is familiar to us from Kafka’s early diary entries on the relationship of the writing bachelor to the interior of his room. Kafka routinely conceives of writing as an activity that disturbs the familiar existence of the writing subject in his bedroom and indeed disturbs the very architecture of the room.

⁵⁰ Kafka, *D* 290-1.

safer for these mundane researches. His meticulous observation—which we must understand is the condition for writing—instead “violently upset[s]” the room, whose excessive familiarity is disturbing. Writing is “delivered” into this tightly locked context by a descending angel whose message is not born from within the closed circle of habit and familiarity, but shatters this circle from without: “Finally, finally,” the narrator reports, the room “stirs.”

The odd repetition of “finally,” however, suggests that the narrator has summoned something from beyond, holding open the question of whether the angel’s message originates inside or outside the narrator’s room. Is the angel’s message a surprise, or has the narrator commissioned it? Cracks “spread straight out from the centre of the ceiling,” and soon enough “an arm [is] thrust out, a silver sword [swings] to and fro. It [is] meant for me, there [is] no doubt of that.”⁵¹ The narrator’s close reading of his little room is not *at odds* with this unsettling intrusion, but *prepares the way* for the angel’s disruptive message. The allegorized figure of the writer scratches at this hole, so that the emergent messenger can “announce . . . whatever it [has] to announce.” Indeed, “the ceiling [does] . . . break open.” And yet what announces itself from beyond the familiar world is instantly absorbed *by* that world. The writer corrects his impression of rupture upon second glance:

I lowered my eyes. When I raised them again the angel was still there, it is true, hanging rather far off under the ceiling (*which had closed again*), but it was no living angel, only

⁵¹ Kafka, *D* 291. Kafka’s language here alludes to his so-called “breakthrough” diary entry of September 22nd-23rd, 1912 by echoing its key words. The narrator’s remark that the “breaking-places [*Bruchstellen*]” in the ceiling “didn’t yet have any connection/context [*Zusammenhang*]” recalls Kafka’s earlier statement, in the “breakthrough” entry, that writing can be done “*only* with such *coherence* [*Zusammenhang*]” (*TB*, Band 2, 162 and 101 respectively).

a painted wooden figurehead off the prow of some ship, one of the kind that hangs from the ceiling in sailors' taverns, nothing more.⁵²

The ceiling breached by writing is allegorically stitched up again. Kafka's allegory of writing declines to inform us whether or not any writing has taken place. The wound through which writing miraculously delivers itself is judged illusory, and the content of the angel's "message" withheld. The form of writing here allegorized is a kind of rupture-without-rupture or breakthrough-without-breakthrough.

The figure of the "sealed wound" recalls an erotic dream of three years earlier, in which Kafka hurries through a row of rooms before their rickety walls can buckle from the force of his passage. He treads lightly, softly, effacing his illicit trespass through these rooms "all . . . with beds"—rooms interrupted by "brothels" through which the dreamer "especially" hurries, though he makes the journey "seemingly because of them."⁵³ A visit to the brothel is not to be avoided. The concatenated rooms dead-end in another brothel whose back wall "was either of glass or merely *broken through* [*durchbrochen*]..."⁵⁴ "More likely it was *broken through*," Kafka's waking record of the dream decides, for "the head of one [of the whores] hung down a little over the edge [of the floor] into the open air."⁵⁵ It is with this whore—whose body has "broken through" the floor—that Kafka chiefly occupies himself. The immense pleasure the dreamer finds in his rhythmic squeezing of her thighs is interrupted at once by a horrifying discovery: beneath his lifted fingers, Kafka finds small sores and wounds pocking the body of the

⁵² Kafka, *D* 291-2, my emphasis.

⁵³ Kafka, *D* 71.

⁵⁴ Kafka, *D* 72, my emphasis; *TB*, Band 1, 58.

⁵⁵ Kafka, *D* 72.

woman whose thighs he so joyfully pressed. Nevertheless, like the “holes” in his porous fictions, Kafka figures the breached skin of this woman’s body not in terms of penetration, but in terms of *sealing-off*. Her circular wounds are “sealing-wax-red [*siegellackrot*]”⁵⁶; they are closed as soon as they are opened.

The dreaming writer’s hands “break through” the woman’s skin just as her head “breaks through” the floor. In the form of wax seals, these strangely *closed* wounds render the woman’s body inaccessible while hiding the letters of an unreadable or secret text inside her; they are therefore connected with authorship and authorization. The woman in his dream is like *ein Buch mit sieben Siegeln* (“a sealed book”; “a complete mystery”).⁵⁷ Kafka’s own fingers seal the body he would possess; only when the writer *releases* his hold on the woman are the illusory “holes” in her skin revealed. When his fingers—which perfectly conceal these holes—are no longer active, Kafka finds them covered with “little red particles – *as though* from a crumbled seal.”⁵⁸ Have the seals been broken? In this dream, as in the story of the angel, the act of writing is allegorized as the receipt of a message, or love letter, whose contents both have and have not been seen.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Kafka, *D 72*; *TB*, Band 1, 59.

⁵⁷ Kafka’s comparison of this woman to a book with seven seals has religious overtones which link her to the intruding angel later in the *Diaries*, by recalling the seven seals on the apocalyptic document described in the Book of Revelation, along with the seven angels that emerge with their seven bowls of judgments when the seventh seal is broken.

⁵⁸ Kafka, *D 72*, my emphasis.

⁵⁹ I have restricted my focus to passages from Kafka’s *Diaries* that have been largely overlooked. The *Diaries* are rife with more widely known images of wounds that do not bleed: for example, in one oft-cited passage, Kafka recounts a narcissistic version of the erotic dream here analyzed. In the self-reflexive double of the brothel dream, both “slit” and “sword” are Kafka’s own. He writes: “A large, ancient knight’s sword with a cross-shaped handle was buried to the hilt in my back, but the blade had been driven

Kafka's "hands-off" erotic dream foreshadows his "breakthrough" diary entry of September 23rd, 1912, in which the ideal act of writing is experienced at the expense of going to bed. Just as the dreaming writer hurries past the rooms "all . . . with beds," and just as his hands render the desired body of a woman inaccessible by sealing her with wax, the waking writer's hands seal off the inviting prospect of his unoccupied bed. Kafka's account of writing "The Judgment" during one long night fetishistically circles the image of his unused bed; it is the first thing he notices at sunrise upon turning around. "The appearance of the undisturbed bed, as though it had just been brought in": this is what strikes Kafka most profoundly when he "steps into the everyday air" upon rounding the story to a close.⁶⁰ Kafka's vision of the unused bed reveals his ongoing effort to seal off a fictional world from the intimate setting of the real bedroom in which it is conjured. Of the writer whose "magic hand" sufficiently encloses him in writing, the real world retains no trace (the bed is "untouched [*unberührt*]").⁶¹ His magical act of writing *has and has not* taken place, for there is no evidence of the writer's presence in his room; the story miraculously "born" is a "something [that] comes out of nothing." Only the "unmarked bed" testifies negatively to Kafka's magical act: if Kafka has not slept, he must have been writing. His fantasy involves an act of writing that would perfectly close off his lived experience from fiction, such that no contamination between autobiography

with such incredible precision between my skin and flesh that it had caused no injury. Nor was there a wound at the spot on my neck where the sword had penetrated; my friends assured me that there was an opening large enough to admit the blade, but dry and showing no trace of blood. And when my friends now stood on chairs and slowly, inch by inch, drew out the sword, I did not bleed, and the opening on my neck closed until no mark was left save a scarcely discernible slit. 'Here is your sword' [...]' (*D* 327).

⁶⁰ Kafka, *D* 212. I will return to Kafka's image of the unused bed several times in Chapter 3.

⁶¹ Kafka, *TB*, Band 2, 101. A forest (*Wald*) that is "unberührt" is a virgin forest. Kafka writes all night, therefore, to preserve the virginal condition of his unused bed.

and fiction would be possible. The real room that preserves no traces of the writing author is the mirror image of a perfect fiction that preserves no traces of its author's life. The virgin bed's blank sheets double the ink-stained sheets of Kafka's diary in which "The Judgment" is recorded, magically erasing the labor of writing. "The appearance of the undisturbed bed" compensates Kafka for the "violent disturbance" of writing.

Abortive Writing or the Fictional Crime

In light of this history of perfectly and imperfectly sealed-off fictional worlds, one is struck by an otherwise insignificant detail from Kafka's unfinished novel *The Trial*. The lawyer Huld informs Josef K. that the Law tolerates lawyers without sanctioning their activities. Huld exemplifies miserable working conditions in the "Lawyers' Room" at the law court offices with one poignant detail (an anonymous narrator paraphrases Huld):

For over a year now . . . there's been a hole in the floor of the room, not large enough for a person to fall through [*durchfallen*], but big enough that one whole leg can sink in [*einsinken*]. The Lawyers' Room is in the upper level of the attic, so if someone slips through, his leg hangs down into the lower level, right into the hall [*Gang*] where the parties [i.e. the accused] are waiting.⁶²

The image of a leg thrust down through a hole in the ceiling is an indexical of sorts. Kafka inverts the sign, more familiar from crime fiction, of a murdered man's stiff limb poking inevitably out of a trash bag in the trunk of a car. When Huld sinks a limb suddenly into the text of *The Trial*, one cannot help but shudder, as though this living lawyer's leg were the rigid arm of a corpse emerging from the lake whose waters should

⁶² Kafka, Franz, *The Trial*, trans. Breon Mitchell (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), 114. Referenced hereafter as *T*. The German original is drawn from the following edition: Kafka, Franz, *Der Prozeß* (Prag: Vitalis Verlag, 1998), 142. Referenced hereafter as *P* (Vitalis).

have buried him... The reference to crime stories is oblique. Kafka's text disorients the cliché further: while the limbs of corpses usually resurface from *below*, the lawyer's leg in Kafka asserts itself from *above*. What kind of a "beyond" is being signaled? In crime fiction, as in Kafka, it is an immanent beyond. The criminal's worst nightmare is always the afterlife of his crime in *this* world. Nothing is more chilling than the inexorable visibility of the corpse, whose rigid arm hails the criminal's *earthly* trial and punishment rather than his eternal damnation, which requires no cue.

The accused in Kafka's *The Trial* observe a lawyer's leg dangling into the hallway where they wait, a leg which refers by way of the conventions of detective fiction to the inescapable earthly afterlife of crime. Nonetheless, we never learn whether the accused have committed any crimes whose afterlife the stray limb could prompt. By breaching the *ceiling*, the leg is linked metonymically to the idea of a transcendent beyond. It points. Yet Kafka grants us no view of this beyond. The reader feels himself "dropped" suddenly from Huld's tale of the Lawyers' Room above to the blindness of the accused below, who see only what pokes through the floor of the rumored room. The image of the leg functions as the flag of heaven or of a higher court, perhaps tempting the accused—and Kafka's readers—to posit a "beyond" that would be more than just the botched finitude of their crimes. The lawyer's leg is a kind of bait to which Josef K. seems indifferent, though his fellow accused nip hungrily at its toes.

At the very least, the dangling leg is an indexical that points outside the *fictional world*, recalling to readers the body of *Kafka*, who worked as a lawyer with the

Workmen's Accident Insurance Institute from 1908-1922..⁶³ If we are inclined to read this detail as an "autobiographical leg" of Kafka-the-lawyer and therefore of Kafka-the-author hanging into the incompletely detached world of a fiction "full of holes," we can just as easily imagine Kafka's preemptive response. In his diary entry of February 27th-28th, 1912, the first person narrator of a fragmentary story begins thus: "Because of caution, general suspicion, and fear that I might make a fool of myself, I deny that I am a lawyer."⁶⁴ Certainly, to have left one lone leg dangling blindly into the body of his text would not have afforded its author a very useful prospect of the work left to be completed. The image is rather a *reversal* of the bird's-eye-view: it recalls instead those medieval woodcuts in which a curious John-the-Astronomer crawls on a miniature globe, his knees on Chil , his robe trailing over the Atlantic Ocean, his hands tearing a hole in the horizon through which he gazes at the machinery of those large gears whose gritted teeth compel the motion of the spheres.⁶⁵ This is the image of a finite being who ventures to steal a glimpse of his creator, or better, a fictional character who disbelieves the wholeness and self-sufficiency of his world.⁶⁶ If the lawyer's leg that breaks through the

⁶³ Cf. *Franz Kafka: The Office Writings*, ed. Stanley Corngold, Jack Greenberg, and Benno Wagner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), ix.

⁶⁴ Kafka, *D* 184.

⁶⁵ Cf. the image reproduced in Camille Flammarion's *L'atmosph re: m t orologie populaire* (Paris: Hachette, 1888), 163. The origins of this image are disputed; it may be based on a sixteenth century woodcut, or may have been commissioned in the late nineteenth century by Flammarion (himself an astronomer and popular science writer) to illustrate medieval flat-earth theories.

⁶⁶ The *tower* rising from the Castle in Kafka's eponymous last novel is portrayed in a similar image: "The tower up here," the narrator informs us, ends "in a kind of terrace, whose battlements, uncertain, irregular, brittle, as if drawn by the anxious or careless hand of a child, zigzagged into the blue sky. It was as if some melancholy resident, who by rights ought to have kept himself locked up in the most out-of-the-way room in the house, had *broken through the roof and stood up in order to show himself to the world*" (Kafka,

ceiling of the accused men's hallway in *The Trial* bears the trace of Kafka's biographical self, we might give this fact an optimistic spin where Kafka would not have: if just *one* of Kafka's authorial feet is still visible, he must have come close to achieving "that freedom of true description which releases one's foot from the experienced."⁶⁷

Images don't mislead; it is we who may mislead ourselves by supplying what the image withholds. Kafka doesn't give the accused the image of a body; he gives them one leg. Might a lone lawyer's leg not as easily be the leg of a corpse, a dancer, or a thief? The *attic* in which the Lawyers' Room is housed, moreover, does not transcend the world. What appears to be a "hole" in Kafka's world may be a hole contained *by* the world's circle—or it may be only the *image* of a hole; "leg" may be the false indexical of "body." The body may be unidentifiable, or missing. Though we are tempted to posit the torso and head of a lawyer from the evidence of his foot, nothing is promised beyond the limits of the frame. In a world where *God* and *author* are dead, one is nevertheless powerless against the threat of a divine corpse, whose leg dangles down through a hole in the sky—for God cannot be buried in a heaven that doesn't exist. The infinite in Kafka, as waste product of its own experiment, floods back to pollute *this* world.

It is inevitably Kafka's *autobiographical experience of writing* that his critics observe seeping through holes in the world of Kafka's incomplete fictions. And yet one can never be sure that what "breaks through" into Kafka's fictions does not still belong to fiction; nor can one be sure that what "breaks through" in Kafka's *Diaries* (as Brod says

Franz, *The Castle*, trans. Mark Harman (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), 8, my emphasis. Referenced hereafter as *C*.

⁶⁷ Kafka, *D* 80. In 1911, Kafka complains to the contrary: "Wrote badly, without really arriving at that freedom of true description which releases one's foot from the experienced."

of “The Judgment”) does not still belong to autobiography. Kafka’s numerous accounts of his experience of writing *fictionalize* that experience. In short, the imagery of breakthrough is a figure for the becoming-literary of Kafka’s experience of writing. It represents the bloodless wounding of Kafka’s autobiography by fiction and the reverse.

Ahistorical Breakthrough and the Birth of Fiction: a Kafkaan Literary History

It is possible and even tempting to historicize Kafka’s imagery by subjecting it to chronology. According to this logic, the prospect of sealing himself safely in a perfectly round fictional world is desirable and magical to the young Kafka, while an older Kafka recognizes the fantasy of enclosure as confining and deadly. One can cite Kafka’s fading belief, late in life, that writing can be independent of the world, and his mounting fear that a perfectly seamless fictional world might be a false, illusory world—a lie—precisely *because* of its “separation” from the world of lived experience.⁶⁸ It is equally possible, however, to resist a historicizing, chronological view of Kafka, according to which youthful mistakes and enthusiasm are opposed to mature skillfulness and despair. The dated entries in Kafka’s journal too easily invite such an approach, in spite of the fact that Kafka’s autobiographical and fictional writings alike reject the possibility and meaningfulness of any such historical “progression.”⁶⁹

⁶⁸ In December 1921, Kafka famously writes: “Metaphors are one among many things which make me despair of writing. Writing’s lack of independence of the world, its dependence on the maid who tends the fire, on the cat warming itself by the stove; it is even dependent on the poor old human being warming himself by the stove. All these are independent activities ruled by their own laws; only writing is helpless, cannot live in itself, is a joke and a despair” (*D* 398).

⁶⁹ Kafka compares his writing of “The Judgment” to advancing in a body of water, which translators have rendered somewhat loosely as walking on water (*D* 212). This belies Kafka’s use of the past tense eight months previously when reflecting on his youthful foibles: “I admitted the possibility of miracles more readily than that of real progress...” (*D* 160). The “real progress” achieved by writing “The Judgment” is

Instead, I have traced the dimensions and volume of a *space of possibility and impossibility* which is simultaneously opened and closed *by the spatial metaphors favored by Kafka to describe his experience of writing in the Diaries*. The writer sits in a room; at any point he may feel trapped and endeavor to write his way into “fresh air”; at any point he may seek shelter from writing, in writing; at any point he may summon a descending angel to announce the text to come. The spatial metaphors that circulate in Kafka’s image of a (fictional) “world full of holes” find their complement in Kafka’s fantasy of reading aloud (*Vorlesung*), which aims to repair and seal the world that is broken through by writing; taken together, the continuous process of writing and reading aloud (in which reading aloud is both a *figuration* of writing and a magical rewriting) simultaneously opens and closes—with a single magic word (*Vorlesung*)—the possibility of writing for Kafka.

still metaphorized *as* miracle—and this by an older Kafka who, as his use of the past tense suggests, no longer believes in miracles.

3. Breakthrough/Breakdown

The closest Kafka comes to experiencing a literary “breakthrough” (*Durchbruch*) is perhaps when he suffers “something very like a *breakdown* [*Zusammenbruch*]” on January 16th, 1922, just two years before his death.⁷⁰ Kafka asserts that he has never before experienced anything of the kind.⁷¹ This claim alone—that the breakdown is a *unique experience*—refers us back to the diary entry of September 23rd, 1912, the night of his alleged “breakthrough,” which, although Kafka doesn’t call it that, is the only other example of an experience he presents as unique in kind.⁷² *Breakthrough* and *breakdown* are the positive and negative instances of a single possibility. “Breakthrough” names the magical conjuring of a friendly space around the alien writing subject; yet the magical space of literary breakthrough is at the same time a shimmering illusion through which Kafka inevitably sees the uncanny room behind—with its forbidden, untouchable bed—in which the bachelor’s shabby existence unfolds. “The book of the living author,” Kafka writes to Milena, “is really the bedroom at the end of his apartment.”⁷³ In the space of

⁷⁰ Kafka, *D* 398; *TB*, Band 3, 198. One wonders whether this thing that is “*like* a breakdown” might be one of the reviled “metaphors,” which, one month previously, make Kafka “despair of writing” as an activity that *lacks* “independence of the world” (*D* 398).

⁷¹ This is not strictly true: Kafka allows one exception, “...that night two years ago” (*D* 398). The allusion seems hopelessly vague; nevertheless, since there are only two diary entries for the year 1920, we can assume Kafka is referring to a passage previously quoted, in which the whole world peers into a hole carved into the back of someone’s head: “A segment has been cut out of the back of his head. The sun, and the whole world with it, peep in. It makes him nervous, it distracts him from his work...” (*D* 391). The only other entry for the same year is optimistic by comparison, if ironically so: “Today is undoubtedly the day, is it not, on which progress prepares to progress further?” (*D* 391).

⁷² Of composing “The Judgment,” Kafka writes: “Only *in this way* can writing be done, only with such coherence, with such a complete opening out of the body and the soul” (*D* 213).

⁷³ Kafka, Franz, *Letters to Milena*, trans. Philip Boehm (New York: Schocken Books, 1990), 233. Referenced hereafter as *LM*.

“breakthrough,” the writer “advances over water”⁷⁴; in the space of “breakdown,” he drowns.

Kafka indicates the double valence of “breakdown [*Zusammenbruch*]” by observing that “one can put *two interpretations* on the breakdown, both of which are probably correct.”⁷⁵ The first of these interpretations cedes to the experience of breakdown its mutilating force:

...impossible to sleep, impossible to stay awake, impossible to endure life, or, more exactly, the course of life. The clocks are not in unison; the inner one runs crazily [*jagt*, or literally, *hunts*] on at a devilish or demoniac or in any case inhuman pace, the outer one limps along at its usual speed. What else can happen but that *the two worlds split apart* [*sich die zwei verschiedenen Welten trennen*], and they do split apart...⁷⁶

The second interpretation, however hesitantly, suggests that *breakdown* can be productively survived:

...the pursuit [of ideas in introspection] goes right through me and rends me asunder. *Or I can – I can? – manage to keep my feet*, be it only to the most negligible degree, and be carried along in the wild pursuit. Where shall I then be brought? ‘Pursuit,’ indeed, is only a metaphor. I can also say, ‘assault on the last earthly frontier,’ an assault, moreover, launched from below, from mankind, and since this too is a metaphor, I can replace it by the metaphor of an assault from above, aimed at me from above. / All such writing [*Diese ganze Litteratur*] is an assault on the frontiers...⁷⁷

Survival is possible only to the extent that the writer can appropriate the “devilish hunt” of “introspection” as his proper activity; only in this case will the splitting of inner and outer worlds not dismember him. To suffer “breakdown” is to endure helplessly what the writer of “breakthrough” joyously claims. This is because “breakdown” names *from the perspective of the world* what “breakthrough” names *from the perspective of the writer*.

⁷⁴ Kafka, *D* 212.

⁷⁵ Kafka, *D* 398, my emphasis.

⁷⁶ Kafka, *D* 398-9, my emphasis; *TB*, Band 3, 198.

⁷⁷ Kafka, *D* 399, translation modified, my emphasis; *TB*, Band 3, 198-9.

It might seem exaggerated to contend that Kafka, in this second interpretation, changes the valence of breakdown by “joyously claiming” it as his own. The writer who is “carried along” by the hunt [*Jagd*] still eschews the active role; nonetheless, it is Kafka who chooses the metaphor of pursuit. His choice tellingly links the second interpretation of “breakdown” to the business of writing by recalling that the hunter is a favored incarnation of the writer in Kafka’s vocabulary.

“...in einem Zug...”

That writing according to Kafka can be suffered as *Zusammenbruch* (breakdown) or celebrated as *Durchbruch* (breakthrough) suggests an analogy between these complementary experiences of writing and two rather unassuming passages from the *Diaries* that similarly communicate with each other as though unconsciously.⁷⁸ Kafka himself does not appear to bear the first in mind when he writes the second more than two years later. The passages in question present two opposing relationships to a speeding train. Bearing in mind that Kafka’s idealized act of writing is executed “*in einem Zug*” (*in one sitting, or in a single breath*), I would like to expose a veiled reference to *writing* in these two “train” passages by recalling that the phrase “*in einem Zug*” means literally to be on a train. Writing is done best, then, “on a train.” The enormous stylistic differences between the passages need not be dissembled: the first is drawn from loose notes Kafka takes of his observations in a train station in April 1915 while traveling with his sister Elli to visit her husband at the front; the second is a concise

⁷⁸ That is, the two passages in question complement each other just as Kafka’s account of his “breakdown” in 1922 complements what critics have called his “breakthrough” diary entry in 1912.

parable in which travel by train is used as a figure for something else. The passages are reproduced here, and referred to subsequently as 1) and 2):

- 1) The old couple weeping as they said good-bye. Innumerable kisses senselessly repeated, just as when one despairs, one keeps picking up a cigarette over and over again without being aware of it. They behaved *as if at home* [*Familienmäßiges Verhalten ohne rücksicht auf die Umgebung*]. *So it is in every bedroom* [*So geht es in allen Schlafzimmern zu*]. I couldn't make out her features [*Gesichtszüge*] at all, a homely [*unscheinbare* (inconspicuous)] old woman; if you looked at her face more closely, if you attempted to look at it more closely, it dissolved [*löst es sich förmlich auf*], so to speak, and only *a faint recollection* [*eine schwache Erinnerung*] of some sort of homely little ugliness remained, the red nose or several pockmarks, perhaps. He had a grey moustache, a large nose, and real pockmarks. Cycling coat and cane. Had himself well under control, though he was deeply moved. In sorrowful jest chucked the old woman under the chin. What *magic* [*Zauberei* (magic, sorcery, witchcraft, conjuring, juggling, sleight-of-hand)] there is in chucking an old woman under the chin. Finally they looked tearfully into each other's eyes. They didn't mean this, but it could be interpreted to mean: Even this wretched little happiness, the union [*Verbindung* (connection)] of us two old people, is destroyed [*gestört* (disturbed)] by the war.⁷⁹
- 2) Sit in a train [*In einem Eisenbahnzug sitzen*], *forget* the fact, live *as if at home* [*wie zuhause*], suddenly remember [*sich erinnern*], feel the onward-rushing power of the train, become a traveler, take a cap out of your bag, meet your fellow travelers more freely, warmly, urgently, be carried toward your destination by no effort of your own, feel this like a child, become a darling of the women, be in the thrall of the window's perpetual attraction, always have at least one hand extended on the window sill. More sharply oriented situation: *Forget that you forgot*, instantly become a child traveling alone on an express train around whom the car trembling with speed [*vor Eile zitternden Waggon*] materializes wondrously as if from the hand of a *magician* [*Taschenspieler* (suggesting *juggling*, but also *sleight of hand/legerdemain*); *Taschenspielerei* and *Zauberei* are synonyms].⁸⁰

There are several obvious points of contact between the two passages: both present figures who behave “as if at home” despite unfamiliar surroundings; secondly, both passages close with reference to magical conjuring. These echoes aside, the relationship between the two passages—as well as their relevance to the act of writing, which I hope to establish in what follows—is obscure.

⁷⁹ Kafka, *D* 336; *TB*, Band 3, 85, my emphases.

⁸⁰ Kafka, *D* 375, translation modified, my emphases; *TB*, Band 3, 146. The English translation of this passage falsely inserts directive conjunctions (and; but) that inhibit the onward-rushing speed of the first sentence in Kafka's German.

Passage 1) evidently registers a real event without literary flourish—and yet Kafka’s description of the mournful parting of two strangers is as much a parable about writing as passage 2), whose conspicuous formal attributes catch one’s eye. Of the old people who behave without regard for their alien surroundings (“just as when one despairs, one keeps picking up a cigarette over and over again without being aware of it”), Kafka writes: “*so it is in every bedroom.*” The reader will be surprised to learn that Kafka has experienced bedrooms in the ordinary way. Perhaps he means not that bedrooms are places where people can kiss comfortably, but rather that every bedroom is a train station—that bedrooms are places of estrangement in which lovers endlessly mourn their mutual loss and can do no better than to repeat futile, meaningless gestures in a failed effort to feel “as if at home.”

That Kafka’s description transports the couple out of the train station and into their bedroom instantly recalls us to the question of writing. In Kafka’s *Diaries*, it is always *the bedroom* that trembles as a mirage behind the scene of writing. The very condition of writing, according to Kafka, is to estrange oneself from one’s own bedroom through an over-production of familiarity. In the story of the descending angel discussed in the preceding chapter, the narrator “violently disturbs” his room by memorizing every detail of its interior in the course of pacing up and down. Kafka writes similarly of his first fiancée: “I alienate myself from her . . . by inspecting her so closely.”⁸¹ When Kafka writes about bachelors (avatars of the writer), he inevitably includes meticulous descriptions of their quarters.

⁸¹ Kafka, *D* 207.

The old couple in passage 1) is not at home; moreover they do not feel at home. Their “senselessly repeated” kisses strive to *conjure* a feeling of familiarity while being symptomatic of its absence. The kisses “senselessly repeated” erase context and meaning in their very attempt to construct it; they are equivalent to a *failure of writing*. The “senselessness” of these gestures contaminates Kafka’s description of the scene in turn. Thus when Kafka complains that they behave without consideration for their surroundings (“*ohne rücksicht auf die Umgebung*”), one wonders whether he is describing the old people or reproaching himself as writer who retains only “a faint recollection” of what he has seen. Unlike the “bachelor of writing” who details every features of his room, Kafka confesses that he “couldn’t make out [the old woman’s] features at all”; her face even “dissolves” beneath his closer inspection. The echo of “train” (*Zug*) in the word “features” (*Züge*) muddies her face behind the passage of trains in the station. Her obscured *Gesichtszüge* (facial features) stand in for Kafka’s uncertain *Schriftzüge* (strokes of the pen).

The couple’s endless kiss symbolizes the cozy familiarity that for Kafka is so hostile to the possibility of writing. Surely he cannot see the details of their faces because he sees only the backs of their heads. It is the kiss that clouds Kafka’s report by “dissolving” the woman’s face. When Kafka turns from his failed picture of the woman’s unreadable features to illustrate the man’s in every ugly detail, we shudder from the unremarked violence of writing that divides the two portraits—for before he can describe the man, Kafka must pry apart these old faces locked in a kiss.

The most noteworthy difference between passages 1) and 2) is the affect attached to the idea of the speeding train: the old couple in the first passage is doleful, resigned;

the subject in the second passage is carefree, delighting in the very experience of loss that the first passage mourns. The two passages flank a scene of separation that figures in neither. Passage 1) transpires before the implicit scene of departure, and forestalls the parting movement of the train; passage 2) commences when the scene of departure has already been *forgotten*. While “forgetting” in passage 1) is associated with a failure of writing, in passage 2) it serves as the positive *condition* of (re-)writing. Indeed, *recollection* and *forgetting* in passage 2) are not to be distinguished.

The narrator of passage 2)—which unfolds as a series of command statements leveled at the reader—bids us first to “forget” that we are on a train and to “live[s] as if . . . at home.” Yet when the narrator instructs us in the same breath to “suddenly recollect where [we] are,” our abrupt awareness of the discrepancy between “home” and “train” does not lead to a mournful nostalgia for *home* as it does in passage 1). Rather, our recollection that we are “not at home” yields the imperative *to become a traveler*. The narrator’s original command for us to “live as if . . . at home” has not been countermanded; the subsequent command to “become a traveler” facilitates our ongoing obedience to the first command by transforming us into one who is at home on the train. The scene of leave-taking that must have preceded this journey is elided: by “becoming a traveler,” redefining ourselves with respect to our movement, our identity is preserved and fortified by the very passage that might have left it behind or torn it in two.

The two old people of passage 1) are replaced in passage 2) by a person of unstated age who in the first sentence is “like” a child, and in the second, “more precise” restatement of the “same situation” is metamorphosed into a child traveling alone. In passage 1), the old man chucks the old woman under the chin as though she were a child;

his “jesting” chuck is however “sorrowful” because unlike in passage 2), the possibility of a transformation from old woman to child is denied. The blithe, future-oriented outlook of the child cannot be restored. The “magic” Kafka observes in this touching movement must therefore be seen as Kafka’s projection onto a scene in which magic *fails* to operate. The old man’s “sorrowful,” infantilizing gesture reinforces the grief of parting by drawing an analogy between the couple’s current loss of each other and their absolute loss of youth. The old woman does not metamorphose into a child; her sorrow cannot be erased by a playful chuck on the chin.

The couple’s compulsive gestures represent not only a failure of writing, but a failure to magically conjure the sense of “being at home.” The twin failures of *writing* and *magic* are reenacted as twin triumphs in passage 2). While the life of the old couple is torn asunder by the movement of the train, the child in the second passage is enclosed in the magic circle of the metaphor that houses him: the train carries him simultaneously forward and backward in time; he is transformed back into a child by the train’s forward progress. An impression of charmed motionlessness survives. This time, the “adult” operates as a phantom figure replaced instantly by the traveling child: there is no indication that this child suspended on the train will live to be old. (That depends perhaps on the length of his journey). Is the child in passage 2) joyful in its agelessness, or is this figure an enchanted old person who is “childlike” in his joy?

The old couple parts as lovers; the “child” magically conjured in passage 2) has no loved one, no home—as far as we know—from which to take leave mournfully. The vignette in passage 1) numbers among the few wartime observations to be found in the *Diaries*. Kafka imposes a kind of “moral” on the scene: “Even this wretched little

happiness, the union [*Verbindung* (connection)] of us two old people, is destroyed by the war.”⁸² In passage 2), the “lesson” learned in the prior scene of departure is upended: the child is a liberated traveler whose sovereignty is born through a *severing of connections* doubly severed in “forgetting” (“Sit in a train, forget the fact, live as if at home...”). Does the train transform the passenger into a child or is it *the child*, as novel being, who transforms the world and his experience of it into a string of images reeling past the windows of a speeding train? In the final clause of passage 2), it is the *train* that “materializes” around a child protagonist (“become a child traveling alone on an express train around whom the car . . . materializes . . . as if from the hand of a magician”). This is a metaphor in which “vehicle” and “tenor” are interchangeable. “Train” would be just a word, were it not set violently in motion by its hunt for a referent. Experience, reality, and fantasy are erased by an all-consuming change that is aligned with and realized through the writing of this passage. The passage of the train is foremost a *written* passage. Kafka as writer is the old couple, the child, and the magician at once.

Our juxtaposition of passages 1) and 2) raises a question that strikes at the heart of Kafka’s experience of writing: what is the relationship between writing, on the one hand, and the nebulous qualifier “*as if at home*” on the other—whether by this we mean *behaving* as if at home (as in the first passage) or *feeling* as if at home (as in the second)? The echoing phrase “as if at home” in the English translation is not repeated exactly in the German original. In the first passage, Kafka notes: “Family-like behavior without consideration for the surroundings,” though he recalls the family home by adding: “So it is in every bedroom”; the first sentence of the second passage urges us to “live as if at

⁸² Kafka, *D* 336; *TB*, Band 3, 85.

home,” though the second, “more precise” sentence eliminates any reference to home. Which of the echoing allusions to “home” is more unsettling? Or does one unsettle the other?

“...as if at home...”: Freud and Kafka Write the Train

In a letter to Milena several years later, Kafka offers an allegory of their letter correspondence in which the conventional sensation of “uncanniness” (or “un-homeyness” [*Unheimlichkeit*]) is reversed. According to Sigmund Freud, the feeling of uncanniness besets us when we suddenly recognize as familiar or known a place in which we do not feel at home; uncanniness overwhelms one who is unable to “feel” at home even in what should be the most familiar setting. Kafka is tormented to the contrary by *the feeling of being at home in a place where he doesn’t belong*. He likens himself to an animal living in shadow. Perceiving Milena in the light, the animal “[forgets] everything” and approaches her; in her hands it feels “*so much at home, again and again: so much at home...*”⁸³ But suddenly the happy animal “[remembers] who [he is].” Kafka summarizes his wounding revelation as “the nightmare (of feeling at home in a place one doesn’t belong)”; the reader’s trained ear retains only the most idiosyncratically Kafkan fragment of this sentence: *the nightmare of feeling at home*.⁸⁴ How different from the wonderment of the child on the train!

Passage 2) edits out all reference to “home” when the situation is restated “more precisely,” because for one who is “at home” in traveling, there is no longer any

⁸³ Kafka, *LM* 194, my emphasis.

⁸⁴ Kafka, *LM* 194.

difference between estrangement and familiarity. To ask whether the one who “become[s] a child . . . around whom the [train] car . . . materializes” is “at home” or not is the wrong question. Being at home is no longer an objective fact that can be verified; it is rather a feeling of familiarity in which the subject is well-tailored to his context. To be “at home” in this sense names *the impossibility of exile*. For the one who is no longer a child, there is perhaps never anything more than feeling “*as if* at home [*wie zuhause*].” Home dwells in the “as if”—a fact that consoles and threatens by turns.

Two years before his death, Kafka complains of himself that, like the old couple in passage *I*), he is unable to “create comfort” by conjuring a feeling of belonging in his environment. “The power comfort [*Behagen*] has over me, my powerlessness without it,” he writes, “I know no one in whom both are so great.”⁸⁵ (A boast lurks in this remark.) Minor interruptions of habit and routine therefore are devastating: “the maid who forgets to bring me my warm water in the morning *overturns my world*.” This is to say that Kafka is easily estranged: it takes more work to make him feel at home, as it were, than other people require. Kafka imagines the feeling of familiarity with his surroundings as something that *materializes* about him as though from a magician’s hand: “I have been under comfort’s constant harassment; it has deprived me not only of the strength to bear up under anything, but also the strength myself to create comfort; it creates itself about me of itself [*das Behagen*] *schafft sich um mich von selbst*...”⁸⁶ Kafka’s *comfort* [*Behagen*] converges with *discomfort* [*Unbehagen*]; comfort “harasses”

⁸⁵ Kafka, *D* 414; *TB*, Band 3, 221.

⁸⁶ Kafka, *D* 414; *TB*, Band 3, 221.

him. It is not that he *has no comfort*—the problem is rather that the feeling of being at home in the world is beyond his control.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*), Sigmund Freud begins by remarking that human efforts to alleviate discomfort (*Unbehagen*) might be viewed as a series of fruitless displacements: the very measures taken against discomfort constitute fresh sources of discomfort. For Freud as for Kafka, comfort and discomfort converge. “Is there, then,” Freud asks, “no unequivocal increase in my feeling of happiness, if I can, as often as I please, hear the voice of a child of mine who is living hundreds of miles away or if I can learn in the shortest possible time after a friend has reached his destination that he has come through the long and difficult voyage unharmed?” Freud captures the dubious “progress” of civilization in the image of a speeding train, which stands in for all modern inventions: “If there had been no railway to conquer distances, my child would never have left his native town and I should need no telephone to hear his voice...”⁸⁷ Kafka’s writing process, too, has been called a “modern invention,” or even “the invention of modernity” in prose. Kafka himself conveys a positive (familiar or comforting) and negative (discomforting or alien) experience of writing visualized on the model of a speeding train. The writer of “breakthrough” joyfully rides the train despite the writer of “breakdown” through whose frail body the train speeds unimpeded. Kafka imagines finding, in writing, solutions to the very pains and problems that writing causes him.

⁸⁷ Freud, Sigmund, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XXI: 1927-1931, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964), 88.

Kafka's despair over his incapacity to "create comfort" makes sense only insofar as the ability to manipulate and control his feeling of being "at home" is bound up with the power to write. His late remarks on creating comfort are the negative image of his despair over the possibility of writing. Why despair? Does Kafka not posit estrangement as the *condition of Schriftstellersein* (being-a-writer)? Is it not through an act of deliberate self-alienation from his surroundings that the writer is born? The writer's estrangement must be an intentional act. Kafka speaks of his banishment from the world—or else of his eagerness to escape the world, to live elsewhere, to flee in writing, through writing, to "another world."⁸⁸ The next best thing is however to remain in this world, in one's own bedroom, *as an alien*. These are equivalent possibilities. Recall the writer's "alien" presence at daybreak in the bedroom with the unused bed, which his inhuman needs did not require. Kafka wants "to go to another planet"; yet "it would . . . be enough if I could consider the spot on which I stand as some other spot."⁸⁹ The experience of "breakdown [*Zusammenbruch*]" Kafka undergoes in January 1922 is the negative image of a "breakthrough [*Durchbruch*]" that the writer has failed to appropriate and control—but to call it a "negative image" is already to distinguish too sharply between *breakdown* and *breakthrough*; the writer is never quite sure which of these

⁸⁸ "I lie here on the sofa, kicked out of the world..." (D 123-4); "...myself more and more unable to escape" (D 263); "...I am now a citizen of this other world, whose relationship to the ordinary one is the relationship of the wilderness to cultivated land... I look back at it like a foreigner..." (D 407); "...I am too far away, am banished..." (D 408); "I live elsewhere; it is only that the attraction of the human world is so immense..." (D 409); "Do I live in the other world, then? Dare I say that?" (D 409). This represents only a small sampling of numerous such references in the *Diaries* to "banishment" on the one hand, and "escape" on the other, in which the significance of "escape" and "exile" converge.

⁸⁹ Kafka, D 405.

experiences he is having, for to write is to suffer and to celebrate simultaneously the feeling of being “*as if* at home.”⁹⁰

Kafka, Adorno, Corngold: Three Perspectives on the Onrushing Train of Modern Prose

Theodor Adorno’s “Notes on Kafka” suggest that Kafka’s works violate the safe distance between text and reader, “victimizing” the reader, who “fears that the narrative will shoot towards him like a locomotive in a three-dimensional film.”⁹¹ This resonates with Brod’s claim that “The Judgment” “shoots” out of Kafka’s *Diaries* “like a jet of flame.” With reference to Adorno, Stanley Corngold writes that “to read ‘The Judgment’ is to experience a force like that . . . of an onrushing locomotive.”⁹² The reader’s experience thus characterized mirrors Kafka’s prior experience of writing. Adorno’s portrayal of the violent encounter between the reader and Kafka’s texts apparently is modeled after a passage from the *Diaries* in which Kafka describes his experience of writing in 1911, one year before his “breakthrough”:

Is it so difficult and can an *outsider* understand that you experience a story within yourself from its beginning, from the distant point up to *the approaching locomotives of steel, coal, and steam*, and you don’t abandon it even now, but want to be pursued by it and have time for it, therefore are pursued by it and of your own volition run before it wherever it may thrust and wherever you may lure it.⁹³

⁹⁰ The figure of the bachelor in Kafka is at home everywhere *because* he is at home nowhere. In 1911, Kafka writes that the “bachelor . . . apparently of his own free will resigns himself to an ever smaller space, and when he dies the coffin is exactly right for him” (*D* 131); by the same token, Kafka reports on the question he asks his bachelor uncle from Spain one year later: “I ask him: How is one to reconcile the fact that you are generally dissatisfied . . . and that nevertheless you are at home everywhere, as can be seen time and again. . .” (*D* 208).

⁹¹ Adorno, Theodor, “Notes on Kafka,” *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1997), 246.

⁹² Corngold, Stanley, *Franz Kafka: The Necessity of Form* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 24.

⁹³ Kafka, *D* 51, my emphases.

Those who have experienced the locomotive force of narrative, then, are not “outsiders.” Adorno and Corngold assume a position of enunciation, as readers and critics, that is situated within Kafka’s experience of writing.

For Kafka, too, the image of narrative as a speeding train fuses an experience of reading with an experience of writing. Kafka’s vision of narrative force as an “approaching locomotive” is inspired by his “reading about Dickens.”⁹⁴ It is unclear whether Kafka means to illustrate his “*reading* about Dickens,” or whether he means to identify with Dickens’ experience of writing as fellow writer. Kafka’s subsequent “breakthrough” can be viewed as a lived imitation of Dickens. Adorno and Corngold, for their parts, seem to be projecting themselves imaginatively into the beds of Kafka’s sisters, to whom he reads “The Judgment” aloud: and what if Adorno, Corngold, or even one of us had been lying in bed at daybreak on September 23rd, 1912 when Kafka made his trembling entrance into our room to read aloud “The Judgment” when it had never before been heard in this world? The young Kafka might as well have been an “onrushing locomotive” crashing through the bedroom door. Were his sisters excited, frightened or amused? Just as the complementary passages from Kafka’s *Diaries* sketch two opposing relationships to the image of a speeding train, the *affect* attached to this image of raw interpretive—or writerly—force must be a matter of perspective. To the boy on the train, its onrushing movement may be a way of flying, but the living room walls of the family he leaves behind have snagged on the wheels of the train; its forward locomotion tears open the magic circle of their domestic space.

⁹⁴ Kafka, *D* 51.

A third image is intimated by the constellation of these two perspectives: the image of a train that crashes through a wall to the utter surprise of those assembled inside, squealing to a precipitous halt on its side in the family living room. All three of these perspectives are given in Kafka's early story of a traffic accident (September 11, 1911).⁹⁵ In the collision between a rich man's modern motorcar and a poor delivery boy's bicycle, the rich man represents joy and freedom of movement (his car is undamaged); the poor boy represents collision as disaster (his bicycle is bent and useless); the gathering crowd of spectators represent the audience of a comedy who both empathize with the victim and delight in the entertaining spectacle of another's misfortune.

Kafka's own hesitation in choosing between these three perspectives is manifested in his inability to write the story of this accident. His abortive attempt to narrate the traffic accident is reflected (or anticipated) within the fictional reality by a policeman who arrives belatedly on the scene, "pulls an ancient, dirty, but blank sheet of paper out of his notebook," and begins to write "where for some reason or other he should not have begun." The policeman deserts this "incorrect beginning" in favor of a fresh attempt, but "cannot tell . . . where is the right place for him to go on."⁹⁶ Kafka is disturbed by how the story "detach[es] itself from [him]" when Brod reads it aloud;⁹⁷ yet from an outside perspective, it is the story's *inability* to detach itself from its author that

⁹⁵ The story is published in Kafka's *Travel Diaries* as an appendix to the *Diaries* (D 462-5).

⁹⁶ Kafka, *D* 464-5.

⁹⁷ Kafka, *D* 105.

betrays it as a series of false and “disconnected starts.”⁹⁸ Kafka’s failure to finish the story seems programmed by the fictional policeman’s failure to write an account of the accident; the policeman’s failure is anticipated in turn by the failure of the disorderly crowd of spectators to account for the accident before his arrival on the scene.

The whole failed story revolves around the problem of deciding *what perspective should be taken on the crash*. This discursive “accident”—a collision of words in which “one sentence rubs against another”—inspires Kafka’s fantasy of composing something “large and whole” that would “never be able to detach itself from [him]”; Kafka supposes it would then “be possible for [him] calmly and with open eyes, as a blood relation of a healthy story, *to hear it read...*”⁹⁹ Kafka’s emphasis on the ultimate possibility of hearing his story read suggests that he conceives of reading aloud as the climax of his ideal writing process as early as November 5th, 1911. One year previously, Kafka similarly metaphorizes his inability to write as a traffic accident: “When I sit down at the desk I feel no better than someone who falls and breaks both legs in the middle of the traffic of the Place de l’Opéra.”¹⁰⁰

Kafka entertains three perspectives, then, on modern writing as an onrushing locomotive: to joyfully power the train; to be torn apart by its forward movement; or to view the spectacle of the collision from a detached perspective and to laugh. Same situation more precisely stated: the writing bachelor is working through the night at his desk when all of a sudden a train hurtles through the far wall, crushing his thankfully

⁹⁸ Kafka, *D* 105.

⁹⁹ Kafka, *D* 105, my emphasis.

¹⁰⁰ Kafka, *D* 29.

unoccupied bed. This is an image taken straight from the old silent film comedies in which the impact of the fall, however shattering, is not in focus, nor the hardness of the ground, but only the elastic rebound of the clown. He clammers out of the accident to dust himself off unharmed. (Adorno, likewise, cannot resist the temptation to think Kafka's world together with an old film comedy, "Shopworn Angel," that Kafka never saw.)¹⁰¹

Kafka evokes all three of these perspectives on the speeding train in the famous letter to Milena in which he compares writing to an intercourse with ghosts: "Written kisses never arrive at their destination. . . . People sense this and struggle against it; in order . . . to attain a natural intercourse . . . *they have invented trains, cars, aeroplanes—* but nothing helps anymore: These are evidently *inventions devised at the moment of crashing.*"¹⁰² Writing metaphorized as a train crash is torture for Kafka in 1922. By way of this violent image, he excuses himself for having abandoned the correspondence with Milena (this isolated letter is dispatched after more than a year of silence).¹⁰³ Here, Kafka finally (if naively) rejects the possibility of a comedic response to writing-as-train-crash. In so doing, he answers once and for all a question that haunts his correspondence with Milena from beginning to end, and which each asks the other repeatedly: was this, that, or the other thing meant as a joke or seriously? (Scores of their letters revolve

¹⁰¹ Adorno, *Prisms* 271. The film was released in 1938. Hans Zischler's provocative book on Kafka and film ends with Kafka's infuriatingly unelaborated reference to the belated arrival of Charlie Chaplin's "The Kid" in Berlin; the quote gives no indication of whether Kafka *saw* the film or not. Cf. Zischler, Hans, *Kafka Goes to the Movies*, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 117.

¹⁰² Kafka, *LM* 223, my emphases.

¹⁰³ "Actually I don't have to apologize for not having written, after all, you know how much I hate letters. All my misfortune in life . . . derives, one might say, from letters or from the possibility of writing letters" (*LM* 223).

around the question of whether the other's previous letter should have provoked laughter or despair.) Kafka and Milena never develop a feeling for whether what the other has written is comedic or grave.¹⁰⁴

In silent film comedy, as in the torture chamber, it is the most familiar, intimate spaces of our quotidian world that become uncanny, unusable, hostile, threatening, and strange. The same repertoire of everyday objects serves as props: bed, chair, window, door, wall, wheel, mirror, knife.¹⁰⁵ Both torture and film comedy involve a certain rupture of the domestic spaces their settings recall, but while the torture chamber relies on the absolute *rigidity* of the interior—the unmovable firmness of the walls to which the victim is chained; the unyielding ceiling from which he is strung, the solidity of the institutions such structures represent—film comedies to the contrary hinge on the *flimsiness* of these same architectural structures, the collapse of which signifies the parallel crumbling of social institutions (learning, marriage, fatherhood). The ceiling joist from which a porch swing hangs breaks as soon as W. C. Fields sits down; a floor board, stepped upon, swings up to slap his face; the closed window against which he leans falls out of its frame. No institution, no language, no building is strong enough to protect the clown, to enclose him, to house him or to break his fall. The very ground declines to support him; it gapes open beneath his feet. This is the respect in which silent

¹⁰⁴ At the beginning of their correspondence, Kafka complains: "...you're taking all my stupid jokes . . . in earnest. I just wanted to make you laugh a little" (*LM* 46); at the end of their correspondence, he complains to the contrary that Milena takes what is earnest too lightly: "Wednesday's letter is funny? I'm not sure. I don't believe the funny letters anymore . . . even the most beautiful ones always contain a worm" (*LM* 186). For other references to jokes and joking versus gravity, cf. *LM* 19; 29; 34; 43; 44; 46; 57; 64; 66; 90; 104; 106-7; 110; 113; 141; 149; 158; 166; 167-8; 186; 180; 205; 225; and 227.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Elaine Scarry's illuminating analysis of torture in the first chapter of her book, *The Body In Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

comedies are magical: the clown is an inverse magician whose bumbles are executed with somnambulistic certainty—for each pothole in his path is conjured *just in time* for the clown to fall in it. His experience of failure and loss preserves serendipity through its negation. To make a rabbit disappear into a hat is just as magical as to pull one out, only the trick is rarely begun that way. The clown pulls all the magician's tricks, but in reverse—for the clown is a *passive* magician: he doesn't "trick," but "is tricked." Kafka incites us to the passive magic of writing with these words: "Sit in a train [*in einem (Eisenbahn)zug*] . . . let yourself be carried towards your destination by no effort of your own..."¹⁰⁶

When Buster Keaton and Fatty Arbuckle are shown in prison, the cell is bound to collapse, for the clown's world, like Kafka's, is a world full of holes. It deteriorates around him. Contrary to popular opinion, Kafka's world is closer to that of silent film comedies than to the world of torture: the structure of Kafka's world is inadequate and incomplete. Kafka's heroes, like clowns, are a very particular *type* of victim—slippery victims, the type of victim on whom the instruments of torture most often find no purchase. At the limit, one might suppose that the early comedies would all end with the total destruction of the set—a train crashing through the wall—the bungling clown free-floating in empty space without a tether. Can a world really be full of holes? Such observations are misled by the *illusion* of anarchy and chaos where there are none, for the clown is trapped squarely inside the frame. He is always still on film. Convention and structure are reaffirmed by the very *medium* through which their destruction is portrayed. We must recall here that when Kafka's bedroom ceiling ruptures to make way for the

¹⁰⁶ Kafka, *D* 375, my emphasis.

message-bearing angel, the room later appears intact, plastered over; the descending angel, from another perspective, is a piece of banal kitsch.

Returning to the parallel world of silent comic film: the question after all is not whether the clown exists in a world capable of enclosing him, but whether or not the clown is *at home* in his world full of holes. Is the clown who is “always still on film” therefore at home on film? This question goes unanswered only as long as the clown’s painless victimization unfolds in silence. There is no possibility in these early films of calling for help or screaming out in pain. Neither is there any laughter. Kafka’s act of writing is a mute drama starring an author in whose silent adventures—confined squarely in his bedroom—the comic and the uncanny seamlessly interweave. Kafka’s compulsion to read aloud his fictions counteracts his passive subjection to writing by reclaiming the intimate space from which writing estranges him.

The clown as “charmed victim” resembles the protagonist on the train in Kafka’s passage 2) above. The marveling child on the train embodies the writer who both feels at home and does not. His marvel is a charmed state in which the world “fascinates” him *because* it has become strange; nonetheless, the enchanted circle of his fascination protects him from the question of “home”—his memory of home dissolves in the words “as if...” and he forgets that he forgot. Kafka’s is a clown comedy acted from beyond the collapsing set. Kafka tries to enter this set through the holes in its walls. On which side of its provisional enclosure will he end up? Two of the most suggestive “last acts” of his writing process confirm that this remains, for Kafka, an open question: the castle (*das Schloß*) of his eponymous last novel might be transformed at any moment into a lock (*das Schloß*), and the creature of his late story “Die Bau” buried in its burrow.

4. “The Essence of Magic”

Given that the German phrase “in einem Zug” means not only “in a single breath” but also “on a train,” the modern reader might conclude anachronistically that breathing is grasped through the analogy of travel by train. The reverse obtains. The alien experience of modern travel is domesticated—its shock muted—only insofar as it is linked metaphorically to the ease and continuity of healthy human breathing, an experience too overwhelmingly familiar to surface in consciousness except when it is obstructed and makes a noise. The elusive “as if at home” simultaneously conjured and destroyed in Kafka’s *train* passages (discussed in the previous chapter) relies on the metaphorical link forged and broken between these gliding modern conveyances and human breath.

The analogy in German between breathing and travel by train recalls that the idealized scene of writing “The Judgment” in one sitting (*in einem Zug*) is not complete until Kafka has entered his sisters’ room to read the story aloud in one breath (*in einem Zug*). Since Kafka imagines writing as a particular kind of “magical act,” as we have shown, it comes as no surprise that magic according to Kafka, like writing, must be activated by the speaking voice. “Life’s splendor . . . lies in wait about each one of us in all its fullness [*in ihrer ganzen Fülle*],” Kafka writes, “[Life’s splendor is] *not deaf*.” He elaborates: “If you summon it by the right word, by its right name, it will come. This is *the essence of magic* [*das Wesen der Zauberei*], which does not create but *summons* [*die nicht schafft, sondern ruft*].”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Kafka, *D* 393; *TB*, Band 3, 189-90, my emphases. Directly preceding these words, Kafka writes: “Eternal childhood. Life calls again [*Wieder ein Ruf des Lebens*],” calling into question whether it is *the world* that “summons” the writer-magician or the writer-magician who “summons” the world. This

The word that most often heralds magical acts and magical experience in Kafka is the verb *to tremble* [*zittern*]. It is a “speeding, trembling car [*zitternde Waggon*]” that “materializes in its every fascinating detail” around the child on the train “as if out of a magician’s hand.”¹⁰⁸ In the “breakthrough” diary entry of September 23rd, 1912, Kafka similarly reports his “trembling entrance [*zitternde(s) Eintreten*] into [his] sisters’ room” at daybreak before reading aloud.¹⁰⁹ Kafka’s consummating act of reading aloud must be viewed as bearing “the essence of magic,” which “does not create but *summons*.” In the scene of reading aloud, the writer summons his “elsewhere” or “other world” by incanting the spell. His voice mends the very world that is punctured when he writes. This is to say that the writer who incants his works is more magician than clown: reading aloud is an active magic that counters the passive magic of writing.

Kafka’s ecstatic account of how he writes “The Judgment” is recorded in his diary only *after* he has read the story aloud. The distance between writing fiction and reading aloud is even less than the distance between writing fiction and writing in the diary—a distance already so small that critics, along with Kafka himself, have been unable to measure it. It is remarkable that Kafka inserts the scene of reading aloud *between* the scene of writing fiction and the scene of writing about writing fiction in his diary. Insofar as we are left with only the written pages of the diary, Kafka’s intervening recitation, *which divides two of his most famous entries*, is easily overlooked. It is as though one of

confusion is entirely in keeping with Kafka’s general conception of his creative experience as something passively undergone. Agency in Kafka’s works is forever being passed around; the writer’s avatars cannot escape it quickly enough.

¹⁰⁸ Kafka, *D* 375; *TB*, Band 3, 146, my emphasis.

¹⁰⁹ Kafka, *D* 213; *TB*, Band 2, 101, my emphasis.

the functions of his lecture (*Vorlesung*) is to make a clean cut between the draft version of “The Judgment”—which he composes in the pages of his diary—and the journal entry *about* writing “The Judgment” that directly follows the full text of the story. It may be that Kafka reads the story aloud to his sleepy sisters in order to clip what Brod refers to as his “first completed story” out of the diary in which it rubs shoulders with numerous fragmentary stories and diverse entries of a non-fictional nature. The *Vorlesung* also substitutes for the umbilical cord it clips; it connects the story to its audience in the world. Such impressions are speculative.

Still, when Kafka rifles through the *Diaries* for passages he can read aloud to Max, he waffles.¹¹⁰ Nothing seems good enough to read; neither does anything deserve to be thrown out. Why is Kafka so anxious about the harmless prospect of reading aloud? If Kafka reads aloud writings that are not ready to be born, then the act of reading aloud might *lose* its magical power as incantation to “summon” a world capable of breathing—and conversely, a world in which its author can breathe and live. Since writing fragments the world that struggles toward expression, the subsequent act of reading aloud must preserve at all costs its magical capacity to deliver a “coherent” world seamless and undamaged...

When a story *is* primed for oral deliver, on the other hand (like “The Judgment”), nothing is more urgent. Perhaps this is why there is no indication that Kafka knocks before his “trembling entrance into [his] sisters’ room.” The delivery of a message from

¹¹⁰ The pressure of being *expected* to read aloud indeed blocks Kafka from writing: “How am I to read to M. or even think, while writing down what follows, that I shall read it to him. / Besides, I am disturbed by my having leafed through the diary this morning to see what I could read to M. ...the sight of the mass of what I had written diverted me almost irrecoverably from the fountainhead of my writing...” (*D* 158).

outside is most often announced acoustically in Kafka by a knock on the door. Knocking figures prominently in Kafka's diaries from October 1913 through August 1917.

Knocking enters the diary in the form of "a language" devised by Kafka and his love interest at a health resort in Riva—a language "whose meaning we never definitely agreed upon," causing Kafka to leap at the sound of every "chance knock" that rings through the girl's floorboards into his room.¹¹¹ But these "knocks" that begin as the palpitations of a lusting heart gain menacing overtones as the finite "ticking" of the human clock, until finally the illegible "language of knocks" is given a focused, monolithic meaning in Kafka's tale of "a singular judicial procedure," which appears to be an early draft of his story "In the Penal Colony": "A knock is heard," he writes, "it is the executioner."¹¹²

The figure of *knocking* in Kafka's diaries between 1913 and 1917 recalls the earlier scene in which Kafka writes "The Judgment" in a single seamless movement, stands up, and enters his sisters' room trembling with excitement and perhaps exhaustion to read the story aloud without pause. Knocking therefore marks a provisional division in space as well as a possible interruption in the "coherent," "continuous" process Kafka earlier idealizes as *the only way in which writing can be done*. Knocking is one of the tropes that bind together the spatial and acoustic dimensions of the Kafkan scene of writing, but in this respect it opposes the act of reading aloud. Knocking signals the point at which an intrusion, interruption, or violation of an enclosed space is possible; reading aloud instead reverberates against the walls of a locked chamber, and aims to dissemble

¹¹¹ Kafka, *D* 234.

¹¹² Kafka, *D* 368.

the points at which interruption would be possible. If it is true that Kafka doesn't knock before entering his sisters' room—and his knock, if it sounds, is in any case edited out of his account—this must be because to knock would have allowed Kafka's sisters the possibility of not opening the door. The angel that Kafka later imagines descending through the ceiling to “announce . . . whatever it [has] to announce” does not knock; a messenger who knocks may be turned away before he can deliver.¹¹³

¹¹³ Kafka, *D* 291.

5. Pulsions of the Plastic Voice: Reading Aloud Between Felice and Fiction

The most euphoric passage to be found in Kafka's letters to Felice—the only occasion on which Kafka nearly “forgets himself”—is his letter of December 4th-5th, 1912, in which he conveys a childhood fantasy of “reading aloud in a large, crowded hall . . . the whole of [Gustave Flaubert's] *Education sentimentale* without interruption, for as many days and nights as it would require, in French naturally . . . making the walls reverberate,” an undertaking for which the young daydreamer equips himself with “somewhat greater strength of heart, voice, and intellect” than he boasts at the time.¹¹⁴ Kafka recalls this early fantasy upon realizing a modest version of it: he writes to Felice directly after reading aloud his own story “The Judgment,” in place of Flaubert, to an audience of friends. “I am devilishly fond of reading aloud,”¹¹⁵ he writes, “Whenever I have given a talk . . . I have felt this elation, and this evening was no exception.”¹¹⁶ Nor does Kafka merely *read* into the crowd of “expectant and vigilant ears”¹¹⁷: following Flaubert's famous practice, he “bellows” into them, “blasting away” the competing strains of music from an adjoining room. To “bellow” into the attentive organs of one's

¹¹⁴ Kafka, Franz, *Briefe an Felice und andere Korrespondenz aus der Verlobungszeit*, ed. Erich Heller and Jürgen Born (New York and Frankfurt: SchockenBooks, Inc., 1967), 155, my translation. In translating selections from this text, I have consulted the published English translation: *Letters to Felice*, trans. James Stern and Elisabeth Duckworth (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 86.

¹¹⁵ Kafka, *Briefe an Felice* 155: “...ich lese nämlich höllisch gerne...”

¹¹⁶ Kafka, *Letters to Felice* 86.

¹¹⁷ Kafka, *Briefe an Felice* 155: “...vorbereitete und aufmerksame Ohren...”

listeners “does the poor heart such good.”¹¹⁸ As far as we learn from his letters, nothing gives Kafka greater pleasure.

In the context of a love-correspondence, this fantasy constitutes a remarkable confession: despite Kafka’s complaints about the long separation from Felice (the *Letters*’ whinging refrain), the impossibility of visiting Berlin, his express desire, indeed, to “read aloud” his stories to her in person rather than abandoning them to the post,¹¹⁹ the situation could not have been more ideal: the distance between them requires the author, according to the letter of his wish, to address Felice in a great, booming voice. The ecstatic tone of this rare letter—its euphoric bellowing—might have distracted Felice from the relation between whispering and intimacy buried just beneath its surface: otherwise it must have struck a dissonant chord. Kafka’s most vivid, vibrant, and resonant fantasy enforces the greatest possible remove of the “receptive audience” it simultaneously requires. The “bellowing” voice that “shakes the walls” is a hand that boxes the thronging ears. Kafka screams to drive his listeners away. The ears are filled; the room is emptied: a “breathing space” is carved out in the crowded hall. This, at any rate, would be the unspoken content of the fantasy.

¹¹⁸ Kafka, *Briefe an Felice* 155: “brüllen”; “fortgeblasen”; “...in vorbereitete und aufmerksame Ohren der Zuhörer zu brüllen, tut dem armen Herzen so wohl.”

¹¹⁹ Cf. Kafka’s letter of Nov. 23, 1912: “How could I give it to you to read, even if it were finished? It is rather illegible, and even if that weren’t an obstacle—up to now I certainly haven’t spoiled you with beautiful writing—I don’t want to send you anything to read. I want to read it to you. Yes, that would be lovely, to read this story to you, while I would have to hold your hand, for the story is a little frightening. It is called *Metamorphosis*...” (*Letters to Felice* 58).

Kafka often writes of the quest to find “a breathing space.”¹²⁰ This quest is usually understood as the search for an empty, uncluttered or un-colonized space replete with “fresh air.” Such a reading assumes an exteriority, or a beyond, that is nowhere to be found in Kafka’s hermetically sealed works. The atmosphere in the vicinity of the Castle, or of the Law with its courts and attic offices, is chokingly close, but Kafkan atmospheres all stifle to varying degrees. Windows are fogged by the traffic of bodies and the words they exchange. Air can be at best *relatively* fresh. What if “breathing space” in Kafka is not a space that affords breath, but a breath that affords space? The crowning importance of the scene of reading aloud that is continuous with Kafka’s writing process suggests as much. It is literally by exhaling, with noise, speech or song, that Kafka’s protagonists hollow out a space in which to live. The more forcefully they exhale, the further the reach of the whisper or the scream, the more room they will have in which to move about. The Kafkan “interior space” or “confinement” is the volume of the lungs turned inside out: the voice as habitation. Kafka’s first “draft” is vivified by a second “draught” of air from the lungs. The connection between *reading aloud* and the “as if at home” from Kafka’s two “Zug” passages (“train” or “exhalation”) is reaffirmed: to read aloud *in einem Zug* is to summon by continuous exhalation a space in which to *live*. (Less optimistically, it is to summon a space that Kafka occupies “as if” living, or in his words, “as if at home.”)

¹²⁰ In his *Diaries*, for instance, Kafka likens his beleaguered existence as a writer to a quest for breathing space: “. . . I cannot escape either to the right or to the left—straight on only, starved beast, lies the road to . . . air that you can breathe. . .” (*D* 412). On the dialectic of fresh and stifling air, cf. Kafka’s diaries, letters, novels, and many of his stories (e.g. “A Report to an Academy”; “Investigations of a Dog”; “The Burrow”; etc.)

Playing on the double meaning of “volume” as a measure of *space* and the *sound* that fills it, we must remark that the volume of the voice in Kafka is an index of the distance between speaker and listener, or else of the subjective *experience* of this distance—though it is an index that cannot be read. “Loud voice” indicates ambiguously that speaker and listener stand at a great remove, or that the listener’s hearing (like a dog’s) is preternaturally acute, or that the speaker is defending himself against a listener whose proximity he cannot bear. Thus the voice is *plastic*: not only an “index” of distance, but a material obstacle with weight and force to be strategically deployed. To whisper is to seize one’s listeners and draw them near. To shout is to injure, forcing the listener’s retreat—unless he is hard of hearing.¹²¹

In Kafka’s parable “The Silence of the Sirens,” the question of volume finds its limit case in a battle of deafness and silence. Only Ulysses’ “childish measure” of stopping his ears with wax saves him from the Sirens’ most fatal weapon: “their silence.”¹²² What noise would they have made if not for this mummery? Would the Sirens have sung their mythical song, or passed a Kafkan judgment instead? The silence of Kafka’s Sirens links them to the court painter Titorelli’s serial portraits of judges in

¹²¹ To be deaf in Kafka is both a weakness and a powerful self-defense: to be *invulnerable*, the Kafkan authority figure need not be dead. Perhaps Kafka’s heroes admit no guilt because they occupy what Walter Benjamin identifies as a prehistoric swamp world, in which no one has yet managed to kill the “primal father,” or has even contemplated the crime. (Cf. Benjamin, Walter, “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death” and “Some Reflections on Kafka,” *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 111-140 and 141-146 respectively.) Kafkan Law is absolute not because its author is dead, but because its author is *deaf*: inaccessible to protest. This is the threat that lurks in Kafka’s optimistic statement that the world is “not deaf” . . . “if you summon it by the right word...” (Kafka, *D* 393, my emphasis). The Kafkan hero, likewise deaf to the inner “voice” of guilt, has yet to “internalize” a Law that surrounds him as a web of red tape: not psychically “inhibited,” but physically hindered in his movements.

¹²² Kafka, Franz, “The Silence of the Sirens,” *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 430-1.

The Trial, who lunge forward in their seats, frozen mouths poised forever on the verge of delivering a verdict that would have to rip through the surface of the canvas to be heard.¹²³ Ulysses spares himself Josef K.'s disappointment: he stops his ears against the longed-for performance he would be denied.

Ulysses' earplugs still beg the psychological question: can the psyche "defend itself" except against threats that are already known? A Ulysses, or a Josef K., might plug his ears and sing at top lung with an impudent exuberance, perhaps even with "childlike" glee, but not *spontaneously*. The *cunning* of Kafka's "childlike" and "animal" heroes betrays them as already or still human. As every child knows, to plug one's ears is not to escape the judgment of a familiar voice, both terrible and tired, but to provoke authority to speak all the louder—probably to scream. The child's jubilant singing mingles with a "judgment" that has already been heard and will be heard again: to escape, but also to engage,¹²⁴ to escalate. The volume of the voice is an *illegible* index of the relations between speaker and listener, and of their relative frailty and force.

If Kafka's cherished fantasy of reading aloud to a receptive audience is ever to be realized, a piece of fiction must be completed first: otherwise he will have nothing to read. All of Kafka's anxieties about the writing process, his fear of being unable to complete the works he begins, etc., manifest themselves in his fictions—on the level of content—in the form of countless, proliferating obstacles that stand in the way of Kafka's

¹²³ The "radiance" in Ulysses' eyes likewise links him to Josef K. of *The Trial*, in which it is said of all "arrested" criminals that the state of being accused makes their eyes shine.

¹²⁴ Kafka's engagement to Felice might be read in *military* terms. The love letters to Felice wage a war of rhetoric and strategy in which Kafka fights for and against himself as much as for and against Felice. The military aspects of the engagement might be emphasized, in English, if one were to insist on describing its dissolution as a withdrawal of "troops," by way of the verb "to disengage."

guiding fantasy of reading the finished works aloud in a bellowing voice to an attentive audience. His fictions are filled with scenarios that can be read as versions of this core fantasy distorted by the fear of its impossibility.

Among such botched, perverted, and stalled versions, we find scenes in which someone reads, or defends himself, or speaks, despite lacking an “attentive audience”; scenes in which someone listens attentively despite lacking anything to be heard; audiences who are hard of hearing, or infinitely remote, or plugging their ears to block the sound; speakers who are weak-lunged, or infinitely remote, who speak like insects or foreigners, incomprehensible or inaudible in their performances. We also find mismatched, jumbled versions of the fantasy: two subjects speaking at the same time; or two subjects who listen vigilantly to each other listening: the infelicitous confrontation of two speakers, or two attentive audiences, rather than the ideal pairing of speaker with audience. In these latter, “jumbled” versions of what I have called Kafka’s “core fantasy” of reading aloud, the scene of performance and reception is replaced by a scene of *mirroring* or *aping*. Regarding the fantasy of reading aloud, we find no wish fulfillments represented in the fictions. Insofar as the *writing process itself* stands between Kafka and his fantasy of reading aloud, he can write only about the *blocking* and *forestalling* of the fantasy’s fulfillment.

It is fundamentally impossible for Kafka to “break through” the obstruction of the writing process. By reading aloud his works, Kafka endeavors to change his perspective on an experience of writing he characterizes as a “train wreck.” To say that Kafka’s writing *aims* at the culminating scene of reading aloud is also to say that the extra-literary act of recitation attempts to repair the event of writing as though by magic—but always

arrives too late. The memory of the fantasy of reading aloud Flaubert, together with the memory of its impoverished or displaced realization when Kafka reads aloud “The Judgment”—as *breakthrough*—haunts Kafka’s texts like a nostalgic and hallucinatory ideal that can never again be achieved. The scene of reading aloud lies just beyond the writer’s reach.

6. The Advocate (*Der Fürsprecher*) Summons Anxiety with “A Perfect Fool”

Kafka’s guiding desire to read aloud his fictions cannot be enjoyed straightforwardly as a wish fulfillment because it is riddled with guilt from the start—both sexual guilt and a *writer’s* guilt surrounding the question of authorship. Kafka’s cathartic reading-aloud connects him erotically to a rapt audience of sisters and female lovers, but it also allows his narcissistic identification (equally erotic in tone) with other male writers whom he dreams of imitating and surpassing. Kafka’s failure to distinguish his own writings from those of other authors in his fantasy of reading aloud can be seen in the easy transition his December 4th-5th, 1912 letter to Felice makes between his actual reading of his story “The Judgment” and his fantasized reading of Flaubert’s novel, *L’éducation sentimentale*. Kafka believes that he “fuses” with the texts he reads aloud¹²⁵—yet he can never quite shrug the fear that in writing, as in reading aloud, he acts as a lawyer or advocate (*Fürsprecher*) who speaks on behalf of a silent other whose voice will never be heard. Kafka cannot shrug the suspicion that he is a dummy to his own voice.¹²⁶ The dreaded *silence* of the other authors *for whom he speaks* infects Kafka’s joyful act of reading aloud. His fantasy of reading aloud in a great booming voice is contaminated by the guilt of what we might call his “creative imitation” of Flaubert.

The thematic strands of “imitation” and of “reading aloud” arise separately in Kafka’s *Diaries*. They are not united explicitly until the story dated February 27th and 28th, 1912, which has been titled “A Perfect Fool” in the English translation edited by Max Brod. It may be that Kafka’s guilt attaches originally to the theme of *imitation*, and

¹²⁵ I will revisit and elaborate this point shortly.

¹²⁶ Thanks are due to Professor Lance Duerfahrd of Purdue University for suggesting this formulation.

threatens his fantasy of reading aloud only when the latter is drawn into an associative connection with the idea of imitation. At any rate, the primary models for Kafka's literary "imitation" are his favorite authors, including Flaubert, whose works Kafka dreams of reciting. The two themes, then, are never far apart.

It is unclear whether the story-like entry called "A Perfect Fool" is autobiographical or fictional, just as it is unclear whether Kafka can be identified more easily with the lawyer-narrator of the story or with the young stranger who accosts him on the street to beg his legal advice. Neither is the reader sure which one of these two characters is the most "perfect fool." The lawyer-narrator agrees to hear the young man out, but denies [*leugnen*] that he is a lawyer out of "fear that [he] might make a fool of [himself] [*sich blamieren*]." ¹²⁷ The narrator is not the only possible fool: shortly thereafter, the young man is described as a "good reciter" who "makes a fool of the public [*macht sich aus dem Publikum einen Narren*]" by suggesting connections and continuity between the far-flung authors whose works he reads aloud. ¹²⁸ Upon finally disbursing his advice, the narrator goes home having experienced "how refreshing it is to speak with a perfect fool [*mit einem vollkommenen Narren*]." ¹²⁹ The "fool" after whom Brod names the story might be the narrator, the young man, or anyone who listens to his recitations.

The identity of the "fool" in this story is passed around according to the same logic of splitting and doubling that governs Kafka's reflections on "imitation." I will

¹²⁷ Kafka, *D* 184; *TB*, Band 2, 39.

¹²⁸ Kafka, *D* 184; *TB*, Band 2, 40.

¹²⁹ Kafka, *D* 189; *TB*, Band 2, 47.

canvass these reflections briefly before revisiting the fool's tale. Imitation as Kafka understands it is not secondary to an "original" other; imitation is instead an original self-division of the one who "imitates." On September 30th, 1911, Kafka recalls one of his tendencies: "...I too have a pronounced capacity to metamorphose myself [*Verwandlungsfähigkeit*], which no one notices. How often I must have imitated Max [*nachmachen*]." It is not only his *friends* who do not notice Kafka's imitation: Kafka embodies others so fully that he must escape his own perspective to appreciate the effect: "Yesterday evening . . . if I had observed myself from the outside I should have taken myself for Tucholsky [of whom Kafka notes his 'clear voice' and desire 'to be a defense lawyer']. *The alien being must be in me*, then, as distinctly and invisibly as the hidden object in a picture-puzzle, where, too, one would never find anything if one did not know that it is there [*Das fremde Wesen muß dann in mir so deutlich und unsichtbar sein...*]." ¹³⁰

Involuntary Imitation

For Kafka to refer to this phenomenon with the active verb "to imitate" is already a defense against the experience of radical self-alienation he describes. It is not that he imitates another person—it is that something alien *inhabits* Kafka unpredictably and in excess of his will. Exactly three months later (December 30th, 1911), he remarks that his "drive to imitate [*Nachahmungstrieb*] has nothing of the actor in it." Chiefly missing is "unity" or "homogeneity [*Einheitlichkeit*]." ¹³¹ While the actor's imitation is unified at

¹³⁰ Kafka, *D* 58, translation modified, my emphasis; *TB*, Band 1, 40.

¹³¹ Kafka, *D* 156; *TB*, Band 1, 255.

the very least by his *intention to act*, Kafka cannot impose any such self-presence on the “inner imitation” he undergoes. It runs contrary to Kafka’s nature to imitate *obvious*, *striking* traits (“such *attempts* [*Versuche*] have always failed”). He “is moved [driven or impelled (*es drängt mich*)]” rather to imitate the most overlookable details (“the way certain people . . . hold their hands, the movements of their fingers”); yet this he does *effortlessly* (*Müheless*).¹³² Kafka suggests that he imitates behaviors so trivial that they escape the notice of imitated and imitator alike. Such behaviors—which are *not* “striking [*auffallend*]”—reproduce themselves in the “imitator,” as it were, under cover of their very marginality. The imitated reproduces itself in the imitator under cover of his *failure to notice that—and what—he is imitating*.

Such imitation is made possible by a failure of attention: a failure to notice and to observe. If Kafka conceives of the writer as one who attends to his surroundings so closely that he alienates himself from them, then “imitation” names the limit of the possibility of writing. The *writer* estranges himself from his bedroom through an incredible mental exertion and remains painfully conscious of the alien status he gains; the *imitator* slips into a state of self-alienation without realizing what has happened. The all-too-fine distinction between writing and imitation raises a Kafkan problem we have encountered already: that the writer may be unsure whether or not he is writing (impersonally or “passively” put, he may be unsure whether or not writing is taking place).

Kafka writes that the “effortlessness” of his imitation “reflects itself in the fact that *no one* is aware that I am imitating.” He refers so far only to his would-be audience,

¹³² Kafka, *D* 157, my emphases; *TB*, Band 1, 255.

though we discern in this “no one” a shadow of Kafka himself. When he draws a distinction between “external” and “internal” imitation [*äußerliche* and *innerliche Nachahmung*], it is the latter, more radical form of imitation that drives his remarks:

Far beyond this external imitation, however, goes the inner, which is often so striking and strong that there is no room at all within me to observe and verify it [*in meinem Innern gar kein Platz bleibt diese Nachahmung zu beobachten und zu konstatieren*], and it first confronts me in my memory. But here the imitation is so complete and replaces my own self with so immediate a suddenness that, even assuming it could be made visible at all, it would be unbearable on the stage.¹³³

Kafka diverts his reflections into a speculative theory of spectatorship in the theatre.¹³⁴

For our purposes here, his unique experience of *involuntary imitation* is more to the point. Kafka’s “drive to imitate” is “effortless” not in the sense that he is practiced and skilled, but in the sense that his imitations are beyond his conscious control. Insofar as he recognizes his “inner imitation” only retrospectively, Kafka’s “imitation” is a retroactive self-splitting that severs him from his own experience. Kafka’s “imitation” is the belated revelation that he has been *inhabited by an alien being* without being aware of it, that he is powerless and will be powerless against an alien presence that replaces him at any moment without warning.

In his own account of the matter, Kafka begins as a quasi-actor who is the subject and master of “imitation” only to be supplanted by an alien agency that *imitates itself* in

¹³³ Kafka, *D* 157; *TB*, Band 1, 256.

¹³⁴ James Rolleston has analyzed this and other passages in his excellent discussion of Kafka’s “narrative theatre” (cf. *Kafka’s Narrative Theatre* 38-9). Rolleston focuses on Kafka’s idea of “imitation” with respect to acting and the theatre; he does not discuss how Kafka’s ideas about theatre are drawn out of Kafka’s remarks on his own behavioral “imitation” of friends, nor does he propose the connection between Kafka’s thoughts on social “imitation” and literary “imitation” in the *Diaries*. In an earlier chapter of his book, however, Rolleston cites Kafka’s complaint that his story “The Stoker” is a “sheer imitation of Dickens” (Rolleston 18). The repetition of this key word indicates the confluence of these two contexts (involuntary impersonation and writing) in which imitation occurs.

his stead. And who is to say that Kafka “himself” is not an imitation? When for example he “acts his part” in the protracted breakup with Felice, his “acting” survives in the trace form of a headache.¹³⁵ One wonders whether Kafka’s headache is not the last fading trace of his *real self*, rather than, as he writes, “the last trace in me of my acting.” He connects the theme of “imitation” to his literary efforts when he later admonishes himself to “give up too those nonsensical comparisons you like to make between yourself and a Flaubert, a Kierkegaard, a Grillparzer”; “The comparison with Grillparzer is valid, perhaps, but,” he interrogates himself further, “you don’t think Grillparzer worthy of imitation [*nachahmenswert*], do you?”¹³⁶ Kafka questions himself in the second person, *from beyond experience*, as though in conversation with the alien being that inhabits him and imitates other writers against his will.¹³⁷

The question Kafka asks himself about whether or not Grillparzer is “worthy of imitation” takes for granted that one’s *literary* “imitations” can be controlled—an assumption that is contested both by the fact that Kafka addresses himself as “you” in the same passage, and by Kafka’s earlier reflections on his involuntary imitation of friends in his immediate social circle. It is worth emphasizing that the radical problems raised by the possibility of involuntary imitation emerge in Kafka’s *Diaries* most explicitly not in the context of literary imitation or poetic influence, but in the context of imitation amongst members of a social group. We may dispute where and to what extent Kafka “imitates” or “borrows” from Grillparzer or Flaubert, and to what extent he is conscious

¹³⁵ Kafka, *D* 385.

¹³⁶ Kafka, *D* 369-70; *TB*, Band 3, 138.

¹³⁷ One year later, he imagines “consulting” with this echo of his own voice as to “how I might get rid of him” (Kafka, *D* 375).

of his debt, but there can be no doubt that Grillparzer and Flaubert do not borrow from Kafka. Imitation in this case succeeds the original. In the case of contemporaneous imitation amongst friends, however, the distinction between “imitator” and “imitated” is radically compromised. How does Kafka know that he imitates the hand movements, gestures, and bearing of his comrades and not the reverse?

Most remarkable is the way in which Kafka defends himself against the consequences of involuntary imitation by claiming that imitation is his *intention* and “talent”—notwithstanding that he is unaware of his imitations until after the fact. In writing, Kafka attempts to master an inclination to imitate others that might otherwise be identified as a kind of social imprinting that binds members of a group to one another by determining through a system of unconscious cues who belongs to the group and who does not. A practice of mutual imitation without identifiable origin fosters cohesion amongst members of a social group; it is the warp and woof of social feelings. Kafka might as easily have imitated his cohorts without ever becoming aware of it; such imitation might even have fostered in him a not-quite-conscious nod of familiarity or sense of belonging (this is how *we* move our hands; this is how *we* cross our legs). Those who belong in a social group imitate each other in subtle ways without having to think about it; only an outsider and alien ‘intentionally’ imitates others in his doomed effort to pass.

Instead of abandoning himself to involuntary imitation, however, Kafka suffers from a feeling of intense self-alienation when he realizes—belatedly—that he has been subject to social imprinting. Rather than relishing a sense of belonging, he accuses himself, in writing, of “inner imitation”; he apprehends and puts on trial *as an alien being*

the part of himself that effortlessly “fits in” with others. Although Kafka considers the more radical idea of “inner” or involuntary imitation only in the context of social life, and not with respect to his writing, his writings nevertheless invite an application of Kafka’s unique concept of “inner imitation” to his literary imitations, influences, and borrowings. The verb “to imitate [*nachahmen*]” is the key word in Kafka’s *Diaries* for “imitation” in both contexts. Kafka’s concept of “inner imitation” invites one to theorize his writing process, too, as a kind of original plagiarism or original translation.

Original Plagiarism

The story fragment “A Perfect Fool” makes the connection between writing and imitation; moreover, it demonstrates more clearly than any other passage from the *Diaries* how Kafka’s fantasy of reading aloud is contaminated by the guilt of involuntary imitation. The success of reading-aloud as a “consummation” of Kafka’s writing process is thereby endangered, because the guilt that infects the fantasy of reading aloud limits its possibility of success.

In “A Perfect Fool,” as previously noted, a young man accosts the narrator to tell him the garbled story of recent events in his life, regarding which he seeks legal advice. We gather eventually that the young man’s story involves a case of suspected plagiarism, and further, that his exaggerated fear of plagiarism is tangled up in his imagination with his own talent for reading aloud works by other authors. The narrator paraphrases for us the details of the stranger’s story. We learn straight away that “he is a good reciter.” He brags that he “can already imitate [*nachmachen*] Kainz” so well that “no one can tell the difference.” Although “people may say he *only imitates*”—presumably because no one can “tell the difference”—the young man stresses that he “puts in a lot of his own too [*er*

*gibt doch auch viel eigenes].*¹³⁸ We are left to assume that his original embellishments go unremarked.

The definition of “plagiarism” is called into question by this strange reversal. The ordinary plagiarist tries to pass off the work of other writers as his own. This man to the contrary tries to pass off his own writing as the work of other authors. He is a “forger” of prose. There exists no word in our language for such inverse plagiarism. It might be called “false attribution” or “deliberate mis-citation”—related to but not identical with a kind of literary libel. The young imitator ostensibly has the best intentions: he does not wish “to make fools” of other authors, as far as we know, but *to write with them*. It is as though the famous authors of the past, whose works he modifies and reads aloud, were made to plagiarize the inventive young man anachronistically and against their will. By discretely rewriting their works, this man forces his favorite authors into acts of involuntary and posthumous plagiarism. He puts words in their mouths. He authorizes texts in the names of the dead.

The young man’s story is difficult to summarize because each sentence pushes the plot further while revising previous claims. Either he struggles to hide from the narrator as much as he discloses, or he is unaware of his motivations. It all begins when the young reciter offers himself to the Women’s Progress for an evening recitation of *Eine Gutsgeschichte* by Lagerlöf. When chairwoman Durège-Wodnanski judges the Lagerlöf story “too long to be read [aloud],” they agree on an alternate program of poems, epigrams and the like by Dehmel, Rideamus and Swet Marten. But in order “to show Mrs. Durège in advance the sort of person he really [is],” he brings her the manuscript of

¹³⁸ Kafka, *D* 184; *TB*, Band 2, 40.

an original essay, “The Joy of Life [*Lebensfreude*],” in which he appeals to youth not to be sad, “for after all there is nature, freedom, Goethe, Schiller, Shakespeare, flowers, insects, etc.”¹³⁹ (The likes of Dehmel, Rideamus, and Swet Marten do not make the list.) Mrs. Durège arouses the young man’s suspicion when she denies having time to read his essay just then, and asks him to leave it behind.

On Sunday morning, he opens the *Tagblatt* by chance to a piece entitled “The Child as Creator [*Das Kind als Schöpfer*]” and breaks down in tears of joy, for “it is his essay, word for word his essay [*wortwörtlich sein Aufsatz*].” His initial joy, however, is infected by doubts: how did his essay appear in the paper without his consent, without his name, and without his being paid a fee?¹⁴⁰ The young man speculates that Mrs. Durège must have rewritten his essay together with the *Tagblatt* editor: “of course, it had to be rewritten [*bearbeitet*], for in the first place the plagiarism [*das Plagiat*] should not be obvious at first sight and in the second place the thirty-two-page essay was too long for the paper.” The young man’s original essay that is “too long” to be printed recalls the Lagerlöf story that was “too long” for him to read aloud. (The identification of his essay with Lagerlöf’s is later consolidated.)

The young man fails to satisfy the narrator’s request for *proof* that plagiarism has occurred:

In reply to my question whether he would not show me passages which correspond, because that would interest me especially and because only then could I advise him what to do, he begins to read his essay, turns to another passage, leafs through it without finding anything, and finally says that *everything was copied*. Here, for instance, the paper says: The soul of the child is an unwritten page, and ‘unwritten page’ occurs in his essay too. Or the expression ‘surnamed’ is copied too, because how else could they hit

¹³⁹ Kafka, *D* 185; *TB*, Band 2, 41.

¹⁴⁰ Kafka, *D* 185; *TB*, Band 2, 42.

upon ‘surnamed’ [*benamset*]. But he can’t compare individual passages. Of course, *everything was copied, but in a disguised way, in a different sequence, abridged, and with small, foreign interpolations* [*Es sei zwar alles abgeschrieben, aber eben vertuscht, in anderer Reihenfolge, gekürzt und mit kleinen fremden Zutaten*].¹⁴¹

The young man is blind to any “originality” in the essay printed in the paper, just as his listeners fail to notice the “original additions” he interpolates in works by other authors when he reads aloud. In spite of the fact that no *identical* passages can be found, he sees in the revised essay only *his own essay copied* “word for word.” It has been completely “rewritten,” of course, yet “*everything is copied.*” (This formulation—that the text is completely rewritten yet completely copied—might as well be a definition of “translation,” a theme I take up in the next chapter.) The type of plagiarism the young man suspects is what Kafka refers to elsewhere as “inner imitation”; it is a type of copying or borrowing so subtle, so extensive and indeed so easily overlooked that the difference between original and copy can no longer be judged. Alien interpolations and original text hide so well in each other that both are lost. “Original text” is to “plagiarism” as “real self” is to “inner imitation/alien being”; this analogy is confirmed by the fact that the young man gives Mrs. Durège his original essay in order to show her “the sort of a *person* he really [is].”

The man seeks “a clever lawyer” to prove that “The Child as Creator” plagiarizes his own essay “The Joy of Life”: “that’s what lawyers are for, after all.”¹⁴² (In this sense, Kafka’s “real job” as a lawyer is not far removed from his literary pursuits on the side: the lawyer’s job in this story is to authenticate original texts by demonstrating the difference between true writing and clever imitations; the lawyer is a kind of prosthetic or

¹⁴¹ Kafka, *D* 186, my emphases; *TB*, Band 2, 42-3.

¹⁴² Kafka, *D* 186.

supplementary author who vouches for the authority of the text where the author has failed to authorize it fully.) The narrator tries to help the young man find points of correspondence by selecting passages from the essay in the paper at random. *None* of them appears in the original essay, for as its author complains: “these are just the interpolated passages.”¹⁴³ The young man views the essay’s revised title, “The Child as Creator,” as a sarcastic and thinly veiled affront: “by ‘child,’ they really mean him, because he used to be regarded as a ‘child,’ as ‘dumb’ [*dumm*] . . . and they now mean to say with this title that he, a child, had accomplished something as good as this essay, that he had therefore proved himself as a creator, but at the same time remained dumb and a child in that he let himself be cheated like this.” The themes of plagiarism and recitation converge here.

The difference between the gifted young reciter and mature authors, as he sees it, is that only a mature writer can lay claim to originality: the established writer is one who has “proved himself as creator.” This reveals the young man’s belief that language is acquired in the first place only by means of imitation. Thus the “child” writer is always a plagiarist who must one day “prove himself as creator”; the “child” becomes a “creator” only if he can demonstrate that he is the *origin* of his writing.

The newspaper’s plagiarized version of his original essay confronts the man with a myth of origins about the genesis of true authors. However, this tale about the genesis of “creator” out of “dumb child” is an ironic myth of origins: its intention is not to tell the truth about writing, but merely to *wound* the young man, to silence him, indeed to force his regression from “creator” to “dumb child.” It is *the form of the essay as undetectable*

¹⁴³ Kafka, *D* 186.

plagiarism, rather than the content of its claims, that stages a litmus test for the young man's capacity to authorize texts. The plagiarized essay recreates the scene of writing by presenting the young man with a fresh test of his authorial power. Insofar as he cannot establish where and how much "plagiarism" has occurred, his "original writing" is abandoned to anonymity and to the public domain. It is not only Mrs. Durège and the Tagblatt editor whom he has to fear: anyone can steal the words from his mouth.

The phrase "dumb child" in the English translation suggests both "stupid child" and "mute child," effecting an easy transition between the young man's accusation of plagiarism and his earlier intention to read aloud works by other authors. The difference between *dumm* (dumb) and *stumm* (mute) in German disallows this easy move. Nonetheless, he is "dumb," the passage implies, because he is unable to discover his own words in the essay that plagiarizes him; his invisibly plagiarized essay in the paper renders him "dumb" in the sense of "mute" by disguising the young man's voice so thoroughly that he is silenced by his imitators.

The man's outlandish allegations cannot bury for long the relationship between his charge of plagiarism and his original wish to read aloud the Lagerlöf story. After considerable deliberation, he strikes upon what he imagines to be his best argument:

'The Child as Creator' is on the first page of the magazine section, but on the third there is a little story by a certain 'Feldstein' woman. The name is obviously a pseudonym. Now one needn't read all of this story, a glance at the first few lines is enough to show one immediately that this is *an unashamed imitation of Lagerlöf* [*daß hier . . . Lagerlöf in einer unverschämten Weise nachgeahmt ist*]. The whole story makes it even clearer. What does this mean? This means that this Feldstein, or whatever her name is, is the Durège woman's tool [*Kreatur*], that she read the *Gutsgeschichte*, brought by him to the Durège woman, at her house, that in writing this story she made use of what she had read, and that therefore both women are exploiting him, one on the first page of the magazine section, the other on the third page.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Kafka, *D* 187, my emphasis; *TB*, Band 2, 44.

In other words, the young man believes that both he *and* Lagerlöf have been plagiarized—yet in both cases, it is *he* who is “exploited.” His sentiment exceeds empathetic rage on Lagerlöf’s behalf. “Naturally,” he concedes, “anyone can read and imitate [*nachahmen*] Lagerlöf on his own initiative, but,” he continues, “in this case, after all, [my] influence is too apparent.”¹⁴⁵ The young man contends that Ms. Feldstein is guilty of *imitating him* insofar as she *imitates Lagerlöf*. This constitutes a plain confession that *he himself is guilty of “shamelessly imitating” Lagerlöf*. The Feldstein woman’s plagiarism imitates his “original” plagiarism of Lagerlöf. His claim that “Feldstein” is “obviously a pseudonym” begs the question of who really writes under the name “Ms. Feldstein,” recalling both the young man’s earlier wish to show Mrs. Durège “the . . . person he really [is],” and the fact that we have not yet learned the young man’s name.¹⁴⁶ (He is called “Mr. Reichmann” in the paragraph that follows.)

The scene of plagiarism through which the author is multiplied splits fittingly into two scenes: in the first, Mrs. Durège copies Mr. Reichmann’s essay “The Joy of Life”; in the second, Ms. Feldstein copies Lagerlöf’s *Gutsgeschichte* (thereby copying Mr. Reichmann at two removes). Both of these scenes of plagiarism refer us back to Mr. Reichmann’s original fantasy of reading aloud Lagerlöf’s *Gutsgeschichte* to the Women’s Progress group. His double accusation of plagiarism divulges the feelings of guilt with which his fantasy of reading aloud must be contaminated—for the question of authorship is muddled from the start: the young man boasts of having “mimicry, memory, presence,

¹⁴⁵ Kafka, *D* 187, my emphasis; *TB*, Band 2, 44.

¹⁴⁶ The pseudonym “Feldstein” will be revisited shortly.

everything, everything,” but he doesn’t “*only* imitate”: he “puts in a lot of his own too.”¹⁴⁷ Whose *Gutsgeschichte* does he imagine reading aloud, his own or Lagerlöf’s? The young man hides from himself the guilt associated with his fantasy of reading aloud by splitting the fantasy into two crimes: in the first, he substitutes himself for Lagerlöf (thus *he* is the “victim” of plagiarism, not Lagerlöf); in the second, Ms. Feldstein substitutes for him as “imitator” (thus *someone else* plagiarizes Lagerlöf, not he). The fact that guilt is displaced in two different ways reveals Mr. Reichmann’s double accusation of plagiarism as a displacement of his own guilt.

The guilt of plagiarism attaches irrevocably to Mr. Reichmann in the very *wording* of his accusation. He confronts Mrs. Durège in her home and the *Tagblatt* editor in his office: in neither case can the young man articulate his charge against them; rather, he repeats over and over again the words “*J’accuse*”—a phrase that plagiarizes emphatically the title of Émile Zola’s famous open letter of January 13th, 1898 to the newspaper *L’Aurore* in defense of Alfred Dreyfus: “*J’accuse*.” (Still more fascinating is that the Dreyfus affair was itself a case of forgery.) It is with these plagiarized words, then, that the guilty young reciter levels his accusation of plagiarism at a handful of his “imitators,” “even say[ing] it [*J’accuse*] several times at the door.”¹⁴⁸ The striking appearance of these French words in the middle of a German text signals their alien origin, underscoring the fact that the young man’s words are tarnished by the allegation of plagiarism they express. Mr. Reichmann’s accusation reflects back upon him.

¹⁴⁷ Kafka, *D* 184, my emphasis.

¹⁴⁸ Kafka, *D* 187-8. The words appear in French in the original.

It is the lawyer-narrator who reveals *Kafka's* investment in this miniature trial, and brings us back to the point. He dispenses the following advice to his young assailant: "I advise you to settle the matter in a friendly way . . . then you wouldn't have to give up the recitation evening, either, which would otherwise be lost, after all."¹⁴⁹ *Anything is preferable to foregoing the chance to read aloud!* It is as though the young man accuses Mrs. Durège, Ms. Feldstein, and the *Tagblatt* editor of plagiarism *in order to forestall his own plagiaristic recitation of Lagerlöf's text*. Only by accusing others of the crime can he avoid committing plagiarism himself. Yet there is nothing this "perfect fool" desires more. The narrator advises him further: "go to them tomorrow and say that this one time you are willing to assume it was unconscious influence [*unbewußte Beeinflussung*] . . . But because of this you needn't give up your revenge, either. Simply have the essay published somewhere else and then send it to Mrs. Durège with a nice dedication."¹⁵⁰

Neither the narrator nor the young man nor anyone else has been able to demonstrate where and to what extent plagiarism (or "imitation") has occurred. The *threat* of plagiarism that is passed around from one would-be author to another cannot be located; Mr. Reichmann's story suggests that plagiarism is finally conterminous with writing. The accusation that is amplified through his mouth from Zola voices the anxiety that a writer might involuntarily *speaking for another*—whether the alien for whom he speaks is "internal" or "external"—and that countless others might speak through his mouth for him. (In interpreting Kafka, naturally, this is our crime.) The figure of the writer in Kafka is less a "creator" than an "advocate" (*Fürsprecher*, or *one-who-speaks-*

¹⁴⁹ Kafka, *D* 189.

¹⁵⁰ Kafka, *D* 189; *TB*, Band 2, 46.

for). The cryptogram *Feldstein* means *fieldstone* or *landmark*, though what or whom it marks is unknown; the letters in the name of this false author (“obviously a pseudonym”) can be rearranged to spell anything from *Feind* (enemy) to *Dienst* (servant). (And who today has read Selma Lagerlöf in spite of her former fame? Is it not possible that Lagerlöf’s imitators render her the service of reminding the world of her works?) A “clever lawyer” will have to unravel the pseudonym “Ms. Feldstein” before the true author’s real name can be announced. Until then, we may all remain “perfect fools.”

7. Re-wording the Wound

Max Brod renames as Kafka's "breakthrough" what Kafka calls his *wound*. Brod names the breaching or transgression of a definite spatial boundary by a discrete body; Kafka names instead the violent opening of a discrete body to the outside world, obscuring the difference between them. Brod's term brings to mind a triumphant escape from captivity, or else the successful assault on an enemy fortress; Kafka's term brings to mind the frailty of a body unable to defend itself against writing and the world. Kafka's account of his experience of writing "The Judgment" does not expire in its first orgasmic expression, but is delayed and modified—most notably in the difference between his diary entry of September 23rd, 1912 and his letter to Milena Jesenská some eight years later, in which Kafka no longer views his composition of "The Judgment" as evidence of his "progress" as a writer, but rather as a *literary wounding*, albeit the *first* opening of the wound: "it was then, during one long night, that the wound broke open for the first time..."¹⁵¹

It is tempting to claim that Brod's understanding of Kafka's "breakthrough" relies exclusively on Kafka's earliest, most animated notes. And yet perhaps it is not until much later, to the contrary, that Kafka's writing of "The Judgment" assumes decisive importance in the writer's own eyes. Perhaps Brod's declaration of "literary breakthrough" is overly sensitive to Kafka's *belated* and *mounting* estimation of "The Judgment." Kafka's letter to Milena eight years after composing "The Judgment" suggests that the experience gains a retrospective significance for Kafka that even exceeds the joy and promise it holds for him initially. Nowhere in the original diary

¹⁵¹ Kafka, *LM* 173-4.

entry does Kafka pause to wonder whether his experiment will be repeatable, whether it constitutes a turning point, nor whether he has misapprehended its “success.” He does not worry about the experience, but simply describes it. He is happy certainly, ebullient for a change *while writing*, but therefore not in the mood for elaborating the one value judgment to be found in the entry: “the conviction verified that with my novel-writing I am in the shameful lowlands of writing.”¹⁵² (This value judgment must strike readers of Kafka as dubious, for to traverse what he here disparages as “the shameful lowlands of writing” must still have felt like moving uphill: this belongs to the host of sensory illusions that plague the writer and the heroes of Kafka’s novels alike...) What if it is the case that for Kafka—as for his critics—his subsequent *failure to repeat* the idealized act of writing “The Judgment” does not demystify the experience, but rather confirms its imaginary consequences?

If this is the case, then the error we commit in referring to Kafka’s writing of “The Judgment” as his “breakthrough” is *not* to have prioritized Kafka’s first ecstatic diary entry of September 23rd, 1912 above his numerous later reflections on the writing process. Rather, we have failed to take account of the striking *temporal delay* that separates Kafka’s “breakthrough” experience of writing from *his ability (or compulsion) to name it as such*. When Kafka tells Milena that “the wound broke open for the first time” when he wrote “The Judgment,” he attributes a far more decisive weight to the experience than he credits it previously. Although Kafka does not use the word “breakthrough” in his 1920 letter to Milena, his reference to the experience as “the first opening of the wound” is the first evidence, in the permanent record that remains to us,

¹⁵² Kafka, *D* 213.

that Kafka has elevated his writing of “The Judgment” to the status of a unique experience by giving it a name. By 1920, at least, Kafka’s writing of “The Judgment” has distinguished itself in his memory as a unique experience of writing. By 1920, Kafka’s experience of writing “The Judgment” is born after a mysterious lapse of time and named, belatedly, “The First Opening of the Wound.”

If there *had* been a time-lag between Kafka’s “breakthrough” experience of writing and his recognition of it as such, what would be the significance of this delay? (The critics’ high estimation of “The Judgment,” as previously noted, has been subject to a similar delay.) It is of no small interest that Kafka does not describe, name, and testify to his “first wounding” in his *Diaries*, nor for instance in a letter to Max Brod. The context of Kafka’s belated “naming” of his watershed experience is chronically elided in the secondary criticism. No less a critic than Charles Bernheimer—whose book-length study of Kafka and Flaubert borders on the concerns of this chapter, and is the only major study of Kafka to have offered a commentary on his fantasy of reading aloud Flaubert—has scrutinized Kafka’s literary “wounding” in isolation from the context in which it is named. Bernheimer begins his chapter on “The Judgment” with careful attention to Kafka’s correspondence with Felice Bauer, initiated by Kafka “a few days” before writing “The Judgment,” which Bernheimer calls “the story that signals [Kafka’s] breakthrough to his mature style, and that is dedicated to Felice.”¹⁵³ Given that Bernheimer reads “The Judgment” in the context of Kafka’s love letters to Felice, one

¹⁵³ Bernheimer, Charles, *Flaubert and Kafka: Studies in Psychopoetic Structure* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 144.

might expect him to consider Kafka's love letters to Milena as the proper context for Kafka's naming of "The Judgment" as the opening of his wound.

Eight years elapse between the opening of Kafka's wound and his written testimony of the wounding experience. Obscuring this lapse of time, Bernheimer begins thus: "I want now to examine Kafka's experience with the writing process prior to that extraordinary night [September 22nd-23rd, 1912] on which, he told Milena, 'the wound broke open for the first time.'"¹⁵⁴ Later in the same chapter, Bernheimer exposes in passing the expanded context of the famous "wound" quote, once again without further comment: "Complimenting Milena on her translation of the closing sentence [of 'The Judgment'], Kafka remarked: 'In that story every sentence, every word, every—if I may speak this way—musical note is connected to *Angst* [fear]: the wound broke open then for the first time in one long night.'"¹⁵⁵

Bernheimer repeats a critical gesture common amongst secondary literature on Kafka. He extracts the "wound" quote from its context in Kafka's letters to Milena and cites it in reference to Kafka's story "The Judgment"—as though it were not precisely in a written exchange of love letters with Milena that Kafka calls his experience of writing a "wound." Let us allow Brod's claim that Kafka's writing of "The Judgment," loosely speaking, represents a kind of literary "breakthrough": still, we must underline that Kafka acknowledges his "breakthrough" officially, as it were, only eight years later in the course of a letter exchange with the woman and fellow writer with whom he was then in love. More significantly still, this woman is Kafka's translator. Kafka recalls his

¹⁵⁴ Bernheimer 144.

¹⁵⁵ Bernheimer 186.

experience of writing “The Judgment” upon reading Milena’s translation of it, which strikes a nerve.

These initial remarks aspire to eroticize the idea of Kafka’s “breakthrough” or “wounding” while calling into question its reference. “Wound,” then, refers not only to Kafka’s original writing of “The Judgment,” but also to the letter to Milena in which this “wounding” is belatedly named. Further still, Kafka’s literary “wounding” is dressed and underwritten by Milena’s translation of “The Judgment” from German to Czech. When is Kafka’s wound inflicted, and by whom? It is possible that Kafka experiences his “literary wounding” *for the first time* only when he reads his “breakthrough” story in Milena’s translation. (This would be the most extreme wording of my hypothesis.)

Milena’s Translation as Original Wound

Most intriguing in the scenario here outlined is that Kafka enjoys his earlier, guilty experience of “involuntary imitation” or “creative plagiarism” from the other side—that is, from the side of the one being imitated. To translate well, as Kafka exclaims of Milena, must be to engage in what a younger Kafka cannot prevent himself from doing: to imitate others without anyone noticing that they are being imitated. So too, the skilled translator disappears behind her work; the good translation masquerades as complete and independent by inhabiting and being inhabited by “originality,” obscuring as far as possible the difference between itself and the original in whose shadow it unfolds. This is perhaps to be what Kafka earlier calls “lost inside oneself.” It is impossible to write even the shortest essay, he says, without being sufficiently “lost

inside oneself.”¹⁵⁶ And what of writing translation? *To be lost inside oneself* captures in a single breath the experience of the great writer and the great translator, for it is an image of perfect self-containment and self-sufficiency only while conveying the total absence of any identifiable self—the absence of self-sameness in the text. Writer and translator hide behind each other. In “great translation,” both the original work and the labor of translation are “lost inside themselves.”

Thus Kafka reports on his literary “wounding” only eight years after the fact, upon experiencing for the first time the rare pleasure of “being imitated, without realizing that one is being imitated.” If the “imitator” or “creative plagiarist” is the guilty party in Kafka’s youthful fantasy of reading aloud a novel by Gustave Flaubert, here he enjoys a new version of the same fantasy unhindered, insofar as *Milena* steps into the “guilty” role; moreover, it is she who does the dirty work of writing. (Kafka imagines sparing her this toil by “[kissing Milena’s] hand so long” that she would “never have to translate again.”¹⁵⁷ He does not go so far as to stop her.)

In 1920, Kafka finds a new answer to the rhetorical question he raises in his diaries of 1913 (one year after composing “The Judgment”): “Who has *the magic hand* [*die Zauberhand*] to thrust into the machinery without its being torn to pieces and scattered by a thousand knives?”¹⁵⁸ I suggested earlier that since writing for Kafka is a kind of “passive magic,” the writer alone can have this “magic hand”; yet in 1920, Kafka

¹⁵⁶ Kafka, *D* 156; *TB*, Band 1, 255 (“Verlorenheit in sich selbst...”).

¹⁵⁷ Kafka, *LM* 107.

¹⁵⁸ Kafka, *D* 239, my emphasis.

welcomes his beloved Czech translator into an exchange of letters between *two* “magic hands.” He blesses her translation of “The Judgment” with these words:

The translation of the final sentence is very good. Every sentence, every word, every—if I may say so—music in that story is connected with the ‘fear.’ It was then, during one long night, that the wound broke open for the first time [*damals brach die Wunde zum erstmal auf*], and in my opinion *the translation catches* this connection [*Zusammenhang*] exactly, with that *magical hand which is yours* [*mit jener zauberhaften Hand, die eben Deine ist*].¹⁵⁹

There is only the faintest trembling difference between the writer’s “magic hand” and the translator’s “magical hand.” Does Milena’s “magical hand” seal the wound of writing where Kafka’s “magic hand” more often fails? Or is Milena’s translation a wounding that reopens the original wound of writing? Translation is *wounded by the original* as much as the original is wounded by translation, indeed “catching” the connection between “music” and “fear” as one catches a disease. In the German text of Kafka’s letter, the translator’s magical hand does not passively “catch” the connection Kafka has in mind, but actively *touches, hits, or strikes* upon it (*treffen*). Milena’s translation re-inflicts Kafka’s writing as “wound.”

The doubling of Kafka’s literary wound by the translation of his “breakthrough” story confirms that his “wounding” cannot be localized in 1912. Neither does the mouth of Kafka’s literary wound stop dilating here. Milena’s translation of “The Judgment,” which compels Kafka to testify to his wound only eight years after what he calls its “first opening,” eerily recalls Kafka’s letter to Oskar Pollak written eight years before the “first opening of the wound”—a letter in which Kafka describes his experience of being wounded by the works of other authors when he reads. (This happens of course only in

¹⁵⁹ Kafka, *LM* 173-4, translation modified, my emphases. The German is cited to the following edition: Kafka, Franz, *Briefe an Milena* (New York: Schocken Books, 1952), 214.

ideal cases.) *Two* “wound” letters flank the so-called “breakthrough” experience of being wounded by writing, referring to it presciently and nostalgically in turn. In other words, Kafka names his exemplary experience of writing after a much earlier but equally exemplary experience of reading. (Here, again, the question of Kafka’s “involuntary imitation” or “creative plagiarism” of his favorite writers pokes its head through his authorial wound, or, more appropriately, crowns.) By a conservative estimate, the wound now swallows sixteen years of Kafka’s life (1904-1920). In the 1904 letter to Pollak, Kafka describes his feeling of suffocation while reading Hebbel’s diaries “consecutively” (without interruption):

I simply could not take a pen in hand during these days. Because when you’re surveying a life like that [i.e. by reading Hebbel’s diaries], which towers higher and higher without a gap, so high you can scarcely reach it with your field glasses, your conscience cannot settle down. But it’s good when your conscience receives *big wounds*, because that makes it sensitive to every twinge. *I think we ought to read only the kind of books that bite and stab us.* If the book we’re reading doesn’t wake us up with *a blow on the head*, what are we reading it for? ...we need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us. That is my belief.¹⁶⁰

The wound that opens when Kafka writes “The Judgment” reiterates the wound inflicted on him eight years earlier (ideally always) when he reads. What better way to experience such a wounding than *to read one’s own works in translation*—an experience in which activity and passivity, self and other, writing and reading converge? Writing for Kafka is a simultaneous experience of “breakthrough” and “breakdown” in which triumph and capitulation cannot be distinguished. The writer actively wounds himself and passively is

¹⁶⁰ Kafka, Franz, *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors* 15-16, translation modified, my emphases. Kafka had previously read Hebbel’s diaries by fits and starts (“I had always just bitten out small pieces...”). Just as his “wounding” experience of writing “The Judgment” requires him to write “continuously [*in einem Zug*],” he is “wounded” by reading Hebbel only when he reads everything “consecutively,” without gaps.

wounded when he writes. Kafka comes closest to possessing a writer's "magic hand" when his phantom fingers enclose Milena's "magical hand" as she translates his story "The Judgment."

Kafka's experience of his literary breakthrough is made possible through a secondary estrangement or alienation from the act of writing (itself an experience of self-alienation already). This secondary removal of the writer from himself is a fresh solution to an old problem: how to mend gaps in the world shattered by writing? Kafka's earlier strategy of reading aloud his finished texts—reading them aloud *in order* to "finish" them—is his first response to this problem. When he writes "The Judgment" in 1912, Kafka consummates his writing process by entering his sisters' room to read the story aloud. When he reads Milena's translation of the same story in 1920, Kafka's dismembering act of writing "The Judgment" is "rounded to a close" and consummated once more, with all the erotic overtones that word bears.

Kafka compliments Milena especially on her translation of the story's *last line*, which expresses, as he earlier enlightens Brod, "a violent ejaculation."¹⁶¹ There is every reason to believe that the story's violent ejaculation survives Milena's translation: her translation is the story's most recent ejaculation. *This* occasions Kafka's testimony of his "first wounding." Thus my hypothesis: his famous testimony belongs to an epistolary love dialogue between two writers (Kafka and Milena) whose love is consummated only (with one possible exception) in their exchange of letters.¹⁶² Their love is consummated

¹⁶¹ Brod, *FK* 129.

¹⁶² The physical intimacy they enjoyed during their first meeting (when their impassioned exchange of letters had long been underway) was not repeated.

in writing, a disembodied union that finds its highest expression in Milena's "original rewriting"—or transformation—of Kafka's "The Judgment," which she renders anew, renews, for him to read.

Orphaned by Language: Kafka's Mother Tongue

Kafka's numerous reflections on his own existence as a writer "between languages" need not be rehearsed here. Several quotes will recall that the relationship between "original" and "translation" is more complicated for Kafka than for other writers. This is why my suggestion that Milena's translation of "The Judgment" from German to Czech in 1920 operates *inside* and *at the heart* of Kafka's "original" writing of the text in 1912 is less extreme a thesis than it might appear. Kafka is pinned between three languages: Czech is Kafka's native language, the primary language of his mother and father and amongst siblings in their family home; German is the official language of the state, spoken by Kafka at school and later at work; Yiddish is spoken at the Yiddish Theatre in Prague, which Kafka frequents in 1911. German is the language of officials, but it is also the language of Kafka's beloved Goethe and other writers in the German-language tradition in which he is educated. German is the language Kafka chooses when he writes. *Milena translates Kafka's works from his adopted language* (a kind of alienated "mother tongue"), German, *into his native language* (the language of Kafka's mother), Czech.

Kafka reports his feeling of alienation from the German language already in 1911:

Yesterday it occurred to me that I did not always love my mother as she deserved and as I could, only because the German language prevented it. The Jewish mother is no 'Mutter,' to call her 'Mutter' makes her a little comic . . . we give a Jewish woman the name of a German mother, but forget the contradiction that sinks into the emotions so much the more heavily, 'Mutter' is peculiarly German for the Jew, it unconsciously

contains, together with the Christian splendor Christian coldness also, the Jewish woman who is called 'Mutter' therefore becomes not only comic but strange. Mama would be a better name if only one didn't imagine 'Mutter' behind it.¹⁶³

This early commentary belies Kafka's later claim, in a 1920 letter to Milena, that "German is [his] mother tongue"—this in spite of the fact that, as he also writes, he "ha[s] never lived among Germans," and "consider[s] Czech much more affectionate."¹⁶⁴ Kafka is a kind of exile from language who by 1920 no longer knows what his native tongue is. He has written his way out of any illusion other language-users might harbor regarding their original familiarity or intuitive feeling of intimacy with language. Milena's translations open for Kafka a new possibility of loving his mother in the act of writing. Her translation of "The Judgment" represents a fresh consummation of Kafka's writing process only insofar as this impossible union with the mother (or *mother tongue*) is accomplished. Kafka calls his Czech translator "Mother Milena."¹⁶⁵ He demands that she write to him in Czech: "I wanted to read you in Czech because, after all, you do belong to that language, because only there can Milena be found in her entirety (the translation confirms this)... So Czech, please."¹⁶⁶ Is Kafka "in his entirety" anywhere to be found? In what language would this "whole" Kafka speak? Write?

At the beginning of the same letter in which Kafka compliments Milena's translation of "The Judgment" and testifies to his wound, he imagines an ideal conversation between mother and child: "why do I need a letter, if, for example, I spent

¹⁶³ Kafka, *D* 88. The entry is dated October 24th, 1911.

¹⁶⁴ Kafka, *LM* 14.

¹⁶⁵ Kafka, *LM* 79.

¹⁶⁶ Kafka, *LM* 8.

the whole day yesterday and the evening and half the night in conversation with you, a conversation where I was as sincere and earnest as a child, and you as receptive and earnest as a mother...” Kafka idealizes this imaginary conversation with Mother Milena only to deny its possibility: “actually,” he confesses, “I’ve never seen such a child or such a mother.” In the next paragraph, Kafka declines to answer a question from Milena’s previous letter (we never learn what her question was): “Those are very complicated things which can only be solved in conversation between mother and child; perhaps they can only be solved there because they can’t possibly come up.”¹⁶⁷ The “more intimate” language-of-the-mother (as Kafka characterizes Czech) *unites* mother and child in an ideal dialogue, rather than dividing them in dialogue, *because the conversation between mother and child need not take place*. The maternal ear listens to the child’s pre-linguistic listening.

Nevertheless, Kafka intuits just such a telepathic exchange passing silently beneath the surface of his correspondence with Milena. Kafka worries about the impossibility of merging completely with language: “it’s such a bad thing one can’t throw oneself with all one’s being into every word,”¹⁶⁸ yet he holds faith that—at least in the letters to Milena—an ideal merging silently transpires: “I’d . . . like to somehow intercept the laments coming from your letters, not the written laments, but the silent ones, and I can do this since they’re basically my own. It’s the strangest thing that even here in the darkness we are so much of one mind...”¹⁶⁹ The telepathic exchange at work

¹⁶⁷ Kafka, *LM* 172-3.

¹⁶⁸ Kafka, *LM* 167.

¹⁶⁹ Kafka, *LM* 170.

in the correspondence between this writer and his translator finds its proper name in Kafka's earlier concept of "inner imitation." Kafka, of course, only vaguely intuits this "inner imitation" at the origin of his writing, while still defending himself against its consequences: "*not the written laments,*" he carefully specifies, "but the silent ones..."

"Translation" in the letters between Kafka and Milena is not limited to Milena's rewriting of Kafka's works. Translation for Kafka—like plagiarism—is an experience of not-quite-voluntary imitation that is co-original with writing. Translation "catches," "strikes," "wounds," or as Kafka has it here, "intercepts" the original. The letter exchange of Kafka and Milena calls authorship radically into question through an act of original, unlimited and mutual translation. Kafka's absent "mother tongue" is the phantom ideal their correspondence constantly approaches.

8. Kafka's Flaubert and the Failure of '*Bildung*'

In the preceding chapters, I have argued that the critical convention of referring to Kafka's story "The Judgment" as his "breakthrough" in and into fiction, a convention inaugurated by Max Brod, is belied by the structure of repetition that characterizes the temporality of the writing process for Kafka; by the radical indeterminacy and uncertainty of writing what is called modern literature; and by the writer's corresponding ambivalence in the face of the rather immaterial production that puppets and expends him. Furthermore, I have marshaled close readings of passages from Kafka's *Diaries* and letters to suggest that Kafka mythologizes his experience of writing "The Judgment" primarily as a defensive measure by which he seeks to preserve his fictions from contamination by autobiographical writing—a contamination which, moreover, has always already taken place. I have argued that the critical habit (inherited from Brod) of referring to "The Judgment" as a "breakthrough" imposes a developmental narrative on Kafka's experience of writing which falsifies and obscures the most crucial and unique aspects of Kafka's poetics. As Kafka's fictions show us over and over again, the advent of modernity in prose is characterized precisely by an *annulment* of the grand narrative of development that is smuggled in when we refer to Kafka's innovation as a "breakthrough."

In this chapter, I would like to explore the consequences of the preceding argument for Kafka criticism by approaching the same conclusions from a different angle. My aim is to show that the endlessly repeated story I have revised about how Kafka "learns to write fiction" is drawn out of, and must be folded back into the stories Kafka himself tells about the possibility of learning and growing. To this end, I will turn

from the *Diaries* and letters to Kafka's fictions. Bearing in mind the repetitive temporality of writing that we have exposed in the first-hand testimony of Kafka's autobiographical texts, this chapter performs a close reading of a trope that will be eminently familiar to readers of 19th-century European literature—to the point of seeming banal and uninspired. (We may rely on Kafka, as usual, to revivify an ailing trope.) I refer to the plot of 'learning from experience,' which is scattered throughout Kafka's fictions, in spite of the immeasurable distance that separates Kafka from the 19th-century *Bildungsroman* in which the plot of personal and cultural-historical progress is enshrined.

Fictional Incompletion

It is difficult not to smile at Kafka's lifelong suspicion that his literary efforts may have "failed"—not only qualitatively, as bad or flawed literature, but in the extreme and fundamental sense, elaborated by Maurice Blanchot, of failing *to be* literature. Nonetheless, much of Kafka's fiction must be viewed as incomplete. Moreover, it is not only the unfinished novels and other posthumously published works that are incomplete: rather, as I have argued, all of Kafka's fictions are structurally incomplete insofar as their claim to importance is supplemented by Kafka's autobiographical accounts of his experience of writing them. Ironically, it is the monumental significance of Kafka's life and thought, of Kafka 'himself,'¹⁷⁰ which precludes the independence of his fictions. Thus, as we have seen, the notoriety of "Das Urteil" ("The Judgment"), his "first complete story," stems no more from the story's own qualities than from the journal entry in which Kafka memorializes and mythologizes his creative act.

¹⁷⁰ Or at least the "Kafka" we inevitably project behind the furious production of paratextual prose.

Despite their remarkable insularity, there is a sense in which Kafka's fictions do not detach themselves from what is outside and beyond fiction. This is why Kafka's biography is as famous as his unfinished novels; his marginalia is as well-known as the works published in his lifetime; images of his face are ubiquitous; and the extra-literary writings in his diaries and letters are as canonized as the story beginnings that appear scattered throughout the *Diaries*' pages. Nonetheless, we can avoid charging Kafka's fictions with fragmentariness and failure by arguing to the contrary that Kafka's writings, which are neither strictly fictional nor strictly autobiographical, do something to experience—to his own, his protagonists', and ours—such that, in light of Kafka, nothing can be written outside of autobiography and nothing can be experienced outside of fiction.

I propose to assess the uniqueness of Kafka's prose in this respect through a comparative analysis of modern writers. This presents a rather obvious dilemma: most literature composed during the period of modernity reflects changes in the structure of human experience. Nevertheless, the *Diaries* suggest a fitting point of reference: they reveal Kafka's early, ongoing fixation with the writing style and habits of Gustave Flaubert. The preceding chapters have touched upon the autobiographical ways in which Kafka's creative imitation of Flaubert is central to his writing process and his developing poetics. Here, I will approach Kafka's relationship to Flaubert from the perspective of their literature. A comparative study of the deformations to which these two authors subject experience in and through their writing sheds light on the question of what exactly Kafka's writing 'does' to experience and to literature; this, in turn, will allow us

to reread Kafka's literary "breakthrough" through his transformative absorption of Flaubert.

Unlearning How to Read: Flaubert's Anti-novels

Kafka's lifelong admiration of Flaubert's seminal anti-*Bildungsroman*, *L'éducation sentimentale*, raises the question of how Flaubert's systematic devaluation of experience in that novel may have influenced Kafka's writings. Kafka declares to his on-again, off-again fiancée Felice Bauer as early as 1912 that "*Education sentimentale* is a book that for many years has been as dear to me as are only two or three people"; he further confesses: "I always feel as though I were the author's spiritual son, albeit a weak and awkward one."¹⁷¹ Flaubert is one of only four authors whom Kafka looks upon as "true blood-relations."¹⁷² Although Kafka writes no dedication in the copy he gifts to Felice—since "[*L'éducation sentimentale*] is a book that should not have other people's writing in it,"¹⁷³ nevertheless he does not balk at the idea of participating in Flaubert's stylistic authority by reading it aloud. This he does regularly, both alone and before friends.¹⁷⁴ Kafka carries the book with him everywhere; he writes to Felice several weeks after sending her a copy:

As a child—which I was until a few years ago—I used to enjoy dreaming of reading aloud to a large, crowded hall (though equipped with somewhat greater strength of heart, voice, and intellect than I had at the time) the whole of *Education sentimentale* at one

¹⁷¹ Kafka, Franz, *Letters to Felice* 42. Referenced hereafter as *LF*.

¹⁷² Kafka, *LF* 315.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁷⁴ Kafka and his friend Max Brod were in the habit of reading Flaubert aloud to one another in French.

sitting, for as many days and nights as it required, in French of course (oh dear, my accent!)¹⁷⁵

The comic aspect of this fantasy is enhanced if one recalls that Flaubert is famous for the deliberate awkwardness of his prose, which has been remarked by readers from Proust to Jonathan Culler. The latter notes that Flaubert's "clumsy writing" is produced through various strategies of ironic distancing: "discontinuity, fragmentation, awkwardness, flatness..."¹⁷⁶ Kafka's fantasy—as the "weak and awkward spiritual son" of Flaubert—is to read aloud in a clumsy foreign accent the whole of a novel whose already awkward prose relates the bungling, mostly failed attempts of a youth from the provinces to thrive in Paris. Kafka's "weak awkwardness," if it were the case, would not have proven ill-suited to the task.

A brief look at what happens to "experience" in Flaubert's fictions offers an instructive point of comparison with Kafka, and justifies the latter's unqualified passion for Flaubert. The title of Flaubert's *L'éducation sentimentale* (1869) announces the novel as a *Bildungsroman*, though Flaubert's aim is apparently to bankrupt the genre by recounting the (banal) experiences and (dubious) growth of his protagonist, Frédéric Moreau, in a narrative voice that crackles with irony.¹⁷⁷ As if this were not enough, the

¹⁷⁵ Kafka, *LF* 86. Kafka's fantasy of reading aloud Flaubert's novel "in one sitting" recalls the language of his "breakthrough" diary entry, in which Kafka eulogizes his experience of writing "The Judgment," too, "in one sitting." For an excellent, psychoanalytically informed study of Kafka and Flaubert in which voice is discussed, see Charles Bernheimer's *Flaubert and Kafka: Studies in Psychopoetic Structure*.

¹⁷⁶ Culler, Jonathan, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 206.

¹⁷⁷ As Marc Redfield points out, the *ironic* narrative of *Bildung* still falls squarely within the genre: "...numerous critics, faced with the paradoxes of this genre, have sought to define the *Bildungsroman* in ironic terms as the exemplary novelistic genre of failure or loss"; Redfield glosses the point: "...so long as irony is understood as self-reflection or knowledge, the essential structure of *Bildung* is preserved: the subject 'matures,' either in a wry or a pensive mode, by transforming loss into the knowledge of loss, thus acquiring representative status as an entity capable of universalizing its own mortality." *Bildung* thus

novel ends by invalidating the project of writing this particular “novel of education”—though it stops short of categorically denying the possibility of *Bildung*. The final chapter consists of a conversation between Frédéric and his boyhood friend, Deslauriers, in which the two now-middle-aged men “[exhume] their youth” only to conclude that the “best time” they ever had was a *missed* experience that also predates the time of the novel thus far by three years.¹⁷⁸ This mutually confirmed conclusion—that the heroes’ most memorable and formative experience is one mentioned only on the penultimate page—is so shocking in the context of a novel of education that naïve readers may even overlook the scene or find it utterly forgettable.¹⁷⁹ The crowning moment Frédéric has in mind is a boyhood quest for sexual experience that slips between inexperienced fingers.

Determined to visit prostitutes for the first time, the two friends curl their hair and pick flowers from Mrs. Moreau’s garden. However, in the face of his first prospective conquests, Frédéric stands “rooted to the spot, unable to speak” from fear, guilt and elation, while the assembled women laugh until he “turn[s] tail and [flees]”; penniless

is recuperated as the ironic knowledge of its own impossibility. Redfield, Marc, *Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 53-4.

¹⁷⁸ Flaubert, Gustave, *A Sentimental Education*, trans. Douglas Parmée (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 462 and 464 respectively. Referenced hereafter as *SE*. The concluding memory dates from summer 1837; the novel begins on Sept. 15th, 1840. References to the original French will be cited as *ES*: *L’éducation sentimentale: histoire d’un jeune homme* (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1985).

¹⁷⁹ In this sense, Flaubert’s novel seems to have more in common with the conventions of drama than with those of the *Bildungsroman*: all of the action takes place *offstage*. As one of the most widely-known facts about the book, the novel’s “surprise” ending, of course, can no longer come as a surprise.

Deslauriers is “obliged to follow.”¹⁸⁰ The pinnacle of Frédéric’s life, in his own estimation, is when he flees from the possibility of his first sexual experience.¹⁸¹

L’éducation sentimentale introduces the structure of false, meaningless oppositions that will be exaggerated in Flaubert’s unfinished, posthumously published novel, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Both novels feature two central characters different in every detail; yet these differences in psychological character, development, training, ideology, and priorities lead to identical outcomes. In *L’éducation sentimentale*, although Frédéric “dream[s] of Love,” is “too sentimental” and “[lacks] perseverance” while his friend Deslauriers “dream[s] of Power,” is “too rigid” and “too logical,” the narrator informs us in conclusion that “they’d *both* been failures.”¹⁸² The governing oppositions between them must therefore be read as irrelevant. The text offers no response to the question it explicitly raises: “How had [their failure] come about?”¹⁸³ Deslauriers learns from his experiences only that “stupidity is very catching.”¹⁸⁴ Frédéric worries that the son borne him by his mistress Rosanette will be “maybe . . . stupid, and surely unhappy.”¹⁸⁵ The

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 464.

¹⁸¹ In his excellent chapter on “prereading” in Flaubert and Kafka, Stanley Corngold offers a different interpretation of this scene. Corngold attributes great importance to Frédéric’s early brothel memory, arguing that it represents a utopic time in Frédéric’s life before profane and sacred love diverged and became forever separate possibilities of experience. Corngold’s argument rests on a “hint” at the beginning of the novel in which the brothel at Nogent is “evoked”: “Venus, queen of the skies, your servant! But Poverty is the mother of Continnence, and heaven knows we’ve been slandered enough about that!” (Corngold, Stanley, “The Curtain Half Drawn: Prereading in Flaubert and Kafka,” *Franz Kafka: The Necessity of Form* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 218; see also note 23 on 218).

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 462, my emphasis.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 421.

two children of Frédéric's "great love," Marie Arnoux, variously negate the promise of an "education of the feelings" held out by the novel's title: the little boy is "affectionate" but un-teachable ("[not] very original") while the little girl is brighter but "lack[s] feeling."¹⁸⁶ Flaubert contemplated entitling the novel "Dry Fruits"¹⁸⁷; if the novel's fruits never ripen, its plot also unfolds at such a bracing clip that flowers cannot even wilt: when Frédéric hustles Rosanette into the rented room so carefully prepared for Marie Arnoux, "the flowers were still fresh."¹⁸⁸ These might be the same flowers from his mother's garden that a younger Frédéric, frozen and speechless, clutched before his face as though to ward off the possibility of being molded by experience before the novel began. Indeed, everything happens too quickly for Frédéric to learn anything from his failures—and almost too quickly for him to fail.¹⁸⁹

Bouvard et Pécuchet begins where *L'éducation sentimentale* leaves off: an "odd couple" of male protagonists sits reflecting on the pointlessness of their adult lives.¹⁹⁰ Nor does *Bouvard et Pécuchet* fail to imitate the self-invalidating conclusion of Flaubert's earlier novel: after the twin protagonists have abandoned their jobs as copy

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁸⁷ "Les Fruits Secs," or, fruits which never ripen (Cf. Parmée, Douglas, "Introduction," *SE* xiv).

¹⁸⁸ Flaubert, *SE* 309.

¹⁸⁹ This is an effect of the revolutionary times (around 1848) in which the novel unfolds, as well as of Frédéric's relentless impatience. In the traditional *Bildungsroman*, the hero's sexual development contributes to his overall "formation" as a full human subject; in Flaubert's novel, to the contrary, sexual experiences inhibit, substitute for and preclude Frédéric's cultural and social formation. Frédéric complains to Madame Arnoux: "...but I've not trained to do anything, you're my only interest, my only riches, my only goal!" He adds nihilistically: "...if we can't come together, my life's not worth living" (*SE* 293).

¹⁹⁰ Thanks are due to Professor Elissa Marder for pointing out this suggestion of continuity between the two novels (in conversation, Sept. 2008). Frédéric and Deslauriers are around forty when we last see them; Bouvard and Pécuchet are both forty-seven when they first meet.

clerks to pursue a systematic but doomed project of self-education in all the branches of human knowledge at breakneck speed, they end by simultaneously confessing that their only ambition in life is “to copy”—like in the old days.¹⁹¹ They build a two-sided (“double”) desk and set to work. Thus Flaubert’s last novel, too, ends by returning to a time before the novel of education began. The experiences related in the course of the narrative are rejected as pointless.

Unlearning How to Write: Kafka’s Anti-novels

If Kafka and Flaubert share the common aim of dismantling the plot of *Bildung*, then Kafka does Flaubert one better by voiding the novel of education on the level of form—rather than by belatedly recanting the *value* of his protagonists’ experiences (thus their content) in a concluding remark. For Flaubert, it is still possible to write the story of *Bildung*, even if this project is revealed to be a worthless enterprise; for Kafka, to the contrary, the *Bildungsroman* is no longer even a possibility. Kafka’s work shows that the value of *Bildung* cannot be denied without threatening the formal possibility of a *Bildungsroman*, and likewise that the *Bildungsroman* cannot be deformed without negating the value of *Bildung*. In Kafka’s novel *The Trial*—an exemplary post-*Bildungsroman*—*Bildung* is not ironically recuperated as the hero’s laboriously gained knowledge that he was better off as a foolish, callow youth. Flaubert makes of the novel of formation a merely formal affair, while Kafka shows that the form and content of the *Bildungsroman* are so intertwined that one cannot survive the other.

¹⁹¹ Flaubert, Gustave, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (Bloomington-Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005), 279. Flaubert’s notes for the unfinished final chapters read: “A good idea nurtured by each one in secret. They hide it from one another. Now and again they smile when they think of it; then they tell each other about it simultaneously: to copy.”

Unlike Flaubert's Frédéric, Kafka's Josef K. never arrives at the ironic knowledge that he has failed in life; further, the reader is left unsure of whether K. has failed, and if so, how things could have turned out otherwise. Kafka shows that the story of a character's formation is indistinguishable from a process of deformation; similarly, he shows that 'development' is indistinguishable from devolution or regression. In Kafka's fictions, these formal changes are in either case without content. His dramas have been called 'static' because the transformations they describe (most famously in "Die Verwandlung"/"The Metamorphosis") are at the same time static repetitions of an original condition in disguise.¹⁹²

To Experience the Trial (*Das Verfahren erfahren*)

Kafka's unfinished novel *The Trial* can be read as a would-be *Bildungsroman* in which the hero, Josef K., need not conclude tardily that it would have been better to miss out on experience, for he misses his experience all along. Perhaps this is the meaning of *trial* for him, or else the unspecified reason for his arrest. Josef K. is repeatedly shown to experience the major events of his life in various states of absence and distraction;¹⁹³ his profound failure of both memory and foresight are the symptoms of what may be called

¹⁹² For a comprehensive examination of metaphor in "The Metamorphosis" and a weighing of various critical responses to the same, cf. Corngold, Stanley, "The Metamorphosis: Metamorphosis of the Metaphor," and "Metaphor and Chiasm," *Franz Kafka: The Necessity of Form* 47-104.

¹⁹³ No unequivocally "major events," of course, are named. This effects the "formalization" of the *Bildungsroman*, and is the means by which Kafka radicalizes the project we have identified in Flaubert's *L'éducation sentimentale*. That there were any such "formative" or "decisive" events in Kafka's *The Trial* is insinuated only by the fact that Josef K. has been "arrested" and is "on trial." No reason for his arrest is stated. The evidence of major events in his life confronts Josef K. from without and apparently takes him by surprise, yet his "surprise" lacks force. It is anti-climactic to the extent that K. (like his readers) does not know where the force of his arrest lies. Has he forgotten or overlooked some error of his own (in which case the arrest should come as no surprise), or is the arrest itself a mistake (in which case he may yet get out of it)?

his absence to experience. Josef K.'s lack of memories and inability to anticipate future threats make it impossible for the reader to decide whether Josef K. is condemned to *pure* immediacy, or whether he is to the contrary *inaccessible* to immediate experience. In the former case, he would be animal-like, operating on instinct and reactively. In the latter case, his consciousness would operate in a calculating reflective mode—restricted to hindsight and foresight—but would be empty of content because no immediate experience has been registered. His memory would be blank—a record of absence.¹⁹⁴

The word “experience” (*Erfahrung*) appears only a few times in the novel, usually in connection with learning; nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the theme of “learning from experience” surfaces in the first scene (of arrest) and again in the final scene (of execution). *The Trial* is therefore bracketed by a question central to the classical *Bildungsroman*. Led by two half-mute men to his execution, Josef K. worries about the “parting impression” he will make: “should I show now that not even the yearlong trial could teach me? Should I leave them with the impression that I’m dull-witted?”¹⁹⁵ The reader cannot determine whether K. struggles against his executioners or succumbs: K. declines what he views as his “duty” to commit suicide by guiding the blade into his own heart, yet he makes no effort to escape. Moreover, it remains totally unclear whether *struggling against* or *acquiescing* in his execution would constitute proof that he has

¹⁹⁴ The idea that Josef K. is a full, human subject of experience can hardly be entertained; some critics even go so far as to compare Josef K. to a “billiard ball” that reacts headlong, unreflectively, and in short, without enough psychological depth to constitute subjective interiority.

¹⁹⁵ Kafka, Franz, *Der Prozeß* (Prag: Vitalis Verlag, 1998), 278, my translation. Referenced hereafter as *P*. The German reads: “...soll ich nun zeigen, daß nicht einmal der einjährige Prozeß mich belehren konnte? Soll ich als ein begriffsstütziger Mensch abgehn?”

“learned” from his trial, just as it is unclear on what grounds such a distinction could be made. K.’s anxiety on this point recalls his early *resolve* to learn from experience.

The theme of “learning from experience” is introduced in the opening scene of arrest. Josef K. disregards the advice of his two guards (which he dismisses as “idle gossip”) in favor of “thinking back”;¹⁹⁶ the fruits of his reflection are narrated as follows:

K. recalled clearly—*though it otherwise wouldn’t have been his habit to learn from experience*—several cases, unremarkable in themselves, in which, unlike his friends, he had been conscious of behaving carelessly, without the slightest feeling for the possible consequences, and had been punished through the outcome. That should not happen again, at least not this time.¹⁹⁷

But whose “resolve” is behind K.’s decision to learn? Has K. really ignored the guards in favor of private “reflection” as he believes? He also recalls that it is “not his habit to learn from experience.” The guards’ sole function from the start has been *to interrupt K.’s habits and routine*. Directly preceding this passage in the text, the word “*Verfahren*” (trial) is linked tellingly to “*erfahren*” (to experience). The guards inform K. that from now on, he will “learn everything (*alles erfahren*) in the course of the trial (*das Verfahren*).” When K. asks Willem why he is being held, Willem evades the question:

¹⁹⁶ Kafka, *P* 12. “K. achtete auf diese Reden kaum . . . viel wichtiger war es ihm Klarheit über seine Lage zu bekommen; in Gegenwart dieser Leute konnte er aber nicht einmal *nachdenken*...” (my emphasis).

¹⁹⁷ The German reads: “...wohl aber erinnerte er sich—*ohne daß es sonst seine Gewohnheit gewesen wäre, aus Erfahrungen zu lernen*—an einige, an sich unbedeutende *Fälle*, in denen er zum Unterschied von seinen Freunden mit Bewußtsein, ohne das geringste Gefühl für die möglichen Folgen, sich unvorsichtig benommen hatte und dafür durch das Ergebnis gestraft worden war. Es sollte nicht wieder geschehen, zumindest nicht diesmal...” (Kafka, *P* 13, my translation, my emphases). The English translation obscures the importance of this passage, firstly by translating “*Fälle*” (cases) as “occasions” (*The Trial*, trans. Breon Mitchell (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), 7. Referenced hereafter as *T*). The passage is interesting for other reasons, to which I will return in closing. That K.’s “habit” (*Gewohnheit*) is first mentioned here is key: *Gewohnheit* (habit or routine) is to the individual (K.) what “practice,” “procedure,” “tradition” or “custom” are to the collective (the Court system; the society). In this story, the “habit” of the Court comes into conflict with the “habit” of a private citizen; the confrontation between two “procedural habits” begins in K.’s bedroom with the disruption of his morning routine.

“The trial [*das Verfahren*] has just been initiated, and you will learn [*erfahren*] everything at the appropriate time.”¹⁹⁸ One must conclude either that on account of the trial *learning is deferred*, or on the other hand that *learning will finally begin* under controlled circumstances, thanks to the freshly imposed conditions of the trial. The unresolvable tension between these two possibilities lies at the heart of Kafka’s world.¹⁹⁹ The “trial” (*Verfahren*) intervenes between K. and his so-called “experience” (*erfahren*) as though to prevent him from learning, or else to teach him what he should have learnt himself. This intervention of the trial between K. and his experience is visible on the level of the words: “*Verfahren*” (trial) is just “*erfahren*” (“to experience” or “to learn”) blocked or facilitated by an intervening “V.” What exactly is its mediating function?²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ “Das Verfahren ist nun einmal eingeleitet, und Sie werden alles zur richtigen Zeit erfahren” (Kafka, *P* 11, my translation). The verb “einleiten” for “to start/begin/initiate/introduce” links this early statement to the parable “Before the Law,” which, as the priest informs K., comes from the “einleitend[e] Schriften zum Gesetz” (*ibid.*, 476). In light of the fact that K. never seems to “learn” anything, whether “at the appropriate time” or not, one might argue that the whole novel takes place, as it were, in the “introductory texts to the law,” or, that the trial is forever in its “initial stages.”

¹⁹⁹ I will return to this problem in closing.

²⁰⁰ Corngold similarly approaches *The Trial* through the question of Josef K.’s “personal experience.” However, he decides the matter against K.’s empiricist approach by siding with the prison chaplain, according to whom K.’s personal experience is invalid and without authority—a “vicious and limited circle” (Corngold, *The Necessity of Form* 220). Corngold raises the importance of the cathedral scene (in which the chaplain converses with K. before relating a short parable, published separately as “Before the Law”) above other moments in the novel; Corngold prioritizes this scene by relying on the “imagery of darkness and blindness,” which in his view “evokes a low point in K.’s mastery of his situation” (*ibid.*, 221). Nevertheless, one might ask why the “light” shed on K.’s trial by the chaplain should be privileged—by K. or by us—above K.’s personal experience. As Corngold neglects to mention, the dialectic of darkness and light in the cathedral scene by no means suggests that the cathedral will be a place of “enlightenment”; it may be the chaplain, not K., whose vision either struggles through darkness or is the source of darkness in the scene. According to the narrator, the candles in the cathedral—which are meant to illuminate the high altar—“actually *increased* the darkness” (Kafka, *The Trial* 206-7, my emphasis). All of the chaplain’s advice must be read in the context of this un-illuminating “light.”

K.'s failure to approach his trial methodically and systematically—his lack of a strategy—results from his inability to decide whether immediate experience should be mistrusted and devalued in favor of reflection (*nachdenken*) or the reverse.²⁰¹ K.'s irresolution is mirrored by the reader's persistent doubt as to whether the trial is supposed to *force* K. to, or to *prevent* him from synthesizing and psychologically assimilating his experience. (Whether the trial realizes its aim in either case is a separate question.) On the one hand, K. ignores his immediate surroundings in favor of "thinking back"; on the other hand, the narrator complains on K.'s behalf that "in the presence of [the guards], he couldn't even think."²⁰² K.'s haphazard search for a proper strategy reaches its crisis in his dealings with the lawyer Huld, whose help and influence are foisted upon K. by his uncle from the country, and whom K. later tries unsuccessfully to fire.

K.'s ambivalence regarding whether or not he should defend himself or seek legal representation hinges on the question of whether getting/making a "first impression" of/on the Court is more valuable than gradually "learning from experience" or the reverse.²⁰³ Huld assures K. that his trial is better off in the hands of a lawyer: "the extensive experience [Huld] had gained in all these trials would naturally be used to K.'s

²⁰¹ K.'s problem once again translates into a problem for readers: one might suppose that the trial initiates K.'s introversion and occasions his self-interrogation by forcing him to think back; nevertheless, the reverse could also obtain: that the trial condemns K. to immediacy and gets in the way of his un-obscured self-knowledge and ability to reflect. This latter possibility brings to mind myths and legends of the "stolen shadow" or "stolen reflection."

²⁰² Kafka, *P* 12.

²⁰³ Although the trial *intervenes* between K. and his so-called "experience," the trial also simply stands in for experience. All the questions raised about K.'s relationship to his "experience" are shifted onto K.'s relationship to his trial; thus the ambiguity between "immediate impact" and "delayed response" is reactivated in the context of K.'s defensive strategy.

benefit.”²⁰⁴ Further, a lawyer would shield K. from the painful details of the process. K.

debates firing Huld as follows:

So long as he had shifted the burden of his defense to his lawyer the trial had not affected him all that much; he had observed it from afar and could scarcely be touched by it directly... on the other hand, if he intended to undertake his own defense, he would have to expose himself fully to the court...²⁰⁵

However, K. contradicts these considerations in his actual attempt to fire Huld:

...the point of engaging a lawyer is to shift the burden of the trial in part from one’s self. But the opposite occurred. I never had as many worries about the trial as I did from the moment you began to represent me. When I was on my own I did nothing about my case, but I hardly noticed it; now, on the other hand, I had someone representing me, everything was set so that something was supposed to happen, I kept waiting expectantly for you to take action, but nothing was done. ...the trial is positively closing in on me in secret.²⁰⁶

The value of “first impressions” as opposed to that of “learning from experience” is no less thorny a question for Huld himself—and despite the long legal experience he boasts. Thus he emphasizes the importance of the “*first* petition” (though its submission is forever postponed), since “the *first impression* made by the defense often influence[s] the whole course of the proceedings.”²⁰⁷ However, Huld warns K. that “the first petition [is] generally misplaced or completely lost, and even if it [is] retained to the very end . . . it [is] hardly even glanced at”; he adds that “on some occasions initial petitions [are] not even read by the court.”²⁰⁸

²⁰⁴ Kafka, Franz, *T* 113.

²⁰⁵ Kafka, *T* 131.

²⁰⁶ Kafka, *T* 187.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 113, my emphases.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

The apparent opposition between immediate and reflective experience is revealed as a red herring. Kafka borrows this structure of false oppositions from Flaubert; the “choice” K. apparently faces between a hypertrophy of immediate experience and a hypertrophy of reflective experience echoes the false opposition in *L'éducation sentimentale* between “passionate” Frédéric and “calculating” Deslauriers. But in Flaubert’s novel, we can still tell the difference between the two possibilities, even if their “difference” proves inconsequential, while in Kafka’s novel, we cannot even tell the difference between “immediacy” and “reflection,” between passion, impetuosity, or haste on the one hand and shrewd cunning on the other—even if *The Trial* at first misleads readers into believing that there is a difference, and further, that we can judge the character of Josef K. with the aid of such distinctions. The novel’s static plot, in collaboration with Kafka’s writing style and formal techniques, prevents us from distinguishing between the two; it is fundamentally impossible to locate “immediacy” in *The Trial*.

Stanley Corngold remarks that the novel prevents *readers* from forming a “first impression” by beginning *not* with an account of the first events of the plot, but with the first *interpretation* of an event that has not been established or recounted (Josef K.’s arrest).²⁰⁹ It is as though we are prevented from knowing whether we are reading this novel “for the first time” or are always already “rereading” it. We might contribute to Corngold’s observation that—just as readers are given interpretations of events rather than the events themselves—K. himself is not shown “experiencing” his arrest, but is informed of it belatedly.

²⁰⁹ Corngold, *The Necessity of Form* 223.

The lack of difference, and lack of relation, between immediate and reflective experience (or first and subsequent “impressions”) is reformulated in terms of age. K. is confronted with the question of whether a *young* trial or an *old* trial has better chances of success. While waiting to consult Huld, K. meets one of the lawyer’s older clients, Block, who observes: “you’re a newcomer . . . a mere youth. Your trial is six months old, right? . . . Such a young trial!”²¹⁰ K. inclines to respect Block’s seniority as a defendant, and eagerly absorbs his advice. However, he monitors with disgust Block’s canine submission to Huld, of which Block remarks: “[K.’s] trial is in its beginning stages, and therefore probably not particularly muddled yet, so the lawyer still enjoys dealing with it. Things will be different later on.”²¹¹ That the lessons of experience are worthless and even *obfuscate* the facts is corroborated by one judge’s opinion of Block’s case: “[Block has] gained a good deal of experience and knows how to protract a trial. But his ignorance far outweighs his cunning. What do you think he would say if he were to learn that his trial hasn’t even begun yet...?”²¹² Trials still in their infancy can masquerade as mature.

Metamorphosis as Premature Aging and the Subject of Missed Experience in the Post-*Bildungsroman*

The theme of aging suggested by the difference between “young” and “old” trials recalls the traditional plot of *Bildung* with which we began. A brief detour through several of Kafka’s short stories on aging reveals the way in which growing old—which

²¹⁰ Kafka, *T* 176.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 182.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 197.

does not require maturation—is drained of significance in Kafka, and will lead us back to a reevaluation of *The Trial*. It must be remarked immediately that “youth” and “old age” in Kafka generally are not overlapping, adjacent stages in a continuous process; rather, they tend to confront each other as oppositional terms with no middle ground.²¹³ This inorganic discontinuity between young and old can be observed in the German title of “Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor,” which could be rendered somewhat awkwardly but more literally as “Blumfeld, an Older Young-Society-Man”: one pictures here a wrinkled, balding boy or else a “little” old man.²¹⁴

Finding loneliness unpleasant, the bachelor Blumfeld weighs the boons and disadvantages of a pet dog. In Blumfeld’s fantasy, the make-believe dog swiftly ages from companionable puppy to a “half-blind, weak-lunged animal all but immobile with fat,” leading Blumfeld to conclude that he “would rather go on climbing the stairs alone for another thirty years than be burdened later on by such an old dog.”²¹⁵ Perhaps it is not the *dog’s* age that troubles Blumfeld; he conjectures previously that “one day [the pet dog] will grow old, one won’t have the heart to get rid of the faithful animal in time, and then comes the moment when *one’s own age peers out at one from the dog’s oozing*

²¹³ See for instance Kafka’s parable “The Next Village,” in which the perspectives of youth and old age are radically incompatible: neither can account for the other, nor can the two alien perspectives be bridged by language, experience, or imagination.

²¹⁴ *Blumfeld, ein älterer Junggeselle*. The phrase “eingefleischter (alter) Junggeselle” means “confirmed bachelor.”

²¹⁵ Kafka, Franz, “Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor,” *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 184. Referenced hereafter as *BEB*. The German text will be referenced as *BÄJ* (Cf. Kafka, Franz, “Blumfeld ein älterer Junggeselle...,” *Die Erzählungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1996), 219-247.)

eyes.”²¹⁶ Here again Kafka performs a deformation on the story of *Bildung*, this time by displacing its plot from the bachelor’s life to the dog’s.²¹⁷ The dog’s aging can be described as “time-lapsed” relative to the slower, imperceptible wilting of the bachelor Blumfeld. But only the *sight* of the dog—its “oozing eyes”—can make Blumfeld conscious of his aging. The dog presents Blumfeld with an *image* of age, experience, and the passage of time—and this in place of aging. Blumfeld shrinks from the quasi-photographic “development” of the dog just as Frédéric Moreau shields himself from the passage of time with a bouquet of eternally fresh flowers.

We leave the “older young bachelor” momentarily to observe that the phenomenon of time-lapsed aging in Kafka is not unique to Blumfeld’s phantom dog; aging must be thought together with the Kafkan trope of “metamorphosis,” which is found most famously in “Die Verwandlung” (“The Metamorphosis” or “The Transformation”), but also in *The Trial*, where the possibility of change both for the Court system and for Josef K. is referred to in terms of body- and shape-changes or “metamorphosis.”²¹⁸ Metamorphosis, for Kafka, is nothing other than an infinitely rapid process of growing old. To be “transformed” is to grow up on fast-forward, except that in this time-lapsed aging, the “growing up” is also bypassed altogether. As rapid aging, metamorphosis is reducible to the fantasized or wishful development of the prematurely old, for to be “transformed” is to change so quickly that there is no possibility of “learning from experience.” Let us define Kafkan “metamorphosis” precisely as *an*

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ The “arresting” effect on Blumfeld of the dog’s image, which he contemplates as though staring at a work of art, recalls Josef K.’s “arrest” at the beginning of *The Trial*.

²¹⁸ Cf. Kafka, *T* 73, 79, 94, 120, 193.

experience from which nothing can be learned. It cannot even be called an “experience” in the sense of *Erfahrung*; it is survived by someone or something unrecognizable, whose existence is discontinuous with what came before. Metamorphosis in Kafka is a radical break in experience—and yet in spite of all this, such “radical breaks” in experience are consistently glossed over, even effortlessly bridged by Kafka’s prose. The softening of blows and muting of shocks is a hallmark of his fictions.²¹⁹

Gregor Samsa of “Die Verwandlung” preserves continuity with his former (pre-vermin) self because he is lucky enough to have slept through his alarm, and thus through his alarming transformation; Gregor *misses* the transforming experience and suffers its consequences only belatedly. He wakes up still under the illusion that he is a man who will “develop,” if so gradually that growth can scarcely be perceived.²²⁰ But for the one “transformed”—as for the bachelor who reads his aging only in the oozing eyes of an imaginary dog—there is no longer anything left of the youth who made mistakes in the old man who might have learned. Gregor Samsa is buried in the insect that does not recognize itself or know how to work its “little” legs. Metamorphosis buries death and glosses over mourning. “Metamorphosis” or “transformation” (*Verwandlung*) is a way of ripping open the sky while still not promising that there is anything beyond this world. The image of breaking through the surface of the familiar world is still only an image. It

²¹⁹ I will return to this Kafkan effect shortly.

²²⁰ This in itself would be no cause for immediate alarm: the German *Bildungsroman* is typically hundreds if not thousands of pages long. Gregor’s vague plans to quit his job as a traveling salesman for more meaningful pursuits are postponed—that is, until his surprising metamorphosis forces him to “realize” the fantasy of quitting.

is a paper sky that is torn, just as Gregor is “transformed” on earth, in his parent’s house, rather than resurfacing in another dimension.

The case of Blumfeld is interesting in that it shows an aging process that cannot be contained within a single being. Blumfeld must recruit the imaginary dog as though to age *for* him. Blumfeld’s inability to incorporate psychologically the fact of his aging—the absence of an intuitive sense that he has gained or lost anything remarkable in the course of life—means that the elderly Blumfeld is no longer Blumfeld at all, but an old dog with oozing eyes. He has oozed into the image of the dog, and cannot feel his age, but only “sees” it from afar, across the safe but alienating distance always afforded by images. There is a double bind in Kafka’s work that *inevitably* prevents his heroes from “gaining” or “learning” anything through experience, and which disjoints their aging process between two alien beings. This makes of aging an empty hypothesis—a speculation about what must have happened given that where young A once sat, old B now sits, though he remembers nothing of A and though his face has turned from green to brown. The double bind is this: by the time—infinately remote—when it might have been possible for one of Kafka’s heroes to cash in the various funds of his life experience, one finds either that (as in the case of Josef K.) these funds (money, lessons, memories, etc.) have dwindled to the point that there is nothing left to “collect”; or else (as in the case of Gregor Samsa, Blumfeld, etc.) that the man himself has been exhausted, become unrecognizable, or has been replaced by another who usurps his habitat. A similar distribution of the aging process among a series of separate beings can be observed in the movement between Kafka’s novels: from *Karl Rossman of Amerika* to *Josef K. of The Trial* to *K. of The Castle*, Kafka’s protagonists are progressively older;

they are linked yet unrelated, un-relatable. Their quasi-shared *name*, even, is whittled away to a lone *K*. To age in Kafka is to gather dust, or to erode and be scattered. Either there will be nothing left of experience and its funds, or there will be nothing left of the one who survives. The distance to be traversed, in living, is too great.²²¹ The would-be *Bildungsroman* bursts at its seams.

There is a remarkable fetishization of the aging process in Kafka's works; a number of Kafkan tropes can be assimilated under this idea. Despite being condemned to youth and inexperience, Kafka's heroes are suffocated by an aging that confronts them in the form of images or is hypostasized in external objects. Hence Kafka's obsession with the folds of clothing, accretions of dust, piles of bedding, and drifts of snow. Detritus buries the imperial capital city in "The Great Wall of China." Kafka's love-objects (both female and male) are often buried in clothing that drapes and folds over their bodies: these costumes simulate the wrinkled skin of old age—but whose? Layered wrinkles of cloth collect *between* Kafka, or his protagonists, and the objects of their desire.²²² Is this the hero's projection of his own aging onto the desired object? Or does the love object wear its age as disguise—as though age could be peeled off at will, and the elderly disrobed to reveal a youth which still persists? Wrinkles are at any rate capitally fetishized.

²²¹ In a lengthy summary of the lawyer Huld's meandering speeches to Josef K., the narrator paraphrases Huld: "Sometimes it seemed *amazing that an average lifetime sufficed to learn enough* to work here with a modicum of success" (Kafka, *T* 120, my emphasis).

²²² In Kafka's *Diaries*, descriptions of women to whom Kafka is clearly attracted frequently feature draped and pleated clothing; in his stories, male figures often appear in "traveling outfits" covered with folds, pleats, and numerous pockets.

The accretion of wrinkles and dust around Kafkan heroes is related to the remarkable *inaccessibility* of the Kafkan subject to “processes” of any kind (most notably in *The Trial/Der Prozeß*). Kafka’s subjects are invulnerable to time, change, and growth. Processes in Kafka can be suddenly stripped of their temporal dimension and reduced to a matter of appearances. Thus only Block’s limiting perspective leads him to conclude that his trial is well underway, while in one judge’s view, it has not yet begun. The decay of cities and traditions, the erosion of texts and messages as they are passed around, the time-lapsed aging of Kafkan heroes: all these processes might be merely apparent. Blumfeld the bachelor, called “elderly,” is at the same time a young man mummified or pickled. “Aging” isn’t undergone; it accumulates in the form of dust and clothing that presses in around the hero until he can no longer move or breathe. It is as though the *world* were aging, rather than the Kafkan hero, as if these heroes experience not their own aging but the “ages” of the world in geological time. In Proust, memory is externalized in the form of objects; in Kafka, the traces of experience and aging—which are never appropriated to be made *legible* or *significant* in the form of Proustian “memories”—are externalized as material sedimentation that surrounds his characters without penetrating them. The enfeebled, disillusioned Kafka is no more than forty years old; the last photos of him show ears more cartoonishly large, but on this “wise man’s” face no wrinkles. The unyielding *smoothness* of his face was another of Kafka’s many worries: experience, he felt, should leave visible marks. “With the progress of my work,” Kafka writes optimistically in early 1912, “my face will finally be able to age in a natural way.”²²³ The absence of these traces belies the hope that any progress has been made.

²²³ Kafka, *The Diaries. 1910-1923*, ed. Max Brod (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1975/6), 163.

It is as though the Kafkan hero's "age" were a system of ranking to be read in the number of pleats (*Falten*) in his uniform, or better, in the number of wrinkles (*Falten*) creasing his suit and face. Walter Benjamin notes that authority figures in Kafka are disheveled and filthy.²²⁴ These authorities are also infinitely fatigued and often asleep, as though their "age" could be shown only in the hatch-marks impressed on cheeks by wrinkled sheets. The idea that pleats and folds in Kafka could be counted is merely a reader's fantasy, never realized, of how rank and power in the Kafkan text could be made legible. (Five wrinkles, five particles of dust would command more respect than three, and so on.)²²⁵

Immediate Reflections on the Deformation of a Genre

Critics have been tempted to decide the mediating function of *trial* in the life of Josef K. in favor of "trial" *not* as an obstacle to experience, but as a painful retracing and magnification of experience whose purpose would be *to teach K. what he has failed to learn himself*. This could be understood either as an intensification of immediate experience (as when Josef K. complains that ever since hiring the lawyer Huld, he has been acutely "sensitive" to his trial, apprehensively awaiting the faintest clues from his surroundings or murmur of news from the Court), or as an enriching of reflective experience (as when it is argued that the trial forces K. to strive for greater clarity and a more profound understanding of his experience). Nevertheless, even when K.'s "trial" is

²²⁴ Benjamin, Walter, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 114.

²²⁵ For a fascinating work of cultural history and literary criticism that relates the "superficial" dimension of Kafka's early prose to the Kafkan trope of uniforms and clothes, see Mark M. Anderson's *Kafka's Clothes: Ornament and Aestheticism in the Habsburg Fin de Siècle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

described as a painful intensification of experience, this artificial reinforcement of the traditional plot of *Bildung* must be read as symptomatic: such a farcically exaggerated reiteration of the *Bildung* narrative is comprehensible only as a defensive reaction on Kafka's part against the decay of experience which, according to Walter Benjamin and others, characterizes modern times. Furthermore, such readings overlook an equally strong body of evidence to the contrary, and ignore the *buffering* effects afforded K. by his trial. In fact, "immediacy" insulates K. against "reflection" and vice versa. Josef K. brandishes his trial as a shield against experience (both immediate and reflective)—insulated as much by his own "dull-wittedness" as by external factors and intermediaries, it is the blinding shininess of Josef K.'s youth that Kafka's novel borrows from Flaubert's *L'éducation sentimentale*.

The tendency of critics to read *trial* as a painful recapitulation of experience—thus *The Trial* as a kind of synthetic *Bildungsroman* in which growth is *imposed* on the hero—might seem to resonate broadly with the familiar Kafkan theme of carving experience into living flesh. Most famously in "In the Penal Colony," the law which has been transgressed is traced and retraced ever deeper into the back of the accused man until this violent "writing" of the proper (official) interpretation of his actions and experience kills him. Josef K.'s trial is similarly fatal. Yet the deadly writing of experience "In the Penal Colony" is also *not* a revelation in the self-consciousness of the accused, as the officer claims, but merely a meaningless and illegible tattoo. In Kafka's story, writing fails to parallel *Bildung*, and thus fails to bear witness to its successful conclusion. It reveals no more to the reader than it does to the accused man. K.'s trial is

likewise a “growth process” worn on the outside like clothing or scars, the superficial traces of experience that has *failed* to penetrate.

A paradox emerges when immediate and reflective experience are made simultaneous and conflated, a paradox which makes learning from experience impossible for Kafka’s protagonists: experience must be “writable” in order for *Bildung* to begin; however, *Bildung* must be completed before experience can be “writable.” The same contradiction governs Kafka’s stories about the transmission of messages, information, letters, and the written text of the law. Nobody, in Kafka, “gets the message” that is perpetually passed along. I will address this Kafkan impasse in reference to the transmission of messages and texts before folding my observations back onto the question of learning from experience to show how the two instances are related in the case of Kafka’s anti-*Bildung* narratives.

In *The Trial*, the painter Titorelli explains to Josef K. that only *legends* of “full acquittals” granted by the Court remain—in the absence of permanent records or contemporary experience of such cases; these legends of course are unverifiable.²²⁶ According to Titorelli, the metamorphosis of legal precedent since ancient times is paralleled by the metamorphosis of the very legend that tells the history of legal precedent. The evolution of legal procedure is rendered dubious by the evolving story of its evolution. Two possible metamorphoses are superimposed, obscuring each other’s reality. The metamorphosis of legend might artificially animate the stagnant history and sterile repetition of the unchanged ancient customs of the Court; conversely, a stable, unrevised legend might report the objective transformation of Court customs. Have the

²²⁶ Kafka, *P* 183.

Courts changed; has the Law changed; or is it only the story about them that has changed?

The relationship between the metamorphosis of law and the story of its metamorphosis parallels the relationship between the process of *Bildung* and the text of the *Bildungsroman*. *Bildung*, which can be understood as parallel and analogous to, even contingent on *the possibility of writing* lived experience, similarly has the status of a rumor or legend in Kafka (whether one speaks of the *Bildung* of Josef K., Blumfeld, Gregor Samsa, or any of the others); it can be suspected but not proven. The lessons learned—and therefore the *text* of the *Bildungsroman*—must be transported over the whole course of a human life before they can be reported on; yet such a vast stretch of time is needed to learn anything worthwhile that the text of the *Bildungsroman* (precious cargo) is forgotten, lost, or misremembered before the message of its contents can be delivered.

In Kafka, *Bildung* and the writing of *Bildung* become curiously entangled. When learning from experience is troped as the writing of experience on the body of the protagonist, and as the progressive editing of this “living” text,²²⁷ then the progress of *Bildung* becomes hopelessly obscured and transformed by the effort to record the story of *Bildung*. *Insofar as the text of the Bildungsroman is written on the body of the protagonist, the difference between “immediate” and “reflective” experience is erased.* The modern text of *Bildung* (in this case, Kafka’s writing) is eroded and exhausted in parallel with the lives and lessons of its heroes. Thus the “metamorphosis” and aging of Josef K. is obscured by the “metamorphosis” and aging of his trial, and further by

²²⁷ Cf. “In the Penal Colony,” *The Complete Stories*, 140-167.

Kafka's writing of *The Trial*. There is no way to tell whether it is *Josef K.'s habits* or *his trial* or merely *the novel* which is moving and (d)evolving over time; we can be certain only that something is static, something is failing to change, even if stasis and failure in the novel cannot be adequately located. Is it that there is no longer any possibility of *Bildung* in Kafka, or is it only that the *story* of K.'s *Bildung* will not be able to reach us? A dog, after all, would have to write it.²²⁸ When Josef K. dies "like a dog," Kafka's fantasy of reading Flaubert's *L'éducation sentimentale* aloud in a clumsy foreign accent returns in the image of an animal who would tell the story of human development.²²⁹

"...though it wasn't his habit to learn from experience..."

It is Josef K.'s "habit" *not* to learn from experience. In closing, we might consider another way of approaching the impossibility of *Bildung* in Kafka (and the uneasy designation of *The Trial* as a post-*Bildungsroman*) beginning with the vital function of habit and routine—and their violation—in his works. One must ask firstly what the relationship of habit to "learning from experience" is supposed to be, as it were, "normally": is there anything unusual in the fact that it is Josef K.'s "habit" not to learn? To learn from experience presumably would mean the disruption and revision of habit; it would mean not to succumb to habit, and to resist the coagulation of experience into the assimilating forms of habitual behavior and thought. However, habit and routine also provide the requisite context of familiarity from which a disruptive experience—that is,

²²⁸ Josef K. dies "like a dog." On a related note, one of Kafka's most autobiographical late stories is entitled "Investigations of a Dog," and is narrated by a canine protagonist.

²²⁹ Kafka realizes this scenario in "An Address to an Academy," a story in which an audience of scholars invites an ape to report on how he became human (unlike Gregor Samsa, the "humanized" ape retains his simian form).

one from which it would be *necessary* to learn something in the first place—can be apprehended and reflected on at all. Habit is therefore the condition of the possibility and the impossibility of learning from experience. The idea that it might be Josef K.’s habit to learn *or* not to learn from experience is incoherent and obscures the mutually conditioning relationship between habit and learning borne out by the novel.

To grasp the role of habit generally in Kafka’s writing requires us to take a step back. One could say that Kafka evacuates interiority and explodes the domestic space by introducing catastrophe and horror into its formerly safe enclosure; however, one could also say that Kafka has domesticated horror and miniaturized disaster—and for precisely the same reasons. Gregor Samsa wakes up a giant vermin, but the closed doors to his bedroom in the family home conceal this embarrassment. Kafka quarantines catastrophe in the bosom of a familiar world that still functions, and where life indeed “goes on” as though nothing has happened.²³⁰ A much-cited biographical detail can be invoked here: Kafka worked as a lawyer with the Workmen’s Accident Insurance Institute from 1908-1922.²³¹ Critics have appealed to this fact to suggest that disaster, for Kafka, is uniquely within the realm of possibility. As an insurance man, the argument runs, Kafka is never under the illusion that the worst cannot happen; habit and routine are *insufficient* protection against traumas. Nevertheless, this familiar biographical detail can be employed as easily in the service of a different argument: disaster in the writings of

²³⁰ Similar observations have led some critics to remark that it is as though the universe has reacted *belatedly* to the small, fictional traumas Kafka describes. Perhaps it is only the works of later writers and the disasters of a posthumous history that could respond to Kafka’s world.

²³¹ Cf. *Franz Kafka: The Office Writings*, ed. Stanley Corngold, Jack Greenberg, and Benno Wagner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), ix.

Kafka—who worked for an insurance institute—is *always* seen in advance; catastrophe is buffered against and contained within the narrative structure; it is padded by foresight and precautions, or at the very least by a host of belated defensive measures (both practical and psychological) taken as soon as it strikes.

The difficulty in deciding between the two readings of Kafka here outlined—1) that Kafka tells the story of a disruption of habit that is never resolved, or 2) that Kafka’s fiction is “shock-proof” and absorbs catastrophe back into routine—reveals an unresolvable tension that is *constitutive of habit in the first place*. Habit is a continual effort on the part of the individual to accommodate himself to a world in which shock experience otherwise would be the norm. Habit has been theorized by Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, and others as the reproduction of disturbing stimuli and shattering experiences with the aim of mastering these events and rendering them familiar. In Kafka’s world, where the most intimate trappings of subjectivity are so easily reduced to costume, “habit” is both the subject’s attempt to acclimate himself to an alien world, and the familiar clothing in which the “alien” creature tries to pass as a native at home in his surroundings.

Kafka’s fictions famously climax in the first sentence;²³² they begin with an *original* disruption of habit that is ambiguously both reabsorbed by routine and *never* resolved. This suggests that the “key” moment in the narrative—and the protagonist’s

²³² Gregor Samsa wakes up as a giant vermin in the first sentence of “The Metamorphosis,” etc. Corngold cites as further evidence for “...what might be termed the general and fundamental priority of the beginning in Kafka’s works” several facts: “...the innumerable openings to stories scattered throughout the diaries and notebooks, suddenly appearing and as swiftly vanishing, leaving undeveloped the endless dialectical structures they contain”; he also cites Kafka’s explicit complaint about “the misery of having perpetually to begin, the lack of the illusion that anything is more than, or even as much as, a beginning”; etc. (Corngold, *The Necessity of Form* 48-9).

most formative experience—occurs before the beginning of the story. But while Flaubert could not resist including the eventful prehistory of his anti-*Bildungsroman* *L'éducation sentimentale* in the novel after all (by revealing Frédéric's memory of his first visit to the brothel in the final scene), Kafka's fictions rigorously exclude the "original event" whose effects his texts struggle to absorb. Thus the reader never meets Gregor Samsa in his "human" form. Neither can the reader rely on the Samsa family's reaction to indicate wherein the force of the event lies. Gregor Samsa's sister "gets used" to his insect form, but as the narrator hastens to add: "of course she could never get *completely* used to it."²³³ Similarly, Josef K. is "arrested" in the first sentence of *The Trial*, but this obscure change of state is neither clarified nor proven, nor does the novel allow us to decide whether the situation of arrest is familiar or unfamiliar to Josef K.—a change of state or merely an allegory for his way of life prior to being apprehended.

By *beginning* with such disruptive force, Kafka's work emphasizes the fundamental impossibility of distinguishing between "habit" or "routine" on the one hand, and its radical disruption on the other. Josef K.'s arrest is both climax and anti-climax: his state of "arrest" can be defined as a *permanent* disruption of habit, but it is also the *originary* "disruption" that opens the economy of habit in the first place. In other words, K.'s arrest is the sort of disruption that the shock-absorbing monotony of habit so successfully smoothes over and conceals. Kafkan figures rarely express any feeling of surprise. The "disruption of routine" with which Kafka's stories so often begin—and the permanent disruption of routine he writes—is nothing more than the eternal repetition of disturbing experience that *is* this routine.

²³³ Kafka, Franz, "The Metamorphosis," *The Complete Stories*, 109.

Habit is an economy through which familiarity is produced. The familiar, the private, subjectivity (or psychological interiority), homeland, and home (the domestic interior) nevertheless are often assumed as substantives, locations, identity positions—as givens, rather than as fragile, evaporating habitats that must be continually produced by transforming the alien and the unknown into recognizable form. This accounts for the tendency of Kafka’s critics to read him as a writer of escape, flight, and exile on the one hand, or on the other hand as a kind of failed “rebel” who in the end never escapes his childhood traumas, his pathologies, his father, his mother, his national identity, his Jewishness, or even his bedroom in the family home.

The critical response to Kafka has been remarkably unable to answer the following question: given that his works are characterized by a series of defensive structures and procedures (the trial, the castle, the burrow, etc.), *against what* do Kafka and his heroes “defend themselves”? Does Kafka’s writing struggle against the shocks of the modern world (from which one might suppose he seeks refuge), or to the contrary against the claustrophobic confines of the family home, against the stickiness of intimacy, against the smothering spoils of domestic comfort (from which he might wish to flee)? Does Kafka seek to *escape* (as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue) or to *belong* (as Günter Anders has it)?²³⁴ Does his principal anxiety regard the difficulty of *leaving traces* in the fray of modern life that would erase them and reduce the human subject to an anonymous and replaceable/disposable existence, or does his anxiety regard the

²³⁴ These two readings are dialectical counterparts resulting from the same misunderstanding of the liminal economy of habit. Cf. Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); for the converse claim, see Anders, Günter, *Franz Kafka*, trans. A. Steer and A. K. Thorlby (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1951).

difficulty of *obliterating one's traces*, becoming anonymous and disappearing from the bosom of a familiar, familial world, a mother tongue, and the social network into which one is born?

The ineluctable historical embedded-ness even of the wildest fantasy is expressed in the Kafka trope of the one who is trapped in bed—and trapped there precisely when the most incredible events are suffered. Once again we find that the inescapable “bed” or “nest” of familiarity is violated and made alien only in the same gesture by which the fantastic and horrible are domesticated and reabsorbed. To approach Kafka’s works through the economy of habit reveals as a false dilemma the pair of dialectically opposed readings with which we began: that nothing *needs* to be learned (because it is already known); or that nothing *can* be learned (because it is too alien and alienating to be conceived in familiar terms, and thus has no bearing on the life of the one transformed.)

Habit on Trial: the Original Disruption

To summarize: the trial magnifies and exacerbates Josef K.’s “experience” even while it also simply stands in for and replaces or metaphorizes his experience. The simultaneously identical/repetitive and supplementary status of trial with respect to experience—the fact that *trial* obscures the difference between immediacy and reflection—results in the following paradox: the trial indeed “mediates” between K. and his experience, but insofar as it “teaches K. what he has failed to learn himself,” trial is at the same time *that which obviates the need for K. to learn from experience in the first place*. “Trial” recapitulates K.’s “experience” only while protecting and insulating him from it. The analogy between the process of *Bildung* and the process of writing the text of *Bildung* must be recalled here: trial “writes,” inscribes and formulates K.’s experience

only while un-writing his experience, erasing all permanent traces of K. from the world—and conversely all traces of the modern world and its would-be “shock experiences” from K.’s perception and memory.

To this extent, the trial functions in a way that is analogous to the economy of habit—it operates like a layer of fat between the vulnerable, exposed individual and his natural and social worlds. Let us not be content, however, with understanding “habit” in Kafka as the exclusive province of individual human subjects. There is a murky intermingling of the habits and routines of Josef K., the conventions of his society, the traditions of his culture, and the legal procedures of the Court system. Our trouble deciding whether routine has mastered traumatic shocks in Kafka or the reverse manifests itself as an inability to determine where emphasis should be placed in the narrative. How and where should we locate the “decisive” moment in Kafkan dramas? Consider *The Trial*: the reader is surprised to find that it is not Josef K.’s execution (or suicide) that carries the most dramatic weight; rather, it is the disruption of routine with which the novel begins.

Josef K. is not served his breakfast at the usual time.²³⁵ And yet to place the entire weight of the drama on this comparatively *minor* disruption of habit is to read *The Trial* as one of Kafka’s animal stories in human disguise.²³⁶ Animals, not humans, are most profoundly disturbed by deviations from routine: the rearranging of furniture, the appearance of a new food dish in place of the old—the minutest change is experienced by an animal as the beginning of the end. In this they are like children, who demand for

²³⁵ He is disturbed by this unfamiliar circumstance even before being informed of his so-called arrest.

²³⁶ This is not to deny that Kafka’s animals seem to be more like humans, or even philosophers.

instance that a story be read always in exactly the same way, as though variation were tantamount to death. In fact the “tragedy” of the novel, if there is any, appears to be this initial outrage: the dragging of a peckish animal out of bed without the anticipated treat. Is it tragic to go without one’s breakfast? How long must one go hungry? Must one die?²³⁷

For the reader to be incensed by this minor deprivation is to react to K. as though he were an animal or a child. (To call Josef K. “human” may be to anthropomorphize him, though to be “anthropomorphized” is perhaps the condition of *Bildung*: if we did not routinely anthropomorphize our infants and young, children would be put in zoos, exterminated, or petted, depending on their size and on the number of their legs and teeth.) A younger Josef K. no doubt would have been the modern babysitter’s bane. Josef K. is a child whose only Law is routine; his mantra: *that’s not how we do things at our house*. Adaptation would mean metamorphosis, which is the death of the familiar. The warden’s intrusion surprises Josef K. with the news that there is an authority higher than routine, which is to say that there exists an *unfamiliar* Law—for the routine of the animal-child Josef K. would be the law of the familiar, and familiarity as Law.

Nevertheless, the idiosyncratic, microscopic law of familiarity cannot contain our reading of the opening scene. Josef K.’s expectation of breakfast cannot be reduced to “how we do things at our house”—namely, that the breast appears in one’s mouth at 8:00 a.m. come rain or shine. (If this were the case, then *The Trial* would be a novel about weaning that begins with the blackening of the breast.) Confronted with the reality that

²³⁷ Josef K. is not shown enjoying any regular meals for the remainder of the novel; nothing compensates for the breakfast of which he is deprived.

his breakfast will no longer be brought to him in bed, and that he will have to venture into the world to hunt for food,²³⁸ Josef K. refuses. How hungry is he anyway? Is he hungry because his stomach is growling, or because it is 8:00? *Whose* routine, private or social, is being violated in the opening scene of arrest? With breakfast, K. might have been served the whole of the social and professional world; breakfast might have made of him a productive worker, a greedy adherent to the logic of progress, *Bildung*, and learning from experience. In short, need the breast have been blackened, or is this gesture, too, nothing more than tradition—a protracted, inherited routine?²³⁹

Beyond Habit: Kafka's Naïve Reader

What does Kafka's writing "do" to experience? The deformation of the narrative of *Bildung* in Kafka's hands is reflected back on his readers. He makes of us "naïve" and inexperienced readers. Kafka's texts denature our literary *Bildung*. In the face of his writing, the reader finds that his or her training is without value; it even may be an obstacle rather than a tool. It is this final point that gauges the distance between Kafka and Flaubert: for Flaubert's readers maintain their sovereignty over the text, their safe remove in the form of a critical, ironic distance from the events of his anti-

Bildungsroman *L'éducation sentimentale*. We may fail to anticipate its ending, but we

²³⁸ The warden suggests this by asking whether K. wants food from the shop across the street.

²³⁹ Kafka, as usual, offers up black comedy in this faint suggestion of a "last breakfast"; breakfast is far too hopeful a meal to be experienced as the last. Insofar as the opening scene already refers us forward to the final scene, it also recalls the strange convention of performing executions first thing in the morning. Kafka's peculiar humor could perhaps be captured by the image of a criminal who must set his alarm clock to get up in time to die, and who is awakened from a nightmare of eternal damnation to the utterly mundane chore of being executed; here, the mythical dimensions of death are trivialized by routine.

are never embroiled in the confusions of the young Frédéric Moreau; rather, we watch with a knowing smirk as he makes his bungling social debut.

Kafka's readers enjoy no such comfortable detachment. Critics of Kafka notoriously struggle to maintain the proper distance from his texts: one tends to be either "spit out," left to write about Kafka from the remote position of an alien to Kafka's world, or to be "sucked into" Kafka's texts such that one's writing unfolds in the sinister interiority of a Kafkan hermeticism. It is as though one must choose between making extravagant claims and being a detail-monger, or better, between having a Kafkan experience of the Kafkan text, and refusing or failing to have a Kafkan experience of the Kafkan text. One is either trapped "inside Kafka," or else is so far from him that one loses sight of his world. The consequences of Kafka's anti-*Bildung* writing practice for readers and for literary history are vast: Kafka's borrowing and revision of Flaubertian themes is transformative not only of Flaubert, but of the history of writing to which they both belong. Kafka's writing performs an operation on our experience of reading such that his texts can no longer be placed in literary history, and such that we as readers cannot have "learned" from our experience of reading. Kafka's unique achievement is to have placed us before habit, beyond *Bildung*, and outside the history of writing.

PART II: W. G. SEBALD

9. Sebald's Intertextual Romance

Arbitrariness and Literary Origins: the First Detail

The adamant rhetoric of chance and arbitrariness in W. G. Sebald's literary works gives one the impression that they could have "begun anywhere," could have started with anything: a passing reference, a random detail, an inessential observation, a chance encounter, a propitious pause in the life of the writer during which he happened to write something down... The inclusion of haphazardly acquired images, newspaper clippings and "nomadic" photographs fortifies Sebald's poetics of chance.²⁴⁰ And yet the apparent arbitrariness of his starting points may be merely an index of the inevitability with which all tangents in this species of storytelling branch from the same stem. As though relying on the primary rule of psychoanalysis—free association—there is a confidence in Sebald that the tangent will prove central. The enclosure of every Sebaldian particular in a single snarled web provokes Mark McCulloh to speak of Sebald's "literary monism."²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ On the topic of coincidence, see for instance Eshel, Amir, "Against the Power of Time: The Poetics of Suspension in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*," *New German Critique: An Interdisciplinary Journal of German Studies* 88 (Winter 2003): 71-96.

²⁴¹ McCulloh, Mark, *Understanding W. G. Sebald* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003) 20-21. McCulloh identifies Sebald's "literary monism" in spite of "a typically Sebaldian paradox" whereby "the narrator has no choice but to describe the oneness of all things from a detached and objectifying point of view" (21). McCulloh lifts the word "monism" from a Borges story, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," to which Sebald refers twice in *The Rings of Saturn*. McCulloh also speaks of free association in reference to Sebald's poetics (3). Arthur Williams speaks similarly of the "coherence, integrity, and *Zusammenhang*" that is "on every page of S.'s work" (Williams, Arthur, "W. G. Sebald: A Holistic Approach to Borders, Texts and Perspectives," in *German-Language Literature Today: International and Popular?*, ed. Arthur Williams, Stuart Parkes, and Julian Preece (Oxford, England: Peter Lang, 2000) 106, my emphasis). He quotes from Andreas Isenschmidt's 1990 review of *Schwindel.Gefühle*. Critics agree less on wherein, exactly, the metaphysical unity of Sebald's texts lies. Is his writing unified by the inevitable "natural history of destruction" by which all things disintegrate, collapse, age, and decay? Or are they unified by the promise—though it may remain unrealized—that art, writing, and acts of remembrance salvage something meaningful from within the forces of chaos and all

But why should the coherence of Sebald's work be so noteworthy after all? The conclusion that every point in a novel is connected to every other point in that novel is scarcely worth drawing; Sebald's "literary monism" is remarkable only because it blankets his entire oeuvre as though erasing the distinction between discrete works, and because of the way in which he blends fiction with literary criticism, biography and documentary to write what we may call literary historiography. If every particularity in Sebald is connected to every other, this unity or monism seems to bear on "reality," and on history, in a way that the coherence of "purely" fictional texts does not.²⁴² There is no clear division between the inside and the outside of Sebaldian prose. His work challenges the distinction between "realism" (as an aesthetic ideal in artistic representations) and reality. This is why Sebald's monism may be more than just a fact about fiction, lending to it the character of a worldview or a philosophy of history.

The arbitrariness and non-arbitrariness of the beginning in each of Sebald's prose fictions is linked intimately to the question of where to mark the beginning of the fictional turn in Sebald's hitherto academic bibliography. When does Sebald begin to write fiction? At what point does a poetic element creep into his scholarly prose? One may be tempted to grope for the origins of Sebald's literary career from a position outside and before the works in question: for instance biographically. In his mid-forties, W. G. Sebald, a professor of European Literature at the University of East Anglia, shelves his

that follows in the human world from the passage of time (forgetting, loss, death)? On the ambiguity of the Sebald's monism, or unified worldview, see also Jan Cueppens, "Seeing Things: Specters and Angels in W. G. Sebald's Prose Fictions," in *W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, ed. by J. J. Long and Anne Whitehead (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004) 190-202.

²⁴² The idea of the "purely fictional" may be merely a useful fiction; nevertheless, Sebald distinguishes his literary texts from the more strictly fictional by referring to them as "prose fictions" rather than as "novels."

twenty-year career as a literary scholar and critic in favor of writing what he calls “prose fictions.” He never returns. What inspires Sebald’s departure from academic standards and style in favor of a sudden, irreversible fictional turn? *Is there, indeed, a “fictional turn”?*

The chronological-biographical approach to Sebald’s literary beginnings instantly encounters an obstacle: most native-English-speaking readers of Sebald will have read his best-known works in quasi-reverse order. His first prose fiction, *Schwindel.Gefühle.*, was not translated into English (as *Vertigo*) until 1999 (Harvill Press), following the translations of his second and third such texts, *The Emigrants* (1996) and *The Rings of Saturn* (1998). Only *Austerlitz* (2001), the last in this series, was delivered to English readers in its natural order. Since Sebald’s works were first and most vocally received by English-speaking readers and critics—being initially less popular in Germany by far—the “backward” order of their translation into English has been reproduced in the secondary sources on Sebald. Mark McCulloh’s introductory book, for instance, devotes a chapter to each of the four prose fictions, but organizes these chapters according to the books’ English publication dates rather than preserving the order in which they were written.

In addition to the belated availability of Sebald’s first foray into what would become his uniquely crossbred literary form, Sebald’s English-speaking audience cannot have received *Vertigo* in the context of his mostly un-translated academic essays on Austrian literature, which appeared in two volumes immediately flanking the 1990 German publication of *Schwindel. Gefühle.* (*Vertigo*) under the titles *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks. Zur österreichischen Literatur von Stifter bis Handke* (1985) and *Unheimliche Heimat. Essays zur österreichischen Literatur* (1991). These volumes

anthologize pieces of literary criticism published originally in various periodicals from 1972-1985 and 1976-1989 respectively. Given the chronology of Sebald's assorted publications, it comes as no surprise that *Schwindel. Gefühle.* is ubiquitously foreshadowed in his academic writings.²⁴³ Yet as the first of what the author calls his "prose fictions" (in contradistinction to "novels"), *Schwindel. Gefühle.* represents not only a literary reworking of the themes and figures from his critical essays—thus proving closely and self-consciously connected to those works; it also represents Sebald's first attempt to *detach* his writing from its academic prehistory.²⁴⁴

Although the ordered Sebaldian catalogue exhibits a gradual hypertrophy of the literary, an "ordered" approach to Sebald obscures the severing of fiction from literary criticism that *Schwindel. Gefühle.* simultaneously achieves. Thus Sebald begins to write fiction by distinguishing with a new term, "prose fiction," a literature which issues forth from his rather poetic pieces of literary criticism to the point of eclipse.²⁴⁵

²⁴³ A few of the themes that bridge Sebald's literary criticism and his prose fictions are ships and sailing; love, sexuality and writing; the failure or success of writing; the happiness and unhappiness of the writer; biography and autobiography; natural history and the destruction of the environment; symptomatic writing and pathology; etc.

²⁴⁴ Cf. Marcel Atze, "Koinzidenz und Intertextualität," in *Porträt 7: W. G. Sebald*, ed. Franz Loquai (Eggingen: Klaus Isele, 1997) 151-175. Atze characterizes Sebald's academic essays as a fund of themes and figures for his literary works, though he does not seek to describe the difference between the two types of prose, nor the possible reasons for Sebald's departure from scholarly conventions. Of the two volumes of Sebald's collected essays, Atze writes: "Both volumes of Sebald's essays represent a true treasure trove with respect to his narratives. Perhaps one wouldn't be going too far to describe them as a collection of material and motifs, a quarry of material as it were for [Sebald's] literary production. Sebald not only appears to be able to take for granted an extensive knowledge of literature; moreover, this knowledge, and with it the texts [Sebald has] read, is internalized" (157, my translation).

²⁴⁵ *Logis in einem Landhaus* is Sebald's only collection of quasi-scholarly essays to appear after his prose-fiction career takes off. However, these later pieces of quasi-criticism are imaginative and fictionalized in comparison to Sebald's earlier volumes of literary criticism.

“Beyle oder das merckwürdige Faktum der Liebe”

If extra-textual efforts to mark the beginning of Sebald’s literary career are abandoned, one is left with a second possibility: to identify the facts of the fictional turn from within Sebald’s prose fictions. The metamorphosis of Sebald-the-literary-critic into Sebald-the-*littérateur* no doubt is underway already in his academic writings.²⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the first transitional point that can be marked as a kind of joint between his academic and literary careers is the opening section of *Schwindel. Gefühle.*, “Beyle oder das merckwürdige Faktum der Liebe” (which in the English translation of *Vertigo* has been renamed “Beyle, or Love is a Madness Most Discreet”). The section recounts formative years in the life of the prolific nineteenth-century French author Henri Beyle, better-known to readers as Stendhal.²⁴⁷ Two years before the publication of *Schwindel. Gefühle.*, this first chapter was published as a freestanding composition in *Manuskripte: Zeitschrift für Literatur* 99 (March 1988) with minor differences from its later incarnation. It bears all the marks of an inaugural experiment in the new literary form Sebald continuously refines thereafter.

Fortunately, we are invited to regard Sebald’s fictional turn from “inside” fiction on intra-textual grounds as well: the “Beyle...” section of *Vertigo* happens to be Sebald’s own most forceful interrogation of literary beginnings. The author therefore thematizes in the opening section of *Vertigo* the very question *Vertigo* has compelled us to raise with

²⁴⁶ Critics have faulted Sebald’s literary criticism for drawing arbitrary conclusions and being un-academic.

²⁴⁷ I focus here on the *prose fictions* as an outgrowth of his prose criticism, and therefore will not address the poem “After Nature,” Sebald’s first “literary” experiment, which seems not to have been repeated after Sebald discovered his characteristic prose form. Several short prose fragments appeared at roughly the same time (cf. “Learning to Fly” (1987), in the penultimate sentence of which the word “Schwindelgefühl” appears).

regard to his career—for Sebald’s retelling of Henri Beyle’s life is focused explicitly on the question of how the writer becomes a writer and where his literature begins and ends.²⁴⁸

Further intra-textual grounds for examining the apparent arbitrariness of Sebald’s literary beginnings by way of *Vertigo* derive from the numerous ways in which the book calls into question the notion that fiction could have a beginning or an end. Firstly, *Vertigo* is only marginally distinguishable from the academic essays Sebald publishes up until its emergence; its first and third sections in particular are subtly fictionalized pieces of biographical literary criticism. Secondly, *Vertigo* opens with Sebald’s nearly imperceptible rewriting of Stendhal’s autobiographical works—a rewriting that may strike readers as closer to parroting than to paraphrasing, leaving one to wonder not only whether *Vertigo* can be distinguished from literary criticism, but whether there is enough “fiction” in Sebald’s account of Beyle’s life to differentiate his work from biography. One may form the impression that Sebald involves himself in the redundant task of transforming Stendhal’s autobiographies into biography solely to deprive the author symbolically of his authorship—the one form in which he survives. Thirdly, *Vertigo* unhinges the progressive temporality on which the concept of a “beginning” relies. The book is exemplary of Sebald’s narrative structures in that its temporality is not chronological, but non-linear, circular, repetitive, and discontinuous; it is closer to the

²⁴⁸ McCulloh writes that “Sebald is tracing origins” (*Understanding W. G. Sebald* 102). Claudia Öhlschläger writes on a related note that “Sebald’s intertextuality obscures the question of what came first [i.e. Sebald’s text or those to which they allude]” (“Unschärfe. Schwindel. Gefühle. W. G. Sebalds intermediale und intertextuale Gedächtniskunst,” in *W. G. Sebald. Mémoire. Transferts. Images. Erinnerung. Übertragungen. Bilder.*, ed. Ruth Vogel-Klein, *Recherches Germaniques* (Université Marc Bloch – Strasbourg 2, 2005): 16.

temporality of a psychoanalytic case history than to that of conventional autobiographies. Fourthly, Sebald's re-writing of Stendhal's autobiographical texts is haunted by the vexing question of where to begin when writing *autobiography*: when, indeed, is one ready to write a life still in the process of being lived? How can any distance from the subject matter be achieved? How can one determine whether the most significant moments of a life have already occurred, or whether they may not be yet to come (for as Sebald's own biography reveals, it is precisely in the lives of writers that development commences late and continues practically until the moment of death)? Far from exempting itself from these questions in its passage from autobiographer's to "literary critic's" or "biographer's" hands, the text of Sebald's *Vertigo* is worried at one remove by the same quandaries Stendhal faces in writing autobiography.

The Intertextual Origin: Sebald Writes Stendhal

I would like to consider the aptness of Stendhal as the first substantial intertextual source for Sebald's prose narratives, before revisiting the question of Sebald's literary origins in order to propose, to the contrary, the arbitrariness—even irrelevance—of Stendhal as a starting point for Sebald. As I will show, Sebald's inaugural rewriting of Stendhal's autobiographies is exemplary of his poetics in being an apposite point of entry to his literary project and an arbitrary one at the same time.

Little has been written on Sebald's relationship to Stendhal; due to its belated translation into English, *Vertigo* as a whole has received less attention than any of Sebald's other prose fictions. James Chandler alone asserts the priority of Stendhal for Sebald's literary project, though only after qualifying his thesis by echoing the pervasive view that Sebald's most enduring concern is not nineteenth-century French literature, but

the poetic retelling of twentieth-century history for a German-speaking audience. With this caveat, Chandler ventures:

the use of Stendhal as the starting point for the entire project should not be taken to be a matter of serendipity—not in view of Sebald’s evident emulation of the hybrid fiction-memoir, not in view of Sebald’s marked imitation of Stendhal’s practice of sprinkling his text liberally with figures and illustrations, and especially not in view of the kind of epistemological conundrums that Sebald highlights in his ‘reading’ of Stendhal’s text.²⁴⁹

Chandler turns from Stendhal as a particular writer to the epistemological conundrum underlying Romantic texts in general: the difficulty of distinguishing between memory and imagination.²⁵⁰ It is the consequences of this Romantic epistemological problem for *memoria technica*, according to Chandler, that motivates Sebald’s interest in Stendhal. In the world of Sebald criticism published in German, Claudia Öhlschläger independently draws a similar conclusion: that Sebald identifies in Stendhal a precursor and model for the epistemological conundrum faced by his narrators and protagonists in their efforts to represent history. Both critics link Stendhal’s struggle to distinguish between imagination and memory to the historiographical dilemma sketched by the history teacher Hilary in Sebald’s last prose fiction, *Austerlitz*.²⁵¹ Beyond reiterating Chandler’s finding, Öhlschläger develops her argument through close readings of Stendhal’s theory of

²⁴⁹ Chandler, James, “About Loss: W. G. Sebald’s Romantic Art of Memory,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 102:1 (Winter 2003): 247.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 248.

²⁵¹ Öhlschläger, Claudia, “‘Die Bahn des korsischen Kometen.’ Zur Dimension ‘Napoleon’ in W. G. Sebalds literarischem Netzwerk,” in *Topographien der Literatur*, ed. Harmut Böhme (Stuttgart: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2005) 552. Like Chandler, Öhlschläger writes that “[...] this breaching of boundaries between reality and imagination, between truth and deception in the act of cognition [...] becomes meaningful for Sebald’s poetic handling of historical knowledge” (*ibid.*, 554, my translation). See also: Öhlschläger, Claudia, “Kristallisation als kulturelle Transformation. Stendhal, W. G. Sebald und das Problem der Wirklichkeitstreue,” in *Verschiebepbahnhöfe der Erinnerung*, ed. Sigurd Martin and Ingo Wintermeyer (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007) 105-118.

“crystallization” and his story “The Salzburg Bough” from *On Love*, both of which Sebald weaves into his transcriptions of Stendhal in “Beyle [...]”²⁵²

Chandler and Öhlschläger pick up on the striking formal affinities between Stendhal and Sebald. Both writers compose hybrid texts that incorporate images and diagrams. Both transgress conventional boundaries between genres, baiting readers with thinly veiled autobiographical content while also fictionalizing these references. Both writers leave the reader uncertain of whether their quasi-documentary texts are of interest primarily as records of individual experience—private, psychological and aesthetic—or as a testament to watershed events in our collective social-political history. Sebald appears to be interested in Stendhal as what we might call a *defective* witness of the Napoleonic wars. Stendhal bears witness to the advent of modernity without looking directly at it, so to speak, and while he seems to be engaged with the much more microscopic questions he raises in the autobiographies about his own character, talents, shortcomings, and memories of his youth.

On Love (De l'amour) and Flawed Beloveds

In addition to these broad formal similarities, vital elements of the concept of love Sebald articulates in *Vertigo* are drawn from Stendhal. Superficially, the theme of love appears obsolete with respect to Sebald's enduring concerns. However, the theory of love he lifts from Stendhal's *On Love* functions as a cipher for the questions raised in *Vertigo* about where literature begins. According to Sebald's text, Stendhal's writings

²⁵² “Crystallization” is a term Stendhal coins for the process by which love develops not in relation to a “real” person, but in relation to a reality supplemented to an unknowable degree by the lover's imagination (cf. Öhlschläger, “Die Bahn des korsischen Kometen’ [...]” 553).

are nothing other than a continuation of his love life by other means.²⁵³ Insofar as Sebald reflects Stendhal's theory of love back upon the activity of literary production, it is worth dwelling on the characteristics of this "love" that is relayed back and forth between Sebald's *Vertigo* and its intertextual sources.

It is tempting to view Sebald's borrowing and modification of Stendhal's diaries and autobiographies as a kind of intertextual romance between the two authors. If this were the case, Sebald would be responding in kind to an invitation tendered by Stendhal. The latter refuses to be cast as a corpus reanimated by Sebald's transformative desire: Stendhal is a ghostly aggressor who anticipates in advance Sebald's anachronistic longing for him and ours. In his "Apology" for "those faults which my friends are apt to call my extravagances, my enthusiasms, my contradictions, my *non-sequiturs*, my . . . etc., etc.," published as an afterward to his *Life of Rossini*, Stendhal signs off characteristically by begging for his readers' love: "condemn me, criticize me, *but do not cease to love me.*"²⁵⁴ This seems an odd way of concluding an apology for his faults—which are even too many for him to list. It is as though Stendhal trusts that his flaws will make us love him all the more. He countenances no contradiction between our critique of him and our love of him. The two go hand in hand. "I am talking to *you*," he presumes,

²⁵³ Upon having ruined his wishful relationship with Méthilde through his indiscretions, Sebald writes, "Beyle was inconsolable. For months he reproached himself, and not until he determined to set down his great passion in a meditation on love did he recover his emotional equilibrium. On his writing desk, as a memento of Méthilde, he kept a plaster cast of her left hand [...]" (Sebald, V 20). In the next section of this chapter, I take up the role of this cast hand in the writing process. Claudia Öhlschläger observes similarly: "Sebald fokussiert einen Zusammenhang zwischen Liebe und literarischer Production. Denn aus der Erfahrung unglücklich verlaufender Liebesgeschichten wurde auch im Fall des historischen Stendhal Literatur" ("Die Bahn des korsischen Kometen" [...]" 555).

²⁵⁴ Stendhal, *Life of Rossini*, ed. and trans. Richard N. Coe (New York: The Orion Press, 1970) 472, my emphasis.

“and you are my *friend* [...]”²⁵⁵ Only as “lovers” of Stendhal are we granted the privilege and the capacity to criticize his work. The link Sebald insinuates in *Vertigo* between loving, writing and reading, too, is lifted from Stendhal.

Nor does Stendhal neglect to love the subjects of his writings. He writes only in love, and only of what he loves: “and therefore you will never hear me say that *this is good* or *that is bad*; instead, I will rather exclaim a thousand times a day: *This I love!* Yes, I love, I shall love, and I shall never cease to be in love with love while there is breath left in me.”²⁵⁶ This apparently uncritical stance precludes neither perceptual nor descriptive accuracy. There remains a great tension in Stendhal’s work between the blinkered “love of love” that annihilates its object by projecting onto it an imaginary ideal, and a painfully lucid awareness of the real beloved who is inevitably flawed. Stendhal does not deny that the beloved things of which he writes are often “bad”; it simply is not his inclination to emphasize this aspect of “the truth.” He loves what is perfect for its perfection and what is flawed for its flaws, on the model of his acquaintance who loves her two nephews equally: “*the elder because he is clever, and the younger because he is stupid.*”²⁵⁷ Stendhal is not uncritical, then: it is simply that the *defectiveness* of what he loves is beside the point. Whatever its pretext, the true subject of Stendhal’s writing is always his love.

²⁵⁵ Ibid. 469, his emphases.

²⁵⁶ Ibid. 470, his emphases. Stendhal’s confession that he is “in love with love” echoes the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine (cf. Book III, Ch. I).

²⁵⁷ Ibid. 470, his emphasis. Stendhal hastens to deny that he loves everything in the world indiscriminately. If he were to begin writing of what he despises, he says, “there would never be an end of it” (470). His abridged list of repellent things includes virtuosic but unfeeling verse and chamomile tea.

The Cast Hand

Love in Sebald's *Vertigo* is without exception love of what is defective and flawed or else love that is amiss with respect to some norm. Following his billeting at Ivrea and coming of age, the young Henri Beyle is glimpsed falling in love with a soprano whose talent is less than prodigious, who is slightly wall-eyed on the left side and whose right canine is missing, though Beyle is "not in the least disturbed" by her shortcomings: "quite the contrary, his exalted feelings seized upon these very defects."²⁵⁸ The second of Beyle's loves catalogued by Sebald is for a fellow soldier's mistress, Angela Pietragrua, whose lacking attributes as Beyle's beloved are that she pities, not loves him, and eleven years later can scarcely remember who he is, though she capitulates to his advances in exchange for his promise to desist.²⁵⁹

The last and most emblematic love in this series is Beyle's devastating infatuation with Méthilde Dembowski Viscontini, of whom the disappointed admirer is left with only a plaster cast of her left hand. Displaced onto this fetishistic substitute,²⁶⁰ Beyle's love again fixes on its most endearing flaw: the "leichte Krümmung des Ringfingers [slight crookedness of the ring finger]," which "occasioned in him emotions of a vehemence he had not hitherto experienced."²⁶¹ The crooked ring finger of Méthilde's cast hand

²⁵⁸ Sebald, W. G., *Schwindel. Gefühle*. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2009) 13-4. Referenced hereafter as *SG*. My translations diverge only where necessary from those of the English translation: Sebald, W. G., *Vertigo*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1999) 9-10. Referenced hereafter as *V*.

²⁵⁹ Sebald, *SG* 16; *V* 13.

²⁶⁰ The process by which casts are made by pouring plaster into a mold aptly corresponds to the phallic nature of the fetish (its essence as a substitute for the maternal phallus in Freud's account).

²⁶¹ Sebald, *SG* 26; *V* 21.

functions as a synecdoche for the fundamentally flawed character of the severed hand as partial object; the finger's flexion similarly captures the deficiency of artistic representations in general insofar as they are measured against so-called reality. The errant finger does not point straight to Méthilde, but describes a curve that misses its mark, betraying the almost-but-not-quite parallel relationship not only between Méthilde's five fingers, but between the plaster representation and its real-life model. This recalls the non-parallel gaze of Beyle's adorable soprano whose left eye fails to supplement the right, but doubles it uncannily, as though each eye in her divergent gaze were contesting the other's vision of reality.

The ring finger is opposed to the index finger insofar as it offers a different relational model; rather than "pointing" to its object in a kind of pre-linguistic or mute signification from which both the pointing finger and the subject who points remain safely aloof, the ring finger suggests a relational model according to which the subject is bound up with its object: it refers us to a "something else" from which the ring finger and its subject cannot be separated cleanly, because to separate them would damage the identity of each. In contrast to the index finger, the ring finger symbolizes a form of referral in which the distance between subject and object is insufficient for scientific objectivity to be achieved. Moreover, the ring finger's mode of referral is illegible, secret: it does not indicate clearly to whom it is attached. By means of the ring finger, a subject may refer us to an unspecified object to which it is uniquely bound. Unlike discursive signs, the ring finger "sticks" to its signified; its way of signifying is immobile,

non-arbitrary.²⁶² The “defectiveness” of the ring finger featured in “Beyle...”, of course, suggests that Sebald is not proposing an unqualified priority of this “other” (photographic) mode of referral above the arbitrariness and interchangeability of discursive signs. Rather, he uses the image of Méthilde’s ring finger to generate, within the sign, an unsettling tension between a *unique* relationship to the beloved object and an *arbitrary* relationship which is forever subject to displacement and substitution.

The theme of love as the love-of-defects and as defective love is carried forward through the subsequent sections of Sebald’s *Vertigo*. In the third section devoted to “Dr. K.” (a thinly veiled cipher for Franz Kafka that alludes to the protagonists of his last two unfinished novels, Josef K. and K.), Dr. K. is surprised by his erotic attraction to “the young girl to his left” as he dines with other patients of the health resort at Riva: “she seems very precious to him in her illness.”²⁶³ Dr. K.’s companion, whose frailty and mortality only increase her value, gestures back toward the defective left hand of Beyle’s Méthilde when she mutely waves goodbye to Dr. K. as his boat pulls away from shore, describing “*with her left hand* [...] somewhat clumsily the sign betokening the end.”²⁶⁴

²⁶² This non-arbitrary way of signifying bears a resemblance to the signifying structure of the photographic sign as theorized by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. For Barthes, the photograph is a signifier that similarly adheres to the signified. Although I cannot pursue the connection here, Sebald’s use of photographic images in his prose fictions supports the idea that he is interested in complicating his writing through the incorporation of non-discursive signs.

²⁶³ Sebald, *SG* 172; *V* 157. “Sie erscheint ihm in ihrer Krankheit sehr wertvoll.”

²⁶⁴ Sebald, *SG* 175; *V* 160, my emphasis. As noted above, the love of defective objects in *Vertigo* is coupled with the theme of love that diverges from social norms and from a nineteenth-century concept of “nature.” The latter theme manifests primarily as the repressed homosexual desire of the narrator, which in turn informs his interpretation of Kafka’s *Letters to Felice* and of Kafka’s two story fragments on the Hunter Gracchus in the third section of *Vertigo*. As the theme of homoerotic longing is scarcely foreshadowed in the book’s opening section, “Beyle [...]”, it will not be the focus of what follows. We can remark, however, that homosexuality is linked to the flawed *left* hands of these beloved women insofar as homosexual desire in *Vertigo* is thematized as a transgression of law (in various faintly implied forms of

The “crooked” and “clumsy” left hands of these beloved women signal the impossibility of an ideal union: it is Méthilde’s ring finger which is bent, while Dr. K.’s young paramour raises her left hand not to touch him but to wave goodbye.

Insofar as all the fingers in the photographic image of the cast hand reproduced in the opening section of Sebald’s *Vertigo* could be called “slightly crooked,” it seems that Sebald’s Beyle singles out *the ring finger* only out of nostalgic attachment to the married woman who never wore a ring from him. Sebald’s narrator, to the contrary, singles out the ring finger’s *crookedness* (through Beyle) only to further “detach” the plaster hand from the powerful metaphorical associations it bears: not only is this cast hand unable to grasp and grope because it is plaster and because it is not connected to anyone’s body, but also its ring finger is ill-suited to wearing the engagement ring that could have symbolized its special connection to someone else. In fact, in the image Sebald reproduces for us, it is the *pinky* finger that appears to diverge most crookedly from the other four, which in spite of their individual kinks are remarkably parallel—even the thumb.²⁶⁵ This curious arbitrariness in Beyle’s (or the narrator’s) perception of the image flags the importance of this detail for the red thread that so loosely connects the four sections of *Vertigo*. In the interests of the provisional aesthetic cohesion of Sebald’s first

“law” ranging from the natural to the divine), most of the words for which in German are etymologically linked to the word for “right” (*recht*). On the other hand, the social stigmatization of homosexuality in *Vertigo* is thematized as a failure of “justice,” a word likewise linked to “right.” For the most extensive discussion of homosexuality and indeed of sexuality in Sebald (a generally ignored theme), see Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006) pp. 143-196. Santner observes that homosexuality in *Vertigo* “is registered as a suspicion directed at the narrator, as something being projected on him from the outside” (171). Thus homosexual desire in *Vertigo* is not consciously acknowledged, but expresses itself symptomatically in the narrator’s “paranoia with respect to the male gaze” (175).

²⁶⁵ Sebald, *SG* 25; *V* 21.

prose fiction, it *must* be the ring finger which is bent, all documentary evidence to the contrary.

Naturally, Sebald's remodeling of the left hand as a figure for disjunction hardly outweighs the conventional symbolism of the hand as our foremost instrument of possession and primary mediator of our connection to fellow humans and to the world. Even in *Vertigo*, the hand never shrugs its metaphorical power to reach out. Sebald merely casts a shadow over the lover's capacity to grasp his objects and to draw them near.

The Writer's Hand

The capacity to grasp one's objects undergoes a medial and temporal shift in *Vertigo*'s opening section. A nearly seamless transition between the twinned themes of loving and writing may be glossed in this connection: it is no longer by seizing living bodies, but through the act of writing, and more specifically through writing autobiography that love objects may be captured—if at all. The plaster hand, which “means more to him now than Méthilde could ever have meant,”²⁶⁶ sits on Beyle's writing desk and is indispensable for the work accomplished there. The capacity for possession of which the plaster hand has been deprived is neatly transferred to the hand of the writer on whose desk it features so prominently. While composing, the writer dwells often on his “luck” in acquiring it shortly before the unfortunate events that removed Méthilde permanently from his reach.²⁶⁷ From the perspective of Sebald's

²⁶⁶ Sebald, *SG* 26; V 21.

²⁶⁷ Beyle managed to get a copy of the hand, “glücklicherweise,” shortly “vor dem Debakel” (Sebald, *SG* 26).

readers, of course, Beyle's timely act of preservation in plaster betrays an unconscious presentiment of his imminent defeat: if Méthilde were soon to be his, the hopeful admirer would hardly need a copy of her hand.

On a paranoid reading, Beyle's casting of the beloved fingers may even appear to have caused his loss of the real Méthilde—and this is not far from the case. According to Sebald's narrator, the “inconsolable” Beyle “recover[s] his emotional equilibrium” only by “set[ting] down his great passion in a meditation on love.”²⁶⁸ The writer is consoled insofar as he revenges himself on his loveless beloved by memorializing her in prose, repeating in a new medium his prior transformation of her living body part into an inanimate plaster object. Surely Méthilde's cast hand (*Abdruck*) is “cast” also in the sense of being cast off or cast away (*abdrücken*).²⁶⁹ It is the instrumental if belated role played by writing in “casting off” a love which has already been lost that Sebald derives from Beyle's biography. To write of one's bygone loves does not reanimate those loves so much as it “writes them off” or casts them off again. Sebald's text links the commemorative piece (*Denkschrift*) Beyle produces in the wake of Méthilde (Stendhal's *On Love*) to the plaster memento (*Andenken*) that inspires it through the echo of the root word *denken* (to think [about]).²⁷⁰

In any case, the cast hand is no more a monument to the writer's lost love than to his own role in bringing about its end. “Beyle was on the point of winning the affection of Méthilde through the passion he offered her with silent discretion,” Sebald writes,

²⁶⁸ Sebald, *SG* 25; V 20.

²⁶⁹ Sebald, *SG* 25.

²⁷⁰ Sebald, *SG* 25.

“when he himself, as he later admitted, thwarted his chances by committing a gaffe for which he could never make amends.”²⁷¹ Beyle’s bungling incognito pursuit of Méthilde on a trip to visit her sons leads to her dry dismissal of him when she sees through his flimsy disguise. Beyle’s acquisition of the inanimate hand is his way of appropriating the loss of his beloved: by minting the plaster hand, Beyle escapes being the passive victim of disappointment by actively casting (away) what has been withdrawn; further, he acknowledges through repetition the extent to which he is to blame for his loss. The image of the defective plaster hand that represents Stendhal’s failed love of a flawed beloved in Sebald’s *Vertigo* therefore summons the writer to his work by focusing Beyle’s critical eye on himself, on his past and on the world.

The scene handed to us by Sebald, in which Beyle sits writing at his desk with Méthilde’s cast hand as his muse, can be viewed as an allegory for the metamorphosis of Stendhal-the-Romantic into Stendhal-the-Realist, though these two incompatible strands of the French writer’s creative personality in fact were never resolved. In Beyle’s fetishistic possession and overvaluation of the plaster hand lies his Romanticism; in the fact that the beloved hand is inanimate and refers to a missing body from which it appears to have been severed lies the death and overcoming of this Romanticism; in the detail of its “flawed” ring finger, Beyle’s Realism and his integrity as a writer emerge as successors to the destruction, via writing, of his idealized, idealizing love. It seems possible that Stendhal’s waxing distaste for poetry in favor of plain speech (on which topic he polemically rants)—and the turn from Romanticism to Realism of which Stendhal’s work is symptomatic—is one of the reasons Sebald chooses Beyle as the first

²⁷¹ Sebald, *SG* 23-4; V 19.

protagonist in his first prose work. Sebald's first major literary work indeed is a poem, *Nach der Natur (After Nature)*, a lyric experiment that seems not to have been repeated after he strikes upon the prose-fiction form. In his rewriting of Stendhal, Sebald cites and reenacts the French author's turn away from poetry toward a heightened realism.

10. Sebald's Realisms

I am interested in Sebald's placement of Stendhal 'at the beginning,' his use of Stendhal as the first intertextual reference in his prose-fiction career, in light of Stendhal's uneasy status as the first realist. I have argued that Sebald mimes Stendhal's rejection of Romanticism in favor of heightened fidelity to the real world. However, even as he models his 'first move' in prose on Stendhal's literary trajectory, Sebald also distances himself from his model. This is in keeping with the incredible uncanniness of Sebald's intertextual practice in general: his unmarked quotations from texts by other authors are often scarcely, or only marginally altered; yet one often has the sense that by modifying only a few words here and there, and by the violence of his synthesis, reemphasis and reassembly, Sebald has utterly transformed his source texts for his own aims. In the case of Stendhal, whose works Sebald transcribes and weaves together in the "Beyle [...]" section of *Vertigo*, one has the impression that Sebald has been faithful to the letter of Stendhal's work while somehow, subtly, betraying its spirit. The Stendhal known to readers is nothing if not spirited (even if we know that his sparkle is merely a successful performance of esprit); yet the Stendhal whom Sebald disrobes as "Beyle" (the French author's real name) appears phlegmatic, disappointed, exiled from his own desires. In other words, Stendhal serves the same function for Sebald that the plaster cast of Méthilde's hand serves for Beyle when he writes: Sebald 'models' Stendhal's realist prejudices in order to cast his model aside. What I will refer to as Sebald's "realism," then, deliberately misses its mark. Given how often Sebald refers to writers and visual artists who work in a realist vein (Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, Stifter, Courbet, Tripp, to name a few), my aim is to discover what "realism" means to Sebald. Although it is

beyond the purview of these chapters, my findings here could be folded back into the large body of scholarship on Sebald's pervasive use of photography. Sebald troubles the relationship of his prose fictions to their realist intertexts just as he unsettles the documentary function of the photographs he incorporates in his texts.

In the chapters that follow, the term "realism" will become increasingly unfamiliar, to the point of being unrecognizable. I follow Sebald's relatively random application of the term to everything from nineteenth-century French novels to contemporary painting; my analysis synthesizes under the concept of a realist aesthetic, loosely defined, Sebald's scattered remarks on the relationship between artistic representations in various media (including prose, painting and photography) and what is outside the work of art (the world, history, reality, experience, etc.). My analysis exploits the tension between Sebald's clearly postmodern approach to literary history and postmodern perspective on reality, on the one hand, and on the other, his anachronistic tendency to favor modern and early modern points of reference for his project, rather than foregrounding immediate precedents for his literary style and form, such as Beckett, Pynchon, Céline, Bernhard, etc.²⁷² In his works of criticism, this same proclivity for anachronism allows Sebald to write, for instance, that in studying the contemporary paintings of Jan Peter Tripp, "one should bear in mind" what the art critic Ernst Gombrich says about fifteenth-century painter Jan van Eyck.²⁷³ Sebald's anachronistic

²⁷² Although Sebald acknowledges the importance for instance of Thomas Bernhard's "periscope" narratives on his work, he does not devote sections of his prose fictions to Bernhard or Bernhard's *curriculum vitae* as he does to Stendhal and other (early) modern writers.

²⁷³ Sebald, W. G., "As Day and Night, Chalk and Cheese: On the Pictures of Jan Peter Tripp," *Unrecounted. W. G. Sebald and Jan Peter Tripp*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Penguin Books, 2005) 85.

points of reference for his own writing that I examine here include the painters Matthias Grünewald and Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, and the writer Stendhal. An expanded version of this work will consider, additionally, the influence of German realist writer Adalbert Stifter on Sebald's prose style and narrative form.

Potentially more perplexing still than Sebald's alternately historicizing and a-historical invocation of the questions raised by aesthetic realism, which draws on artworks from the fifteenth through the twentieth centuries, is the astounding variety of terms of disparate cultural-historical and linguistic origins that Sebald appears to conflate in the course of his reflections: in addition to "realism" (*Realismus*) and its derivatives (*Surrealismus*; *phantastischer Realismus*; *Fotorealismus*; *Hyperrealismus*), these include *Wirklichkeitstreue* (fidelity to reality/verisimilitude); *Sachlichkeit* (objectivity); *effet de réel* (reality effect, in French in the German text); *trompe-l'oeil* (in French); *Wirklichkeitsnähe* (proximity to reality/verisimilitude); as well as a constellation of terms and phrases that are central to his discussion of the realist aesthetic: *täuschend echt gemalt* (painted with deceptive verisimilitude); *nach dem Leben gemalt* (true-to-life painting); *Genauigkeit* (accuracy/precision); *wahrhaft* (veracious); *tatsächlich* (actual/factual).

All Realisms Intersect at the Detail

Following Sebald, the point of intersection in my discussion for all of these realist frameworks from various points in history is the concept of the detail. The 'realism' of a particular work hinges critically on the status and function of detail, and on how these details are inscribed and contextualized. The various versions of aesthetic realism to which Sebald refers are characterized and distinguished by the relationship in them

between detail and the work of art as a whole, as well as between detail and the world beyond the work of art. This ‘beyond’ includes both historical reality and other works of art, which means that questions about the relationship between Sebaldian detail and historical reality similarly frame the relationship between Sebald’s intertextual references and original works by other authors. Sebald’s fictionalized treatment of historical events is mirrored by his intertextual practice, which is characterized by loose, often un-cited paraphrasing and modified transcriptions of his source material. I examine the modified function of detail in Sebald’s prose with respect to the conventional realisms against which he defines his own project. The detail emerges as a contested site: it is an anchor and badge of authenticity for the realist work of art, while being simultaneously the iceberg on which the realism of the work of art founders.

Furthermore, as we shall see, the status of detail lies at the center of Sebald’s interest in several theories that may seem far removed from early modern painting and nineteenth-century realist prose—the anachronistic points of reference around which his remarks on realism revolve. Roland Barthes’ theory of photography and Sigmund Freud’s essay on screen memories (*Deckerinnerung*) may be conceived as post-modern theories of the detail; they unsettle the firm, accurate, objective detail of early modern realism by metaphorizing detail as a kind of *wound* on the smooth façade of the image (for Barthes), or in the fabric of memory (for Freud). In keeping with the fact that memory and forgetting are the organizing tropes of his prose fictions, Sebald embraces the compound temporality with which Freud invests the detail.²⁷⁴ According to Freud’s

²⁷⁴ Todd Presner writes of *Austerlitz* that “Sebald mixes past and present, fact and fiction, autobiography and literature, and photography and narrative to create a space of *terra infirma*, which destabilizes both the reliability of memory and spectatorship. Within the parameters of the novel, the narrator’s own memories

“Screen Memories,” the detail recalled is of special importance precisely when it appears to be erroneous or out of place; the false detail leads the analyst to emotionally fraught, elaborate psychic truths. The detail is the site at which reality is written, constructed or built; it pierces through superimposed layers of time, stitching together memory and consciousness, past and present, fact and fiction, reality and its representation.

Nonetheless, competing accounts of past events dispute the details. For Sebald, writing after Freud, the continuity and objectivity of detail that sutures together our experience of the passage of time in realist texts always threatens to *fracture* time’s layers—for it is in the details that the realism or documentary aspect of Sebald’s memorial texts miscarries.

Sebald’s Rhetorical Dismissal of ‘Realist’ Readings, and Realism in Sebald Criticism

I read Sebald’s essay on the painter Jan Peter Tripp (“*Wie Tag und Nacht—*”) as an essential document for any discussion of Sebald and realism. In it, Sebald considers the realist aesthetic more explicitly than he does elsewhere. Although the essay is about pictorial realism, his interpretation of Tripp corroborates the conclusions I draw about Sebald’s relationship to literary realism based on his use of Stendhal’s autobiographies in *Vertigo*. Although Sebald dismisses as “a false association” the “almost compulsive” tendency of art critics to “connect [Tripp’s work] with [the] already historical trend [of photorealism, hyperrealism, etc.],” he acknowledges that “one cannot avoid the tiresome

are layered like Freudian screen memories.” (Presner, Todd, “‘What a Synoptic and Artificial View Reveals’: Extreme History and the Modernism of W. G. Sebald’s Realism,” *Criticism* 46.3 (Summer 2004) 349). Presner defines Sebald’s updating of realist strategies with the help of this reference to Freud. I would like to explore Presner’s insight by asking more specifically how the status of detail in Freud’s “Screen Memories” illuminates Sebald’s work.

question of realism” in any discussion of Tripp’s paintings.²⁷⁵ I read Sebald’s framing of the Tripp essay as a tacit reflection on his own prose fictions and, more precisely, as a warning issued to his own critics. As we will see, there is something disingenuous in Sebald’s dismissal of ‘realist’ readings as “almost compulsive”; nevertheless, the range of ways in which Sebald’s work has been compared and contrasted to genres from literary realism to autobiography to historical fiction is symptomatic of the uncertainty his texts generate regarding the relationship between the historical and the fictional, the authentic and the fabricated or falsified detail.

Among the numerous critics who have considered the documentary aspect of Sebald’s prose fictions in a variety of contexts, several have investigated his relationship to nineteenth-century genres and to conventional realist strategies specifically. In her article “Realism, Photography, and Degrees of Uncertainty,” Lilian Furst concludes that Sebald’s work paradoxically produces the reality effect (*l’effet de réel*) that Roland Barthes identifies in nineteenth-century French fiction, while simultaneously undermining the realist illusion by deliberately producing uncertainty. Furst characterizes Sebald’s “pattern of hyperrealism undercut by a current of uncertainty” as follows:

Sebald’s art [...] defies any kind of facile categorization because of its innate paradoxicality. Both the photographs and the descriptions function in a complex, ambivalent manner. On the one hand, they appear to corroborate Sebald’s realism through the precision of the details and as graphic documents. On the other hand, they simultaneously provoke a degree of uncertainty through their sheer profusion and the possibility of fakery.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁵ Sebald, “As Day and Night...” 83-4 and 80 respectively.

²⁷⁶ Furst, Lilian R., “Realism, Photography, and Degrees of Uncertainty,” in *W. G. Sebald. History – Memory – Trauma.*, ed. Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006) 229.

Furst outlines an unresolved dialectic in Sebald's work between realism (or, the production of a Barthesian "reality effect") and uncertainty (the production of doubt and skepticism about whether the text and its details are realistic). She reads Sebald's text and images along parallel lines: Sebald's descriptions mimic and challenge the conventions of literary realism just as his photographs exploit and challenge the documentary nature of the photographic medium.

Whereas Furst attributes to Sebald a complex, ambivalent, or "paradoxical" relationship to realism, Patrick Lennon returns Sebald's work to the realist tradition via a small detour through reality. In his analysis, text and image collaborate in some respects and work at cross purposes in others. Lennon replaces Furst's dialectic between realism and uncertainty with another. While Furst opposes the realistic effects of text and image alike to their unrealistic effects, Lennon opposes aesthetic realism (the question of whether or not an artwork is realistic), to *reality*. For Lennon, moreover, both sides of the dialectic outlined by Furst belong squarely in the realm of the realist aesthetic, because the production of uncertainty that dispels *l'effet de réel* is itself a conventional realist strategy. A narrator who voices doubts about the accuracy of his account merely reinforces our faith in his devotion to the truth, just as raising objections to one's own philosophical argument may strengthen its case. Thus, according to Lennon, some aspects of the Sebaldian text, such as exaggeration, "force the narrative away from reality and into language, away from the real and into the realistic, into realism," while "at the same time [...] the narrative contents [e.g. its autobiographical content] and the pictorial material of Sebald's work strongly resist this movement away from reality and reference

to the real world.”²⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the “realism” of Sebald’s texts ultimately has priority over the movement of the photographs and autobiographical content away from realism and toward reality; if Sebald’s texts generate *any* uncertainty about their referential capacity, then the referential function of the whole is contaminated, so to speak, by the literary. Lennon affirms that “the (partial, alleged) reality or authenticity of the textual and pictorial materials does not undo the realism of Sebald’s narratives.” He concludes that the documentary aspects of Sebald’s work are folded back into its aesthetic realism: “Rather than moving away from reality, these narratives move through reality into realism.”²⁷⁸

In his article entitled “‘What a Synoptic and Artificial View Reveals’: Extreme History and the Modernism of W. G. Sebald’s Realism,” Todd Presner reads Sebald not in relation to nineteenth-century literary realism, but in relation to nineteenth-century historicism, historical realism and the historical novel. He argues persuasively that the aspects of Sebald’s prose which may make his narratives appear unrealistic according to the conventions of realism reflect the way in which reality—and our experience of it in modern times—has changed since the mid-nineteenth century. His thesis is that “the modernist war event” is “the condition of possibility for the development of a decidedly modernist form of realism, in which the boundaries between fact and fiction, history and literature, real and imaginary are blurred.”²⁷⁹ Presner historicizes the conditions for

²⁷⁷ Lennon, Patrick, “Depiction and Destruction: W. G. Sebald’s Realism,” in *Images and Imagery: Frames, Borders, Limits – Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Boldt-Irons, Leslie, Corrado Federici and Ernesto Virgulti, *Studies on Themes and Motifs in Literature*, vol. 74 (2005): 258.

²⁷⁸ Lennon 259. Cf. 264.

²⁷⁹ Presner, Todd Samuel, “‘What a Synoptic and Artificial View Reveals’: Extreme History and the Modernism of W. G. Sebald’s Realism,” *Criticism* 46.3 (Summer 2004): 345.

literary realism in order to suggest that Sebald's modernism is an updated species of realism; he discovers in Sebald an evolutionary progression of realism that constitutes a modern literary response to the reality of modern warfare. Because "modernist war events no longer unfold [...] according to the stable unities of time, place, and action, and therefore cannot be captured, communicated, or emplotted by the traditional structures and coherences of realistic narration," Presner writes, "the writings of W. G. Sebald [...] create a specifically modernist reality effect" by "employ[ing] the techniques of literary modernism to represent extreme historical events."²⁸⁰ Sebald "rejects [...] the realist injunction" to "mak[e] the past live as it really was"; rather, he attempts "to create a reality effect of the present in all its uncertainty and contingency."²⁸¹

The range of genres and terms from literary history to which Sebald's critics appeal in their efforts to describe his work is symptomatic of Sebald's unsystematic borrowings; his anachronistic points of reference; and the way in which his prose fictions defy classification by obscuring the distinctions between literary realism, historical fiction, autobiography, and the like. And yet if, as Presner in particular notes, Sebald blurs the boundaries between "fact and fiction, history and literature, real and imaginary,"²⁸² then the decision to read Sebald's—for lack of a better word—'realism' relative to historical fiction or historiography rather than relative to literary realism seems

²⁸⁰ Presner 344 and 345 respectively. The techniques of literary modernism Presner foregrounds in Sebald include "the use of intransitive writing, the dissolution of objective narration, the multiplication of perspectives, the embrace of contingency, the blurring of fact and fiction through narrative ruptures, leveling, and blockages, and the creation of what [Sebald] calls 'a synoptic and artificial view' for visualizing the firebombing of Hamburg" 345.

²⁸¹ Presner, 345 and 350 respectively.

²⁸² Presner 345.

arbitrary. Following Presner's compelling work on the *Luftkrieg* lectures, we can distinguish Sebald's realism definitively from that of the nineteenth-century historical novel—but what then distinguishes Sebald's realism from literary realism, which, as Presner observes, is concerned with verisimilitude, and is not subject to the injunction of historical realism to represent what really happened?²⁸³

Both Furst and Presner emphasize the fact that, in general, literary realism dissembles its uncertainty by aiming at verisimilitude, while Sebald deliberately heightens the reader's uncertainty, indeed produces it, by drawing attention to the contingency of his narratives and their realistic effects. Lennon and Presner reach contrary conclusions about the relationship between reality and realism in Sebald's work. Whereas Lennon concludes that the fragments of reality Sebald incorporates into his narratives (such as autobiographical content and photographic images) do not remain merely real, but operate in the service of the literary by reinforcing the 'realism' of the literary text, Presner concludes to the contrary that "in *Austerlitz*, it is the imaginary and fictional that contributes to and extends the real and historical."²⁸⁴ He stresses the point further when he writes in closing that "Sebald uses literature [...] to extend historical knowledge and interrogate what history is and can be."²⁸⁵ One wonders whether Furst/Lennon and Presner have not closed in mutually opposing ways the very question that, as their analyses show, Sebald's work holds open: how to receive and conceptualize

²⁸³ Presner 346.

²⁸⁴ Presner 351.

²⁸⁵ Presner 357.

the works of a writer whose texts refuse a relationship of priority between literature and history, realism and reality.

The Historicity and Mediality of Realism: Flawed Details in Stendhal and Jan Peter Tripp

Rather than deciding the question of whether one should prioritize the literary or the historical in Sebald's work, by asking whether or to what extent the realism of Sebald's texts helps us see reality, I will ask how the realism of Sebald's texts affects our reception of Sebald's texts. Here, I follow Sebald's own assertion, in the essay on Jan Peter Tripp, that the question is not whether Tripp's drawings accurately depict reality, but how the realism of Tripp's paintings affects our view of the paintings. My interrogation of Sebald's writing is literary and aesthetic rather than historical. My aim, therefore, is to look specifically at Sebald's manipulation of realist narrative strategies in order to examine how Sebald's engagement with the realist aesthetic, loosely defined, simultaneously reformulates and rejects a realist framework. This double movement is reflected again by his comment regarding the works of Tripp: that "one cannot avoid the tiresome question of realism"²⁸⁶—a comment in which the realist aesthetic is presented as a necessary yet insufficient, unsatisfying frame of reference. Sebald's uninhibited patchwork of terms from various languages and historical moments reveals that he is interested in the historicity of realism, or, in realisms. He is concerned not so much with the fidelity of aesthetic representations to reality; rather, Sebald is interested in how our impression of 'realism' in works of art reveals the way in which 'reality' itself is constructed in the first place by literary and aesthetic means. My focus on the status of

²⁸⁶ Sebald, "As Day and Night..." 80.

detail in Sebald's prose fictions is informed by his theoretical reflections on detail in the fictions as well as in his interviews and critical essays.

I complicate my discussion of the origins of Sebald's prose fictions and the realist questions they raise by doubling those origins. Stendhal's nineteenth-century writings and Tripp's contemporary drawings and paintings will be given equal status as points of reference for Sebald's mixed-media works. My juxtaposition of Sebald's work on Stendhal and Tripp is motivated by the fact that both his rewriting of Stendhal's autobiographies and his critical essay on Tripp are organized around the idea of the flawed detail, which figures as a betrayal of realism and, paradoxically, as a certification of the work's realism.

On the level of narrative description or visual depiction, the Sebaldian concept of the 'flawed detail' certifies the work's realism by showing that its objects are not idealized, imaginary objects, but imperfect and therefore 'real,' while also threatening the text's realism with the possibility of *introducing* flaws, falsifying the details and getting them wrong. Sebald frequent use of the term *Wirklichkeitstreue* (fidelity to reality) in reference to Tripp's paintings and in reference to his own writing reinforces the connection between his responses to Tripp and Stendhal; the phrase "fidelity to reality" recalls that sincerity and hypocrisy, fidelity and betrayal are Stendhal's central topics in addition to being the classic themes of nineteenth-century realist literature. The nineteenth-century drama of betrayal, epitomized in the novel of adultery, reiterates on a thematic level the creative drama of the 'realist' artist: the loyalty and disloyalty of the protagonist dramatize the artist's fidelity to or betrayal of reality in the work of art.

In the opening section of *Vertigo*, Sebald elaborates his discussion of the flawed detail with the help of a metaphor for love as a process of “crystallization”—a metaphor coined by Stendhal and elevated to the level of a concept in his book *On Love (de l'Amour)*. Stendhal’s metaphor is drawn from the process by which a dead twig dropped into a salt mine is gradually encrusted with sparkling crystals and transformed into an object of beauty. Sebald summarizes the metaphorical dimension of this natural process from the perspective of his character Henri Beyle, paraphrasing Stendhal: “The protracted crystallization process, which had transformed the dead twig into a truly miraculous object, appeared to Beyle, by his own account, as an allegory for the growth of love in the salt mines of the soul.”²⁸⁷ Critic Claudia Öhlschläger captures the implications of Stendhal’s metaphor as follows: “the intensity of the feeling of love develops not so much in relation to a real person, but in proportion to the progressive denaturing of the person through crystallization”; in other words, love develops “in relation to an artificial supplement” as the beloved is idealized in the lover’s imagination.²⁸⁸

In Sebald’s hands, as Öhlschläger notes, the Stendhalian notion of crystallization becomes a troubling figure for the production of the work of art, and more specifically, for the act of writing.²⁸⁹ Insofar as metaphorical ‘crystallization’ is occasioned by a

²⁸⁷ Sebald, *Vertigo* 26.

²⁸⁸ Öhlschläger, Claudia, “Die Bahn des korsischen Kometen [...]” 553, my translation. Stendhal’s “crystallization” is what Sigmund Freud later refers to as an “overvaluation” of the love object, though Stendhal and Sebald are interested in the *process*, or how the love object comes to be overvalued, while Freud’s term reduces the phenomenon to a static feature of a certain kind of (potentially pathological) love.

²⁸⁹ Öhlschläger writes: “Sebald recurriert auf Stendhals Modell und Denkfigur der Kristallisation, um sie für grundsätzliche Reflexionen über das Verhältnis von schriftstellerischer Produktivität und Wirklichkeitstreue nutzbar zu machen.” (Öhlschläger, “Kristallisation als kulturelle Transformation [...]” 107. Elsewhere, she writes similarly: “Nimmt man die Kristallisation mit Stendhal als Verwandlung von Natur in Kultur, von Natur in Kunst, und im Horizont von Sebalds Akzentuierung als Gleichnis für die

flawed beloved, whom the lover is at pains to improve upon by means of his imagination, crystallization explicitly aligns artistic production with a betrayal of reality and a departure from its real-life models. Moreover, it links both meanings of the flawed detail in Sebald—a detail that is imperfect in reality with respect to some ideal, and a flawed representation of a detail in the work of art—by refiguring the idealizing propensity of representational art as a failure of realism; thus in a realist framework, aesthetic perfection is a form of imperfection. As a dead twig, the beloved figures in Stendhal as a particular whose flaws and imperfections *provoke* the lover-writer to cover them with a shell of imaginary, crystalline projections. Because crystallization requires the imaginary perfection, or idealization of a flawed particular, Öhlschläger characterizes it further as a process of generalization;²⁹⁰ we might add to this that crystallization abstracts from the specific objects, with their real imperfections, to which a ‘realist’ art would be devoted.

The Adorable Imperfection of the Work of Art

Sebald ventriloquizes Stendhal for the purpose of performing an autopsy on Romantic literature, though it is an autopsy most lovingly performed in prose. In the first volume of his collected critical essays, *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks*, Sebald can be found rehearsing the procedure to which he soon subjects Stendhal.

Readers of Sebald’s academic essays in general will notice right away that as a literary critic and lover in the style of Stendhal, Sebald prizes in his pet writers their dear

Dopplung von ‘Nachahmung’ und ‘Aufhebung’ der Natur, so hat man es mit einem Muster zu tun, das Grundsätzliches aussagt über die poetische Organisation von historischem Wissen in Sebalds Texten” (“Die Bahn des korsischen Kometen [...]” 557).

²⁹⁰ Öhlschläger, “Die Bahn des korsischen Kometen” 552; “Kristallisation als kulturelle Transformation” 109.

little flaws. It is these unique flaws that distinguish Sebald's favorites from the indifferent masses of those writers less appealing to his critical eye. Perhaps we can think of such small blemishes as the distinguishing marks by which even a disfigured corpse can be identified—or by which even a sentence of Stendhal's prose, divorced from its context and un-cited, can be recognized as Stendhal. It is Sebald's fascination with the *unique flaws* of individual writers that invites us to probe his interest in Stendhal beyond the striking formal similarities between the two authors. Chandler's and Öhlschläger's incisive arguments about Sebald's concern with Romantic epistemology do not account for his specific choice of Stendhal. One senses something more personal, idiosyncratic, and sometimes perverse behind Sebald's literary proclivities.

In the broadest terms, Sebald is attracted to writers whose work either is flawed with respect to social expectations and norms,²⁹¹ or whose work begins the process of its own critical undoing insofar as it fails with respect to its stated project, its conscious self-image and aims. Thus he loves Franz Kafka for his self-proclaimed inability to love and to write; Robert Walser for the evasively recorded traces of his un-certifiable and possibly feigned madness; Hofmannsthal for his untimely decorum so out-of-place in Viennese Modernism, for the way in which his wishful pre-modern aims of integration and synthesis in the *Andreas*-fragment are increasingly undermined by its unwitting exploration of “the centrifugal force of our lives, which—strangely and willfully—leads not to a beautiful *Bildung*, but to deformation and destruction” (*BU* 63). He loves

²⁹¹ Sebald insists, however, that their work is *not* flawed with respect to *aesthetic* norms and standards (cf. Sebald's introduction to *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks. Zur österreichischen Literatur von Stifter bis Handke* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003). The volume was originally published by Residenz Verlag GmbH in 1985).

Adalbert Stifter for the restrained, perverse eroticism submerged beneath the exaggerated modesty of his leading men, and for the pathological relationship to security Stifter barely sublimates in his work.

Sebald's early volumes of literary criticism manifest his interest in psychopathographical literary criticism, a form of criticism informed by the biographical details of an author's life, which follows the symptomatic traces that abnormal psychology leaves in an author's works.²⁹² Sebald's annotated copy of Alexander Mitscherlich's *Psycho-pathographien des Alltags* (1982), a seminal work of psychopathographical literary criticism, is included in his *Teilbibliothek* (partial [personal] library) at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach. The scope of the following chapters precludes a discussion of psychopathography in Sebald's early literary criticism, and his later divergence from it. However, my discussion of Sebald's essay on pictorial realism in the paintings of Tripp takes up in a different context the constitutive relationship between pathology and realism that Sebald proposes.

The species of fictionalized biography and literary criticism Sebald develops in the first section of *Vertigo* follows this pattern: it is Stendhal's most glaring foibles as a writer that appear to have rendered his works irresistible to Sebald. Accordingly, Sebald loves Stendhal for his apologetic, almost involuntary hypocrisy and forgetfulness in the midst of the most fanatical devotion to honesty, authenticity and truth. This is not to say that Stendhal is not usually well aware of the discrepancy between his true character and the self-image he projects. Rather, the point is that it is not Stendhal's artistic

²⁹² Cf. Klebes, Martin, "Sebald's Pathographies," in *W. G. Sebald: History-Memory-Trauma.*, ed. Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006) 65-75.

achievement, exactly, that endears him to Sebald. Sebald loves Stendhal for those moments when the latter is truthful or dishonest *in spite of himself*, where Stendhal's self-portrayal in prose exceeds his aesthetic and rhetorical control.

Around the leitmotif of *the beloved defect* crystallizes a relationship between loving and writing as two parallel forms of critique; it is this relationship that Sebald elaborates throughout his literary career. More precisely, it is in what Sebald portrays as the "slight difference" between loving and writing that the possibility of critique springs up. In an earlier essay on Schnitzler, Sebald characterizes the affinity between loving and writing in the following way:

To a large extent, literature and love are congruent, tautologically mediated fields. This is why the historicity of the emergent idea of love in the process of its formation, [the idea of love] out of which one writes to and for others, and in which desire and pain are fixed in a mutually parasitic relationship, is increasingly disregarded.²⁹³

The historicity of our conceptions of love, according to Sebald, is visible to none but the most attentive readers; nevertheless, it is precisely by reading literature of the past and present carefully that we may become cognizant of the historicity of love. Such awareness arises at those points where the gap between a writer's historically specific concept of love chafes against, and is belied by the formal properties, stylistic qualities, or experiential dimension of his or her writing.

There are certain privileged figures in the history of literature in whose writings the difference, or non-congruity between the nearly "congruent, tautologically mediated fields of literature and love" is plainest. This claim clarifies Sebald's interest in marginal writers who have in some way failed in the pursuit of their literary aspirations—for it is

²⁹³ Sebald, W. G., "Das Schrecknis der Liebe. Zu Schnitzlers *Traumnovelle*," in *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks* 38, my translations throughout. Referenced henceforth as *BU*.

only in the works of writers whose way of writing is incompatible with their narrative content and poetic ideals that the *historicity* of key concepts comes to light. Sebald unearths a form of unconscious social critique encrypted in the very “failure” of these writers’ works.

Stendhal, of course, can scarcely be called a marginal or failed writer; nevertheless, he exemplifies just the sort of uncomfortable fit between the act of literary production and what is written about that Sebald has in mind. As numerous critics have remarked, there is a striking modernity in Stendhal’s writing that is at odds with some of his eighteenth-century ideas and ideals. In this respect, too, Sebald’s affinity with Stendhal is apparent: as a post-modern writer of twentieth-century history clothed anachronistically in an early modern narrative voice borrowed from the prose rhythms of Adalbert Stifter, Sebald’s work mirrors the way in which Stendhal’s nineteenth-century realism harbors an anachronistic fantasy of the *ancien régime*.

Operating within the Stendhalian strain of Romantic discourse, Sebald mobilizes a critique of Romanticism by effecting a very slight and subtle shift of emphasis: from Stendhal’s insistence on the loveliness of defects, Sebald demonstrates the defectiveness of romantic love. Nor must Sebald distort the discourse of Romanticism to mount his critique. By an odd optical illusion, the “defectiveness” of Stendhal’s beloved objects ennobles his love. It is as though only a perfectly authentic love could love objects so unworthy and poor.²⁹⁴ In his essay on Schnitzler, Sebald points out that ideal

²⁹⁴ In the Schnitzler essay, “Das Schrecknis der Liebe [...],” Sebald remarks similarly: “In general, the incompatibility of ideal love and life praxis becomes virtual proof of the authenticity of the feeling. Only a retrospective view affords us insights into the dialectic of an opposing development, in which the undoubtedly not-only-unreal emotion loses credibility in proportion to the frequency with which it is invoked” (BU 39).

love paradoxically requires the *distance* of the beloved, rather than his or her proximity;²⁹⁵ one might add that ideal love also requires the deficiency of its object rather than his or her perfection (distance is merely an instance of deficiency for which the beloved is not necessarily to blame). Beyond the pale of the lover's imagination, every object after all is flawed. The more ideal the love, the less plausible it becomes that any object could prove worthy of its unswerving attention: thus the defectiveness of the object is brought into focus and magnified by the nineteenth-century's very idealization of love. By a familiar logic, the deficiency of the object—an insufficiency which moreover is required to prove the authenticity of love—ends by reflecting back upon the ideal (and idealizing) love that mistakes it for being unconditionally worthy of regard.

False Entry: the Origin as Façade

These considerations must be folded back, finally, upon what we have referred to loosely as Sebald's "love" of Stendhal. I have tried to make a case for the relevance and aptness of Stendhal as the original intertext in Sebald's prose fiction career. However, in light of these conclusions, might it not be true that Henri Beyle and the works he published under various pseudonyms is in turn a deficient first point of reference in Sebald's prose literature—a kind of "flawed beloved"? Is the opening section of Sebald's *Schwindel. Gefühle*. on Beyle a false start? The majority of critics have passed over *Schwindel. Gefühle*. in favor of Sebald's later works. And might it not be the case, therefore, that Sebald's inaugural rewriting of Stendhal's autobiographical texts is an inadequate foundation for our understanding of Sebald's literary project as a whole?

²⁹⁵ Ibid. 38-9.

Upon reconstructing the timeline of Sebald's works in the order of their emergence, one might well ask whether the first chapter of *Schwindel. Gefühle.* adheres to any pattern at all. Returning for a moment to our chronological approach: the strangeness of the "Beyle..." piece following on the heels of Sebald's academic writings bears special emphasis. While Sebald's critical essays are devoted exclusively to German-language writers and bristle with the most historicizing, indeed dismantling analyses of the efflorescence of 19th- and 20th-century ideas of love reflected in Austrian literature of the past two hundred years, his first experiment in prose fiction is devoted astonishingly to the life and works of consummate Romantic and Frenchman Henri Beyle, alias Stendhal.

Stendhal is unapologetic on the topic of romantic love. Compared to the typical objects of Sebaldian criticism, his novels are so many airy confections. What sort of relationship could Sebald possibly have to an unselfconscious devotee of "happiness," "love" and "truth"? Can Stendhal's inadvertent hypocrisy with respect to these ideals really have been enough to pique Sebald's interest? And how could Sebald move from writing a series of essays focused sincerely on *The Description of Unhappiness* or *Misfortune (Die Beschreibung des Unglücks)*, to a writer who considers unhappiness to be unworthy of literary representation, who endeavors to banish unhappiness from his autobiographies, exposing his childhood tribulations not for their own sake but as a garishly painted backdrop to his subsequent euphoria, and who in *Le Rouge et le Noir* ironizes the unhappiness of his protagonist Julien Sorel in words that could not have been better designed to dismiss both Sebald and his academic concerns? Stendhal writes, prototypically:

Nothing gave [Julien] pleasure any more, neither in real life nor in his imagination. Lack of exercise had begun to affect his health and to give him the highly strung yet feeble temper of a young German intellectual. He was losing the manly pride that, with a vigorous oath, rebuts certain unworthy thoughts likely to assail an unhappy soul.²⁹⁶

What, then, is the significance of Stendhal as the founding point of reference and originary intertext in Sebald's literary career?

Perhaps it is not only Stendhal's relevance to Sebald's project that recommends him as the perfect point of departure—for this would not have been enough—but also the almost consummate *inappropriateness* of Stendhal; the irrelevance of his ideals; the abrasive contrast between his style and Sebald's; the obsolescence of his themes; his persisting, studied ignorance of everything in human experience and in history that matters most to Sebald (unhappiness, misfortune, illness, aging, loss, forgetting, catastrophe, war, etc.): these incongruities, the very ill-suited-ness of Stendhal to Sebald's purpose are what recommend him most highly.

Sebald begins to write prose fiction by recounting the life of a figure so remote from his central concern with World War II and its reverberations in German literature and culture for two reasons: firstly, the heightened appearance of "arbitrariness" that clings to such a beginning allows Sebald to prove all the more categorically what McCulloh and others have referred to as his "metaphysical monism," his guiding belief in the "interconnectedness of all things." Secondly, the contrast between Stendhal's voice and Sebald's, as between Beyle's experiences and the twentieth-century history which more immediately involves Sebald, presents the reader with a black-and-white, high-

²⁹⁶ Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, trans. Roger Gard (London: Penguin Books, 2002) 522.

contrast image in which the outlines of Sebald's incipient project may be viewed in sharper relief.²⁹⁷

I wish by these observations to propose that the "Beyle..." section of *Vertigo* is not only the gateway to Sebald's literary project in a straightforward sense, but that it also constitutes a kind of *camouflage*, façade, or false lead, not unlike the abandoned original entrance to the defensive structure in Franz Kafka's "The Burrow" ("Die Bau"), left standing by the tunneling creature throughout his continuous renovations as a false portal meant to deceive predators—a beguiling dead end. To dwell exclusively on the convergence between Stendhal and Sebald is to obscure the telling fact that Sebald invokes Beyle primarily to distance himself from Stendhal.

Bearing in mind that Sebald transforms Stendhal's theory of love into a theory of literary production, we must recall Sebald's earlier claim that "the idea of love is based [...] on the disjunction [or disconnectedness] of the body." This fundamental paradox may be brought to bear on Sebald's consternating intertextual practice: do Sebald's readers witness a merging of Sebald's fiction both with his literary criticism and with the works of other authors, or does Sebald's intertextual practice enact rather the careful maintenance of a distance—even the widening of a gap? Just as Sebald says of the conventional conception of love relationships, Sebaldian intertextuality is predicated not

²⁹⁷ Franz Loquai argues similarly that Sebald seduces us with the beautiful style of a Stifter, Hebbel, or Bernhard in order to shock us with the naked truth of authentic things (cf. "Der Archivar verwehter Spuren. W. G. Sebalds 'Die Ausgewanderten,'" in *Far From Home: W. G. Sebald*, ed. Franz Loquai (Bamberg: University of Bamberg, 1995) 89). Andreas Isenschmid compares Sebald's Stifterian style to "a calming announcement right before the crash" (cf. "Melancholia. W. G. Sebalds *Schwindel. Gefühle*." in *Die Zeit*, September 21, 1990). These two are cited after Alex Dunker, "Metonymische Diskurse. W. G. Sebalds 'Max Aurach,'" in *Die anwesende Abwesenheit: Literatur im Schatten von Auschwitz* (Munich: Fink, 2003) 137.

upon the desire for synthesis and union as one might suppose, but upon the insurmountable separation of two bodies.²⁹⁸

Although *Schwindel. Gefühle.* in many ways is a book about love, Sebald is profoundly aware of the irony by which even our most heartfelt efforts to approach the objects of our desire and curiosity remove them ever further from our grasp. What I have called the “opening move” in Sebald’s prose fiction, his rewriting of Stendhal, mimes the way a swimmer sets himself in motion by “pushing off”; switching to an aeronautical metaphor more in keeping with the imagery of *Vertigo*, the autobiographical texts of Stendhal function as the solid, rooted object off which Sebald’s transcription, relatively weightless, takes flight.

The Defective Reader

Stendhal, though, who could be promoted with reason to “co-author” of the opening section of Sebald’s debut fiction, cannot quite be kept in his proper place. Despite the homogenizing uniformity of his narrative voice, Sebald exhibits a remarkable restraint vis-à-vis the texts and images which are incorporated into his books as it were without being digested completely. He does not make clear the extent to which intertextual references are important; neither does he limit their importance, leaving the

²⁹⁸ Sebald, W. G., “Das Schrecknis der Liebe [...]” 38-9. According to Sebald, it is in Schnitzler’s literary works for the first time that the lingering 19th-century bourgeois ideology of love, with its “complex strategies of beguilement and self-deception,” is confronted “almost explicitly” with the above-referenced paradox. On Schnitzler’s “nearly explicit” confrontation with the paradoxical 19th-century ideology of love, Sebald writes: “In Schnitzler for the first time—and herein lies the special significance of his work above and beyond the images of conventional morality he inherited—skepticism vis-à-vis the habitual performances surrounding love advances to the threshold of explicitness” (BU 40).

reader considerable latitude. Sebald allows his texts to be overwhelmed by foreign material to the point that he has been accused of formlessness.

Refusing to adopt a historical view of Stendhal, we may be justified to take seriously the effects of an illusory gravitational pull, the same defective perception of force for which *Vertigo* is named, by strategically allowing our sense of balance between the two writers to be disturbed. Sebald quotes so liberally from his sources—moreover in the form of unmarked citations, paraphrase, allusion, and free indirect discourse—that the distinction between authorial voices is profoundly obscured. His radically de-centered writings force one to ask whether critics would not do just as well to turn *Vertigo* on its ear, reading Sebald from the perspective of Stendhal.

This would mean to resist the assumption that Sebald's works, like conventional novels, contain their own center of gravity, or that they constitute in themselves an adequate point of reference for our readings of them. Sebald begins an essay on the poet Ernst Herbeck (who also appears as a character in *Vertigo*) by remarking that interpretation is "legitimate only when [...] its explanations are *no less defective* than the lyric excursions with which it is concerned."²⁹⁹ Defective books demand defective readers and defective readings. This echoes Sebald's justification of his labile methodology in the preface to *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks*: "the case-by-case procedure which changes its analytic method without much scruple according to the difficulties that surface before it corresponds to the deliberate recklessness with which

²⁹⁹ Sebald, "Eine kleine Traverse. Das poetische Werk Ernst Herbecks," *BU* 131, my emphasis. Herbeck also appears as a character in *Vertigo*'s second chapter, "*All'estero*"; Sebald's narrator pays a visit to Herbeck at a pensioners' home in Klosterneuburg, where Herbeck has resided since being discharged from a mental institution after thirty-four years of confinement.

Austrian literature transgresses traditional boundaries, for instance between its own field and that of science.”³⁰⁰ If Sebald’s texts are dizzy and dizzying, our reading of them must be, in his words, “no less so.” To offer an interpretation more coherent, more linear, grounded or focused than Sebald’s *Vertigo* would be to betray that text. In what follows, we will attempt to alter our impressions of Sebald through a kind of gradual immersion in Stendhal—a prolonged exposure to the first “outside” author whose life and works Sebald’s prose fiction inconclusively absorbs.

³⁰⁰ Sebald, “Vorwort,” *BU* 9.

11. Sebald vis-à-vis Stendhal: A Literary Self-Portrait Occulted

Most critics agree that Sebald's literary-memorial project does not exploit historical data the better to write fiction, but exhibits a genuine devotion to history for its own sake, as well as a fundamental concern with the possibility of holding writing accountable to something beyond itself. This section will consider Sebald's rewriting of Stendhal's autobiographical texts in order to trace the shift in genre from autobiography to the novel form that Sebald's prose fiction partially—if incompletely—effects. His work blurs the distinction between the particular question raised by autobiography: the truth of an individual life, and a more general question raised variously by such genres as the realist novel and historical fiction: that of the relationship between the work of fiction and the world. Sebald begins to dismantle the ideology of the realist aesthetic by merging the questions raised by autobiography and realist literature, both of which genres claim a connection between the text and something external to it, be it the author's person or the socio-historical world.

Sebald's interrogation of the classical distinction between autobiography and realist literature further accounts for his interest in Stendhal, whose autobiographies blur the principle distinction between the two genres: that autobiography is written in the first person and vows implicitly to give a true account of the author's life, while realist literature features fictional characters and prides itself on its objective, third-person point of view. In this sense, the two genres are related inversely: autobiography gives a subjective (even unrealistic) account of a real person's real life, while realist literature offers an objective, realistic portrayal of the fictional lives of invented characters. Although Stendhal's autobiographies are easily distinguished from his novels, his

autobiographies, published likewise under a pseudonym, sever the connection between the author and the “I” that speaks. Furthermore, the second of these works, *The Life of Henry Brulard*, lies somewhere between autobiography, a subjective genre, and biography, an objective genre closer to the narrative perspective of realist literature. *Brulard* is written in the first person, but is twice removed from the real Henri Beyle insofar as its pseudonymous author, Stendhal, assigns a second fictional name, Henry Brulard, to the narrating “I.” The title page therefore appears to promise a biography.

Autobiography’s Lost Self

Sebald’s rewriting of Stendhal’s autobiographies is governed by a double gesture: he “outs” Stendhal and Henry Brulard alike, calling the author by his real name, Henri Beyle. Nevertheless, we cannot conclude from this that Sebald aims to reestablish a straightforward, unqualified connection between autobiography and the real world. Even as he unmaskes Stendhal/Brulard as Henri Beyle, Sebald’s selective rewriting of Stendhal’s autobiographies subtly characterizes autobiography as an arena for the author’s self-fictionalization. In spite of the earnest questions that inaugurate Stendhal’s autobiographical project—“What kind of man am I?”³⁰¹—Sebald trains his eye on passages that reveal Beyle’s self-image as skewed and false.

Sebald’s transcription of Stendhal’s works, paradoxically, is equally skewed, and deliberately so; Sebald does not present Stendhal as the latter presents himself. Rather than echoing Stendhal’s belief that autobiography is the instrument of his quest for truth, Sebald implies that autobiography may be the product of his penchant for mystification.

³⁰¹ Stendhal, *Memoirs of an Egoist*, trans. Andrew Brown (London: Hesperus Press Limited, 2003) 7.

More precisely, Sebald identifies in Stendhal's self-questioning an inevitable *loss* of self. The split in autobiography between narrated and narrating selves, which is the condition for the question 'who am I?,' exposes the genre as a response to this threat. Working against the tide of a self that always threatens to become a third person—unknown—the autobiographer transforms this third person, or third persons, into the unified, first-person subject of the text. A multiplicity of selves are synthesized in and by the voice of the narrating "I."

The Outing of a Genre

Rather than leaving autobiography to its self-synthesizing aims, therefore, Sebald's rewriting of Stendhal emphasizes the fragmentation of the self that autobiography repairs without ever succeeding completely. This is how he unsettles the first-person/third-person distinction that divides autobiography absolutely from realist literature. What may seem like a disturbingly unsympathetic rewriting of Stendhal has a larger goal in view: Sebald "outs" Henri Beyle, re-establishing the broken connection between Stendhal's autobiographies and the real-life Beyle, only to "out" the genre of autobiography itself as a self-mythologizing process through which the true person of the author is concealed from our eyes and from his own.

Sebald's interest in autobiographies is not limited to his partial transcription of Stendhal. As we have just seen, Sebald abandons his career as literary critic with the publication of *Vertigo* in 1990, the first of four carefully researched, mixed-media literary works, that he refers to as "prose fictions" rather than "novels" to emphasize the role of factual data and external sources in their genesis—and it is the genre of autobiography in its early and high modern forms that supplies the primary source material for Sebald's

Vertigo. The book's opening section is a condensed transcription of the autobiographies, journals and letters of Stendhal, while its third section mines the diaries and letters of Franz Kafka; its second and fourth sections involve autobiography more intimately by tracing the movements of a first-person narrator whose life parallels the biography of Sebald.

In light of his general interest in European history, and the broader questions about the relationship between fiction and the world raised by his work, one might well ask: why does Sebald appeal to autobiography, and moreover to highly literary autobiographies, as his principal source of historical data? This tendency is evident in all four of his prose fictions, although the "Beyle..." section of *Vertigo* will be my focus here. As we have seen, Sebald's prior critical essays from the 1970s and '80s perform a kind of psychopathographical literary criticism indebted to the genre of the psychoanalytic case history. Where psychoanalysis and autobiography collide, a question arises that concerns Sebald profoundly: *who has the authority to write the true story of a human life?* Psychoanalytic insights discredit the truth-claims of autobiography by challenging the notion that a human subject can judge the factual and emotional accuracy of his own memories. Where autobiography—despite its inevitable failure—aspires to make a homogeneous entity of the subject, psychoanalysis exposes the subject as porous and discordant.³⁰² The competing influences of psychoanalysis and autobiography on Sebald's early writings manifests as a tension between 'weak' and 'strong' concepts of

³⁰² Canonical theories of autobiography from Lejeune to de Man have assumed that the genre of autobiography aspires to coherence, though it inevitably fails. Cf. Lejeune, Philippe, *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); and de Man, Paul, "Autobiography as De-Facement," *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 67-81.

subjectivity—a tension that provokes the broader question concerning what type of history he intends to write.³⁰³

The Psychopathology of Autobiography: Strong and Weak Subjects

Some examples from his four prose fictions will illustrate Sebald's historiographical style. The life stories he retells with the aid of images and intertextual references range from the well-known to the obscure, though both cases evince a 'strong' concept of subjectivity: in *Vertigo*, eminent literary personalities such as Dante, Casanova, Stendhal, Grillparzer and Kafka cross paths, while his second and fourth books salvage the minor biographies of Jewish and German-Jewish individuals whose names and life stories are combined, edited, fictionalized or disguised. Numerous references to Napoleon evoke a 'grand-narrative' style of writing history, while accounts of exiles, ex-patriots and emigrants suggest an interest in exemplary cases and emblematic scenes: for the transient lives of these unknowns are animated by the major events and forces driving the continuous flight and movement of peoples in a modern, post-WWII, post-national world. Whether his subject is Napoleon or an obscure victim of Nazi Germany, Sebald's literary works crystallize around the unique experience of particular subjects who embody their historical milieu.

Nevertheless, Sebald's least sympathetic critics object to what I am calling the opposing, 'weak' concept of subjectivity in his prose, behind which they suspect a dangerously empathetic appropriation of voiceless suffering that obscures the particular

³⁰³ Related questions present themselves here: what type of historical truth does Sebald expect to find in the autobiographies of luminary writers of the past several centuries, and to what does he subject the truth of these seminal works when he transcribes them in subtly modified form?

identities of history's real victims. Sebald's flexible attributive practice abolishes the sovereign subject formally and stylistically. The voice of his first-person narrator merges ambiguously with those of protagonists, known and unknown authors whose words he relates without quotation marks in a monotonous cadence and uniform tone. Thus the narrative voice remains disturbingly aloof from its subjects, formal and without intimacy. Even as the boundaries between distinct voices are dissolved, there is a curious subjective absence of narrator and protagonists alike; these voices are less those of characters with human qualities than they are paper-thin divisions between reader and narrative data. Sebald's writing is remarkably devoid of affect and other trappings of subjective interiority.³⁰⁴ This internal, psychological absence is reflected by the eerily depopulated urban centers in which Sebaldian scenes unfold. Lastly, his writing emanates from the point at which the very possibility of human interest expires when human history is overtaken by what he calls "the natural history of destruction."³⁰⁵

In light of these observations, one may well be astonished at the formative role of real autobiographies in Sebald's literary debut. I would like to propose that Sebald's manipulation of autobiographies in *Vertigo* does not rely on a 'strong' concept of subjectivity as one might suppose, but is informed by psychoanalysis and by the special variety of psychopathographical literary criticism Sebald favored in his critical essays of the '70s and '80s. He is not interested in autobiography as a distinct literary genre that

³⁰⁴ Cf. Martin Swales, "Intertextuality, Authenticity, Metonymy? On Reading W. G. Sebald," in *The Anatomist of Melancholy: Essays in Memory of W. G. Sebald*, ed. Rüdiger Görner (Munich: Iudicium, 2003) 86: "It is not confessional prose. While it may feel personal, it is in fact meta-subjective." See also 85.

³⁰⁵ A possible question here would be: does Sebald's work achieve a synthesis of literary forms in which the sovereign subject and the post-subjective are exemplified, or do 'strong' and 'weak' concepts of subjectivity confront each other as irreconcilable terms?

takes for granted the writing subject's sovereign authority over his experience, feelings and memories; rather, Sebald performs a psychopathographical meta-critique of autobiography as a literary form. In his subtle rewritings of Stendhal's autobiographies in *Vertigo*, as we shall see, Sebald deftly emphasizes what we might refer to as the psychopathology of autobiography as a genre. He reads the genre as a belated defensive maneuver on the part of a modern author-function whose coherence and integrity have been imperiled; the genre is symptomatic of a *loss* of faith in reality, in the integrity of the sovereign subject, in the coherence of a 'life' that mirrors and is mirrored by the coherence of a 'historical milieu', etc.

Sebald appeals to autobiographical writing (loosely defined) as a privileged site for interrogating the relationship between literature and historiography, imagination and reality, emotional and factual truth.³⁰⁶ He privileges it above other species of source-texts available to him because it puts on trial the conditions of the possibility of all genres of 19th-century prose concerned similarly with the problem of truthfulness in writing. In its exemplary, self-reflexive modern form—a point to which I will return momentarily—autobiography cross-examines the authenticity of writing and attempts to document its rapport with an outside. Sebald seems to believe that if the truth-claims of autobiography fail, then those of realist fiction, historiography and the like will collapse in its wake.

³⁰⁶ Of course, if autobiography is the privileged field for questioning or securing a relationship between fiction and history, writing and truth, then other forms of prose must be 'autobiographical' to the extent that they, too, interrogate the authenticity of writing and attempt to document its rapport with an outside. This is why Sebald's reconstruction of Henri Beyle's life blurs the distinction between Stendhal's letters, his autobiographies, his proto-realist novels, and his theoretical treatise *On Love*. Sebald jumbles these sources indiscriminately because on his implicit reading, Stendhal is everywhere concerned with the possibility of truth in writing. Autobiography exemplifies a writer's engagement with the problem at hand, while other genres may also be doing other things.

Self-authentication and Self-counterfeiting: “The Afterlife of *Henry Brulard*” by W. G. Sebald

In this connection, Sebald’s choice to begin his debut prose fiction by rewriting the autobiographical texts of *Stendhal*, in particular, may be grasped. In other words, Sebald could not have used the work of ‘any old autobiographer’ for his critical dismantling of the genre. The exemplariness of Stendhal has to do not only with his position as the first realist, poised awkwardly between Romanticism (with its insular, self-enclosed subject) and Realism (with its collective subject: society), Enlightenment idealism and historicist modernity, but also with what I will call the fortuitous self-referentiality of Stendhal’s autobiographies. In the majority of autobiographies, the synthetic truth of the personality—the coherent truth of the self—is a separate matter from the possibility of truth in writing. However, Stendhal happens to define himself as a person almost exclusively with respect to what he calls, by turns, his naturalness, candidness, *Espagnolisme*, truthfulness, honesty and the like. His autobiographies represent the most concerted of his various efforts to convince himself that he is unguardedly sincere. Thus for Stendhal, uniquely, the success of autobiography or, more broadly, the truth in writing, and the authenticity of the self are everywhere equally and simultaneously at stake.

Stendhal’s work exhibits such a precociously modern, self-reflexive feel because the writing of autobiography is a test of his subjective integrity; it tests the validity of his self-image and ego ideal. If his *Memoirs of and Egotist* and *The Life of Henry Brulard* fail, then Stendhal’s very ‘self’ will have proven incoherent and false, his autobiography a fiction. On the other hand, just as Stendhal’s writing puts on trial the authenticity of the

self, the cohering or consolidation of his self-image also puts on trial the possibility of truth in writing. Sebald chooses Stendhal's works as his model because other autobiographies, lacking this coincidence, would not be exemplary interrogations of the relationship between literature and historiography, fiction and reality, etc. In Stendhal's hands, autobiography is not merely self-authenticating: it becomes an instrument of the *writer's* self-authentication (in the best case) or self-counterfeiting (in the worst).

The writing of autobiography therefore is perilous; it discloses and strives to contain a threat. When Sebald renders Stendhal's life story in the opening section of *Vertigo*, he presents the latter's authorship accordingly as a cautionary tale. Of Stendhal's second autobiography, *The Life of Henry Brulard*, Sebald writes: "the notes in which the 53-year-old Beyle [...] attempted to relive the tribulations of those days afford eloquent proof of the various difficulties entailed in the act of recollection."³⁰⁷ It sounds as though Sebald hopes to draw from Stendhal a list of obstacles that, in his own memorial project, he would rather avoid.

Readers of the French author will find it hard to imagine how Sebald could improve upon the measures already adopted by Stendhal to limit distortions of the truth. Most conspicuous among these are his eschewal of 'style' and his speed—collaborating strategies, since the attempt to write beautifully not only falsifies the truth, but slows one down. "More than anything else," Stendhal affirms, "I want to be truthful." Thus in his first autobiography, *Memoirs of an Egotist*, "so as [...] not to lie and not to hide my faults," he imposes on himself "the task of writing these memories down at a rate of

³⁰⁷ Sebald, *Vertigo* 5.

twenty pages a sitting, like a letter.”³⁰⁸ He writes furiously for fourteen days before abandoning the *Memoirs*; marginal notes boast the number of pages covered in each sitting and ‘prove’ the veracity of the text, for as Beyle assures us: “I wouldn’t have been able to work like this on a work of the imagination.”³⁰⁹ His second autobiography, *The Life of Henry Brulard* is similarly certified: “I’m writing this, without being untruthful [...], with pleasure like a letter to a friend.”³¹⁰ Or as he later confesses: “I have only one means of preventing my imagination from playing tricks on me, that is to march straight to the objective.”³¹¹ *Brulard*’s forty-six chapters are dashed off in the winter of 1835-6. In keeping with his fanatical love of music, Stendhal’s fidelity is to the metronome: he insures the truth-content of his writing by respecting the pace—a method that anticipates the primary rule of psychoanalysis, free association of ideas without censorship, as well as surrealist experiments in automatic writing. Above all, don’t edit and don’t stop.

The distorting pressure of the imagination on memory is ever to be feared because imagination colludes with vanity, the autobiographer’s slyest enemy. The claim not to have edited is a rhetorical strategy that reveals the genre’s weakness—for the very possibility of revising one’s own work implies a narcissistic doubling of the self that compromises autobiography’s assertion of subjective coherence. In spite of the analogy with psychoanalytic free association, it is unclear whether the quick clip of Stendhal’s

³⁰⁸ Stendhal, *Memoirs of an Egotist* 29. See also *ibid.* 44: “perhaps, writing this like a letter, thirty pages at a sitting, I can make it seem *real without knowing*. / For, more than anything else, I want to be truthful. What a miracle it would be in this century of play-acting [...].”

³⁰⁹ Stendhal, *Memoirs of an Egotist* 85. The sentence continues: “[...] like *The Red and the Black*.”

³¹⁰ Stendhal, *The Life of Henry Brulard*, trans. John Sturrock (New York: New York Review of Books Classics, 2001) 10.

³¹¹ Stendhal, *The Life of Henry Brulard* 175.

composing precludes narcissistic revision. Might not what Freud calls the mind's 'censoring agency' outstrip Stendhal's quill? Can he be sure that the distorting influence of vanity is not at work already in the decision not to edit?

In the opposing imperatives to edit or not to edit, it is impossible to judge whether authorial arrogance or authorial humility has the upper hand. (As a form of narcissistic understatement, of course, humility is no less a distortion of the truth than exaggeration.) Consider the rotations of that self-counterfeiting coin whose two faces are vanity and self-loathing in the following statements: I never edit; I can't stop editing; I can't bear to read my own writing—I can write so much better now; I love reading my books—they're so much better than anything I could write now; I can't stop editing my work because the lure of its countless flaws is more than my self-loathing can resist; I read myself in self-hatred, in boredom, incessantly, without the least hope of improvement; or more naively: What do you think of my books? I haven't read them. Stendhal fears nothing more than authorial vanity when he writes. He detests the easily wounded pride that is every Frenchman's birthright. And yet if there is only one thing his work asserts, denies, believes, disavows, suspects, and fears by turns, it is this: that any human action or gesture that appears not to be driven by vanity must be driven by vanity in disguise. His autobiographies; his novels; his theoretical treatise *On Love*: all are obsessed with the unmasking of vanity in its diverse forms. Stendhal fears that a writer's humiliated vanity continues to advance its best interests hypocritically in the form of self-doubt. To criticize oneself as a writer—to edit and rewrite—is to exercise vanity in bad faith. Self-loathing is nothing less than the Napoleonic effort of vanity to increase its share.

Given that the promise of sincerity galvanized by speed lives in Stendhal's fantasy of writing the autobiographies "like letters to a friend," we may be excused for recalling the art of two-faced letter writing earlier practiced by the same man.³¹² Whether or not a younger Beyle succeeds in communicating his sincere love to Victorine Mounier by sending letters to her brother about his fictional exploits with other women, these experimental missives are burdened as severely by vanity and affectation as any document a reader is likely to have seen. In what he calls 'the art of writing to two people at once,' it is the *author* who splits in two. In this respect, our love-struck young hypocrite resembles the autobiographer, who is divided in being both the subject and the object of his text.

A theoretical commonplace has it that good autobiography achieves a synthesis of past and present selves, private and socio-political worlds; this coincidence is supposed to be compelled by the coherent, binding force of what Roy Pascal calls alternately an "inner personality," a "specific dynamic truth" or "dynamic creative element," the self's "inner core" and "most precious reality."³¹³ "The value and truth of autobiography," Pascal concludes,

arise out of the monolithic impact of a personality that out of its own and the world's infinitude forms round itself, through composition and style, a homogeneous entity, both

³¹² Cf. Green, F. S., *Stendhal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939) 37-42. Green describes Stendhal's letters "addressed to Édouard [Mounier]," which "were really written for the benefit of the latter's sister, Victorine" (37). Stendhal "relied on Édouard's indiscretion, hoping that his letters would be shown to Victorine and that she with her feminine instinct would read their cryptic messages [...]" ; he furthermore laces the letters to Édouard with fictional love affairs to cast himself as a "world-weary libertine in search of a pure woman's love" and in order "to stimulate the curiosity of Victorine" (38). There is no evidence that Édouard ever mentioned the contents of these letters to his sister.

³¹³ Pascal, Roy, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960) 193-5.

in the sense that it operates consistently on the world and in the sense that it creates a consistent series of mental images out of its encounters with the world.³¹⁴

The writer of autobiography sutures together his split subjectivity insofar as the events recorded are “symbolic of both” his “historical life” and his “present self.”³¹⁵ In Stendhal, to the contrary, there is a profound antipathy between the young man who lives and the old man who writes; they avoid meeting each other at all costs. Perhaps this accounts for Stendhal’s *two* autobiographies in place of the usual one. Though they are written only four years apart, it is the “man of fifty-three” who writes *Brulard*, the “final line” of his sketch having made him “forget all the earlier lines.”³¹⁶ He sees a younger self gazing up at him from the bottom of a deep well.³¹⁷

The earlier *Memoirs*, we are told, are written to the contrary by a young man exiled in an ailing body. Having begun writing to distract himself from the urge to blow out his brains, Stendhal breaks off upon arriving at “the reason why I will never blow out my brains”: unlike his contemporaries, who are “desiccated, disgusted with the world, philosophers,” Stendhal has “the good fortune to be as naïve [at fifty] as at the age of twenty-five.”³¹⁸ The identity of past and present selves trumpeted here seems roguishly insincere. We are light-years from the “homogeneous entity” that takes shape in autobiography across a distance according to Pascal. Rather than forging a coherent

³¹⁴ Pascal 188.

³¹⁵ Pascal 71.

³¹⁶ Stendhal, *The Life of Henry Brulard* 386.

³¹⁷ Stendhal, *The Life of Henry Brulard* 419.

³¹⁸ Stendhal, *Memoirs of an Egotist* 99.

entity from the self's "infinite,"³¹⁹ Stendhal asserts a static repetition of the self that disavows the passage of time.

The *Memoirs* are those of a split subject whose two halves struggle to hide behind each other or to push each other out of the frame. This subject survives only thanks to a miscalculation—for surely it is not only the strength to resist blowing one's brains out that belongs to the twenty-year-old, but also the urge to blow one's brains out in the first place. A fifty-year-old might prefer the subtler ways of dying with which Henri Beyle is more familiar, such as languishing in obscurity, or soldiering through most of a Sunday and then going to bed early in a small town. His reasons for these multiple deaths might be other than the disappointed hopes of vanity and young love. Or not. Maybe it is only the twenty-year-old who takes seriously the fifty-year-old's suicidal impulse, and only the fifty-year-old who takes seriously the twenty-year-old's lust for life and power to resist. If this is the case, then the fifty-year-old-twenty-year-old-at-heart will have struck a delicate balance... We sense, moreover, that it is the twenty-five-year-old, a false self-image, whom the ailing autobiographer hasn't the heart to kill. Thank god their roles were not reversed!

Writing, Hypocrisy and Polemics: Sebald's Other Face

In his recapitulation of the French author's autobiographies, Sebald resists the temptation to catch Stendhal out when he lies. This is because one need not point out hypocrisy so flagrant. (Naturally, Sebald's restraint in this respect hardly makes him what fans of Stendhal would recognize as a sympathetic reader...; Sebald's selective

³¹⁹ Pascal 188.

rewriting juxtaposes passages meant to confront the reader with false or embellished memories, inconsistencies and contradictions in Stendhal's autobiographies, in order to make his larger points about autobiography, and more broadly, about realistic genres of prose.) Beyle spends much of his life writing himself into the conviction that he sincerely loves sincerity, un-hypocritically despises hypocrisy, suffers from an unexaggerated inability to exaggerate, etc.—all this from a man whose first ambition in life was to write plays for the French theatre, and who once took acting lessons in order to appear more natural!³²⁰

In spite of his discretion on the topic, I believe that Sebald always has Beyle's hypocrisy and self-betrays in mind. Sebald alerts us to the centrality of this theme by referring in several of his four prose fictions to “the dubious business [or ‘false transaction’] of writing”—a phrase that first appears in the ‘Beyle...’ section of *Vertigo*. Stendhal functions as the face of writing: it is *writing*, and ultimately *Sebald's* writing that ‘betrays itself’ in the opening section of *Vertigo*. That Sebald presents us with a rather tendentious image of Stendhal must not distract us from what is truly at issue in the section: that the (perhaps exaggeratedly, falsely) self-falsifying ‘Stendhal’ Sebald gives us is the false self-image of *Sebald*, a distorted mirror image of the writer behind which Sebald hides. This is why Stendhal, the consummate hypocrite, serves so well as the model writer for Sebald; it is also why Sebald chooses *autobiography* as the exemplary form of writing in general—for to write autobiography is a “dubious business” (*Scheingeschäft*) in which self-defense and self-betrayal, concealment and exposure are

³²⁰ Sturrock, John, “Introduction” to *The Life of Henry Brulard*, by Stendhal, trans. John Sturrock (New York: New York Review of Books, 2002) xxv.

indistinguishable. The autobiographer shores up his identity by giving himself away. The lesson Sebald derives from the cautionary tale of Stendhal must be this: that like historical writing, realist fiction, autobiography, and any form of prose that advertises its ties to life in the world, Sebald's unique variety of documentary fiction has no special resources of its own; if it is committed to history, the best it can do is to expose fiction by means of writing fiction. Self-betrayal is its ideal form.³²¹

The type of 'history' Sebald recounts is neither a grand narrative nor an ordered causal chain; rather, Sebaldian history is *a non-chronological list* of meaningfully juxtaposed but un-synthesizable terms. If this is the case, then its consequences for Sebald criticism are not insignificant. Nothing less than a transformation of the most prevalent image of Sebald's compositional practice is at stake. For what if the prose fictions are not only webs of associative links in which a connective tissue of relationships is forged between the most far-flung historical instances, but also a carefully constructed balance of opposing and mutually contradictory terms? Just as the 'young' and 'old' Beyle keep each other alive by *refusing* to integrate, so too the first and third sections of Sebald's *Vertigo* on Stendhal and Kafka respectively are a delicately balanced juxtaposition of opposing but un-synthesizable leitmotifs.

In the substantial body of criticism on Sebald and Kafka, little has been written yet about Sebald's juxtaposition of Stendhal and Kafka in *Vertigo*. What has been written, however, emphasizes the similarities between the two sections: e.g. that both writers are shown pursuing unconsummated love affairs in Italy and taking cures at

³²¹ I use the term 'self-betrayal' here in its double sense: both 'to hide one's true nature,' as in the case of the hypocrite, and 'to give oneself away,' as in the case of one who cannot keep his secrets.

lakeside health resorts. Sebald indeed weaves disparate references and inter-texts into a single web; and yet this critical focus on the synthesizing aspects of his prose overlooks the strong oppositional tendency in Sebald's thinking. Much of his literary criticism belongs to a tradition of polemical thinking that can be traced back to Nietzsche.

Sebald's unqualified rejection of the culture of forgetting and amnesia in post-WWII Germany in his *Luftkrieg* lectures similarly reveals his contrarian roots. It is my belief that the Sebald of the beautifully constructed prose fictions has been received too readily as an almost uncritically compassionate 'apprentice of memory' whose commemorative project would be happy to join hands, so to speak, with anyone who has died. Given the tone of his earlier criticism, however, we may ask whether Sebald's weaving together of historical figures and texts is not guided at the same time by a logic of exaggerated contrasts, polemics and oppositional thinking.

Nor does Sebald's debut work of literary historiography focus on exemplary cases in the usual sense of figures and events that embody a historical milieu whose coherence is assumed. The lives of Stendhal and Kafka variously call into question the possibility of truth in writing. Both exemplify the history of attempts, on the one hand, to separate historiography from literature by salvaging what is true from the distortions of aesthetic representation, and on the other hand to hold literature accountable to something outside itself—be it truth, fact, reality or experience. But insofar as Sebald presents us with exemplary *refusals* or *failures* to prioritize writing above what is external to it or the reverse, his examples are not emblematic of unique historical moments. They stand outside of history and literary history alike.

Vertigo assigns no priority, chronological or evaluative, between Kafka and Stendhal. Sebald's juxtapositions create the illusion of historical depth from what is essentially a two-dimensional surface in which background and foreground trade places as one reads. And this is why Sebald's history of writing history, which is simultaneously a history of writing literature, may strike readers as strangely *anti-historical*: its particular moments coexist as adjacent terms entered in a list.

12. Listless History

I would like to elaborate my assertion that Sebald's quasi- or pseudo-historical narratives are constructed according to the logic of the list, the terms of which are linked yet held apart, juxtaposed without being synthesized. I aim to do this by illuminating a connection between Sebaldian listing and a scene of listing from Stendhal's second autobiography that has gone unremarked by the small body of secondary criticism on Sebald's lists. The scene of listing that Sebald borrows from Stendhal reveals that there is a relationship—for both authors—between enumeration, on the one hand, and their peculiar hybrid variety of literary and historical writing on the other. Furthermore, the formative role of Stendhal's list in the genesis of *The Life of Henry Brulard* suggests that Sebald's adaptation of the list-form is linked closely to his implicit critique of autobiography as a genre. Accordingly, my secondary aim will be to substantiate further my claim that Stendhal's position in the first section of Sebald's debut fiction is not incidental; rather, that Stendhal serves as a model writer for Sebald—one who exemplifies what he refers to ambivalently as “the dubious business of writing.” The importance of this shared scene of listing for both authors confirms that in his transformative rewriting of Stendhal's autobiographies, Sebald works out the fundamental questions of his own writerly practice.

Aesthetic Homogenization and Structural Discordance

Sebald's many lists of such things as animal species, trees, plants, and names have been read primarily as a stylistic tic inherited from his nineteenth-century influences. Listing serves to train his narrative voice: only by listing can the monotone that is native to the catalogue be achieved. The famous “list aria” from Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*,

in which Leporello catalogues 2,065 of his master's lovers, exemplifies the list's aesthetic homogenization of difference: "In Italy, six hundred and forty; / In Germany, two hundred and thirty-one; / A hundred in France; in Turkey, ninety-one; / But in Spain already one thousand and three. [...] // Women of every rank, / Every shape, every age. [...] // It doesn't matter if she's rich, / Ugly or beautiful; / If she wears a skirt, / You know what he does."³²²

Nonetheless, the heterogeneity of the list is at odds with its lulling aesthetic. The superficial "smoothing"-effect of many Sebaldian lists obscures structural aspects of the list that are central to his narrative form: these include the un-synthesizable discordance of the list's terms; its structural incompleteness; its discontinuity; and the eschewal of chronology and logical hierarchy manifest in the purely accidental order of its terms. Sebald states in interviews that his monolithic drone is not intended to pacify readers in the face of often grim subject matter; rather his narrative voice is a jarring anachronism that "clashes" with the twentieth-century historical content of his prose fictions to emphasize, by way of contrast, its catastrophic and world-shattering nature.³²³ I hope to show that the list is not just one among Sebald's many rhetorical devices (the list refuses, as it were, to be entered in a list of narrative strategies). Rather, the form of the list structures Sebaldian temporality because he adopts the list-form as a compositional

³²² Mozart, Amadeus, "Madamina, il catalogo è questo (The Catalogue Aria)," in "Don Giovanni." Libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte. English translation, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madamina,_il_catalogo_%C3%A8_questo (accessed November 3, 2012).

³²³ Silverblatt, Michael, "A Poem of an Invisible Subject," interview with W. G. Sebald, *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne Sharon Schwarz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2010) 86. In reference to the narrative voice in his prose fictions, Sebald explains to Silverblatt that "the old-fashionedness of the diction or of the narrative tone is therefore nothing to do with nostalgia for a better age that's gone past but is simply something that, as it were, heightens the awareness of that which we have managed to engineer in this century."

principle. The discrepancy between the aesthetic and structural properties of Sebald's prose derives from the dialectical nature of the list.

Brulard's Initial List

The special scene of enumeration to which I will limit my remarks appears in the first section of Sebald's debut prose fiction, *Vertigo*. The thirty-page section, entitled "Beyle, or the Remarkable Fact of Love," as we have seen, offers among other things a condensed synopsis of Stendhal's five-hundred-page autobiography, *The Life of Henry Brulard*.³²⁴ The list-making scene in question recalls Mozart's "list aria," and is among the few passages from Stendhal's autobiography that Sebald chooses to recount.³²⁵ Given that, in *Brulard*, the list represents the moment at which Stendhal decides and first attempts to record his personal history, I propose to ask what Sebald's retelling of the anecdote reveals about his own writing of history.

Before exploring how Sebald's *Vertigo* abandons itself to the logic of listing, I will linger over the function of Stendhal's list-making in its original context. Stendhal's second autobiography, *The Life of Henry Brulard*, opens with a scene that predates by two months the writing of his *Memoirs*: "musing on life on the lonely road [...], I decided my life could be summed up in [the names of my past loves], whose initial letters I wrote in the dust, like [Voltaire's] *Zadig*, with my stick [...]."³²⁶ The scene involves a crude, strangely illegible inscription that provisionally substitutes for and apes the writing of autobiography: it anticipates Stendhal's resolve to write *The Life of Henry Brulard*.

³²⁴ The section also draws on Stendhal's diaries and his treatise *On Love*.

³²⁵ I read this borrowed anecdote as the intertextual *Urszene* of Sebaldian listing.

³²⁶ Stendhal, *The Life of Henry Brulard* 16.

Having lost the whole world represented by the women whose initials he lists, Stendhal-the-memoirist surfaces as a castaway reduced to the reproduction of civilized life by primitive means: his pen is a stick; his paper, dirt; his affective life, a fading memory.

The scene in which Stendhal's self-memorializing project is born stages the deficiencies of memory that call forth and plague the autobiographer: the material resistance of his crude implements (the stick with which he writes) reflects the difficulty of narrating a life and the imperative to abbreviate; the impermanence of his 'first draft' that will be expunged by wind and rain reflects the ephemeral nature of memory, its vulnerability to revision and its need for external supports. The encrypted list of initials that "sum[s] up" Stendhal's life is the subsequently written *Life of Henry Brulard* in skeletal form. The list is an *aide-mémoire* that spurs the writer, who, in turn, pledges to leave nothing out. Nonetheless, as the skeleton of a life, Stendhal's list also embodies the condensation and selectiveness of autobiography in relation to the lived past. The list, in other words, is an insufficient defense against the very gaps in memory it exposes.

The dialectical nature of the list in general is shown by the fact that Stendhal's list is doubly reduced: it is not yet even a full-fledged list, but a series of letters that stand in for truncated names in a list that has yet to be written. As his memory fades, Stendhal hastens to make not only a list that will aid the composition of his memoirs, but also a pre-list that will help him make the list. Both this original notation and the complete, decoded list of women's names appear in the text of *Brulard*. Because the list is a simultaneously belated and preemptive defensive maneuver against the loss of lost loves, it is also the first point of contact between the two themes of Stendhal's memoirs: his love life and his military career. The list is both a bridge and a barrier between

Stendhal's structured, military life and its sensuous, embodied counterpart. Thus, the list reinforces in advance his *Life of Henry Brulard* even as the *Mémoires* promise to supplement his list by fleshing it out.

Napoleon—Casanova—Don Giovanni—Stendhal

So, what significance does the reappearance of this list in *Vertigo* hold for Sebald? Before claiming that Stendhal's list breaks out of the anecdote in which it is contained to contaminate the very *form* of Sebald's *Vertigo* and of Sebaldian histories in general, we must consider the more modest possibility that the significance of the scene for Sebald could be limited to its content: the enumeration of lovers, to be sure, is one of several thematic links between Stendhal and the apparently minor Casanova-motif that punctuates *Vertigo* and resurfaces several times in Sebald's other prose fictions. Sebald even appears to trivialize the importance of the reference by ironizing it: Stendhal is emphatically a failed Casanova. His list offers a mournful, retrospective view of the comically ongoing registry of lovers that Leporello keeps for the virile genius in Mozart's opera. Don Giovanni employs a secretary to keep his list because he is too busy making fresh conquests to write them down. The physically and emotionally ailing Stendhal, on the other hand, whose impotence is figured in his dry-stick stylus, draws up a tragically finite list of former exploits to compensate himself for the lost possibility of loving. For the Casanova mythologized by Mozart, Kierkegaard and others—if not for the historical Giacomo Casanova—list-making flows from life's superabundance; for Sebald's Stendhal, the list aborts and vampirizes life.

Yet, Stendhal's list-making is no mere "anecdote" in Sebald's *Vertigo*. The list not only links Stendhal thematically to the Casanova-motif by way of *Don Giovanni*, but

also enters all of these literary-historical instances implicitly in a Sebaldian meta-list that begins with Napoleon.³²⁷ The Casanova of myth is himself an ironic reference to Napoleon: he is a Napoleon-of-the-bedroom who sets off, less unrealistically, to conquer exactly half of the known world: the female half. What I am referring to as the implicit “Sebaldian list” that includes Napoleon, Casanova and Stendhal, among others, escapes not only the anecdote from Stendhal’s *Brulard*, but even the frame of Sebald’s *Vertigo*: this series links the founding figures of modernity in several fields of action, and extends through all of Sebald’s prose fictions. Sebald’s juxtaposition of these three historical figures conveys his pet idea that the catastrophes of the modern period are presaged in its founding myths.

Napoleon is the first named figure in the opening section of Sebald’s *Vertigo*; Casanova is the last surname to appear in that section. In the intervening pages, Sebald quickly distinguishes Stendhal from the file of “nameless” soldiers following Napoleon over the St. Bernard pass in the first sentence; on the other hand, he consigns Stendhal to the relative anonymity of his real name, Marie Henri Beyle.³²⁸ Ironically, the identity of the French author is withheld more effectively by his real name than by his illustrious pseudonym. “Stendhal”—famously, one of the first self-proclaimed individuals of the nineteenth century—is lost to the serial uniformity of Sebald’s presentation: Beyle is

³²⁷ Claudia Öhlschläger has shown how Napoleon figures in Sebald’s work as the founding figure of modernity. She uses Napoleon as an example that “[...] verdeutlicht, inwiefern historisches Material bei Sebald in ein Beziehungsgefüge eingebracht wird, das seine Texte in vertikaler wie in horizontaler Richtung dynamisiert.” She continues: “Es geht um die poetische Umschrift historischen Wissens über Napoleon als einer der Gründfiguren der Moderne, um die intertextuelle Verästelung dieses Wissens in literarischen Texten Sebalds und die poetologischen wie repräsentationstheoretischen Implikationen, die sich damit verbinden” (“Die Bahn des korsischen Kometen...” 541).

³²⁸ Sebald, *Vertigo* 4.

lifted out of a file of 36,000 men; he is shown “transformed” by the donning of his first sub-lieutenant’s uniform; lastly, he is abandoned to the scene in which he renders his life story unreadable as a series of “enigmatic runes.”³²⁹

Here, the dialectical nature of the list-as-form emerges in another guise: the items in a list are both discrete and joined; as particulars, they are separated absolutely by the gaps and commas between them, in spite of how their concatenation implies uniformity and repetition with respect to a higher-order, general principle. In Sebald’s adaptation of the list-form, the absolute independence of the list’s terms from one another is reflected by the notoriously singular “personalities” of Casanova, Napoleon and Stendhal, even while the democratic, homogenizing action of the list on its terms is reflected by the spiritual similarity of all three figures, as well as by the way Stendhal—demythologized, or ‘outed’ as “Beyle”—deflates the ambitions of the other two. In keeping with his prodigious knack for narrowly missing opportunities, Beyle’s life undercuts the Napoleonic ideal in its erotic and military modes: he misses all the most important Napoleonic battles; his *grands amours* are largely unrequited. Instead, Sebald shows Beyle reminiscing about women he never possessed, and belatedly visiting the battlefield of Marengo strewn with bones of the dead, where a monument has already been erected.

The Original Omission

Here, I must return Stendhal’s list-making anecdote once more to its original context. Only with reference to *Brulard* can we weigh the significance of Sebald’s decision to include the scene of listing at the expense of other material in the book. Most

³²⁹ Sebald, *Vertigo* 3, 11 and 27 respectively.

striking is his omission of a passage that inverts the aim and reverses the effects of *Brulard*'s inaugural list. I refer to Stendhal's recreation of a graphic monument to his first true love, Victorine Bigillion, which he claims to have inscribed originally in the cover of a newly bound copy of Bézout's *General Theory of Algebraic Equations*: "in it I drew a wreath of foliage [around] a capital V. I gazed at this monument every day."³³⁰ The monument reproduced in *Brulard* commemorates Stendhal's first experience of a phenomenon for which he coins the term "crystallization."³³¹

Sebald's omission of the monumental initial, and initial monument, echoes Stendhal's own omission of the capital "V." from his opening list of initials. Instead, the "V." appears inside its wreath of vines hidden at the heart of *Brulard*. For Beyle, the buried "V." more likely symbolizes an inaccessible vagina than the promise of sexual "victory" extended by Victorine's name—and here one can't help but suspect a clue to the truncation, or castration, of the women's names in Beyle's opening list: these initials are the textual instantiation of a series of partial objects with which the reluctant fetishist increasingly contents himself; most notable among these is Beyle's plaster cast of Méthilde Dembowski's hand. Stendhal's segregation of the initial initial from the rest of his list preserves the privileged status of this graphic monument to unique love. It represents precisely the grand-narrative style of monumental history that Sebald rejects.

³³⁰ Stendhal, *The Life of Henry Brulard* 290.

³³¹ Cf. Claudia Öhlschläger's work on the relationship between Sebald's use of this Stendhalian figure and his writing of history.

On the other hand, Stendhal's confession that he "gazed at this monument every day" implicitly recalls his well-documented, if disingenuous *reasons* for "summing up" the story of his life with a list of initials in the first place. He writes:

In order to consider [my loves] as philosophically as possible and thereby try to strip them of the halo which *makes my eyes go funny*, which dazzles me and removes the ability to see clearly, I shall *arrange* these ladies *in order* (the language of mathematics) [...]. I am seeking to destroy the attraction, the DAZLING [*sic*] of events, by looking at them in this military way.³³²

In spite of the intention Stendhal voices to render an account of his life de-mythologized by the cold logic of the list, he soon abandons his pretense of scientific detachment. To put the matter in terms of his twin themes: Stendhal sets out to write a dry, military account of his love life, but ends up writing a romanticized tale of his military career. *Brulard* ends with an impassioned recollection of Beyle's crossing of the St. Bernard pass that is riddled with blanks because of the fierce emotions that still blind him to the earliest trials of his military life. Beyle's crossing of the St. Bernard is the literal summit as well as the burning emotional and narratological climax of *Brulard*. Accordingly, Sebald's privileging of the isolated scene of enumeration disorganizes the personal history Stendhal relates in *The Life of Henry Brulard*. Sebald remains perversely loyal to the author's stated intentions by inverting the original text: he begins with Beyle's crossing of the St. Bernard and ends with the list-making scene that deprives Beyle's memories of their aura and flattens the qualitative differentiation of his watershed experiences through their serialization. Sebald may be the only reader to have reached the end of *Brulard* who still remembers and does not dismiss as rhetorical manipulation

³³² Stendhal, *The Life of Henry Brulard* 20, his emphases. Similarly, he writes: "I can see the truth about most of these things clearly only as I write them in 1835, so shrouded have they been up until now in the halo of youth, deriving from the extreme vivacity of my sensations" (*The Life of Henry Brulard* 24).

Stendhal's opening claim that: "what I took for high mountains, in 1800, were for the most part only *molehills*."³³³ Sebald's revision of *Brulard* performs without comment the de-crystallization of affect and the de-monumentalization of memory that Stendhal fails to achieve.

Writing Poorly: Incompletion and the List

I would like to elaborate my suggestion that Stendhal's list-making emblemizes a curiously impoverished author-function that Sebald mimes. More precisely, it is through this scene that Sebald 'outs' himself while simultaneously hiding behind Beyle. By means of a citation, he hints at the inevitable shortcomings of his own writing of history while disowning these failures by pawning them off on Beyle. The Beyle who traces letters in the dirt with a stick is the very picture of a failed writer; the scene evokes the empty exercise of a schoolboy who copies out the alphabet on his chalkboard in the absence of having anything to say. If we view the alphabet of Beyle's grand passions as a quasi-mathematical set of possibilities out of which anything meaningful must be composed, however, we are confronted with the rather sad paucity of his alphabet of desire: Beyle's list of twelve initials contains only five different letters.³³⁴ It is a deficient set of possibilities that cannot be used to write. Sebald's Beyle is a would-be lover and would-be author who must write the incomplete story of his incomplete memories of unconsummated experiences with an incomplete set of signs. The initials in his list

³³³ Stendhal, *The Life of Henry Brulard* 24.

³³⁴ The fact that there are precisely five different letters in Stendhal's list might be read as a veiled reference to the five letters B-E-Y-L-E; or, as Stendhal writes, "the five letters of B-R-U-L-A-R-D," in another tongue-in-cheek, or else compulsive, deliberately miscalculating betrayal of his incognito (*The Life of Henry Brulard* 309).

function not only as the gravestones of his decomposed desires, but also as truncated monuments to the book-not-written: these letters de-compose the story of his life. The “A,” “C,” “G,” “M,” “V” of Stendhal’s list are a series of false starts toward the completion of *Brulard*, which, though considerably longer than the originary list, remains unfinished.

The impoverished author-function that Sebald discovers in Stendhal is offset, once again implicitly, by the Casanova-Don Giovanni motif in its most richly mythologized, nineteenth-century efflorescence. The Casanova of myth embodies a potent authorial function: Casanova is a profane god whose world is a text in which everything is meaningful insofar as he loves it or will love it or desires to love it. He is a listful luster. The social universe finds its significance in the possibility of being known by Casanova on his rounds of the inhabited world. Naturally, the cultural myth of a world animated by Casanova’s desire merely revives the *vanishing* possibility of living in a world where objects have aura. It is to reveal the defensive thrust of this founding myth of modernity that Sebald juxtaposes, without comment, Casanova and Stendhal.

If Casanova’s universe reflects the infinitude of his desire, the list-making Stendhal of *Henry Brulard* occupies instead a world of aura-less women, the memories of whom have uncannily survived his desire for them; the world reflected in his list is a droning catalogue of desires that have expired. The reverse lining of the Casanova-myth revealed by Stendhal’s list has to do with the frightful finitude of our capacity to desire love and life in the face of countless possible objects before which the desiring subject is paralyzed, overwhelmed, and finally even bored. The same century that fetishized Casanova was subject to the apathy of Sadean libertines and to Baudelaireian spleen. In

Stendhal's list, the world's multitudinous forms reflect an indifferent choice; the unique value of each object is negated by its position in a non-hierarchical, horizontal sequence of multiple love-objects of equal status to be shuffled at will. If Stendhal "sterilizes" the author-function in Sebald, however, his life's work also turns impotence into a mode of production.

Much as Sebald's mellifluous nineteenth-century narrative voice exposes by way of contrast the catastrophic nature of the modern history he recounts, his use of Stendhal's markedly un-Casanovian list exposes the contrast between the list's lulling aesthetic quality and the un-synthesizable discordance of its terms. Taken alone, the Casanovian list hypocritically blinds us to the impossibility of its full realization: it has pretensions to the cataloguing exhaustiveness of the Enlightenment sciences, and to the systematic *completeness* of early modern philosophy, even while its optimism vis-à-vis the world, and the future, exploits the inherent openness of the list to new entries—its structural *incompleteness*. Stendhal's fossilized list, on the other hand, compiled after the possibility of fresh entries has passed, cancels the structural "openness" of the list by dogmatically realizing its pretention to totality. This is how Sebald's retelling of the anecdote gently ironizes the philosophical underpinnings of nineteenth-century realism—i.e. its resolve to capture the world "whole"—as opposed to his own modernist or postmodernist realism that is confronted with the impossibility of capturing a fragmented and incoherent world.

Finally, when Sebald rewrites the anecdote from Stendhal, he enters *himself* into a list of listers, together with Henri Beyle and Voltaire's Zadig, whom Beyle claims to be mimicking. Stendhal's false memory of the scene from Voltaire presages Sebald's

tendentious rewriting of Stendhal, and seems fittingly ironic in the context of an author-function that has been imperiled: for in the *Urszene* of an autobiography in which he disguises his identity, yet compulsively blows his incognito, Stendhal recalls falsely that Voltaire's *Zadig* traces *his own name* in the dust. In the original text, however, *Zadig* does not write his own name. It is *Zadig's* long-lost lover whom he sees tracing his name in the dust; he identifies her on this basis, though her appearance has changed. One wonders whether Stendhal has not remembered the scene from Voltaire unconsciously after all: ironically, Stendhal/Beyle identifies himself—and 'signs' his life story as it were—not with his *own* real initials, but with those of the women he has loved. The real names of his real beloveds link the text of *Brulard* to Henri Beyle though his own name is suppressed. Here, too, *Brulard* shows its melancholy aspect: unlike *Zadig*, who is written into existence by another's love, Stendhal traces the names of his former beloveds in the dirt because no one any longer traces his.

Discrete Terms

Sebald retrieves from Stendhal's list-making the model for a new form of writing that escapes the logic of continuous chronology on which conventional narrative fiction and conventional historiography rely. As a discontinuous list of instances that converge or diverge depending upon how they are read, Sebaldian "history" opens a set of carefully delimited spaces for thought that are severed from lived time. By characterizing the Napoleon-Casanova-motif in Sebald as a list, I mean to emphasize that its terms cannot be synthesized as a unified theme. This Sebaldian motif functions much more like a series of discrete instances that constitute a conceptual milieu because of how the

provocative *differences* between them draw out key features of each instance in sharper relief.

The critical response to *Vertigo* has focused almost exclusively on the similarities between the historical figures Sebald pairs. Both Casanova and Stendhal loved women, left their native countries, and wrote their memoirs from abroad. Despite these coincidences, my aim has been to show that Sebaldian pairings are inspired less by a synthesizing impulse than by the polemical tendency to exaggerate differences, and to sharpen a point via the juxtaposition of contrasting terms—a tendency that also characterizes the pieces of literary criticism Sebald wrote and published in the decade preceding his literary debut.

In closing, we might return to a much more obvious juxtaposition of historical figures in *Vertigo* by considering the relationship between the book's first and third sections on Stendhal and Kafka respectively. As previously noted, the critical response to *Vertigo* has drawn its inspiration from the similarities between the two figures in Sebald's retelling. Despite these superficial coincidences, however, the foregoing argument is borne out by the juxtaposition of Stendhal and Kafka that frames *Vertigo* as a whole. Sebald offers no comment on the strangeness of juxtapositions such as these because the incongruity of the figures is *so* plain that it need not be underlined. Stendhal can write only as a lover in love and Kafka only as a bachelor; Stendhal thrives on society and Kafka on solitude; Stendhal is radically disingenuous in the company of others and Kafka is radically earnest; Stendhal dies of syphilis, profane disease of the flesh, and Kafka of T.B., poetic disease of the spirit or breath; Stendhal frets over the

impossibility of truthfully describing happiness, Kafka over that of describing unhappiness; Stendhal writes easily and copiously, Kafka slowly and arduously; etc.

Sebald adapts the list as a compositional principle for constructing punctuated cultural-historical series whose organization is not chronological but conceptual. Just as Sebald assigns no priority, chronological or evaluative, between Stendhal and Kafka, whose lives are featured in the first and third sections of *Vertigo* respectively, the “Beyle...” section of *Vertigo* assigns no priority between Casanova and Stendhal. As previously remarked, Sebald’s juxtapositions create the illusion of historical depth from what is essentially a two-dimensional surface in which background and foreground trade places as one reads. It is through the coincidence of mutually dismantling figures and motifs, following the structural logic of the list, that Sebald’s texts deprive the guiding myths of modern history of their aura.

13. Postmodern Revisions of Realism: the Dubious Detail

In the previous chapter, I argued that Sebald's adaptation of the list form, borrowed from Stendhal, raises the problem of details that don't add up to anything whole. In this section, I leave Stendhal aside in order to think more generally about the problem of the detail in Sebald's work. Given that the relationship between a particular detail and the work of art as a whole is a touchstone for theorists of realism across media, a closer look at how details function in Sebald's texts will illuminate more directly Sebald's response to the ideology of the realist aesthetic. Unlike the details featured in nineteenth-century realist prose, Sebaldian details resist totalizing interpretations and fail to secure the meaning of the work of art as a whole. Nevertheless, and for this very reason, I would like to suggest that detail lies at the center of Sebald's postmodern artistic practice as much as it does for the nineteenth-century realists.

Honoré de Balzac's use of detail has been theorized as paradigmatic of the relationship between part and whole in nineteenth-century realist texts; Balzac therefore will serve as my main point of contrast to Sebald's post-modern practice. The fact that Stendhal is less fitting as a point of contrast in this respect, however, speaks once more to the precocious modernity that makes Stendhal a blood relation of Sebald. Stendhal's erratic details are much closer to the unstable details of Sebald's post-modern prose than they are to the symbolic details of the realist tradition that flourished in his wake.³³⁵ In

³³⁵ Given that "details" in Sebald's *The Emigrants* are metaphorized as "branches" [or 'ramifications' (*Verzweigungen*)], it could be shown that Sebald's discussion of detail is linked to the Stendhalian figure of "crystallization," to which Sebald alludes in *The Emigrants* as well as in *Vertigo*. The process of crystallization involves the gradual growth of salt crystals over a bare twig, such that the real appearance and form of the twig are obscured and, as it were, glamorized by the glitter of salt crystals. Insofar as Sebald adapts Stendhal's concept of 'crystallization' as a figure for his own descriptive details, he offers a decidedly non- or anti-realist image of detail: for the 'truth' of the branch is not fixed and unchanging—

what follows, my discussion proceeds from *Vertigo* to *The Emigrants* (Die

thus the branch as detail is not objective—but rather is in the process of mutating and transforming. “Crystallization” as a figure for the narrative inscription of details suggests the metamorphosis of detail over time and across contexts. The scope of the present section prevents me from following Sebald’s metaphors of “branching” and the argument sketched out here in preliminary form. Apart from Sebald’s application to “detail” of a metaphor that Stendhal uses for other purposes—and in spite of their stylistic and formal affinities—descriptive details in Sebald and Stendhal are erratic for unique reasons. To give a full account of the relationship between Sebald’s unreliable details and Stendhal’s, it would be necessary to analyze the role of memory and forgetting in the genesis of their texts. In general (and unsurprisingly, given that all the inventions of twentieth-century literature intervene between them), Sebald’s inscription of details is markedly more self-conscious than Stendhal’s. A full account of this matter would also require one to consider the difference between unreliable details in Stendhal’s fictions and in his autobiographical works; in the latter, as noted in the previous section, mistakes and discrepancies are recuperated on a higher level as proof of Stendhal’s “truthfulness”—or more precisely, of his intention to be truthful: the inaccuracy of detail in Stendhal’s life stories results from the speed with which he writes, which itself is brandished as proof of his honesty and resolve not to obscure the immediacy of his impressions by editing. Here, Stendhal opts for the lesser of two evils: errors committed thoughtless and arbitrarily, in haste, are preferable in a work of autobiography to the type of psychically motivated inaccuracies introduced by the vanity of an author who wishes to conceal his shortcomings or to glamorize his accomplishments; and since ‘accidental’ mistakes result from the speed which guards against ‘deliberate’ mistakes in the realm of detail, the price of avoiding the latter is to commit a few of the former. A brief example from *The Red and the Black* will illustrate the type of unreliability one encounters most frequently in Stendhal’s fictions: in *The Red and the Black*, there are two Julien Sorels on horseback. One is the Julien Sorel ‘the natural’ who—though a stranger to the saddle—rides irreproachably through Verrières on horseback, “naturally bold” and “prancing” (112); his “agility,” and luck, are confirmed for instance when Julien “fl[ies] from ladder to ladder” hanging decorations in the cathedral for the festival of Corpus Christi (204). On the other hand, there is the Julien Sorel who falls from his horse in Paris and is “covered in mud” (263). This wild contradiction between the perfectly nimble Julien and Julien-the-bumpkin for whom “it was almost a matter of course [...] to be thrown to the ground” (280) is typical of Stendhal’s galloping and perfectly flawed prose. For cross-checking there isn’t time. Indeed, one might say Stendhal writes so quickly that there is no time to remember. Dislocating the activity of recollection from this human geyser of words to his texts, one might say that Stendhal’s novels are without memory. His *writing* is not accountable, cannot be held accountable, to itself. And this is why Stendhal’s writings are so ‘alive’—mobile, fleeing, ephemeral—unasphyxiated butterflies badly pinned. In the provinces, Julien runs up ladders and rides like a centaur; in Paris, he tumbles from the saddle like a heel and lands in the mud. Yet we refuse to believe in Julien’s ‘clumsiness’ on horseback—even in Paris—for it is recounted in the unbroken gallop of Stendhal’s prose. The routine Parisian ‘falls’ that contrast so starkly with Julien’s former “agility” (204) are imposed on him solely to emphasize his “courage” in sharper relief. In spite of falling, Julien persists in demanding “the most vicious horses” (280); if “courage” is “the only thing in his riding that could be praised” (265), courage is also the only significance of Julien’s clumsiness. From the perspective of Stendhal’s amnesiac prose, Julien’s courage, boldness and persistence are the only reason for—and only referents of—his ‘falling in the mud.’ For Stendhal’s novel does not recall that Julien is lucky and acrobatic—it knows only the present impulse to paint his courage, and grabs at the readiest device: that Julien boldly remounts vicious horse after vicious horse, though he be thrown in the mud every time. Julien’s intrepid perseverance is carved from the resistant wood of his eternal falling from unruly mounts.

Ausgewanderten) to show how the questions that Sebald's first prose fiction raises about the status of detail are developed in his second prose fiction.

"...down to the tiniest detail..." (Max Aurach)

Part four of Sebald's *The Emigrants* recounts the life of Max Aurach, a Manchester painter who leaves his native Munich in 1939 at the age of fifteen, never to be reunited with his Jewish parents, who are murdered at Riga during the war. Aurach finds the significance of his whole life expressed in its smallest details: "It now seems to me that the course of my life, down to the tiniest detail [*äußerste Verzweigung*], was ordained not only by the deportation of my parents but also by the delay with which the news of their death reached me."³³⁶ This passage offers a meta-reflection on the status of detail in the narrator's framed retelling of Aurach's story; it also reveals descriptive detail as the site of Sebald's revision of realist conventions, and suggests the importance of literary realism for his work. His reliance on description connects him to his principal 19th-century influences: Stendhal, Balzac, Stifter and Flaubert. I would like to examine Sebald's relationship to the realist tradition he so frequently invokes by assessing the function of descriptive details and their inscription in part four of *The Emigrants*.³³⁷ More broadly, I am interested in how Sebald's manipulation of realist strategies sheds

³³⁶ Sebald, W. G., *The Emigrants*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1996) 191. *Die Ausgewanderten: Vier lange Erzählungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1994) 285. Referenced hereafter as *TE* and *DA* respectively.

³³⁷ Since its emergence in the 19th century with the ascendancy of description over narration, concrete, historically specific detail has been the mark of realism in prose. It is therefore my assumption that the foregrounding of descriptive detail is no arbitrary feature of the realist aesthetic, but an essential gauge of a text's 'realism.'

light on the characteristic fictionalization of documentary sources that continues to disturb his readers.³³⁸

Returning, then, to the details: if the tiniest details of Max’s life—from the chimneys piercing the skyline of his Manchester neighborhood, to the ashy sediment of coal dust and paint flakes coating his studio floor, to the technique of erasure by which he obscures the representational function of his portraits—if these ‘details’ are all oblique references to the Nazi obliteration of Jewish life and to the deaths of his parents at Riga, then all the details in Sebald’s narrative “Max Aurach” must signify monolithically Aurach’s early experience of loss and oblivion. To the extent that the “smallest details” of Aurach’s life seem “ordained,” descriptive detail in Sebald retains something of its classical, Balzacian function.³³⁹

In his seminal book, *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach attends to the relationship between part and whole in realist texts; he traces the realist presupposition that every individual character is determined by the unity of the total context in which he or she is given. He observes that Balzac not only “places the human beings whose destiny he is [...] relating in their precisely defined historical and social setting, but also conceives this connection

³³⁸ Sebald, somewhat perversely, insists on the documentary foundation of his fictions. He describes protagonist Max Aurach, for instance, as a composite of the lives of “two and a half” real people. Nevertheless, Aurach’s fictional biography in *The Emigrants* is sufficiently familiar to painter Frank Auerbach that Sebald is forced to change the character’s name to Max Ferber in English translations of the book.

³³⁹ Among the French nineteenth-century writers to whom Sebald refers, Balzac explicitly and most thoroughly theorizes the relationship of part to whole, or detail to milieu, that is specific to the realist novel. Auerbach derives his observations on realist detail largely from the reflections on detail to be found scattered throughout Balzac’s novels, as well as in the 1842 *Avant-propos* to *La Comédie humaine*.

as a necessary one.”³⁴⁰ Auerbach identifies the “stylistic unity” of person and milieu as a recurring motif in Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot*, where a perfect harmony is introduced between the character of Madame Vauquer and the shabbiness of the pension she runs: “her whole person, in short, explains the pension, as the pension implies her person.”³⁴¹ Auerbach’s remarks on character apply equally to objects in their narrative inscription as ‘details’.³⁴² The relationship between detail and milieu parallels that between character and milieu: both character and detail are particulars drawn out of a general context. The tailored fit between character and milieu in Balzac ensures that no detail can be absolutely random or stray, just as in Sebald’s *The Emigrants*, every detail of Max Aurach’s studio tells us something about Max. This is because, paradoxically, the detail totalizes.

The Pathological Unity of Milieu: Realism Caught Between First- and Third-person Perspectives

However, the analogy between Balzac and Sebald quickly collapses. Unlike Max Aurach, Balzac’s Madame Vauquer is immersed immediately and unselfconsciously in her world. It is the narrator who asserts the stylistic unity of milieu. If Vauquer herself were aware of how her personality and moral character are determined by her historical and material surroundings, Balzac’s stylistic unity perhaps would not be compromised,

³⁴⁰ Auerbach, Erich, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature.*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953) 473.

³⁴¹ Auerbach 470-1. Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot* is quoted by Auerbach.

³⁴² For a provocative and thorough discussion of detail and its function in realist literature, see Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen, Inc., 1987).

but its dynamism would collapse. The mutually formative interplay of character and historical moment would be exchanged for a sense of static inevitability.

The protagonists of Sebald's *The Emigrants* suffer from just this sense of predestination.³⁴³ In the "Max Aurach" section, Sebald reduces Balzac's stylistic unity of milieu to the subjective impression of a psychologically disturbed man. In a neat reversal of Balzac, it is Max Aurach who informs the narrator that every detail of his life has been "ordained." More precisely, Aurach complains of *feeling as though* this were the case. He feels oppressed by the predetermined quality of his life, we gather, because he has ceased to live. Sebald pathologizes the stylistic unity of context and character by depriving it of the historical specificity it has in Balzac. The details of Aurach's surroundings do not have a strictly contemporary significance; they refer diachronically to a traumatic event in a past life discontinuous with Aurach's Manchester exile. The discontinuity between Aurach's German- and English-speaking lives in Munich and Manchester amplifies the insurmountable discontinuity between early childhood and adult experience according to psychoanalysis and modern theories of subjectivity. Accordingly, the unitary significance of Aurach's life is never grasped in real time: the reflection of its totality in every particular emerges only through a delay. Thus in Max's words, "the course of my life, down to the tiniest detail" seems "ordained not only by the deportation of my parents but also by the *delay* with which the news of their death reached me."³⁴⁴

³⁴³ Compare for instance the "Paul Bereyter" section of *The Emigrants*, in which Paul is dogged by a similarly pathological sense of passive predestination.

³⁴⁴ Sebald, *TE* 191, my emphasis; *DA* 285.

I will interrupt my argument here to emphasize that it is unclear whether Aurach or the narrator has a greater formative influence on the story we receive, because Sebald's prose fictions leave us uncertain who speaks and when. On the one hand, there is no unmediated dialogue in the text. Our access to Aurach's speech is indirect; his words are always filtered through a narrator who recounts to us his conversations with Aurach, weaving together their two voices. On the other hand, the narrator gives us the impression that he is quoting long stretches of Aurach's monologue word for word. If anything, our suspicion that Aurach's speech has been modified is aroused by the monological form of the narrator's report: we have the impression that Aurach spoke to the narrator without interruption. It is as though the narrator reveals his hand in the final product precisely by editing himself out of the dialogue, transforming what must have been a conversation into a monologue in which he poses Aurach no questions, never interjects, nor coughs, nor excuses himself to eat or drink; thus "we talked for three whole days."³⁴⁵ We are left to wonder who is really speaking when the narrator relates Aurach's words patiently, humbly, but from memory, at a temporal remove from their real-time encounters.

This is the sense in which Sebald writes neither autobiography, nor biography, nor novels, nor histories. The formal structure of his narratives eschews generic categories. In the narrator's account, Aurach 'speaks' in the first person, but without quotation marks. We are therefore uncertain whether and to what extent Aurach's monologues have been subject to elisions, emendations, synthesis, paraphrasing, and like modifications. Moreover, the narrator reminds us of a certain narrative loss, the effects

³⁴⁵ Sebald, *TE* 180.

of which even he, perhaps, cannot calculate (due to the insufficiency of memory; practical limitations; etc.) with such disclaimers as: “a great many more things were said than I shall be able to write down here.”³⁴⁶ In the same paragraph, the pronoun “I” refers alternately to the narrator and to Aurach. Sometimes both voices speak in the same sentence. These subtle shifts in perspective and voice are indicated by internal punctuation, together with clauses such as “ [...], he went on, [...],” signaling when the narrator’s own impressions give way to his recollection of what Aurach said.³⁴⁷

The narrator thus mediates our access to Aurach completely; nevertheless, it is Aurach, in the passage discussed above, who reflects on the narrative coherence and formal structure of his life—considerations more proper to a narrator, or a writer, than to a character operating within the diegetic level of the text. Sebald’s narrative technique is characterized by a kind of self-interference, a formal merging of voices that disturbs the coherence of the text as a whole—and it is this formal structure which underlies the tenuous status of descriptive details here under consideration. Just as Balzac needs the formal structure of an omniscient, third-person narrator in order for his details to totalize the meaning of the text, the incoherence of Sebald’s narrative voice conditions the way in which his details tend to fragment, rather than totalizing the text.

In other words, to resume our analysis of Max’s self-narrativizing efforts, Max suffers the symptoms of Sebald’s mis-en-abyme of the structure of Balzacian detail. It is as though the modified function of detail in Sebald’s post-modern narratives causes his characters’ uncanny sense of not quite belonging in their world; at the very least, Max’s

³⁴⁶ Sebald, *TE* 181.

³⁴⁷ Sebald, *TE* 181.

experience reflects and parallels the incapacity of detail to totalize the fragmentary world of Sebald's prose. Intra-narrative diachrony becomes the difference between reader and text, such that Max experiences in life what we experience in reading Balzac: for no matter how perfectly a detail embodies the context to which it belongs, the totality of a social and historical milieu can be neither given nor grasped as a whole; only from a heap of painstakingly accumulated, fragmentary details is Balzac able to conjure forth the illusion of a unified world. Just as Max misses the 'original' loss of his parents, and gathers its significance from a heap of fragmentary evidence over time, the Balzacian whole cannot be apprehended as such; it can only be inferred synthetically through an accumulation of details sequentially read.

The function of detail in Sebald—and specifically the fit between part and whole—is subject to a kind of Freudian 'belatedness (*Nachträglichkeit*)' as well as to a modernist reversal: it is not that Aurach's material surroundings, as concrete manifestations of the external, social world, have imprinted his character to make him what he is, but rather that Aurach unconsciously shapes his environment, seeking out surroundings that reflect his idiosyncratic psychology. If there is any whole to which the details of Max's life refer (and this is uncertain), it is not an inter- and extra-subjective reality, but a private, psychic one. Otherwise put, Sebald places Aurach in a setting that statically mirrors his emotional life without exposing him to historical influence or change. Rather than character and world interacting dynamically, this Sebaldian character—who, with Romantic overtones, is also an artist—fashions himself a suitable reality. The ash-filled painting studio he occupies in Manchester's warehouse district, together with the technique of erasure by which he paints portraits whose human subjects

are gradually obscured, symbolically reproduces a psychic event beyond which Aurach cannot move: the unknowable deaths of his parents at the hands of the Nazis.

Teased by the Teas-maid: Extraneous Detail

Aurach's subjective sense of immobilizing oppression in the midst of his life's "every detail" must be measured against the narrator's use of detail in part four of Sebald's *The Emigrants*. It remains to be seen whether the narrator who mediates our access to Max's story confirms Aurach's conviction that the details of his contemporary life have been ordained by his past. Here, too, the comparison with Balzac is illuminating. In spite of the necessary selection and isolation of details from their environment, the detail in Balzac rarely arrives alone: it is camouflaged in a hoard of random, rapidly recorded details. The specific is submerged in a general descriptive fray, and it is the critical mass of details in Balzac that summons their milieu and its stylistic unity in the first place. In Sebald, to the contrary, the detail is often inappropriate: it precedes or survives its world. Either the detail is given in isolation from its context, or else its failure to integrate, rather than its belonging, is emphasized.

To illustrate what I have in mind, I would like to focus on a detail from the framing narrative, in which the narrator describes his arrival in Manchester before he meets the Max Aurach character. This particular detail provides a point of reference external to Aurach's experience, and has been discussed previously by Lilian Furst in her article on the uncertainty generated by Sebald's realism.³⁴⁸ Furst compares the curious appearance of a contraption called the teas-maid early in the "Max Aurach" section of

³⁴⁸ Furst, Lilian R., "Realism, Photography, and Degrees of Uncertainty," in *W. G. Sebald. History – Memory – Trauma*, ed. Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006) 219-229.

The Emigrants to that of the barometer in Flaubert's *A Simple Heart*. Flaubert's barometer is a superfluous detail made famous by Roland Barthes' essay "The Reality Effect," to which I will return shortly. Although details in Flaubert tend to be random and arbitrary relative to the symbolic cast of detail in Balzac,³⁴⁹ Furst argues that the relationship between part and whole in Flaubert is still unproblematically one of belonging: however digressive or inconsequential they may be, Flaubertian details always have "a well-defined bearing on the novel as a whole."³⁵⁰ Furst further asserts that Sebaldian details, by contrast, are "will-o-the-wisps" that tempt us to posit a consistent world where there is none. She proceeds to show how individual parts in Sebald problematize their own significance by exposing the absence of a whole to which we might expect them to refer. Whereas Flaubert's world still has "an order, albeit a negative one," the details in Sebald "are juxtaposed associatively, in an apparently random manner as a reflection of a universe full of bewildering objects and chance encounters, a world governed in the last resort not by any comprehensible order but by a disconcerting contingency."³⁵¹

Beyond the thematic randomness which makes it exemplary of Sebaldian detail for Furst, the teas-maid is extraneous to the "Max Aurach" section in several narratological respects: firstly, the narrator plays a remarkably passive role in its selection. The teas-maid is not tendered as one object amongst others equally suited to

³⁴⁹ Peter Brooks remarks that "things in Balzac are usually indexical: they point to character traits of those people who wear them, live amid them, endure them." See *Realist Vision* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) 58.

³⁵⁰ Furst 224.

³⁵¹ Furst 225.

the purpose of embodying a common milieu; rather, it strikes the narrator from without. (In this respect, contra Furst, the problem with the teas-maid may be not that its inclusion in the narrator's description is too random, but that it *isn't random enough* to be "realistic".) Shortly after he disembarks in Manchester and lets a room, the odd appliance is presented to him by Gracie Irlam, his new landlady, whose ceremonious presentation of the device symbolically violates the enclosure of his room. As he later reports: "Apparently by way of a special welcome, she brought me, on a silver tray, an electric appliance of a kind I had never seen before."³⁵² A coherent detail in this case (à la Balzac) would have been something knowable, familiar, predictable or generic within its given environment. But the teas-maid is an incongruous object inscribed awkwardly in the text only when the narrator is "initiat[ed] into the mysteries of what Gracie called an *electric miracle*."³⁵³ The narrator teaches us by rote the significance of this obscure, indeed 'miraculous' detail when he reiterates in his subsequently written account Gracie's description of the object, to which he has nothing to add: "it was, as she explained to me, a so-called *teas-maid*, an alarm clock and tea-making machine in one."³⁵⁴

A sense of abysmal foreignness permeates this description: the importance of the teas-maid, the very emblem of British culture, is inexplicable to the narrator newly arrived from Germany. His adoptive environment lacks the objects that could have made him feel at home. The teas-maid is a striking Sebaldian detail not only because, as Furst

³⁵² Sebald, *TE* 154; *DA* 226-7.

³⁵³ Sebald, *TE* 155; *DA* 228. Among the words and phrases given in English in the original are *teas-maid*, *an electric miracle*, *alien*, etc.

³⁵⁴ Sebald, *TE* 154, translation modified; *DA* 227.

observes, it is doubled by the first photograph to be found in the “Max Aurach” section—an illustrative close-up of the device: this tea-maker is a *machina ex deo* that comes equipped with an alarm as though to alert us to its alien presence in the narrative, indeed to awaken us to its interruption of the text’s realism.

On the one hand, the Sebaldian difference is a matter of emphasis: his quasi-realist prose deconstructs the paradoxical nature of descriptive detail in traditional realism without adding anything new. Detail enters the literary imagination in the nineteenth century as the smallest, most basic unit of description; it is supposed to be an elementary component, an indivisible particle of description that language cannot further break down. In this sense, detail stitches together the representation and its object; it is an illusory point of contact between linguistic signs and the material world. In his essay “The Reality Effect,” Barthes observes that each indivisible detail presents us with the mirage of a linguistic utopia behind which the difference between signified and referent, or language and the world, disappears.³⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the incongruous function of detail so acute in Sebald is discernable even in conventional realist novels (and this is why I say that Sebald’s work deconstructs the conventional function of detail, rather than opposing or rejecting narrative conventions in favor of something radically new). In the realist tradition, a detail both belongs and does not belong to the context in which it is inscribed: it must ‘stick out’ enough to be noteworthy while ‘fitting in’ enough to be significant. The violence of detail as severed part must be softened either by its

³⁵⁵ Cf. Scherpe, Klaus R., “Beschreiben, nicht Erzählen! Beispiele zu einer ästhetischen Opposition,” *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* Vol. 2 (1996): 368-83. Scherpe writes: “Die Beschreibung isoliert ihren Gegenstand. [...] Die Beschreibung schärft das Unterscheidungsvermögen. Vermutlich ist die Beschreibung eine linguistische Utopie: die Sehnsucht, die Welt Wort für Wort zu bezeichnen” (370).

meaningful inscription in the narrative or by our ability to overlook and forget it as incidental. The teas-maid embodies this incongruous function: the promise of a morning tea ritual softens the rude shock of the alarm, even while the supplementary effects of caffeine coax into waking life a dreamer for whom the blunt sound of the alarm, too jarring to ‘stick’, would not have been enough. Similarly, the detail interrupts the flow of our reading, but it must not arrest our capacity to synthesize the whole.

When detail does not destroy the coherence of the text, it is because each detail has a kind of aura or surplus significance. In his analysis of Balzac’s *La Comédie humaine*, Auerbach implies that concrete detail is the point at which the particular and the general converge; this is because detail helps paint a picture only when it summons to mind *more* than itself. Thus, when a single hairpin or comb is lifted up and privileged over the other unmentioned items lying on the bureau, the whole world of the narrative must be gathered in it. According to Auerbach, this is why Balzac selects and isolates not details that are exceptional, but ones that typify their surroundings. ‘Exemplary’ in both, competing senses of the term, the detail in conventional realism is privileged *because* it is ordinary.

The detail functions differently in Sebald’s prose fictions: firstly, and most simply, given the whole formal structure of his post-modern texts; but secondly, because Sebald deliberately deconstructs the traditional role of detail in description. The very randomness of Sebaldian details observed by Furst paradoxically makes them *too* noteworthy to catalyze the synthesis of part and whole. When it is introduced unexpectedly into the first scene, the conspicuousness of the teas-maid, as detail, enacts a certain narrative violence that is never properly absorbed. Sebald’s teas-maid is clearly

also a tease. It attracts the narrator's attention and ours while refusing to work, as it were, automatically. Extra explanations within the scene, and our interpretive labor without, are needed to make this would-be time-saving device operative. Given in English in the original, even the *name* of the object so tersely defined by Mrs. Irlam as "an alarm clock and tea-making machine in one" reflects the narrator's insuperable foreignness: for his variant phonetic spelling, "teas-maid," misses the sense of the implied contraction—*the tea is made*—behind the unpunctuated spelling of the object's name as it is usually written: teasmade.

Sebald vs. Balzac: Fragmenting vs. Totalizing Details

Ironically, it is the "mere presence [*bloßes Dastehen*]" of this ungraspable object that, according to the narrator, keeps him "holding on to life [*am Leben festhalten ließ*]" at a time when he feels "surrounded by an ungraspable feeling of disconnectedness [*umfassen . . . von einem mir unbegreiflichen Gefühl der Unverbundenheit*]." ³⁵⁶

Fittingly, the narrator occupies a socio-cultural as well as a cognitive-narrative vacuum: he "cannot grasp" his "disconnectedness" from his environment because he has nothing and no one to grab hold of affectively or conceptually. Remarkably, however, he solves the problem of how to describe *in the realist mode* this ungraspable feeling of existence in a vacuum. The disconnected narrator indulges in a narcissistic identification with his object on the level of its inscription as disconnected detail in the text: it is the isolation of the teas-maid *in the narrative*, its detachment from the storyline and its failure to be contextualized or integrated in a descriptive passage, that makes the narrator feel less

³⁵⁶ Sebald, *DA* 228, my translation.

alone in his detachment from British culture. The dialectic that fundamentally structures realist detail—the dialectic between ‘sticking out’ and ‘fitting in,’ or between ‘isolation from’ and ‘submersion in’ a descriptive passage—is dismantled here. Normally there is a constitutive tension between the detail’s *distinction* from its environment as exemplary, and its *belonging* to the environment as typical; in Sebald, however, isolation and submersion are no longer opposed: it is precisely *by his disconnectedness* [*Unverbundenheit*] that the narrator feels “surrounded [*umfassen*]”—so “surrounded,” in fact, that he “could easily have removed [himself] from life [*sehr leicht aus dem Leben hätte entfernen können*].”³⁵⁷ The opposition between isolation and submersion, detachment and engulfment that structures the relationship of both the detail to description and the individual to society dissolves. It is through his narcissistic identification with the teas-maid as *isolated particular* that the first-person narrator “clings to life” in the world. Only in the act of writing does he belatedly forge his indispensable attachment to this alarmingly detached detail. As in conventional realism, the detail is an anchor of sorts, but here it anchors a pathological, rather than an objective description of reality. It is an anchor in the void.

This is why the inappropriateness of Sebaldian detail is perfectly suited to his purpose. What Furst rightly identifies as the disconcerting contingency of details in Sebald—indeed their insignificance—is sublimated by significance of a higher order. The teas-maid’s intrusion on the scene echoes the narrator’s recent arrival in Manchester as a foreigner to the city. His landlady immediately observes that “only *an alien* would

³⁵⁷ Sebald, *DA* 228, my translation.

show up on her doorstep at such an hour.”³⁵⁸ Though an “alien” in Manchester, Aurach’s very alienness renders him narratologically ordinary. Aurach is exceptional neither in the broader context of Sebald’s collected works, nor in the unique historical moment he occupies. Sebald chooses Aurach as protagonist according to the same principle by which Balzac chooses details: ordinariness is the principle of selection in both cases. Aurach’s case is significant because it is typical of post-WWII, post-national, transient or homeless subjectivity.

Like Sebald’s expatriate and exiled protagonists, the teas-maid remains irredeemably foreign to its narrative surroundings. But in spite of how far-removed such descriptive details are from the context of 19th-century literary realism, they are still parts whose relationship—or lack of relationship—to the whole work reflects that of Sebald’s protagonists to their world: the details are no more out of place than the characters whose reality they embody. Both tend to sediment out of solution. In conventional realism, a character’s material belongings and habitation register his or her spiritual force in the world. The teas-maid shipwrecked in Sebald’s description, on the other hand, which eludes the narrator’s cognitive grasp and ours, reflects a kind of generalized psychological and material dispossession that are the conditions of life in Sebald’s universe, determining the narrator’s identification with the teas-maid as well as his tenuous but persistent identification with Max Aurach. The effort-and-failure-to-grasp that both binds and dissociates the narrator from the elusive detail of the teas-maid extends to every relationship in the text. It comes as no surprise that the effortless inscription of detail in Balzac sutures together the world, while detail in Sebald fractures

³⁵⁸ Sebald, *TE* 152; *DA* 224, his emphasis, in English in the original.

its context, given that 19th-century realism takes the form of social novels, while Sebald's heroes—whose stories unfold in a modern or post-modern narrative mode—are aliens and bachelors in their middle age or twilight years, childless, world-weary introverts who interact with the narrator just long enough to transmit the tale of a solitary life.

Incongruous Details and the Scene of Writing

Both Balzac and Flaubert dissemble the principle of selection at work in their descriptions, obscuring traces of the author's hand. In "The Reality Effect," Barthes argues that it is paradoxically the very pointlessness and futility of the barometer in Flaubert's *A Simple Heart* that fosters *l'effet de réel*: by signifying nothing within the narrative, gratuitous details seem to point beyond the text as though to say "we are the real." Thus, we have the impression that the barometer is mentioned neither because of the thematic significance of humidity, nor because of Flaubert's speculative fondness for the word *baromètre*, but simply because it 'was there' in the room. Or, as Barthes concludes: "the [...] absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism: the *reality effect* is produced."³⁵⁹

By contrast, Sebald's incongruous details draw attention to the scene of writing, puncturing the illusion upon which literary realism relies: by dwelling on the function of the teas-maid, Sebald's narrator stresses the laboriousness of inscribing details and the difficulty of writing a description that hangs together. No amount of dwelling on objects such as these would be adequate to the realist task. In so doing, Sebald exposes the fantasy projected onto the detail as 'basic unit' common to reality and to realist prose.

³⁵⁹ Barthes, Roland, "The Reality Effect," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986) 148. See also 141-2.

The firmness of detail as a piece of reality that won't shatter further when language presses against it is exposed as the necessary illusion of realistic prose. This is why the concreteness of Sebaldian details tends to dissolve behind their abstract existence as detail, such that each 'particular' gestures not toward a reality beyond or prior to writing, but toward the abstract function of detail in literary constructions of reality.

14. A History of Painterly Realism in Sebaldian Detail, Part I: Matthias Grünewald

In the preceding chapter, I opposed the formal structure of Sebald's post-modern narratives to the formal structure of Balzac's realist narratives in order to show that the status of detail in both cases is determined by the overarching narrative structure. In other words, Balzac's omniscient, third-person narrator secures the power of his descriptive details to suture together and synthesize 'part' and 'whole' in Balzac's texts. Furthermore, I argued that it is this tension between detail and the text as a whole which underwrites the distinction between the 'inside' and 'outside' of the work. In Sebald, on the other hand, there is no objective third-person narrator to secure the relationship between part and whole. Rather, the narrative voice is poised awkwardly between first- and third-person voices, between a post-modern unreliable narrator whose observations are relative and subjective, and a third-person narrator who refracts these observations to an unknowable extent, in unknowable directions. Our fundamental confusion about whether Max Aurach or the narrator is speaking disturbs our ability to distinguish between the inside and the outside of Sebald's texts.

In this chapter, I would like to perform a close reading of Sebald's references to "detail" in *The Emigrants* and in his essay on the contemporary painter Jan Peter Tripp. My aim is to explore further, and to show more precisely, how the formal structure of Sebald's texts is reflected in every detail. Secondly, this chapter lays the foundation for a future study on the problem of affect in Sebald. The scope of the present work prevents me from showing how the problems of identification, (un-)empathic reporting and viewership, and the transmission of affect can be drawn out of the formal idiosyncrasy of Sebald's narrative voice. Nevertheless, in spite of its limited scope, this chapter functions

as a preliminary approach to the broader questions of affect and affectlessness in Sebald's work. Suffice it to say that the uniquely Sebaldian problem of the 'detail' that swallows, or fragments, and destroys the work as whole is linked to the way in which Sebald's texts block and transmit affect by inviting and prohibiting the reader's psychic identification with his narrators and protagonists.

Sebald's narrative voice is characterized by both an absence and a surplus of empathy. This incoherence on the level of affect is illustrated, for instance, by the contradiction between Sebald's vow in the introduction to *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks* to write only "empathetic" literary criticism, versus the moment in *Die Ausgewanderten* when Sebald's narrator interrupts himself to disavow and reject "empathy" as a dangerous and violent projection. Contrary to Sebald-the-literary-critic, the narrator of *The Emigrants* vows, therefore, to write *without* empathy. A longer, future study would be able to follow the consequences, in the realm of affect, of the close reading of Sebaldian 'detail' offered here, as well as to connect my findings with the growing body of scholarship on empathy and affect in Sebald.

'Detail' in Translation

Bearing in mind, then, the example of the teas-maid, I would like to canvass more generally the handful of Sebaldian terms that have been rendered uniformly as "detail" in English translations of his texts. The English translation rightly identifies the conceptual unity of a constellation of terms in Sebald's work; nonetheless, the diversity of terms in the German original reveals more about the nature and function of details in Sebald, further illuminating his adaptation of literary realism.

In the “Max Aurach” section of *The Emigrants*, the constellation contained in the English word ‘detail’ first emerges in a description of extreme physical pain. The pain in question is doubly figured: first as a visual representation in the works of German Renaissance painter Matthias Grünewald (c. 1470-1528), and then as Aurach’s memory of a personal experience of physical pain. Making an exception to his fear of traveling, he tells the narrator, Aurach visited Colmar to view the famous Isenheim altarpiece of Grünewald, whose “extreme vision” he had long “felt in tune with.”³⁶⁰ Aurach’s direct encounter with Grünewald’s paintings induces a “flood of memory” beginning with his recollection of the “paroxysm of pain” earlier occasioned by a slipped disc.³⁶¹

Several keywords characterize Sebald’s discussion of detail here as elsewhere: *Einzelheit* (detail; particular; item; point) and *Genauigkeit* (exactitude; accuracy; elaborateness; fidelity; minuteness; precision) describe the two poles of a relationship between subject and object, the painter and the things he represents, or the viewer and the painted image. *Einzelheit* names the extreme particularity of detail, its singularity; *Genauigkeit* names the extreme attention of the painter or viewer that is brought to bear on the detail as discrete particularity. Later in the same paragraph, a third phrase refers to Aurach’s slipped disc as an “einzig[e], ausdehnungslose[r] Punkt des äusersten Schmerzes” (single, un-expandable point of most extreme pain).³⁶² The *einzig[e] Punkt* (single point) of Aurach’s pain is linked implicitly to *jede Einzelheit* (every detail) of Grünewald’s paintings. This is due not only to the content of the works— Grünewald’s

³⁶⁰ Sebald, *TE* 170.

³⁶¹ Sebald, *TE* 171.

³⁶² Sebald, *DA* 254, my translation.

dreadfully detailed images of bodily suffering revive Aurach's memory of his own bodily pain—but also to the singularity (*Einzelheit; einziger Punkt*) that characterizes detail in the paintings as well as Aurach's pointed pain.

Painted Pain and the Detail that Wounds

Aurach even intuits that it is the intensity of Grünewald's vision, his unwavering scrutiny of the bodies portrayed, that *inflicts* pain on them. These “gashed bodies” are not in pain independently of being painted.³⁶³ Aurach identifies no source of illness or violence internal to Grünewald's pained images: instead it is *the painter's* “*extreme vision*” that appears to “lodge in every detail, distort every limb,” and “infect” his colors “like an illness.”³⁶⁴ In Aurach's words, the “durchbohrten Leiber” (pierced bodies) reflect Grünewald's “durchdringende Weltsicht” (piercing vision).³⁶⁵ However, if the detailed objects of representation are wounded by the scrutiny of the proto-realist gaze, it is also these very details which wound the realistic surface of the work of art in turn. It is no accident that the details Aurach fixes upon in Grünewald's paintings happen to be images of wounded and ailing body parts. On the one hand, his gaze dismembers anything it sees; however, on the other hand, there is a mutual attraction between wounded parts and the realist gaze: the artist is captivated by bodies in pain because of the challenge they present to descriptive realism. The intricate, amorphous topography of wounds is a lure that the artist cannot resist. The ‘wound’ therefore supplies a metaphor

³⁶³ Sebald, *TE* 170.

³⁶⁴ Sebald, *TE* 170, my emphasis.

³⁶⁵ Sebald, *DA* 253.

for the potential limitlessness of realist description; as a concrete image of the infinitude of the microcosm, each wound bleeds detail.

On Sebald's implicit reading, detail in realism always marks a kind of wound, wounding or woundedness. Aurach's disturbing encounter with Grünewald metaphorizes the relationship between realism and detail as the production of bodily exposure, suffering and pain. Even as the painter's penetrating vision bores through the objects of his representation, he witnesses the puncturing of an illusion on which the work of art relies: for no matter how much attention the realist brings to bear on his objects, no matter how small the level of detail, there is no possibility of extinguishing the infinite particularity of the microcosm. In its attempt to bring objects into ever greater focus, realism magnifies these fragments of reality to monstrous proportions, disturbing the "realistic" impression they are supposed to foster.³⁶⁶ The detail is the site of a self-inflicted wound in the realist aesthetic: it wounds and is wounded by the realism of the work of art.

Reformulated in terms of the critical conversation surrounding the detail in realist prose, Aurach's reading of Grünewald's "gashed bodies" accomplishes two things: firstly, it offers a fairly straightforward realist account of the economy between part and whole; secondly, and more strangely, it characterizes this relationship as a source of mutual impairment and irremediable pain. The signifying economy Aurach traces between part and whole is familiar enough: the artist's devotion to insignificant details such as small discolorations and puncture spots on skin is justified by the conviction that the whole is revealed in every part. Grünewald sees each body part in the first place only

³⁶⁶ One thinks here of Kafka's Gregor Samsa.

through the lens of the whole. This is why, on Aurach's reading, the paintings are characterized not by a lucid view of isolated particulars which preexist the moment of representation as one might suppose; rather, it is Grünewald's "*Weltsicht*" (*worldview*) that distorts and inscribes itself in every agonized limb.³⁶⁷ The artist's gaze brings into being the objects it records. Aurach's description of the Isenheim altarpiece follows this signifying movement from the particular to the general and back again: "the monstrosity of that suffering [...] emanating from the figures depicted, spread to cover the whole of Nature, only to flood back from the lifeless landscape to the humans marked by death."³⁶⁸ Moving from individual part, to "the whole of Nature," to individual part, Aurach's reception of the paintings closes a circular economy, but it also inserts "the whole of Nature" *between* the singular part and itself. The relationship between each wounded figure and itself thereby is mediated by the intervening totality.

Further still, the suffering of each part is metaphorized as the *consequence* of this symbolic incorporation of the whole. The impossible enclosure of something large inside something small, "the whole of Nature" contained in every part, offers an image of the detail engorged with meaning as a bloated organ in pain, sick with significance. These details both mark and inflict what Naomi Schor calls "the danger that is always hidden in synecdoche," which she identifies as the threat of a disproportion between part and whole.³⁶⁹ When the small, insignificant detail is allowed to stand in for the whole, the classical doctrine of proportionality is disturbed; what results is a kind of narrative

³⁶⁷ Sebald, *DA* 253, my emphasis.

³⁶⁸ Sebald, *TE* 170.

³⁶⁹ Schor, *Reading in Detail* 146. See also her related discussion of "hypersemanticized" details in the context of Freudian displacement (Schor 71).

hypertrophy: the significance of each distended detail overshadows that of the organic whole to which it should be subordinated. This harmonizes with the reading of the teasmid proposed in the preceding chapter, in which I argued that details in Sebald fracture the whole, rather than suturing it together. Aurach captures the painful discrepancy of the immense within the minute when he refers to the “Ungeheuerlichkeit des Leidens” (*monstrosity* of suffering)—the word “monstrosity” is twice repeated—flowing from each gouged but finite figure to saturate the world.³⁷⁰ Aurach conveys his impression that the wounded figures in Grünewald, which are incarnations of hypertrophied realist details, burst under pressure of the whole they are supposed to contain. The finite body buckles beneath the immeasurable, dimensionless “monstrosity” of its suffering.

Realism’s Death Drive: Singularity and the Mark of Death

The wounded parts and points of absolute pain in the “Max Aurach” section of *Die Ausgewanderten* do not function primarily to record the injuries of particular bodies; rather, Sebald uses the image of injured parts to show, via reversal, that the “gash” inflicted on the integrity of the whole when an insignificant part is allowed to stand in for it cannot be transcended or repaired. In Balzac’s realism, the part stands in for the whole; in Sebald’s internal critique of realism, wounded parts stand in for a damaged whole. Through this slight adjustment, Sebald reveals something about the relationship between part and whole in artistic representations that is always the case, but which conventional realism so artfully obscures. Viewed from the perspective of the individual, the whole can signify only his insignificance, impairment, and mortality; viewed from the

³⁷⁰ Sebald, *DA* 253.

perspective of the whole, the individual can signify only as an injury or wound—an obstacle to abstraction. In this discrepancy between the limited and holistic points of view that realism endeavors to bridge, we discover one clue to the mystery of Sebald's many lists of things such as animal species, trees, and names. By gesturing toward a whole that would be nothing more than the sum of its parts, the Sebaldian list gently ironizes the nineteenth-century realist assumption that the organic totality of the world is endorsed afresh in every detail; instead, he suggests, the integrity of the whole is compromised and diminished when the whole is chopped into itemized pieces.

Aurach's circulating description of Grünewald's paintings suggests that it is precisely the intervention of a totalizing vision in the self-relation of each "figure marked by death" that brands these figures with the mark of death. What, indeed, is a "mark of death" if not the mark of individuality, or absolute singularity, that characterizes the detail's finitude in the context of the whole? Similarly, the singularity of the back pain Aurach recalls in the face of Grünewald's altarpiece is not self-constituting; rather than isolating the experience of pain, Aurach's description recalls that his "*whole life* [...] shrunk" to this "einzigster Punkt des äußersten Schmerzes."³⁷¹ In his discussion of Grünewald's details, the "single point" of Aurach's pain is apropos because it focuses all of reality for him, reducing him to singularity in the face of something larger. Just as the absolutely particular detail in realist prose is a signifier of the whole, it is the whole of Aurach's life, his character and his world which are at stake in the singular pain of the slipped disc. Pain is the sensual signifier of his mortality. "I sensed," he concludes, "that

³⁷¹ Sebald, *TE* 171, my emphasis; *DA* 254.

the awful condition of being utterly crippled by pain corresponded in the most accurate way conceivable to the inner constitution I had acquired over the years.”³⁷²

Corporeal pain seems an apt reflection of the artist’s precise, realistic vision because of the accuracy of pain, its way of specifying a particular body part, seizing upon it, magnifying the sufferer’s consciousness of *this limb* or *this organ* that can no longer be confused with any other. Nevertheless, Aurach implicitly identifies the limits of the correspondence when he proceeds to distinguish two types of pain: physical and psychic.

He observes:

Looking at those gashed bodies, and at the witnesses of the execution, doubled up by grief like snapped reeds, I gradually understood that ,beyond a certain point, pain blots out the one thing that is essential to its being experienced – consciousness – and so perhaps extinguishes itself; we know very little about this. What is certain, though, is that mental suffering is effectively without end. One may think one has reached the very limit, but there are always more torments to come. One plunges from one abyss into the next.³⁷³

Only the latter kind of pain, mental suffering, proves to be a sound conceptual model for the *limitlessly* wounding relationship between detail and realistic representations, and for the inexhaustible imperative to specify that is the death drive, so to speak, of the realist aesthetic.

Aurach’s Psychic Wound as the Origin of the Text

³⁷² Sebald, *TE* 172, translation modified; *DA* 255.

³⁷³ Sebald *TA* 170-1. The original reads: “Dabei begriff ich allmählich, auf die durchbohrten Leiber schauend und auf die vor Gram wie Schilfrohr durchgebeugten Körper der Zeugen der Hinrichtung, daß an einem bestimmten Grad der Schmerz seine eigene Bedingung, das Bewußtsein, aufhebt und somit sich selbst, vielleicht – wir wissen sehr wenig darüber. Fest steht hingegen, daß das seelische Leiden praktisch unendlich ist. Wenn man glaubt, die letzte Grenze erreicht zu haben, gibt es immer noch weitere Qualen. Man fällt von Abgrund zu Abgrund” (*DA* 253-4).

Returning briefly to the passage in question, Aurach's governing self-reflections on mental suffering are displaced onto the memory of his own physical pain, and further, onto the representation of physical pain in Grünewald's paintings. The second displacement is exposed more fully than the first: although he moves explicitly from Grünewald's gashed bodies to his back injury, Aurach's remarks on mental suffering are confined to his interpretation of the paintings. Two types of woundedness face each other in the images. In the opposition Grünewald captures between the corporeal pain of "gashed bodies" and the psychic pain of the "witnesses of the execution" who are "doubled up by grief like snapped reeds," it is the grieving witnesses who reflect and prefigure Aurach's viewership within the painting. Three instances of suffering merge in Aurach's account—the physical suffering of the wounded bodies; the psychic suffering of their painted witnesses; and that of the external viewer: the "bent reeds" of the witnesses' lamenting bodies grow in the metaphorical floodplain of a "monstrosity [of suffering]," emanating from the gashed bodies in the image, that "r[ises] and ebb[s]" in Aurach "like the tides of the sea."³⁷⁴ Aurach draws himself into the painted image in the wake of these related metaphors. There is a relay and conversion of pain between Grünewald's injured bodies and their witnesses within the painting and beyond. Bodily suffering, whose limit is marked by unconsciousness, finds an afterlife in the psychic pain of its witnesses. Like the punctured bodies Grünewald paints (*durchbohrt*), Aurach's word for the "doubled up" bodies of the grieving witnesses (*durchgebeugt*)

³⁷⁴ Sebald, *DA* 253; *TE* 170, translation modified. These images find a third echo in the "flood of memory" that washes over Aurach upon seeing the paintings (*TE* 171).

echoes and is pierced through by the painter's penetrating vision (*durchdringend*). All eyes converge on the image of a wound inflicted by the painter's gaze.

Nevertheless, the fixation of these multiple, telescoping gazes on Grünewald's wounded bodies merely serves to obscure the true subject of the story Aurach relates piecemeal to the narrator: that of his lifelong psychic and emotional impairment. Aurach's vivid memory of his back injury, similarly, covers and figures the primary subject of his emotional wound. Only the echoing preposition "through [*durch*]" in *durchbohrt*, *durchdringend* and *durchgebeugt* suggests that Aurach's loose ekphrasis of Grünewald is a medium through which his larger autobiographical themes are conveyed. The repetition of *through* cuts a path from the painter and his subjects to Aurach as viewer. When Aurach concludes cryptically that "in Colmar" (where he traveled to see Grünewald), he "beheld all of this in precise detail, how one thing had led to another and how it had been afterwards," he apparently still refers to the paintings and the reflections on pain they occasion.³⁷⁵ No other topic has been mentioned by name. Our suspicion that a displacement has occurred is aroused because the subjects of this breathtakingly vague sentence—"all of this," "one thing," "another thing" and "it"—are comically at odds with Aurach's claim to have beheld "everything *in precise detail* [*alles auf das genauste*]."³⁷⁶ What emerges gradually in the pages that follow is that the "all of this" Aurach beholds so clearly in Colmar can no longer be the details of Grünewald's paintings. He does not "behold" literally; rather, Aurach clairvoyantly sees the details of his life in its entirety and their myriad connections. The excessive detail of Grünewald's

³⁷⁵ Sebald, *TE* 171.

³⁷⁶ Sebald, *TE* 171, my emphasis; *DA* 254.

wounded bodies indeed wounds Aurach's consciousness; it blinds him to the images before him by turning his gaze inward and backward. On the level of the narrative, inversely, Aurach distracts us with a description of the paintings that deflects our attention from the matter of his psychic pain.

Aurach's reading of Grünewald is the poetic origin of the text. What began as a trip to view "especially [Grünewald's] 'Entombment of Christ,'"³⁷⁷ ends with the disinterment of Aurach's past that issues in the story of his life: "In Colmar, at any rate" Aurach says, "I began to remember, and it was probably those recollections that prompted me [...] to retrace another old memory that had long been buried [...]"³⁷⁸ From an image of burial painted in the early sixteenth century, Aurach's story and thus, at one remove, Sebald's narrative "Max Aurach" is unearthed.

Several cues consolidate the association between Grünewald's paintings and the text of Sebald's "Max Aurach," confirming that Aurach's discussion of detailed wounds in the paintings performs an analysis of detail in literary realism and reflects the modified function of detail in Sebald's text. Following Aurach's memory of the slipped disc is a second link in the mnemonic chain occasioned by the paintings: "the crooked position I was forced to stand in reminded me, even in my pain, of a photograph my father had taken of me in the second form at school, bent over my writing."³⁷⁹ The photograph reproduced in Sebald's text of a boy bent low over his writing (*tief über die Schrift*

³⁷⁷ Sebald, *TE* 170.

³⁷⁸ Sebald, *TE* 172.

³⁷⁹ Sebald, *TE* 172.

gebeugt)³⁸⁰ represents not so much a link as a gap in the mnemonic chain. Aurach's slipped disc—an injury of literal 'displacement' that reveals the psychological mechanism at work—does not remind him of the experience of hunching over his childhood assignments; it reminds him of a photograph of himself hunching—an image of back pain. The images of pain in Grünewald provoke an affectively charged memory of physical pain that Aurach immediately displaces back onto an image. He seeks refuge from the feeling of pain in the requisite distance that separates viewer from spectacle. The image of the child hunched before us marks a missing memory of pain—and perhaps even extinguishes the memory it represents. In Aurach's memory of remembering the photograph (the memory of a missing original at two removes), the boy is "tief gebeugt" over his copybook, aligning him with the witnesses of the execution in Grünewald's paintings who are "durchgebeugt" (bent double) with grief.³⁸¹ Sebald, his narrator and Aurach seem to bow with grief over their nested stories, with and through the image of Grünewald's grieving witnesses bent double like snapped reeds.

The Universal Suffering of the Realist Gaze

The adult Aurach is not a writer but, like Grünewald, a painter whose life story is related orally to the narrator who writes it down. The reproduced photograph of Aurach writing as a boy links the creative activities of painting and writing, and points to the exertions of the narrator who records Aurach's story in his place. The photograph relocates Aurach's theme from painting and writing *about* pain to the special pain of

³⁸⁰ Sebald, *DA* 255-6.

³⁸¹ The pagination of the English translation prevents the photograph from appearing in the middle of Aurach's corresponding description of it as it does in the original.

writing. Pain in Sebald cannot be objectified: it escapes the representational frame and contaminates the world.

The analogy between painting and writing that begins with a contagion of pain is secured through several additional passages. Critics of *Die Ausgewanderten* have noted that the narrator's extended description of Aurach's unusual painting technique serves as an allegory of his own writing process. There is no need to rehearse here the resemblance between the narrator's self-annihilating drafts of his literary portrait of Aurach "crossed out, discarded, or obliterated by additions"³⁸² and Aurach's portraits of models whose features are slowly disfigured by his method of "constantly erasing" and "continual destruction" of the painted surface.³⁸³ Rather than focusing on the convergence of their techniques, I have noted the common suffering of the narrator and Aurach laboring in their respective media, in order to pursue the question of how realism is "wounded" in Sebald's career-long re-articulation of the realist aesthetic. On this level of abstraction, Aurach's autobiographical account of his psychic wound is the form in which the narrator—and Sebald—examine the capacity of visual and literary representations to fasten on real objects.

³⁸² Sebald *TA* 230.

³⁸³ Sebald *TA* 162.

15. Part II.1: Jan Peter Tripp

The passage from *The Emigrants* in which Max Aurach recounts his trip to Colmar strikingly recalls Sebald's most explicit critical remarks on realism, which appear in an essay titled "Wie Tag und Nacht –" on his schoolfellow, the contemporary painter Jan Peter Tripp. The essay is simultaneously a work of art criticism and a sort of homage to Tripp. In my earlier chapters on Sebald's "Beyle [...]" section of *Vertigo*, devoted to the life and works of Stendhal, I traced Sebald's identification with and resistance to various aspects of the French author's work. I revealed a disguised literary self-portrait in Sebald's rewriting of Stendhal's autobiographical texts. In this chapter, similarly, I will attend to Sebald's implicit identification with Tripp's aesthetic, in order to show what Sebald's analysis of Tripp's paintings reveals to us about Sebald's own project in prose fiction. Sebald's stated aim in the essay is to dislodge Tripp's work from the tradition of *trompe-l'oeil* painting, photorealism and hyperrealism with which it has been "almost compulsively" associated.³⁸⁴ Of particular interest in the present context is the question of whether his unorthodox interpretation of Tripp warns us against reading Sebald's own work, in another medium, through a realist lens. Secondly, this chapter takes a detour through Sebald's essay on Tripp as a second station in the punctuated history of 'detail' in painterly realism that I find scattered across Sebald's prose fictions and essayistic works.

Deviant Realism: "...a much more deeply searching objectivity..."

³⁸⁴ "That Tripp's work [...] is connected with this already historical trend is a false association." Sebald, W. G., "As Day and Night, Chalk and Cheese: On the Pictures of Jan Peter Tripp," in *Unrecounted. W. G. Sebald and Jan Peter Tripp*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 83-4.

Without denying the astounding realism of Tripp's images, Sebald rejects the critical impulse to ascribe to them a realist agenda. He begins by disavowing this connection in all but Tripp's earliest pieces: "The pictures of the first three or four years still show the clear influence of surrealism, of the Vienna fantastic realists and of photorealism [...]; but very soon [...] this [...] trend [is] replaced by a much more deeply searching objectivity [...]." ³⁸⁵ Although Sebald concedes that "one cannot avoid the tiresome question of realism" in any discussion of Tripp—since the imposture of reality is the most remarkable feature of his work—it is precisely the almost perfect illusion of reality that, according to Sebald, "*prevents* us from seeing [Tripp's] true achievement." ³⁸⁶ The question is not whether Tripp's images are true to reality, nor how realistic they are, nor by what means, but rather *what function* Tripp's undeniable *Wirklichkeitstreue* (fidelity to reality) has in the context of his creative project. Rather than asking whether and how Tripp's realism allows us to see reality, critics should ask how Tripp's realism affects our ability to see Tripp's paintings. To bring the viewer into contact with so-called reality, in other words, is not the proper task of Tripp's art. One suspects that the priority Sebald assigns the artistic imagination over reality is not limited to the case of Tripp, but we will sidestep for the moment the question of whether Sebald's hypothesis about the task of Tripp's art can be generalized.

In liberating Tripp from the realist tradition in the visual arts, Sebald may appear to preserve the integrity of aesthetic realism. How else, one might ask, could Tripp's work be distinguished from it? On the other hand, if Tripp is not a practitioner of

³⁸⁵ Sebald, "As Day and Night [...]" 78.

³⁸⁶ Sebald, "As Day and Night [...]" 81, my emphasis.

pictorial realism, it is hard to believe that one exists. Sebald's rhetorically tortuous argument surreptitiously undermines the representational framework in which it begins; the essay ends by exposing aesthetic realism as a self-perverting operation that distorts and screens reality under cover of its reflection. Even realism is not and cannot be faithful to reality; furthermore, its pretense of fidelity masks the series of subtle departures that fundamentally characterize creative acts.

Sebald therefore misleads us when he describes Tripp's whole career as a gradual deviation from the various "already historical" schools of realism which, "with their techniques amounting to objectification, very soon exhausted their resources."³⁸⁷ The covert thrust of his argument is to reveal realism as *itself* "deviant." Insofar as Tripp is still "compulsively associated" with the realist project from which he is supposed to diverge, the example of Tripp never quite escapes realism even in Sebald's reading. Instead, Tripp becomes symptomatic of the deviance intrinsic to realism.

In the opening lines of his argument, Sebald brings Tripp's work and the realist aesthetic into a pathological relationship with each other by tracing the origin of Tripp's mature aesthetic—and his alleged deviance from conventional realism—to the "several months spent in the Weissenau psychiatric regional hospital near Ravensburg," where the artist is supposed to have "worked out" his "definition [...] of the human individual as an abnormal creature forcibly removed from all connection with nature and society."³⁸⁸ One need not be intimately familiar with Sebald's work to recognize in this view of human life, far from the idiosyncratic misperception of a disturbed individual, an objective

³⁸⁷ Sebald, "As Day and Night [...]" 83.

³⁸⁸ Sebald, "As Day and Night [...]" 78-9.

definition of modern life to which Sebald himself readily would subscribe. Tripp's "abandoned landscapes" and "still lifes," which reflect the painter's vision of "a species becoming more and more monstrous in the course of [...] civilization's progress," are the familiar depopulated settings of Sebald's own prose fictions.³⁸⁹ It is not a pathological individual who is "monstrous" in Sebald's words, but the whole "species." When Sebald describes Tripp's mature work as a "pathographic enterprise" first formulated in an asylum, and one that "admits no dividing lines between [...] the characteristic features and the deformations wrought in the subject by pressure of work and inner stress," he makes a pretense of distinguishing Tripp's "pathographic" realism from the normal realism of other artists. Nevertheless, Sebald's argument discloses something surprising about the affinity between pathology and realism in general. Because Tripp's mature realism originates in an asylum, is *born* from a pathological state, and takes as the first subjects of its portraiture those victims of pathology who have been segregated from normal society, Tripp's work inadvertently reveals to Sebald's critical eye a pathology that is intrinsic to the realist aesthetic.

The "Worldless" Subject of Pathographic Portraiture

Realism's pathology has to do with its incapacity to discriminate. At the limit, the best instances of pictorial realism both succeed and are undermined by their refusal to distinguish between the insignificant and the significant detail, the marginal and the central figure, the characteristic and the eccentric trait. Sebald cites and seconds Gombrich's famous impression that Jan van Eyck has "painted every stitch in the gold

³⁸⁹ Sebald, "As Day and Night [...]" 79.

damask, every hair on the angel's head, every fibre in the wood separately, for its own sake."³⁹⁰ Tripp's portraits are "pathographic" because they do not choose "characteristic features" at the expense of those which distract from and fail to conform to the unity of the viewer's total impression; it is therefore *because* of their extreme realism that Tripp's portraits are "pathographic."

This point surfaces more distinctly on another level of Sebald's argument. Although he begins by faulting art critics for their failure to distinguish between the atypical case of Tripp and the normal case of other (unnamed) painters in the realist tradition, Sebald's remarks suggest that our collective inability to differentiate between Tripp's "pathographic enterprise" and typical realist paintings may be symptomatic of a refusal to discriminate that inheres in the realist aesthetic itself. In spite of himself, Sebald shows that art critics fail to distinguish Tripp from the realist tradition because at the limit, when it has rejected the important, the normative and the familiar as principles of selection, realism is indistinguishable from the deformation of reality. Furthermore, we must note the skewed angle from which Sebald chooses to analyze the realist aesthetic. Sebald's critique of realism is an enterprise as "pathographic" as Tripp's. Sebald—whose own critics have almost compulsively associated his prose fictions with realistic genres such as literary realism, historical fiction and historiography—offers us his most explicit remarks on realism only in a deviant critique of a deviant case.

The deviance of Sebald's approach rebounds on his subject matter when we realize that it is by no mere chance that Tripp develops his mature style in an asylum. It is clear from Sebald's remarks that an asylum would be the ideal environment for honing

³⁹⁰ Sebald, "As Day and Night [...]" 85.

an extreme realist aesthetic. Realism is the only aesthetic that responds to and is capable of surviving the simultaneously exposed and hermetic, inclusive and exclusive environment of the asylum. To reverse the point, realism *makes of the world* an asylum. The inmates portrayed by Tripp are lone particulars isolated from the world, embodiments of the realist detail. The artist's view of their faces is unvarnished by any knowledge of their professions, social connections, or fates; Tripp's subjects are, in Sebald's words, "worldless," beyond culture, unguarded, their faces as vulnerable to the artist's regard as natural landscapes—and so it is that Tripp, and we ourselves, behold the unanimated plasticity of these inhuman faces with inhuman eyes. The asylum emerges as a cultural-historical supplement to a (modern) world in which anthropocentrism, human prejudice, human interest and self-interest no longer find an ideological foothold.

Inmates of the world-asylum have abandoned the imperative to survive in the face of its groundlessness. Their indifference to being seen and preserved as representations—the indifference of these faces to their own survival as portraits—manifests as the incapacity to pose. Just as an extreme realist cinema seeks out actors who cannot act, Tripp's realist portraiture relies on sitters who cannot pose. Sebald's analysis of Tripp not only implies that realism is dehumanizing; it also suggests that realism is the only viable mode of artistic representation in a dehumanizing modern world. Only when these "worldless," essentially "abnormal creature[s]" are stripped of a realist desire by the realist gaze can they be seen.³⁹¹ Tripp's realism is unmitigated by human sympathy because the fundamental object of realist art is the *nature morte*, and because we cannot empathize with that which no longer lives.

³⁹¹ Sebald, "As Day and Night [...]" 79.

16. Part III: Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn

Sebald's remarks on realistic painting and death are somewhat scattered. This chapter interrupts my reading of Sebald's essay on Tripp in Chapter 15. I interrupt our analysis of "Wie Tag und Nacht—" because Sebald's essay on Tripp illuminates a passage from his third prose fiction, *The Rings of Saturn*, in which Sebald's narrator offers an interpretation of Rembrandt's famous painting *The Anatomy Lesson*; the painting depicts the dissection of the body of petty thief Adriaan Adriaanszoon in Amsterdam in 1632. A full reading of this passage is possible only in light of a rhetorical question Sebald raises in the Tripp essay: "And painting, what is it, anyway, if not a kind of dissection procedure in the face of black death and white eternity?"³⁹² If realist painting is "a kind of dissection," then Sebald's reflections on the dissection pictured in Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson* can be understood as an extension of his theory of painterly realism presented in the earlier essay on Tripp. Sebald's question in the Tripp essay suggests that he reads Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson* as a painting about painting; moreover, it suggests that his rather elaborate interpretation of the real dissection performed on the body of Adriaanszoon is not only about the significance of dissection for the Enlightenment sciences, but is also about the relationship between realist painting and its objects. The Rembrandt passage from *The Rings of Saturn* illuminates, in turn, Sebald's deviant reading of Tripp's realism, to which I will return in Chapter 17.

Dissecting Realism

³⁹² Sebald, "As Day and Night [...]" 88.

What does it mean for Rembrandt, whose *Anatomy Lesson*, in Sebald's words, is "much-admired [for its] verisimilitude,"³⁹³ to have dissected a dissection? What is the relationship between the real dissection represented and the "kind of dissection" Rembrandt performs when the scene of dissection is rendered with "verisimilitude" on the canvas? The fact that Sebald distinguishes Rembrandt's perspective on the body from that of the group of surgeons who perform and witness the dissection in 1632 reveals that two very different kinds of dissection are being opposed. "It is with [...] the victim, and not the Guild that gave Rembrandt his commission," Sebald concludes, "that the painter identifies."³⁹⁴ Unlike painting, which puts bodies on display, "the art of anatomy [*die Kunst der Anatomisierung*], then in its infancy," as Sebald puts it, "was [...] a way of making the reprobate body invisible."³⁹⁵ If dissection serves to obscure the criminal's condemned body, it seems that painting performs a supplementary dissection to make the body visible even as it is being erased. But what is it about the body that the surgeon obscures and the painter brings into view? Its mechanics? Its humanity? Its criminality? The blunt, irreversible fact that it will die, is dead?

Soul Murder: the Metaphysics of Surgical Dissection

Sebald suggests that there is something deeply hypocritical about the practice of surgical dissection. Dissection denies both its metaphysical curiosity and its ideological aims. It pretends to be interested purely in the mechanics of the human body: the

³⁹³ Sebald, W. G., *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1998), 16. For the German text, see: Sebald, W. G., *Die Ringe des Saturn. Eine Englische Wallfahrt*. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2004), 23.

³⁹⁴ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 17.

³⁹⁵ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 13.

architecture of its skeleton; the puppetry of its ligaments; the hydraulics of its circulatory system. Nevertheless, this interest in how the body “works” and “ticks” is a rather transparent disguise for the unabashedly metaphysical question of why the body lives and what its transitory living means; for even as Dr. Tulp slices the inanimate arm and palpates its musculature, he and the group of rapt witnesses in attendance (not all of them specialists, for the dissection was public) still dream of discovering the essence of life. And it is precisely the hypocrisy of dissection—along with its true motivations—that realistic painting, as “a form of dissection,” clarifies.

This is why Sebald writes, in the essay on Tripp, that painting is “a dissection procedure in the face of black death and white eternity.”³⁹⁶ As “dissection,” painting teases apart and identifies not muscles, tissues and organs, but the intertwining of finitude and eternity that inevitably transforms life into death as though to reveal what Sebald earlier in the same essay refers to as “the metaphysical lining of reality.”³⁹⁷ Tripp, for instance, unravels the tightly knit threads of living and dying; he exaggerates their difference in the high-contrast opposition of “black death” and “white eternity,” which Sebald discovers for instance in the chessboard pattern of one Tripp floor. In “all [Tripp’s] later pictures,” he continues, “the most complicated chess gambits and evasions are enacted, to and fro between life and death.”³⁹⁸ Painting, then, is a kind of dissection that overtly differentiates and plays upon the division between life and death, whereas the

³⁹⁶ Sebald, “As Day and Night [...]” 88.

³⁹⁷ Sebald, “As Day and Night [...]” 88.

³⁹⁸ Sebald, “As Day and Night [...]” 88-9.

scientific practice of dissection portrayed in Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson* feigns to search prosaically for pumps and pulleys, vacuums, hinges and motors.

The surgical procedure of dissection, however, redoubles its hypocrisy in this respect: even while it searches surreptitiously, hypocritically for the metaphysical wellspring of life—for that elusive thing formerly called the soul—it hopes simultaneously not to find it. No surprise, then, that Dr. Tulp and his colleagues, priests of Enlightenment skepticism, search badly and in the wrong places. Sebald's formulation of this point echoes the high-contrast image from the Tripp essay in which he suggests that the painter dissects "black death and white eternity" from the frozen bodies of his subjects. In *The Rings of Saturn*, the same black-and-white image resurfaces in Sebald's claim that Dr. Tulp's dissection of Adriaan Adriaanszoon in 1632 "constituted [...] a significant date in the agenda of a society that saw itself as emerging from the darkness into the light. The spectacle," he continues, "[...] was no doubt a demonstration of the undaunted investigative zeal in the new sciences."³⁹⁹ His suggestion that the dissection's real agenda is to battle against cultural-historical "darkness" toward a metaphorical "light" further sharpens the point. To observe that the surgeons are searching for a soul in Adriaanszoon's entrails while hoping not to find one is to stop short of Sebald's claim. Rather, to borrow a phrase from Freud's Dr. Schreber, the dissection's ideological aim is an act of soul murder. The dissecting surgeon symbolically kills what is already mechanically dead. In the context of Enlightenment thought, the practice of dissection serves the planned obsolescence of the soul. Dr. Tulp actively replaces religious with scientific explanations of human life by demystifying the human body. The operation he

³⁹⁹ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 12.

unwittingly performs is an ideological transplant: an ailing spirit, *animus* or *psyche* is replaced with hoses and pump.

Nor does Sebald neglect to observe the irony of the procedure with respect to its hidden ideological agenda: the Guild of Surgeons aims to move society “from the darkness into the light”—from barbarity to civilization—and yet the surgeons seek to accomplish this by means of a procedure that unconsciously reenacts a barbaric form of punishment. In Sebald’s words, Dr. Tulp’s dissection “also represented (though this surely would have been refuted) the archaic ritual of dismembering a corpse, of harrowing the flesh of the delinquent even beyond death.” This remnant of ancient ritual, he notes, was “a procedure then still part of the ordained punishment.”⁴⁰⁰ Dissection is a barbaric way of leaving barbarism behind, a dark path to enlightenment. What presents itself as the vanguard of Enlightenment science in fact serves the ritualized need to cleanse a society of its spiritual ailments. It is no accident that the corpse is that of a criminal; only a condemned man’s body would be subjected to the violation Dr. Tulp commits. Incoherent, too, is the very hope of moving a society from barbarism to enlightenment—for such an aim presupposes a progressive temporality that does not yet exist. Only given the chronic prejudice of the Enlightenment does the “progress” of civilization seem tenable or feasible. The barbarism of ritual punishment belongs to the cyclical returns of mythic time. Barbarism is therefore infinitely self-reproducing; its mythic violence expresses itself unimpeded through the very procedure that would overcome its temporality by cutting apart the past from the present, the “darkness” from the “light,” pinning them, naming them, and discoursing on the difference between them

⁴⁰⁰ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 12.

for the benefit of a public whose morbid, if not sadistic curiosity, following Sebald, is mistaken for instructional zeal.

The Anatomy Lesson vs. the Moral Lesson

Sebald's reading of Rembrandt's painting exposes the duplicity of the word "lesson" in its title: the painting presents Dr. Tulp's dissection of Adriaanszoon not as a lesson in human anatomy, but as a morality tale. As an extension of the punishment, the dissection is meant to break and humiliate an already broken man; the public assembles not to learn how the body works, but to witness the dreadful consequences of wrongdoing (the victim was a thief) for their moral edification. That Rembrandt portrays the dissection as a lesson in morality is confirmed, according to Sebald, by the fact that "the anatomist shown [...] has not begun his dissection by opening the abdomen and removing the intestines, which are most prone to putrefaction, but has started [...] by dissecting the offending hand."⁴⁰¹ Here, too, Sebald emphasizes the irony of the procedure at hand. The anatomical lesson is not only *other* than the moral of the life story of Adriaan Adriaanszoon, alias Aris Kindt: the anatomical and moral lessons are mutually negating and diametrically opposed. This emerges in Sebald's remarks on "amateur anatomist René Descartes, who was also, so it is said, present that January morning."⁴⁰² Descartes' seminal contribution to "the history of subjection," and to the schematic severing of man's physical and spiritual being via the philosophical dismissal of the body (a metaphysical dissection), serves as Sebald's counterpoint to the work of

⁴⁰¹ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 16.

⁴⁰² Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 13.

the painter, who addresses human life by bringing bodies into view.⁴⁰³ The painter “[Rembrandt’s] gaze alone is free of [the] Cartesian rigidity”⁴⁰⁴ that Sebald ascribes to the gaze of the surgeons who *overlook* the supine corpse in Rembrandt’s painting, fixing instead upon an “open anatomical atlas in which the appalling physical facts are reduced to a diagram.”⁴⁰⁵

Sebald captures the contradiction between the anatomical and moral lessons of the dissection by way of a hasty synopsis of Cartesian thought. “Descartes teaches,” he claims, “that one should disregard [*absehen*: look away from] the flesh, which is beyond our comprehension, and attend to [*und hin (sehen) auf*: and look toward] the machine within, to what can fully be understood, be made wholly useful for work, and, in the event of any fault, either repaired or discarded.”⁴⁰⁶ The uncanniness of this passing reference to Descartes hinges on the fact that it is unclear to what Sebald’s phrase “the machine within [*die in uns bereits angelegte Maschine*]” refers.⁴⁰⁷ Syntactically, the phrase is aligned with the anatomical atlas mentioned in the preceding sentence. One would expect, therefore, that it refers to the physical body—insofar as this body can be reduced schematically. The observers in Rembrandt’s painting look past Adriaanszoon’s corpse toward a diagram in the opened atlas, to which the body is supposed to correspond; similarly, Descartes urges us to look past the flesh toward “the machine

⁴⁰³ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 13.

⁴⁰⁴ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 17.

⁴⁰⁵ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 13.

⁴⁰⁶ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 13.

⁴⁰⁷ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 13; *Die Ringe des Saturn* 26.

within.” Nevertheless, the terms have been surreptitiously displaced. While the surgical practice of dissection treats the *body* as a machine, Sebald’s phrase “the machine within” refers not to the flesh, but to the spiritual-intellectual or psychic side of the Cartesian equation. And here lurks an uncanniness most profound—an uncanniness which points to the tension between the anatomical and moral lessons of dissection on Sebald’s reading.

The Guild of Surgeons dissects the body on medical pretenses: their interest in learning how the body works is born of the assumption that a body’s broken parts can be, as Sebald says, “made wholly useful for work, and, in the event of any fault, either repaired or discarded.”⁴⁰⁸ The anatomical lesson presupposes that broken bodies should be fixed and put to work. The moral lesson, however, and the barbaric, punitive dissection to which Adriaanszoon’s body is condemned in its service, assumes that the moral failing of the man, his criminality, is beyond repair. The irony is not only that the surgeons learn how to “fix” broken bodies by way of a dissection which at the same time is meant to break literally a metaphorically broken man. It is also that the scientific feeling of mastery over nature that surgical dissection feeds, the comforting thought that injury and death may one day be held at bay by our emergent mechanical knowledge of the body-as-machine: these consolations seem immaterial in light of the irreparable spiritual deficiency, congenital recidivism and moral corruption of the human being.

Perhaps the knowledge gathered from disassembling Adriaanszoon will be applied to non-delinquent subjects. Nevertheless, Rembrandt’s painting conveys a rather sinister thought: to repair *this* body—to make it work—would be to put a criminal back

⁴⁰⁸ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 13.

in circulation. One pictures an impotent man appealing to the surgeons of the Guild to correct his organic failure, the more efficiently to rape children. As both an anatomical and a moral lesson, the dissection procedure sends an incoherent message about how the broken being both can and cannot be repaired. Unwittingly, Dr. Tulp seems bent on augmenting the human capacity not only for productive human life, but for crime, social disturbance and self-destruction. His meticulous search through the tissues to the bones seems futile because whatever went wrong with Adriaan Adriaanszoon, it will not be discovered among the tendons of his offending hand.

Sebald notes that the dissected hand “is [...] grotesquely out of proportion compared with the hand closer to us.”⁴⁰⁹ The mechanical, uncanny appearance of the overlarge hand transcribed from the atlas gestures toward the “mechanical” nature of the *spiritual* side of man by signaling the readiness of this monstrous hand for crime. The hand is too large for the man, its villainous grasp beyond his control, and moreover, beyond the control of the surgeons busied belatedly with its mechanics. The distinction Descartes would draw between the soul, or intellect, and the body breaks down on Sebald’s reading. If Aris Kindt is fixed, he will only steal again; what Sebald refers to as “the machine within” will see to this. And while the idea that the material body is mechanical may be comforting (a broken machine can be fixed; spare parts can be found), the idea that the spiritual, psychological side of man, too, is mechanical, is rather chilling—not least of all because the automatism of the spiritual machine, especially if it is corrupt, *cannot* be broken. (Sigmund Freud’s spiritual dissection procedure would not be discovered for several centuries to come, and it is in keeping with Sebald’s

⁴⁰⁹ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 16.

anachronistic choice of references to immerse readers temporarily in the world of his source material.) According to the worldview of Adriaanszoon's contemporaries, a broken body lies inert on the table; a corrupt spirit never ceases intending to produce crimes.

A Closed Economy of Light and Dark

Painting, Sebald suggests, as a play of shadows in which “light” and “dark” appear only spanning a continuum of diverse admixtures—never in isolation—deconstructs, or “dissects” the ideological and metaphysical presuppositions of surgical dissection. Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson* reveals “the art of [surgical] dissection” as a defensive response to the hopeless intermingling of light and darkness, insight and ignorance, lucidity and murkiness that inevitably dogs scientific investigation and philosophical reflection alike. It is ultimately not to the historical ascendancy of light, but to the perpetual preeminence of darkness that Sebald devotes his pages on the life and works of Thomas Browne, in which his reading of *The Anatomy Lesson* is embedded. Thus he concludes, paraphrasing Browne, that “all knowledge is enveloped in darkness,” such that “what we perceive are no more than isolated lights in the abyss of ignorance, in the shadow-filled edifice of the world.”⁴¹⁰ Further on, the brave hopes of Dr. Tulp and the Guild of Surgeons are dismissed even more emphatically:

On every new thing there lies already the shadow of annihilation. For the history of every individual, of every social order, indeed of the whole world, does not describe an ever-widening, more and more wonderful arc, but rather follows a course which, once the meridian is reached, leads without fail down into the dark.⁴¹¹

⁴¹⁰ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 19.

⁴¹¹ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 23-4.

These grim conclusions cast their shadows back toward the irony of a dissection procedure meant to ferry a whole civilization “from the darkness into the light” even while the redundant name of its victim, Adriaan Adriaanszoon, twice evokes the meaning of the name Adrian, or “dark one,” recalling that the eyes of this obscure subject are forever closed to the revelatory illuminations his broken body might afford.

Sebald discovers in realist painting an economy of light and darkness according to which clarity in one place, with all of its metaphorical overtones, comes only at the price of obscurity in another. And this is the point about painting as “a kind of dissection,” as well as the point about surgical dissection, that Rembrandt deliberately makes. Sebald unearths a “deliberate intent [rather than ‘an unfortunate blunder’] behind [the] flaw in [Rembrandt’s] composition” represented by the magnified apparatus of the dissected hand, whose “exposed tendons, which ought to be those of the left palm, given the position of the thumb, are in fact those of the back of the right hand.”⁴¹² In spite of the painting’s “much-admired verisimilitude,” this bald factual error transforms an “otherwise true-to-life painting [...] into a crass misrepresentation at the exact centre point of its meaning, where the incisions are made.”⁴¹³ It is another truth, however, that Rembrandt’s painting divulges according to Sebald, another “kind of dissection” he interrogates—and this with the utmost fidelity.

⁴¹² Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 17 and 16 respectively.

⁴¹³ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 16-7.

17. Part II.2: Jan Peter Tripp

Sebald's idea that the deliberate flaw in Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson* (the anatomically incorrect orientation of the corpse's dissected left hand) is a mark of the profoundest, self-scrutinizing realism is the joint between his remarks on realist painting in *The Rings of Saturn* and in his earlier essay on Tripp. Leaning on the Tripp essay, and returning to the line of inquiry begun in Chapter 15, it emerges that Sebald's interpretation of Rembrandt's painting opposes not only two types of dissection, surgical and painterly, but also two rivaling conceptions of realism and realistic effects. What Sebald identifies as the "crass misrepresentation" at the "centre point of meaning" of Rembrandt's "otherwise true-to-life painting" may be a betrayal of the painting's famous "verisimilitude,"⁴¹⁴ but it is not ultimately a betrayal of the painting's auto-dissection of realism in the fuller sense elaborated by Sebald. He begins the earlier essay by hypothesizing two species of realism in reference to Tripp, who abandons the influence of "surrealism, of the Vienna fantastic realists and of photorealism" in favor of "a much more deeply searching objectivity."⁴¹⁵ Not until his analysis of *The Anatomy Lesson* does Sebald insinuate what this "more deeply searching objectivity" might entail.

Stilling Life: Violent and Non-violent Realisms

Rather than portraying an inert body divorced from its humanity, Rembrandt's monstrous misrepresentation of the mutilated hand "signifies the violence that has been

⁴¹⁴ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 16.

⁴¹⁵ Sebald, "As Day and Night [...]" 78.

done to Aris Kindt.”⁴¹⁶ The more obvious opposition between surgical and painterly dissection figures the purely aesthetic difference at stake for Sebald: that between a violent and a non-violent realism, a realism that objectifies and victimizes its subjects versus a realism that “identifies with the victim” by filtering reality through his or her experience of pain. Whether or not they signify as explicitly as Rembrandt’s mutilated hand the violence realism inflicts on bodies, it is always the minor *betrayals* of strict objectivity that give rise to the affective and analytic dimensions of the work of art. “Without such adjustments, divergences and differences [from which unexpectedly the system of a representation opposed to reality can result],” Sebald writes of Tripp, “there would be no line of feeling or thought in the most accomplished of depictions.”⁴¹⁷

Rembrandt’s view of the body from which life so recently has ebbed opposes the surgeon’s gaze: “[the painter] alone sees that greenish annihilated body, [...] the shadow in the half-open mouth and over the dead man’s eyes.”⁴¹⁸ More precisely, Rembrandt’s self-reflexive painting is a kind of dissection that is *conscious* of the violence that painterly realism enacts on the bodies it so accurately portrays, whereas the surgeons within the image seem oblivious to the violence they commit. There is an anatomical lie at the heart of Rembrandt’s dissection scene. This single, deliberate flaw in the work’s realism offers an internal critique of the realist aesthetic: by acknowledging the reduction and violation of life perpetrated by the procedure, Rembrandt reintroduces life into the

⁴¹⁶ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 17.

⁴¹⁷ Sebald, “As Day and Night [...]” 85. Though it exceeds the scope of my argument here, this remark in the Tripp essay should be linked to a strange idea forwarded by the narrator of Sebald’s *Austerlitz* about the ‘lines of pain’ running through history (“die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte”).

⁴¹⁸ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 17.

morbid stasis of the subject that is required as much by the painter who paints as by the surgeon who dissects. In order to be painted, the living subject must be still; the subject must approximate a corpse. It is no accident that the circle of devotees thronging the inanimate body of Adriaanszoon includes both surgeons and artists. Rembrandt's "flawed" realism records not only his subject, but the morbidity and violence of his own act of realistic representation. This is how his painting performs an analytic on painterly realism.

The analytic function of Rembrandt's misrepresented hand corroborates Sebald's claim that the exemplary, "searching" realism of Jan Peter Tripp is a consequence of its divergence from strict verisimilitude. "Tripp's pictures," he writes, "always have an analytical, not synthesizing, tendency." Tripp's pictures achieve their exaggerated realism not because Tripp is more faithful to reality than other painters, but because "the photographic material that is their starting point is carefully modified."⁴¹⁹ In the Tripp essay, the difference between an unconsciously lethal realism and a realism that interrogates its lethality is likened to the difference between photography and painting. This underscores Sebald's conviction that painterly realism relies on the subtle divergence of the representation from its model rather than on their equation. One way of understanding this is to say that Tripp captures the gradual divergence his subjects *from themselves*—a self-departure that figuratively expresses their dying, their passing away. The subject of a violent realism therefore is death in the abstract, in the form of anything which is dead; the content of the non-violent realism Sebald proposes is the embodied dying of particular subjects.

⁴¹⁹ Sebald, "As Day and Night [...]" 84.

The surprising insight Sebald wrests from Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson* is that while the fundamental object of realist art is the *nature morte*, the realist painter does not paint things that are already dead. Rather, the realist gaze effects the passage of living beings into death, and this in order to cultivate the illusion of animated life that defies the stasis of the image. Thus Tripp's paintings actively mortify nature, still life. The flowers he paints are "as though disembodied, in a porcelain rigor mortis," such that "what is conveyed [...] is the almost already forgotten reflection of organic nature." The living flowers are disembodied in the process of being painted. Similarly, Sebald writes, "in the picture with the green grapes [in black-and-white surroundings], these are a last sign of life;" the "ceremonial, emblematic style" that "determines the arrangement"⁴²⁰ of the grapes on a white table cloth recalls the formal, funereal costume of Dr. Tulp and his fellow surgeons in Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson*, "in their finest attire."⁴²¹

The queer way in which the subjects of Tripp's paintings seem to take leave of themselves in the fullest realization of their embodiment, to take leave of the world just when they inhabit it most consummately, constitutes the self-annihilation of a realism that consumes reality in its fire, destroying the very referents that would confirm its authenticity and success. It is in this sense that the most perfect realism, on Sebald's reading—and not only Tripp's deviant variety—always assumes the form of a departure from realism. Either aesthetic realism negates the condition of its own possibility by violently destroying its real referents, passing off death as the sign for life, or else the

⁴²⁰ Sebald, "As Day and Night [...]" 88.

⁴²¹ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* 13.

artist deliberately introduces an error, a compositional flaw, indulging a detour from “reality” that leaves his subject intact at the expense of the image’s (lethal) realism.

“*Wie Tag und Nacht*—”

The Sebaldian master trope of travel—more often anchored in the past by leave-taking than in the future by an Odyssean homecoming—is therefore a figure for Sebald’s idiosyncratic species of realism; his is an itinerant realism which exercises a self-imposed exile from life in the world. Like Rembrandt, Sebald identifies not with the still-living against the already dead, but with the universal human experience of dying. This is why his most explicit reflections on the realist aesthetic surface with respect to Rembrandt and Tripp, whose works he reads not as a static repetition of reality, but as a subtle series of departures in which the work of art, as it were, takes leave of its subjects.

Sebald’s deviant theory of realism is structured around the relationship between life and death as it is mediated by so-called “realist” works of art. Readers might perceive an allusion to this relationship in the title of his essay on Tripp, “*Wie Tag und Nacht – [As Night and Day]*.” One cannot help but hear the missing terms of the phrase: “*as different as day and night [ein Unterschied wie Tag und Nacht (literally, ‘a difference like day and night’)]*.” The title implies a contrast, a difference so absolute and so abstract that its terms cannot be named. It communicates the impossibility of relation. Ironically, the intuitively completed phrase “[as different] as day and night,” which is not preceded by an ellipsis for instance to indicate its fragmentariness, expresses in the form of a comparison the death of figurative comparisons (the death of analogy, simile, metaphor, or more broadly, the death of figuration). If the title suggests, to the contrary, un-idiomatically, something that is both “like day” *and* “like night,” it nevertheless

annihilates the possibility of comparison through an excess of metaphoricity; something that is “like everything,” even like its opposite, might as well be incomparable insofar as any particular comparison would be arbitrary, none more apt than any other. The title solicits a comparison between everything and nothing only to reject it. Most broadly, it indicates the radical difference between conventional theories of aesthetic realism and the theory of realism that Sebald derives from the works of Tripp; more specifically, the title indicates the deviance of Sebaldian realism by pointing to the artwork’s *divergence* from its model, even the absolute difference between the two, rather than recommending a comparison between reality and its representation. Painting, the title warns, is as distinct from reality as night is from day.

Nevertheless, the essay never links the “day” and “night” from its title to anything specific; it remains unclear to what the terms of the comparison might refer. In the body of the essay, Sebald incorporates, un-cited, Edward FitzGerald’s English translation of a poem by 11th-century polymath Omar Khayyam, in which the two opposing terms are pluralized, reversed and reiterated, without however giving flesh to the missing half of the analogy. He writes:

[...] in all [Tripp’s] later pictures the most complicated chess gambits and evasions are enacted, to and fro between life and death: ‘Tis all a Chequer-board of Nights and Days / Where Destiny with Men for Pieces plays: / Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays, / And one by one back in the Closet lays.⁴²²

The “nights and days” in question make a mockery of figurative reference; they are synonymous with “it all,” which in the context of Khayyam’s poem apparently means all

⁴²² Sebald, “As Day and Night [...]” 88-9. For the German text, see: “Wie Tag und Nacht –,” *Logis in einem Landhaus. Über Gottfried Keller, Johann Peter Hebel, Robert Walser und andere* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003), 169-188.

of life. And yet the terms “night” and “day” also seem to refer to the “life” and “death” between which Tripp conveys the subjects of his pictures, according to Sebald, in the preceding sentence—in spite of the consternating lack of parallelism, according to which ‘night’ is aligned with ‘life’ and ‘day’ with ‘death.’ The question, then, is whether Sebald presents ‘night’ and ‘day,’ or ‘life and ‘death,’ as opposing terms—as suggested by one reading the essay’s title—or whether he means that Tripp’s realism blurs their distinction, in the sense that all of life, living, is a detour en route to death, thus a euphemism for “dying.”

The other possible point of reference within the essay for the title (“As Day and Night –”) is Sebald’s previously quoted question: “what is [painting], anyway, if not a kind of dissection procedure in the face of black death and white eternity?”⁴²³ However, this passage similarly foils the reader’s attempt to anchor the title: for while “black” and “white” are conflicting modifiers, “death” and “eternity” are in no way opposed; “eternity” may even define the temporal dimension of death. “Black” and “white” in this case would be two rivaling interpretations of the same thing twice named. In spite of the unbridgeable difference between reality and art, life and death proposed by the title, Sebald implies that realistic images occupy an intermediate realm. He theorizes the painter and the photographer alike as mediums who ferry their subjects between life and death. The difference, for Sebald, lies in the *way* in which producers of realistic images transport their subjects from life to death—and herein lies the crucial difference between the violent realism of photography and the non-violent realism of painting.

⁴²³ Sebald, “As Day and Night [...]” 88.

Tripp's Non-photographic Realism

The “inherent quality of a picture by Tripp,” Sebald writes, is rooted not in its apparent photorealism, but in Tripp’s “less apparent” refusal to reproduce reality photographically. Whereas the photographic image “turns reality into a tautology,” he writes, “art” requires “the *transcendence* of that which in an incontrovertible sentence is the case.” He dismisses photography as “undertaker’s business,” paraphrasing Roland Barthes’ observation that the “man with a camera [is] an agent of death.” In other words, photography “kills” its subjects; “what distinguishes art from [photography],” he continues, “is that life’s closeness to death is its theme, not its addiction.” Painting, then, bears witness to the “extinction of the visible world” without being complicit with its death; or, as he argues of Rembrandt, the painter does not objectify death but identifies with the dying.⁴²⁴ (It should be noted that photography here serves merely as a foil for Sebald’s theory of realist painting. His later incorporation of photographs in the prose fictions clearly demands a more nuanced and less dismissive understanding of the photographic medium.)

Given the polemical distinction Sebald draws between the “undertaker’s business” of photography and the art of painting, it comes as a surprise in the subsequent pages of the Tripp essay that the painter, too, mediates the passage of his subjects from life to death. And it is not only the posing subject, but also the painter who must approximate a corpse. The realist painter creates “a perfect illusion” only by “steering” a “breathless state in which the painter himself no longer knows whether his eye still sees and his hand still moves.” Just as the pain of Grünewald’s wounded figures could not be

⁴²⁴ Sebald, “As Day and Night [...]” 84, my emphasis.

thematized and confined to the image, Tripp's stalling of life cannot be quarantined in the image. Tripp invests his works with his own immobility. Confronted with the infinity of the microcosm, realism requires the death of the painter who traces hairs even smaller than he can see. Thus it is the painter's own experience of "failing breath in the midst of the utmost concentration [...], or a stillness ever increasing, the paralysis of limbs and blinding of eyes" that "[brings] death into the pictures of Jan Peter Tripp."⁴²⁵ Like Rembrandt, Tripp registers the creative act together with the particular subject of each work; both expire on the canvas.

The Creation of Death in Seven Days

The ghostly afterlife that photography awards its subjects ironically makes the photographer an agent of death, which is after all the price of an afterlife. But while the photographer processes death in the manner of a factory laborer, the painter 'creates' death in seven days by "crossing a frontier." Thus Sebald writes:

Although it is said that one must paint the dead quickly, Tripp, in the thick of the chloroform vapour of putrefaction, spent seven days on [his] picture [of a dead dormouse he found lying one day on his front stoop] in which the silent message of the unexpected guest is perpetuated. On the seventh day there was a little spasm in that lifeless corpse, and a drop of blood the size of a pinhead issued from the nostril. This was the true end.⁴²⁶

Tripp's seven-day labor is a reverse creation of sorts. Tripp doesn't effect the passage from reality to representation by killing reality, extinguishing its life; rather, he endows the dormouse with death—its own proper death—as God is supposed to have endowed

⁴²⁵ Sebald, "As Day and Night [...]" 85.

⁴²⁶ Sebald, "As Day and Night [...]" 86.

certain of his creatures with a soul. On Sebald's reading of Tripp, the profound task of a realist art is to ensoul reality with death as the mark of singularity.

Whereas the photographer operates in a world perpetually passing away to preserve life in a diminished form, the painter works in a world perpetually and grossly alive. However, the regenerative organicism of the natural world is indifferent to individual lives and particular things. Its inevitable, weed-like subsistence comes at the expense of identity because undifferentiated anonymity is the price of macroscopic survival. When Sebald implies that Tripp 'creates' death, he means that Tripp's portrait of the dead mouse brings the mouse into its own by perfecting its particularity.⁴²⁷ This is why, as Sebald notes, there is no world surrounding Tripp's tiny subject to distract from its priority: "embedded in nothingness, with no support or background, this animal now hovers through the air [...]."⁴²⁸ The mouse's corpse is pictured alone on a white page. Tripp carves the mouse's finitude, its mortality, out of the nameless interconnected web of existence. The painted mouse is saved from the anonymous, self-parasitizing survival of organic life in general when Tripp isolates its death on the page. Thus Tripp's pencil endows his subjects with precisely the same "mark of death" that, according to Max Aurach in Sebald's *The Emigrants*, individualizes the wounded figures populating the paintings of Matthias Grünewald.⁴²⁹

Sebald's most innovative contribution to a theory of realist painting emerges from the manner in which Tripp perfects the modest particularity of his rodential subject.

⁴²⁷ I will elaborate this claim momentarily.

⁴²⁸ Sebald, "As Day and Night [...]" 86. Tripp's portrait of the mouse's corpse is reproduced here.

⁴²⁹ Sebald, *TE* 170.

Although the mouse appears to be the only thing represented on the page, the mouse's missing 'world' has a function in the image. The seven days of Tripp's reverse creation provide the clue to the whereabouts of the vanished world: for Tripp ensouls the mouse with death precisely by *de-contextualizing* the mouse, depriving it of an environment. He 'creates' the mouse's death not, as it were, by painting a dead mouse lying on his doorstep, but rather by un-making the whole world in which the mouse would have been able to exist and breathe. The Balzacian immersion of every living subject in its native milieu is reflected here in its negative image: the mouse is dead because there is nowhere left for it to live. The mouse that "hovers through the air" is a remainder which is left after the rest of the world has been erased by the reverse creation of Tripp's exacting sketch. This is also to say that his meticulous portrayal of the mouse is *so* realistic that it de-realizes everything else in the world. A pinhead's worth of blood leaks from the subject's nose to make room inside for *all of reality*, which has been suctioned into the miniature vacuum of the mouse's nostril.

Landscapes of an Abandoned World: "...the estate we leave behind..."

Sebald's earlier remarks on Tripp's portraits from the Weissenau asylum corroborate this startling possibility, along with the inversion of realist conventions that it requires. On Sebald's reading of Tripp, subject and world never appear together in the same image; Tripp's work teases apart these two most fundamental elements of the realist aesthetic: what realism synthesizes, he "dissects." This is why Sebald discovers in Tripp's still lifes the missing background of his portraits: in the still lifes, he writes, Tripp

gives us “the paradigm of the estate we leave behind.”⁴³⁰ This is nothing other than the world of which Tripp deprives the subjects of his portraits. Like the mouse deprived of context, who “hovers through the air,”⁴³¹ Sebald has this to say of Tripp’s strange art of auraless portraiture: “if the pictures of the Weissenau inmates are to be understood as studies of the resounding emptiness inside the heads of those subjects, no less so are the later portraits and self-portraits in their almost *worldless isolationism* [*weltlosen Isolationismus*].”⁴³² It is in these portraits that Sebald reads a “definition” of the human being as “a creature ripped out of any natural or social context [*einer aus dem Natur- und Gesellschaftszusammenhang gerissenen Kreatur*].”⁴³³

The abandoned world of inanimate objects in Tripp’s *nature mortes* signifies the obsolescence of those objects; the death of the subject to whom they belonged; and by extension the death of the viewing subject who is separated from Tripp’s material world by a barrier that cannot be crossed. However, Sebald is arguing something more than what he explicitly says: even Tripp’s *portraits*, he hints, are a kind of *nature morte*. Because his subjects are so radically dispossessed, Tripp leaves us no way of distinguishing between his “worldless” subjects and “the estate they leave behind”; in their incapacity to take objects in the world, the asylum inmates have been evicted from their own subjectivity. Tripp’s dissection of the realist aesthetic reveals the morbidity

⁴³⁰ Sebald, “As Day and Night [...]” 80. Similarly, he writes: “The reverse side of this depiction [in Tripp’s portraits] of a species becoming more and more monstrous in the course of civilization’s progress is the abandoned landscapes and especially the still lifes in which—far beyond the events—now only the motionless objects bear witness to the former presence of a peculiarly rationalistic species” (79).

⁴³¹ Sebald, “As Day and Night [...]” 86.

⁴³² Sebald, “As Day and Night [...]” 78-9, my emphasis; “Wie Tag und Nacht –” 172.

⁴³³ Sebald, “Wie Tag und Nacht –” 172, my translation.

that overwhelms the subject deprived of context. Sebald refers to the fragility of life and proximity of death revealed by Tripp's paintings as "the metaphysical lining of reality,"⁴³⁴ in reference to the title of Tripp's first catalogue of works, *The Reverse Side of Things*.⁴³⁵

Tripp's subjects do not just happen to be worldless, as though they could have been given to us in context: it is the reality of these representative modern subjects, and the "deeply searching objectivity" of Tripp's portraiture, which actively disembodies and de-realizes the world. Sebald describes this phenomenon aesthetically not only with reference to Tripp's un-making of the world, but also with reference to the viewer's imagination vis-à-vis Tripp's work. His remarks reemphasize and expand upon Roland Barthes' famous assertion that modern realism is characterized by a "new verisimilitude." Barthes observes that the ancient idea of verisimilitude is introduced by an "*Esto (Let there be, suppose . . .)*"; ancient verisimilitude therefore relies on our ability to imagine what is represented in the work of art, independently of whether the representation is objectively true.⁴³⁶ Sebald's essay on Tripp suggests that the modern reality effect theorized by Barthes—in Tripp's case visual—is produced, to the contrary, when we are *unable* to imagine ("*suppose*") what the work of art represents, not because it is fantastical or surreal, but because it is excessively familiar, insignificant and dumb. The modern reality effect is produced by that which does not speak to us, that to which our experience and imagination have nothing to contribute.

⁴³⁴ Sebald, "As Day and Night [...]" 88.

⁴³⁵ Cf. Köhler, Andrea, "Penetrating the Dark," in *Unrecounted. W. G. Sebald and Jan Peter Tripp*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 98.

⁴³⁶ Barthes, Roland, "The Reality Effect" 147-8.

In the context of literature, Barthes asserts that the “*effet du réel*” is produced by descriptive details to which no narrative significance can be assigned. In the context of realist painting, Sebald speaks of our incapacity to imagine details rather than of our incapacity to make them signify. To this end, he distinguishes Tripp’s work from the tradition of *trompe-l’oeil* painting, in which “the picture’s power of suggestion and the attitude of expectation aroused in the viewer reciprocally reinforce each other.”⁴³⁷ These images (*trompe-l’oeil* paintings) outbid the verisimilitude of the ancients: rather than aspiring to seem plausible, they masquerade momentarily as reality. Given that such images could not be mistaken for reality on their technical merits alone (and may even be quite crude), the viewer of *trompe-l’oeil* painting falls victim to “a confidence trick.” The “realism” of *trompe-l’oeil*, deficient in itself, relies on a contribution from the viewer’s imagination to produce its effect. This is why Sebald claims that such images “conjure forth *out of virtually nothing*” the “*effet du réel*” they produce.⁴³⁸ The viewer misled by his own expectations imagines that the image he looks at seems real.

Tripp’s technical skill, on the other hand, is unassailable according to Sebald. Tripp’s paintings require no elaboration on the part of our imaginative projections to produce their effect; his realism is self-sufficient, the product of technical skill alone. In the works of Tripp, Sebald writes, “faithfulness to reality is taken to an almost *unimaginable* extreme [*die Wirklichkeitstreue erreicht einen fast unvorstellbaren Grad*].”⁴³⁹ The remainder of the essay reveals that Sebald’s use of the word

⁴³⁷ Sebald, “As Day and Night [...]” 82.

⁴³⁸ Sebald, “As Day and Night [...]” 83, emphasis mine.

⁴³⁹ Sebald, “As Day and Night [...]” 80, my emphasis; “Wie Tag und Nacht –” 174.

“unimaginable” here is more than a rhetorical exaggeration. Sebald associates realism with a certain *malfunction* of the viewer’s imagination; further still, he implies that the primary strategy of modern realism is to disable the imagination. He suggests that the impression of realism results when the artist has fully exhausted our capacity to imagine the work of art before us; only when the artist has “outstripped” us in this way do we begin to view the artwork as “realistic” through our failure to view it as a creative work of art. Realist artworks have no dark corners; they achieve an excess of illumination, an exhaustiveness of detail that crowds out the imagination. This is why Tripp’s work gives the impression of being *beyond* imagining. The paralysis of our capacity to imagine the artwork before us is the new condition of *l’effet de réel*.

One way of understanding the de-contextualization of Tripp’s dormouse is to say that Tripp has painted only the mouse and omitted or neglected to paint its surroundings. However, Tripp’s portraits of the Weissenau asylum inmates are not without background—and yet Sebald refers to these subjects, too, as “worldless.” He cannot have in mind, then, the literal presence or absence of the environment and material surroundings of Tripp’s subjects in the portraits. Tripp’s realism is “worldless” no matter what is included in the image, because we are unable to fill in its microscopic gaps, unable even to identify them, unable to imagine anything other than what Tripp has drawn. The dormouse continues to float in midair—for we imagine no surface beneath him; our imagination is humiliated by Tripp’s technical skill, its operation impaired. We fail to conjure for the mouse a world as real as Tripp’s image of the mouse. Thus what Sebald identifies as the “worldless isolationism” of Tripp’s figures is not incidental, nor

an omission, nor merely a content thematized by the paintings: the worldlessness of Tripp's images is also a *consequence* of his extreme realism.

The mouse that de-realizes its world is preserved from rot because it is without atmosphere. This reflects the “breathless state” in which the realist artist, “no longer [sure] whether his eye still sees and his hand still moves” approaches death as he paints.⁴⁴⁰ The “breathlessness” of the realist painter and his images is echoed in *The Emigrants*, where Max Aurach's memory of the acute pain of a slipped disc—occasioned by his viewing of Matthias Grünewald's paintings—is overwhelmingly a memory of breathlessness. Aurach recalls that when his “whole life had shrunk to that one tiny point of absolute pain, [...] even breathing in made everything go black [*daß es mir schon beim Einatmen Schwarz wurde vor den Augen*].”⁴⁴¹ In the Grünewald passage, as in the Tripp essay, the heightened consciousness and extreme attentiveness to detail that characterize realism can be maintained only in a motionless, breathless state.

Correlatively, the “white eternity” that de-contextualizes Tripp's dormouse is a blank page that artificially induces in the viewer an experience akin to writer's block. This leads to the mortifying paralysis of dead viewing, a passive ‘staring at’ in which, following Barthes, we cease to make our private contribution to the significance of what we see. Sebald quotes Gombrich's observation that our “impression that [Jan van Eyck] painted every stitch in the gold damask, every hair on the angel's head” can only be an illusion.⁴⁴² On the one hand, Gombrich's point expresses the conventional notion, contra

⁴⁴⁰ Sebald, “As Day and Night [...]” 85.

⁴⁴¹ Sebald, *TE* 171; *DA* 254.

⁴⁴² Sebald, “As Day and Night [...]” 85.

Sebald, that works of art usually collude with the viewer's imagination to enhance their "realistic" effects; nevertheless, the Gombrich quote also, perhaps unwittingly, suggests that realistic painting calls into question the viewer's relationship to the real world. In other words, realist painting confronts us with the fact that our access to *reality* is deficient, and this because of the limitation of our senses. Only given the coarseness of vision does a painting in which 'enough' hairs are painted on the angel's head seem realistic; to reverse the point: even in a *painting*, we cannot see all the hairs on the angel's head.

Sebald's reading of Tripp displaces the question of the "realism" of painting onto the viewing subject. Tripp's images reveal to us not only the deficiency of our five senses with respect to the excessiveness of reality, but also, and more disturbingly, the deficiency of our imagination with respect to reality. Tripp's paintings show us more than we can possibly see, and more than we can imagine seeing. Sebald opens the essay by asserting that to ask whether Tripp's images are faithful to reality is the wrong question. This is because what Tripp's work calls into question is not the painter's capacity to represent reality faithfully, but our capacity as humans to perceive reality and to establish a relationship with it.

On this note, Tripp's asylum subjects are ideally suited to render inoperative the viewer's imagination (rendering the viewer superfluous) because they confront us with our incapacity to relate to them as parts of reality. This is what makes pathological subjects so fitting for the extreme realist aesthetic Sebald theorizes on the basis of Tripp's work. As previously suggested, Tripp's viewer is 'disabled,' or disempowered because the asylum inmates Tripp paints are indifferent to being seen: in the face of their passive

submission to being painted and refusal to engage our gaze, the effortless psychological mechanism of imaginary projection at the heart of our empathy for other living humans is impaired. The subjects of these portraits do more than to refuse any relationship with us as viewers: they are indifferent to our viewership, our judgments and our desires. Their vacated gaze looks through us.

Conclusion: the Blind Viewer

In the fragmentary theory of painterly realism that Sebald develops in the essay devoted to Tripp and in his prose fictions, there are several principal themes. He is profoundly concerned with the threat of violence that he perceives in realism's tendency to objectify the human body. The violence of the realist gaze strikes Max Aurach so forcefully in the works of Matthias Grünewald that it induces in him a psychic break and a flood of traumatic memories; however, rather than allowing Aurach to stand aloof from the wounded figures he paints, Grünewald's images provoke a powerful identification in Aurach, who suffers with and through Grünewald's pained, painted figures. In his reading of Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson*, Sebald identifies an internal critique of the violence internal to the realist aesthetic. Rembrandt's identification with the victim, rather than with the surgeons who dismember his body, leads Sebald to entertain the possibility of a non-violent realism that would preserve the humanity of its subjects, at the expense of rigid objectivity. This is why the mark of great realism for Sebald, even in light of its documentary aim, is not a perfect identity between the image and reality, but rather the small adjustments and differences that constitute flaws in the objectivity of the work of art. With reference to Tripp, Sebald uses the metaphor of pathology to figure the crucial divergence of the non-violent, realist artwork from its model; he shows how Tripp

perfects his “pathographic” realism through his portraits of pathologized subjects. In various forms, Sebald attributes just such an internal critique, self-scrutinizing, auto-dissection or deconstruction of the realist aesthetic to Grünewald, Rembrandt and Tripp alike.

In light of the violence it threatens, Sebald calls for an internal critique of realism that would interrogate not only the work of art, but also our capacity as humans to access reality and our willingness to view it objectively. Tripp’s extremely “realistic” images disable our imagination because imagination is driven by desire: we cannot imagine what we do not on some level want to be the case; this is why, on Sebald’s reading, our inability to “imagine” Tripp’s realism shows that we, as humans, fundamentally do not desire reality and do not desire to see things as they are. Taken together, Sebald’s scattered reflections on the realist aesthetic insinuate that there is something deeply hypocritical and disingenuous about the realist agenda as it is conventionally understood. Or, less polemically, he suggests that realism has been wildly misunderstood, perhaps even by some of its best practitioners. The aim of realism is not to present us with a realistic image (if our putative desire for reality could be satisfied by reality, there would be no need for realist art), but rather is twofold: realism interrogates our aesthetic experience and our existence in the world. It asks how the truth claims of a work of art mediate our perception of the work of art, while simultaneously calling into question our relationship with reality and our desire for it.

I would like to conclude by recalling a series of blinded viewers whom we have followed through Sebald’s *oeuvre*: from the scrutinizing eyes of Max Aurach that “go black” as soon as he breathes, to the shadowed eyes of Aris Kindt on the dissecting table,

to—reaching further backward in our analysis—the “dazzled” eyes of Henri Beyle, blinded by the excessive acuity of his senses to the world. The condition of being overwhelmed by sensory experience (in other words, the aim of the ‘realist’ artist vis-à-vis the world) to the point of incapacitation has been named “Stendhal Syndrome” after Henri Beyle’s *nom de plume*. This dizzying, disorienting state of blindness to reality is one of the references concealed in the title of Sebald’s first prose fiction, *Vertigo* (*Schwindel. Gefühle.*).

Fittingly, Sebald concludes his essay on Tripp (“*Wie Tag und Nacht—*”) with the image of a dog from one of Tripp’s paintings. The dog’s two eyes—one illuminated and one lost in shadow—recall the divergent, non-parallel gaze of Henri Beyle’s beloved soprano as well as the left and right hands of Aris Kindt. And it is the dog’s shaded eye that refers, in turn, to the annihilation of the viewing subject that Sebald’s deviant reading of Tripp’s deviant realism proposes, while also bearing witness to the anachronistic intertextual practice we have observed in Sebald’s work:

The dog, bearer of the secret, who runs with ease over the abysses of time, because for him there is no difference between the fifteenth and the twentieth centuries, knows many things more accurately than we do. His left (domesticated) eye is attentively fixed on us; the right (wild) one has a little less light, strikes us as averted and alien. And yet we sense that it is the overshadowed eye that sees through us.⁴⁴³

As Sebald notes, the dog in the Jan van Eyck painting to which Tripp’s painting refers is “a symbol of marital fidelity.”⁴⁴⁴ The dog therefore figures the aesthetic question we have raised regarding the realist painter’s or writer’s fidelity to reality. In other words, the dog who “sees through us” at the end of Sebald’s essay, by seeing more of us than we

⁴⁴³ Sebald, “As Night and Day [...]” 94.

⁴⁴⁴ Sebald, “As Night and Day [...]” 93.

see of ourselves, is the symbol for Stendhal's, Rembrandt's, Tripp's and Sebald's *deliberately* imperfect realism. Sebald's pathologized realism simultaneously de-realizes the viewer and his or her world; it exposes the falsifying tendency of the viewer's imagination by blocking its capacity to act.

In the posthumously published book of poems paired with close-up etchings of eyes that Sebald co-authored with Tripp, there is a fitting juxtaposition of text and image on which to close our eyes to Sebald's scattered notes on realism in various media. Tripp's close-up etchings of eyes are reminiscent of the "details" that are so often cropped from larger paintings, enlarged and reproduced. Tripp's detailed eyes of famous artists, however, are 'complete fragments,' so to speak. They are isolated particulars, "details" that do not belong to any whole, recalling our discussion of detail in Sebald's postmodern revision of the realist ideology. Tripp illustrates one of Sebald's poetic fragments with just such a detail deprived of context: an etching of the shaded eyes of Rembrandt. Beneath the image of Rembrandt's eyes are Sebald's words:

Like a dog

*Cézanne says
that's how a painter
must see, the eye
fixed & almost
averted⁴⁴⁵*

⁴⁴⁵ Sebald, W. G. and Jan Peter Tripp, "Unrecounted. 33 Texts and 33 Etchings," in *Unrecounted. W. G. Sebald and Jan Peter Tripp*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 50-1.

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