

# A THING OF SHREDS AND PATCHES

**J'LYN CHAPMAN**



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J'LYN CHAPMAN

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#60

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# INTRODUCTION

– Amaranth Borsuk

In this poetics essay encompassing literary criticism, autobiography, and ethics, J'Lyn Chapman patches together a fabric that wants to remain, in the words of W. G. Sebald quoted in her epigraph, "utterly botched." An adjective that conjures images of failure, "botched" refers to a clumsy repair job, the handiwork of a novice. Laced, like Sebald's work, with photographs at once personal and historical, this poetics doesn't craft a shoddy shroud: it actively wears out its holes to acknowledge that our knowledge of the past is full of gaps no narrative we cloak it in can ever properly cover. How does one write of a grandparent hardly known, but who makes himself known after his death through sounds and sensations? And of a grandfather-by-marriage who documented the Belgian resistance in photographs that record the public outcry and thirst for vengeance at the end of the Second World War? A traveler through these stories and others, Chapman places herself inside history, refusing those representations of loss that keep it at a safe distance (narrativizing and containing catastrophe).

Chapman seeks the holes in history because, as she writes, “to trace the boundaries of our blindness, to make out the shape of our lacuna is essential to writing about the past.” And while those lacunae may appear to arise from within the tale, they are within us as well: “for many of us, the self is our most expansive blind spot.” The blind spot here is not simply a metaphor, but a physical incapacity—one Chapman knows intimately through her own loss of vision during a serious illness that cast much of the world around her into shadow. Implicating herself within these tangled threads, she makes certain that we not mistake this mapping of the gaps for an attempt to fill them.

An architect of absence, her work invokes a number of artists who ask us to reflect on the problematic nature of memorial. Reading *A Thing of Shreds and Patches*, I was reminded of Gustav Metzger’s “To crawl into—Anschluss, Vienna, March 1938,” which invites visitors to crawl under a broad swath of taffeta-like chartreuse fabric on the gallery floor. On all fours and groping in dappled light, we find ourselves facing an enlarged photograph of Austrian Jews scrubbing the street on their hands and knees. The view is partial, hasty, claustrophobically close. It reminds us that history isn’t separate from us, an artifact of isolated time, but actually present in our daily lived experience. Always outside the picture’s frame, history remains inaccessible, but we continue to construct it from whatever means we have at hand. A meditation on images and spirits, hauntings and manifestations, gauzy membranes that issue from and fail to cover the body, *A Thing of Shreds and Patches* is beautifully and thoughtfully botched.

Chapman writes, “Sometimes I cannot understand what it means to live on this earth with so many other people or what it means to be a presence among so much absence.” Vulnerable and critical, she drops her plumb line in order to help us navigate this terrain.

A THING OF SHREDS  
AND PATCHES

OFTEN I COULD NOT GET ON FOR HOURS OR DAYS AT A TIME, AND NOT INFREQUENTLY I UNRAVELED WHAT I HAD DONE, CONTINUOUSLY TORMENTED BY SCRUPLES THAT WERE TAKING TIGHTER HOLD AND STEADILY PARALYSING ME.

THESE SCRUPLES CONCERNED NOT ONLY THE SUBJECT OF MY NARRATIVE, WHICH I FELT I COULD NOT DO JUSTICE TO, NO MATTER WHAT APPROACH I TRIED, BUT ALSO THE ENTIRE QUESTIONABLE BUSINESS OF WRITING. I HAD COVERED HUNDREDS OF PAGES WITH MY SCRIBBLE, IN PENCIL AND BALLPOINT. BY FAR THE GREATER PART HAD BEEN CROSSED OUT, DISCARDED, OR OBLITERATED BY ADDITIONS. EVEN WHAT I ULTIMATELY SALVAGED AS A “FINAL” VERSION SEEMED TO ME A THING OF SHREDS AND PATCHES, UTTERLY BOTCHED.

— W. G. SEBALD, *THE EMIGRANTS*

## PREFACE

As I write about W. G. Sebald’s writing—reifying, no matter how I may strive to allow contingency, that writing—I want to first acknowledge that for Sebald, reification was not so much a potential consequence of representation but writing’s inevitable end. And so Sebald’s novels compulsively un-write themselves, their photographs and reproduced ephemera validating not so much their subjects as their representational failures. Like the illegibility of pages covered in scribble, text crossed out or obliterated by additions, the repeated initiation of failure is similarly visualized in Sebald’s character Max Ferber, a painter exiled to England from Poland, who repeatedly applies a thick layer of paint to his canvases and then scratches each layer off, leaving the floor encrusted in the droppings, “the most palpable proof of his failure.” Flying in the face of historicism, in which, according to Walter Benjamin, the ruling classes extract as a spoil of the past “cultural treasures” that privilege the ideology of progress, Sebald’s historical factuality is found in debris. It is a methodology that obviates entropy and dares to sustain

the paradox of failure, in which detritus serves as historical fact and destruction fortifies.

Another paradox: scrupulous removal inevitably results in concealment, the paper covered in the writer's marks, the floor encrusted with the artist's paint. I imagined when I began writing a linen cloth pulled away and then, because I felt shame for telling certain stories, the practice of shaving the heads of (female) conspirators. The familiar metaphor is to lay bare: to disrobe oneself, to strip the other. But this kind of exposure is like a disguise. The truth that must be identified has lost its distinctive coverings.

Writing, then, seems dangerous, and yet if there were not so much at stake, the page would remain clean. Sebald's writing is as much about the ethical concerns with truth telling as it is about the truth itself. The exacerbation of failure may suggest flippancy or carelessness with his subject matter, but the fact is that Sebald's invitation to failure, his deep sense of his own failures in writing, derive from what he understood as the profound failures of the twentieth century—genocide, colonialism, environmental destruction. And so Sebald's work demonstrates that the way to bear witness to trauma and historical rupture is to represent the processes of negotiation and to enter into these processes from a distanced perspective that falters, that fails.

Because his is a generous and expansive text, I perceive my own experiences brushing against those of Sebald's narrators and characters. (The uncanny text is also a text

of resemblances and novelty.) And in following these threads, I wonder, like Rilke's Malte Laurids Brigge: "Is it possible that the whole history of the world has been misunderstood?" While this question about history's making, or the *poesis* of history, is not new—we see it reflected in Aristotle's privileging of poetry over history, and more recently in the work of postmodern historians—the following essays propose a literary poetics of history, one that treats the past as fundamentally contingent *and* knowable only through interventions that have their origins in memoir, poetry, and fiction writing. What I also mean to say is that I have intervened by including my own contingencies and those of the people I love. I recognize and know that in the end I will have failed in some ways, will not have uncovered enough, will have stopped short, and the most that I can hope for is the generosity of others.

And so I hold out a white cloth that the wind whips.



# PART I

## THREE HAUNTINGS AND THE QUESTION OF RECORD

1.



My grandfather's soul would not stay put. The first time it returned to us was a week after he died, and now it frequently enters my dreams. Last time, he was in his easy chair in the den as he always was in life. I asked the soul, "What are you doing here?"-

A few days after we buried his body, his soul entered my brother's bedroom, admired the cowboy hat my brother inherited from him, and sat at the foot of my brother's bed. My brother yelled, and when he did I also heard a crashing sound in my adjacent bedroom. We all knew, even my mother, that this was the soul of my grandfather.

Two years later, I encountered it again. I was sleeping in his sister-in-law's basement in Kansas. In the room, there were photographs of my grandfather and his four brothers, all of whom were much older than him. In these old photos, he was the image of my youngest brother, who I helped raise. I love my brother in a different way than I love other people, and perhaps this is why I also love a grandfather I barely knew. By looking at the images so intently and with so much desire, I invited the soul to me. This time it was not a presence in the room but like a presence inside of me.

Then when I was in college, I became very sick and had to take a leave from school. This sickness involved an incessant headache and neck stiffness, as well as disorienting, surreal nausea. As I became sicker, I started to lose my sight. First, an amoeba-like black spot swam across my field of vision. Then, imperceptibly, the

periphery darkened until my sight was both black and trembling, as if I saw through a plane of water. I couldn't tolerate light, so I spent all day and night lying on my left side in a dark room. The nausea, true to its etymology, and my murky vision gave me the sensation of floating underwater.

At a certain point in this blindness, I thought of my grandfather and his long, painful death from cancer, as well as the way he would talk to his dead brothers and chastise an old dog as if they were in his hospital room. "The dead are outside time," W. G. Sebald wrote, "the dying and all the sick at home or in hospitals." An instructor sent me two CDs, Vivaldi's *Gloria* and Brahms's *A German Requiem*. I listened to the requiem most, and since my grandfather was also German, I thought of him even more. I think we became close in that period of compressed, heavy darkness. I had entered a lonely space in which he had existed for the last eight years—death is profoundly lonely for some—and in that space we became companions.

When I started to take heavy, intravenous doses of steroids to repair the nerves in my eyes, I was warned that the chemicals would make foods taste bitter, but no one told me I would experience euphoria, delusions, and Boschian nightmares, nor did they warn me against making major life decisions. When my body started to heal, I wrote a poem about my grandfather's death and accepted a marriage proposal. In my mind, the poem was set to the requiem's fugues, and the marriage might as well have been too.

Illness, like a plumb line, drops one's thoughts into the infinite, to the center of what Sir Thomas Browne calls the *amphibian* body, "whose nature is disposed to live... in divided and distinguished worlds...the one visible, the other invisible." Illness and suffering (ranging from the terminal to something like *acedia*) occur so regularly in W. G. Sebald's novels that it seems a motif within a larger project, yet the sheer number of instances of suffering in his characters—many of whom are historical figures—suggests that pain is the way one feels unified not only with others who are in pain but with those who have died. Pain is also a way, we see this particularly in medieval mysticism, to trim the distance between the past and the present, to reconstitute the flesh, to resurrect the dead. As Ruth Franklin recognizes, Sebald's work presents "suffering without cause, as merely a part of the great pattern of pain that defines the human condition."

Early on in Sebald's last novel, *Austerlitz*, the title character's adoptive mother suffers from a mysterious illness made more uncanny by her compulsively powdering herself with cheap, white talc—as well as by Sebald's disorienting allusion to a congenial image of snow, and to a hardy grandmother in Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*. "The sickroom windows were kept closed," Austerlitz explains, "and the white powder which had settled on everything, grain by grain, and through which visible paths had now been trodden, was not at all like glittering snow." Rather, it reminds Austerlitz "of the ectoplasm that...clairvoyants can produce from their mouths in great bubbles which then fall to the ground, where they soon dry and fall to

dust." "No, it was not newly fallen snow wafting around the manse," Austerlitz says, "what filled it was something unpleasant, and I did not know where it came from."

The passage offers Sebald's typical sleight of hand—first he orchestrates our nostalgia and then reveals the loss it obscures—but doesn't it also suggest that, surrounding the body of the dying adoptive mother, there is the threaded membrane of the birth mother's energetic body? Isn't the white talcum dust, surely containing arsenic, like a haunting, the mania for it like a possession?

While Sebald writes of headaches and blindness, he never writes about the torture, holocaust, or serious intellectual errors of his actual subject—the violence of the twentieth century, the so-called natural history of destruction. It makes me wonder if pain and illness are a figurative haunting of these other violences. Not so much that the dead are with us when we are sick, but that they are a quality of the illness itself, so that the sick and pained body becomes a space in which the dead inscribe themselves on us, in which the body becomes a document of what Ovid called the "minor losses."

Pain is the pattern one traces to produce an insight about the visible and invisible world. Pain tells us we are connected. Pain is a plumb line into the infinite. The infinite exists everywhere—it is the kingdom of heaven, the event that washes blood-red over all time and space.

We make heaven come to us. We are little worlds made cunningly (John Donne). We are (in a word) the world's epitome (Du Bartas).

## 2.

When my husband Alex and I visited his family in Belgium, they, Germanic in nature, wanted to know what we planned to do and on what schedule we planned to do it. Being a guest makes me nervous, so I thought quickly and said I wanted to see Fort Breendonk. Although I did not recall that the fortress is only minutes from their home in Willebroek and was surprised that we arrived at the fort so quickly, I could never forget the language through which I first arrived at it. Early in the novel *Austertlitz*, Sebald's narrator—a fictionalized version of himself—visits Breendonk via Mechelen and Willebroek. He describes the fort, which had been planned in the early twentieth century as one in a series of forts to protect Antwerp, as “a monolithic, monstrous incarnation of ugliness and blind violence,” its thick, concrete walls, “covered in places by open ulcers with the raw crushed stone erupting from them, encrusted by guano-like droppings and calcareous streaks.”

One might say that the construction of the fort was never completed, that it was a ruin the moment it was conceived, a building that augurs its own destruction, to echo Sebald, not unlike the Twin Towers that seemed to me, when I saw them in 1994, damned. In 1914, nine years after its construction began, the Germans took Breendonk siege. Twenty-six years later, the Germans took it again, but by this time mechanized warfare had made it functionally obsolete. The Nazis put it to use as a penal camp for those who violated purity laws and then later for detained members of the Belgian resistance and other political dissidents, and finally it was all of this as well as a transit for Jews sent to Auschwitz. It functions nowadays as a memorial primarily to the Belgian Resistance. This final incarnation may be its only successful use. It is difficult to call even this purpose life affirming but, of course, that was never the intention.

Likely not much of the structure had changed since Sebald visited in the 1960s. The hum of blue neon sentences hung from ceilings (noting the first death at Breendonk and the living conditions), the portraits of political prisoners and SS guards, and the comprehensive memorial to the Belgian Resistance, namely the Witte Brigade, were fairly new. Enlarged photographs of prisoners on the walls and ceilings of one room, a kind of barrel vault, resembled the artist Christian Boltanski's installations of archival photographs and strings of lights in Parisian chapels and Spanish churches. Boltanski's installations problematize our devotion to memorials and the mystification of ephemera, and so it made sense that here we were in a

former concentration camp, unable to determine, as one so frequently finds herself in historical sites, an origin.

Sebald was also suspicious of representing loss. He explicitly expresses this skepticism in *On the Natural History of Destruction*, in which he argues that narratives of catastrophe (including those enacted by memorials) reify clichés, sentimentalize destruction, and nostalgically distort the "steadfast gaze" necessary for scrutinizing history. And yet, in his fiction, he also uses photographs and reproduced images, many of which seem to enact the sentimentality that he critiques—like Boltanski's enlarged and illuminated photographs of "the dead," or Roland Barthes's family photographs that announce "[they are] dead and [they are] going to die" by entering wholly into the enterprise of documenting the past through photographic representation, Sebald's prose performs representation's inevitable failure. If this sounds Platonic, it is. Socrates's dialogue with Glaucon plays out in the theatre of the twentieth century, with its obsessive archiving, documentation, and image-making: "These are only representations," Sebald seems to say, "What remains after they have failed is the inscrutable 'essence' of things."

The Witte Brigade, also called Fidelio, was one of the most prominent Belgian resistance groups, and many of its captured members were imprisoned in Breendonk. Alex's grandfather, Charles—not his biological grandfather but the man who has been with his grandmother for most of Alex's life—fought in the Witte Brigade between the

ages of 16 and 20. Like today's teenagers, Charles took a lot of photographs. He also blew up and sabotaged Nazi railways and stole Nazi weapons and supplies. My husband has inherited from Charles artifacts from this period: a tiny eagle carrying an indistinct object, a swastika, I think, that Charles used as a stamp to falsify identification papers; a metal ladle marked with an authentic eagle carrying a swastika that he stole from the kitchen of a Nazi soldier; and photographs he took on the day British soldiers liberated Antwerp.



In these photographs, all of which were presumably taken on "Liberation Day," as Charles's captions note, the British "Tommies" appear as thin, dirty boys; some photos show them walking, and in others they ride in tanks, flying the Union Jack. A group of children stoke a fire that burns on a sidewalk. Papers litter the ground. A building burns. In one photograph, a man with a drum around his neck leads a group of men and boys and what appears to be a funeral bier. A boy holds the handmade sign: *aan de*

*diep betreurde Fuhrer*. The deeply regretted Fuhrer—the mock funeral is satire but one senses the regret is sincere. In two others, effigies of Nazi soldiers, marked by homemade swastikas and the distinctive riding boots worn by the Gestapo (their glossy stiffness and hard soles a metonym for the awful violence and threat of National Socialism) hang in city streets. The effigies' proximity to human bodies evokes both the image of spirits hovering in the streets of Antwerp and the lynching postcards that haunt the history of American photography.



The photographs of Nazi collaborators are for me the most affecting. Their heads have been shaved, and according to Charles's caption, the men who stand beside them are the resistance group to which he belonged. Directly behind

them, there is a crowd of women, men, and children. Onlookers hang out of a second-story window. Both women wear thick black overcoats and face the camera straight on with their hands in the air. Others stand aside and behind as if to offer them to our gaze. According to Charles, they are mother and daughter. The mother's eyes fall to the corner of the photograph and her sad black handbag hangs from her raised arm. Her daughter's face is slightly dropped, so that her eyes, which fall on us, in fact, seem to meet our gaze, stare from under her dark, naked brow. She holds something I cannot make out—a white cloth or paper. Their vulnerability, ugliness, and shame are so obvious and the daughter's gaze so defiant and yet inscrutable, I find it difficult to look. But the soul in me intuits an "obtuse meaning," to use Barthes's term, that allows the significance of their treachery to continue while also saying that they have been wronged.

"Our concern with history," Sebald proposes, "is a concern with preformed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered." Like the dying mother's body channels the other mother's spirit, these photographs present a ghost narrative, a narrative that haunts the dominant narrative, that palimpsestically overlays both what the image depicts and what it symbolizes. Interestingly, the palimpsest garners our attention in often divergent ways. To read a palimpsest, we must make decisions about how to pay our attention because we cannot pay attention to everything all the time. Some texts exploit our propensity for focused



attention as well as obviating the way all meaning-making requires sliding between narratives. In *Blindness and Insight*, Paul de Man claims that “critics’ moments of blindness with regard to their own critical assumptions are also the moments at which they achieve their greatest insight.” We also learn from Tiresias that blind-vision can be a divination in which all time is present in a moment.

Paul de Man was also a Nazi collaborator in Belgium. As a critic eventually living in the United States and teaching at the best schools in America, de Man made many important contributions to the field of literary criticism. He was rigorous and charismatic, some say. He was a man. People believed de Man when he lied. They ignored what they suspected was the truth, and were purblind by his affection and intelligence. Recent studies suggest he was a sociopath totally at ease, as many critics of deconstruction would note, with paradox—while writing anti-Semitic articles for Nazi-run papers, for instance, he also sheltered Jewish friends in his home.

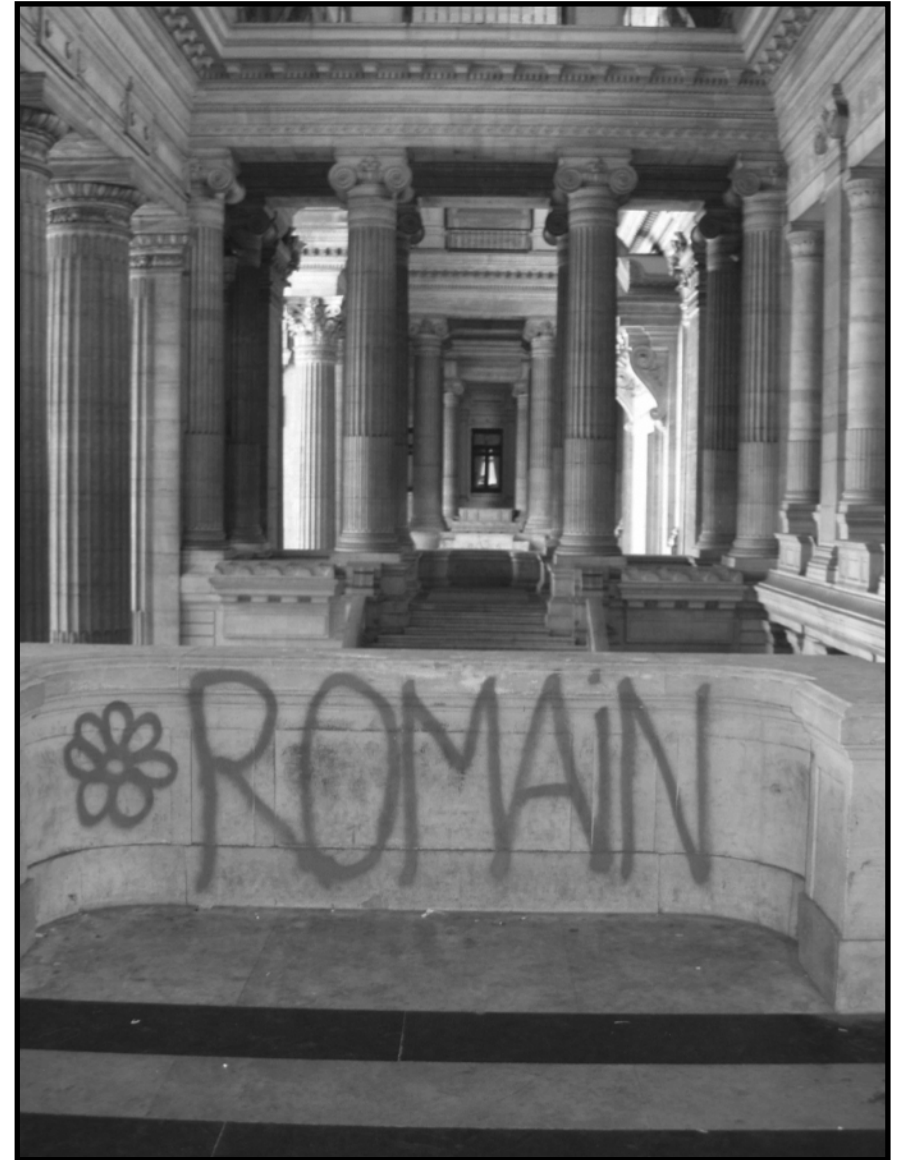
The movement between attention and inattention, blindness and insight, is essential to understanding the past, and it is always urgent and there is always much at stake. And it seems to me that to trace the boundaries of our blindness, to make out the shape of our lacuna is essential to writing about the past. Like Rilke’s Malte Laurids Brigge, who questions whether history has incorrectly paid its attention to the masses instead of to “the one person they were standing around because he was a stranger and was dying,” imaginative interventions in historiography

can treat the past as fundamentally contingent and yet knowable. More specifically, unconventional narrative structures emphasize the fracture that marks the devastation of history; experiments with perspective can recover that which has been subsumed in narratives that perpetuate notions of the universal historical subject; and defamiliarization can re-vision orthodox views on historical evidence and narrative.



### 3.

On the same trip to Belgium we also visited the Palace of Justice in Brussels. I couldn't get the image of it out of my mind since reading Austerlitz's description of the building early on in the novel. Built at the top of what was Gallows Hill in the Middle Ages, the Palace of Justice was the largest structure built in the nineteenth century. Its construction forced the demolition of a section of the Marolles neighborhood and the relocation of nearly two hundred inhabitants. Its depiction in *Austerlitz* is one of the most delightfully strange passages in the novel. In short, Austerlitz describes it as a monstrosity, a labyrinth of corridors, courtyards, and columns, and, as the narrator notes, its description occasions Austerlitz's rare lapse into apocryphal stories "of people who, over the years, had managed to start up a small business in one or other of the empty rooms and remote corridors of that great warren."



Our experience of the Palace of Justice in a century whose first 10 years were marked (in America, at least) by the constant fear of insecurity was not that different from Austerlitz's experience in the late 1960s. Because there is a 20-meter difference between the lower and upper town on which the palace is built, there are multiple levels, each with terraces so expansive that they appear to be the ground level rather than the roof of a lower-level wing. The structure is caged by the ubiquitous scaffolding of so many European buildings (rumor has it that the company hired to do renovations went bankrupt before removing the scaffolding). An indication of passing time, scaffolding becomes an element of the structure as buildings absorb the exoskeleton of their upkeep or become the *scriptio inferior* of an architectural palimpsest. Most of the entrances have been locked or blocked off by chain-link fences, forcing visitors to enter through the immense main doors. In one unused portico, the size of a large room, we disturbed a man sleeping on a mattress among his belongings. Another was clogged with moldering diapers, clothing, and newspapers. Inside, we wandered the halls freely, opened unlocked doors, marveled at the design. At one point, in some massive, echoing stairwell, we realized we had inadvertently walked onto the set of a movie. When we were kindly asked to leave, it was the only time our presence had been acknowledged.

The building was originally commissioned by King Léopold I in 1860 as a court of law. By the time the Palace was complete, in 1883, the first Léopold was dead; his son, King Léopold II, didn't show much interest in the palace

that had cost so many millions of francs to build. That is not to say he wasn't interested in building—he was known for it, but he was also interested in colonizing the Congo. By the time the building was complete, Léopold's attention was deep in central Africa and with the man, Henry Morton Stanley, whom he had charged with the task of making what would eventually become his personal fief. Despite his disregard for the Palace of Justice, the "huge pile of over seven hundred thousand cubic meters [that] contains corridors and stairways leading nowhere, and doorless rooms and halls where no one would ever set foot, [and] empty spaces surrounded by walls" became a trope, *ex post facto*, for Léopold II's ruthless ambition, which Austerlitz calls "the innermost secret of all sanctioned authority."

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the noun "sanction," in its earliest definition, is an ecclesiastical decree. It may also mean a secular law that enforces obedience by way of penalty, as well as through the "provision of rewards." "Sanctioned authority," in this way, is a tautological phrase, in which the authority is the agent of its own sanctioning. It is an authority that is always permissible, always appropriate, because it sanctions itself and operates under its own binding rules. According to Austerlitz, the Palace represents this meta-authority in which rhetorical claims point back toward themselves. Sanctioned authority can only signify itself; and in doing so, it is both absolutely powerful and meaningless. The walls that it constructs conceal its vacuity, and these open

spaces, made possible by hubris and negligence, are available for the taking.

One of the first known uses of the term “jungle” to describe “a place of bewildering complexity or confusion...[or] a scene of ruthless competition, struggle, or exploitation” occurred in 1850. The word itself is an Anglicized version of the Hindi *jangal*, and it was first used by English explorers to describe wilderness regions of India. I like that Sebald chose sanctioned authority and the Palace of Justice to describe what “jungle” has for so long come to signify—corruption, injustice, ruthlessness, and despair. I like that the term European explorers and colonists came to associate with their feelings of disorientation, that came to signify a circumstance of exploitation they invented, might be laid aside in favor of a term whose referent is a space that we can occupy, that we can occupy and “deterritorialize.”

This is what literature can do: in its transgression of discourse (genre, time, language) it occupies the “sovereign territory” of sanctioned authority. This is occupation, not as a seizure or land grab, but as a “reterritorialization,” such that meaning becomes movement into and through space and time; meaning consciously violates the law of origins. Through deterritorialization and reterritorialization, discourse and texts are “caught up in one another,” Deleuze and Guattari write. In this way, the book as assemblage not only deterritorializes discourses of power, specifically sanctioned authority, but also creates “abundant” discourses. The book can be a jungle—vibrant, dense, fecund.

## 4.

What is a ghost? We are anthropocentric, so when we think about ghosts we think about how other humans might endure their bodies: the soul that exists outside time and space. (Couldn't other things, like thought and object, also have an afterlife? What is the body and spirit of thought?) Let us call the ghost the absolute nothingness of that which once was full presence. Because we sense that what cannot be seen still exists and that what cannot be known might still abide, we give this nothingness shape by placing it in space; we call it an afterlife to set it in time. To attend to the ghost, the dead and unseen, requires first radically reorienting our awareness of what constitutes human life. History shows us that the grand narratives like capitalism and imperialism reduce the human subject to “a bundle of reactions” (Hannah Arendt) and human life to a “mere sequence of instantaneous experiences” (Adorno and Horkheimer).

To feel pain, emotionally, spiritually, and physically, disrupts bourgeois industriousness and decency. And for this reason, one is compelled to romanticize the individual's suffering or to read it symbolically (so that it becomes, once again, purposeful), while, as Ruth Franklin suggests, the insight of suffering may simply be suffering. When a great number of people have suffered, we understand this as aberration; we build memorials as if to codify and enclose that which is inexplicable and excessive. In this way, we are drawn toward hardening when we are met with contingency; we turn toward language when we sense emptiness. In the "essay" occasioned by her father's death, Kristin Prevallet writes that "grieving finds form in poetry," to which I think we could include other non-narrative forms, as well as ephemera, images, and the imagination's quickening. "Being open to receive this splatter of meaning hesitantly transmitted through difficult language," Prevallet writes, "is one way to practice living with uncertainty and doubt."

I am relentless in my attention, but I am also exhausted by the ghosts that dog me. "There is the impulse to make a grand inventory," Norma Cole writes, "to apply 'the superego of continuity' (Barthes), thereby always having available the information that determines which things are part of the desirable machine and which are irrelevant." The study of history is a vital gesture within the unity and interconnectedness of all beings. To steadfastly look toward the past, which is real and knowable, to see one's being-in-the-world as both continuous and evolving, as even consequential and transcendent, is essential to

easing the suffering of all beings. But if one opens herself to the past, the ghosts of her forefathers will inevitably haunt her. "Then," Cole continues, "there is an impulse to declare the impossibility of such an inventory."

And so, a lacuna that I will attempt to keep open.

In 1950, Alex's grandparents and his father moved from Brussels to Lomela (and then later Pelenge), in what was considered at this time the Belgian Congo. Alex's biological grandfather, Jan, the grandfather who preceded Charles, was hired by the Belgian government to set up and oversee a plantation that cultivated sap from which to make rubber. In 1960, when Congo became independent, the family moved back to Belgium and then four years later immigrated permanently to the Chicago area. Alex never knew his grandfather—he was killed by lightning three weeks before Alex's parents' wedding. The wedding still happened; photos were still taken. Knowing this, it is impossible to not understand the wedding as inextricably linked to death, impossible not to view the photographs as an aftermath of disaster.

There are also photographs and silent home movies that document their 10 years in the Congo. They include the typical family records of a baby (Alex's uncle) walking, tennis matches, and swimming pools. Some images seem specific to Jan's role in the Congo, such as a video edited to show the step-by-step processing of the raw materials that make rubber. Others, of course, seem to document the banal, and, to the Belgians, unfamiliar activities of

the Congolese (meal preparation and washing, as well as cultural practices—dancing and art). In some ways, the videos supply much information about what life was like for a Belgian in the Congo, and there are all the details that are perhaps only interesting to me—Bobonne’s dimpled smile, my father-in-law’s resemblance to my husband when my father-in-law was a child, the idiosyncratic way he stands with his right leg out and straightened. Yet we know little about Jan and even less about the actual experience of what it was to be this person in this place at this time. I think the only way to really explore these questions is with the smudged realism of Gerhard Richter’s *Uncle Rudi*.

This is a lacuna, but it’s not the lacuna I’m interested in.



In the home movies from the Congo, a mere 30 seconds record two women arranging a third woman’s hair. First the camera comes from one angle and then from another. The final frames focus on the hair itself, the product of the women’s handiwork. There isn’t a narrative, only information. The film seems to say: here is something women do, and here is the product. The silence and multiple camera angles, as well as the fact that the women do not look at the camera, serve as signs of objectivity and anthropological record. As if to also say: here is something inconsequential that now matters. Because if we widened our view, we could draw conclusions about social and gender relationships, fashion, or utility. So, on one hand, the film gives the impression of accident; it offers a comfortable moment for scrutiny and abstraction.

We know, however, that the presence of the observer influences that which is observed. At this level, there is more information. While I don’t know the answer to these questions, I must attend to their relevance: what difference does the colonial presence make in this image? How does curiosity demarcate difference between self and other? What is the gender and sex of the person operating the camera? What are the power relations? There are also the subjectivities of the observed and the observers. Not only can I not answer these questions for the film, I’m not sure I could answer them for myself—for many of us, the self is our most expansive blind spot.

“Attention is not the same thing as concentration,” Krishnamurti writes. “Concentration is exclusion; attention, which is total awareness, excludes nothing.”



There is another kind of privacy that bears itself in these images and that moves beyond the first meaning one could make of these signs, that moves from beyond the narrative scaffolding one is compelled to construct in the gaps. By privacy, I don't mean the anthropological observation of the other in her natural environment. I mean the privacy of essence. Essence not as Platonic Form (although perhaps there is that), but as the absolutely unknowable and yet totally present quality of consciousness, that which flickers at the edges of an image, a horizon that infinitely recedes as I approach it. Essence as that which I put my faith in

because really what other reason is there to outlast the chaos and destruction? Couldn't the document be the thing that keeps us alive, like the turtle in the lake that is so strange or the boy in the park who swings for hours by himself? To be alive at any point in time means that one has existed on a quantum level. We exist more fully and complexly than our mind as instrument of that existence could comprehend. How strange that these women and I are both creatures, that we are composed by this same universe and that we meet in this strange way. And how strange that we could be so different and that this difference is so necessary. Stranger still is to wonder how we might co-exist and how some part of me could attempt to close the gap with these questions, and it can never be closed, and still the universe continues to happen in its way. Sometimes I cannot understand what it means to live on this earth with so many other people or what it means to be a presence among so much absence.



# PART II

## THE SENTENCE OF ABSOLUTE TIME AND SPACE

A poetics is essentially invisible except that it manifests in writing, in which the text both declares one's thoughts and, at best, serves as evidence of those thoughts. To manifest is to make something known. A manifestation is that moment when the ghost shakes the tambourine.

Of my humanity, I particularly relish spontaneity, which some might relate to whimsy or, at worst, wantonness, but it is not. Spontaneity is awareness, a considered and non-habitual act of the will.

My favorite writers show me that writing is an ethic. And so an ethic is both evidenced and engendered by the text. It is thought and praxis. The body has movement; so do thoughts. Some things happen invisibly and others clamor to become tangible.

By reading W. G. Sebald, I learned an important lesson about syntax: it is a paradox of interlocking binaries (public and private, far and near, narrative and lyric, hypotaxis and parataxis) and the cohesion of paradox is itself an ethic. Then, three years later, I traveled to Damascus, and learned an important lesson about time that reinforced something else I had learned from Sebald: time is neither linear nor broken but fully present in each moment. And while it is true,

as Sebald writes, that the dead return to us, I find it more accurate to say that we are the dead, forever returning, and we return, naïvely and habitually, to places and people of both suffering and bliss.

The sentences of both linear and broken time have their poetics because these metaphors mark our experiences with time, *but the sentence of all time or of absolute time waits.*

How could this theory of absolute time and of return, which reconciles the presumed discreteness of the synchronic and diachronic, and is unreasonable, find a form (the intersection of the synchronic and diachronic is obvious, but how might one figure the intersection of parallel synchronies)? How does one proceed without first acknowledging that this is nothing new, neither radical nor specific, but noted, traceable, and broad enough to be a poetics? Let us provisionally call it “lyric prose,” knowing that this term is merely a matter waiting animation. So then, how does one write a poetics without losing sight of its spirit, that is, without laying aside the spirit, in an attempt to construct an argument, the reasoning and aesthetic of which engulf the equally important other third? Julian of Norwich heard the spirit say, “I am the ground of your beseeeking.” By attending to the presence of something, one, of course, engenders it.

For Sebald, twentieth-century occidental positivism taken to its inevitable conclusion resulted in a catastrophic philosophical involution. The resulting destruction (the

furnace and its fire, isolated lights in darkness, buildings that augur their ruin, the absence or deformity of the body) inscribes the modern landscape, and it is through this inscribed wound that Sebald reads the world. While I would like to propose a vision of the modern landscape as private, as other from my human experience of it and so neither whole nor destroyed, I cannot help but to understand it through the wound of my love for it. Two weeks after I left Syria, the military reportedly killed the first anti-government protestors. Since that spring in 2012, hundreds of thousands of Syrians, some hailed as “rebels,” “combatants,” and “insurgents,” have killed each other. And the civil war only becomes more complicated as bodies accumulate at other borders, on other shores—the text that records death is always a living text. Of course, violence of this sort is neither new nor unique to Syria, but a sentence that wishes to hold all time present will also be heavy with it, even the time that is to come.

Sebald wrote like a dead man, or like a soul wandering, enmeshed in its memories and the cipher reflected back to him. John Beck describes *The Rings of Saturn* as “the record of a final passage from this world to another.” The novel opens in a Norwich hospital. The narrator’s admittance to the hospital occurs a year to the day after his walk through the county of Suffolk. From his immobile perspective, the material world seems to have shrunken to the frame of his hospital window, a “colourless patch of sky,” draped with black netting. The netting that covers what now occurs to him as a totally alien world resembles the narrator’s description, on the final page of



the novel, of the old Dutch custom after death of draping mirrors and “canvasses depicting landscapes or people or the fruits of the field,” lest the soul be “distracted on its final journey, either by a reflection of itself or by a last glimpse of the land now being lost forever.”

The world and self at a remove—reflected back in mirrors and in paintings that depict with verisimilitude—engrosses the soul (Plato) and lends one an “orthopedic” image of wholeness (Lacan). In this way, we can read *The Rings of Saturn* as a complex distraction of notes, a more or less catalogued re-presentation of the sensual world that enthralls and ensnares Sebald’s narrator. This was Sebald’s genius: to write both like the soul that metaphorically looks down on creation and like the body that must negotiate creation, must experience it. In this way, a lyric prose marries (Aristotelian) inductive and (Platonic) deductive modes of inquiry, as well as Renaissance humanism’s *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*.

But a lyric prose is also a writing of absolute time, at once far- and nearsighted, and, therefore, a specifically textual incident (how else could such a view be possible?) marked by repetition. Lyric prose manufactures reality as a text and the self as a kind of doppelganger to negotiate (read) the uncanny coincidences and resemblances that network through representation. The text is total mediation, visionary and intuitive, and it shuttles the inside to the outside. In Plato’s *Theaetetus*, Socrates describes his exclusively male students as women giving birth (“the many admirable truths they bring to birth

have been discovered by themselves from within”), which also occasions the axiom “to learn is to remember.” Similar to Socrates sexing the male student female, lyric prose involves radical reconsiderations of the self. To write the self neither stabilizes nor authorizes identity. “Autobiography” happens in the caesura between the original and the replica, embodied by the doppelganger that doubles but cannot be the self.

The absolute time of the text—enslaved to neither empiricism nor rationalism—represents time both diachronically (from above) and synchronically (dipping into “the abysses of human thought and fate” as if with wings, Lamartine imagined upon visiting Lebanon). The farsighted is an ascendant point of view, marked by its desire to describe synoptically the geographic and temporal landscape in symbols, to which it then gives order in dependent and subordinate relationships, their prepositional proximities creating a long and complex grammatical construction. In this involution of landscape, a sentence that can account for the palimpsestic nature of time in a space like Damascus, for instance, forms. From the ascendant point of view, this landscape reflects back a diffuse but coordinate reality. It can be, at worst, an infinite expanse of mirror, and, at best, lively pattern. Either way, it is captivating.

Text is a representation of the world, and as de Certeau explains in “Walking in the City,” there are at least two ways of engaging with the world-as-text: from an ascendant or voyeuristic point of view, or as a walker—one who writes

the city. For de Certeau, the voyeuristic point of view and the city form a reciprocal relationship by which voyeurism exists because of outsized buildings and engineering that offer the semblance of rational organization. I am reticent, however, to assume that the ascendant point of view is traditional, status quo, a "solar Eye, looking down like a god" or that "the fiction of knowledge is related to the lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more."

On the one hand, the city restricts de Certeau's ascendant point of view to its abundance of vertical architecture, whereas a poetics need not depend on physical structures to achieve its points of view. In this way, the ascendant could look down on field, forest, bodies of water. It can fly. On the other hand, if we regard the convenience of the city's immediate organization as semiotic, Gerhard Richter's Townscapes evidence the simultaneity of destruction and of the grid's precise angles. To look specifically at destruction from an ascendant point of view is an ethical vantage because it traces in the landscape the moment that rationality, of which de Certeau writes, reaches its limit. The sentence is specific to the ascendant point of view because the sentence is organizational structure realized in grammar. Its visual presence and its impetus to order meaning form diachronically, accounting for phenomena over the course of time. I want to take this idea for granted because I find it to be true although not uniform in every sentence. It is important to witness the failure of organizational limits, and we can only witness the failure of this organization from above or by attempting the structure.

Suppose that from the ascendant you could see that strange seam where the city meets the uninhabited space of the landscape; the city might look like a scab whose textures are abrupt and mark a kind of wound. Find a scab on your body and explore its textures with your fingers or, to experience dislocation, with your tongue. Or suppose you could look down on your city now; I think you would see textures that are each different, are each a kind of texture-as-palimpsest that holds in it development, green zones, and destruction. And in these textures you would struggle to find the paths of your habitual wanderings, and the magnitude of space would seem to shrink and swell; water-treatment facilities, landfills, power plants, cranes, and scaffolding would reveal themselves; and the borders of your city would leak into the leaking borders of other cities, and your sense of belonging to a space, of occupying that space, would tremor because you would see that without borders there is only space, and you and everyone occupy all of it.

In this abundance of structured and spilling meaning, you would encounter vertigo, a term that in German expresses both the physical sensation of dizziness and the impalpable feeling of disorientation. In the title of his first novel, *Schwindel. Gefühle*, Sebald parses the German compound *schwindelgefühle*, dislocating the physical manifestation of vertigo in the definition of *schwindel* (giddiness, dizziness, staggers) from the perception (feeling, sentiment) and phenomena (sensation, touch, sense of feeling) of *gefühle*. *Gefühle* extends the language of sensory experience to non-empirical knowledge, instinct, and intuition. The

secondary definitions of *schwindel* are at play as well: swindle, fraud, trickery. While Richter's Townscapes lend us a model of what the ascendant sees, "vertigo" gives us language to describe its experience—the sensation of falling through space and through time. Ultimately, vertigo results from a kind of cognitive dissonance, in which the familiar (the "home" of time and space) remains empirically hidden but intuitively apparent.

Through this vertigo, the ascendant makes mistakes. That is, even in its ability to see macroscopically, it misrecognizes (*méconnaissance*), troubling the role of reconnaissance. Again, Richter's bird's-eye paintings invite various and contradictory readings. The ascendant point of view is imprecise, blurred, and textured, or it sees exactly the landscape as flat, monotonous, dichromatic. Distance traverses both ways, just as Sebald writes that Sir Thomas Browne's prose reads "as though one is looking down through a reversed opera glass and through a microscope at the same time." I enjoy the sentence for both its desire and its failures. But a writing that is an ethic can neither believe everything it sees nor exploit its ability to shortcut defamiliarization with clichéd and habitual narrative lines that score the surface of meaning. The steadfast gaze perpetually observes and accepts, for it also cannot afford to adopt permanently an attitude of suspicion, and the sentence is the tool by which vertiginous contingency remains at play.

The peripatetic, on the other hand, expends energy and is jointed. It is more or less calloused, more or less in good

physical shape. It has courage, melancholy, also alacrity, and while it staggers with fatigue and while it is sometimes scarcely able to move and while it is sometimes deranged by sadness and hunger, it is purposeful, pointed, driven. It makes do. It has an aesthetic yaw and appreciates architecture and the forest. As a representation among representation, its travels negotiate the uncanny coincidences and resemblances natural to the catalog. It is intelligent, sensitive, easily frustrated. It projects memory and identity into its migrations, shifting between moments of clarity, in which it identifies and asserts patterns, and resigned confusion, in which it is lost in mental and physical labyrinths that, as you might expect, are dank and creepy. These volatilities are negotiated by the body—its attachments, desires, and suffering. It lies down with its head pointed north to show itself the steering point in the morning.

The peripatetic, traveling through the text-as-world, resembles the lyric tradition in its individuation, its privacy, its shortsightedness that manifests in moments that are introspective or emotional. These moments occur synchronically (that obelisk of the moment, both the point of rupture and redoubling) because their expressions as texts seem to happen without antecedent. The labyrinth of a city, like Damascus, or of the forest (an unseen child shouts from an unseen window, an animal stands so near you smell it) is appropriate here because these landscapes naturally close around the walker, preventing her from retracing her route, enforcing a constant here and now. An event exists as if for the first time, so that every peripatetic

experiences the labyrinths, obstacles, and spontaneous games of the medieval quest. Only when the peripatetic assigns meaning to the inevitably strange encounters of walking do they become textual tropes.

Getting lost is an obvious consequence of the peripatetic point of view, because perspective tightens around the landscape, like a portion of the whole field plumps under the sphere of the magnifying glass, so that even the familiar becomes strange. (Consider how the microscope afforded fleas and drops of water sudden novelty.) But the experience of the peripatetic is not novel so much as it is uncanny. In his strange and insightful essay of the same name, Freud reveals that the uncanny, or *unheimlich*, is not merely unfamiliar or un-homely as the German definition would suggest. Like any chimera, *heimlich* "belongs to two sets of ideas...on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other that which is concealed and kept out of sight," making *unheimlich*, Freud concludes, "a sub-species of *heimlich*." Freud relates the "recurrent similarities" associated with the uncanny to the repetition compulsion, which, in short, describes what happens when trauma is shocked out of repression, where it should remain hidden, resulting in the futile compulsion to repeat the moment of trauma to suture the rift in the psyche. The repetitive behavior is both revelatory and enigmatic, as if removing the white sheet reveals the true ghost. The redoubling of the trauma takes the shape of the unfamiliar familiar and gives pleasure and pain.

The ascendant's vertigo is the peripatetic's uncanny. "Getting lost" is the not-new compulsion, the involuntary return to the same routes and emotionally charged spaces, and, thus, the impossibility of getting lost. Freud's repetitious "involuntary" return to a red-light district in provincial Italy is a kind of lyric, in which "getting lost" makes disorientation structurally impossible. Rather than foregrounding the uncanny logic of neuroses, Freud indicates that logic is itself uncanny. Peripatetics "walk out" their ideas and questions, making natural and engineered landscapes interlocutors. A peripatetic philosophy entails a physical engagement with the world in which movement and the negotiations of geography—borders, roads, nation states—make meaning. If we understand the lyric subject as one who is interior, then it is reasonable that her peripatesis should confine her in her own logic. As Lyn Hejinian writes, "The synchronous keeps its reversible logic, and in this it resembles psychology, or the logic of a person." If we read the peripatetic, or the lyric subject, as a representation negotiating representations, as necessarily artificial, then it also makes sense to recognize that the peripatetic revels in synchronous association as well as in the uncanny logic of association, the endless returns.

Besides Sebald, my favorite peripatetic is the poet John Clare. For Clare, there is no inside and outside, no boundary between self and home, and where language fails to express this extreme permeability, Clare invents one. This is the unique ability of the peripatetic: to define instantly his relationship to the landscape in a language that both describes and determines it. Cadence, parataxis,

and enjambment lend each line a steady velocity, while the careful and empathic observations of animals and landscape, observations obsessed by that which a landscape hides, evidence an outlook saturated in place. When in 1807 an act of Parliament encloses the open-field parish of Clare's native Helpston, Clare expresses his sorrow in a poem that shares the place name and whose final stanza depicts this loss for an uncertain "traveler" who "makes for the home which night denies to find," and uncannily augurs the strange journey he will make 32 years later. When he moves from Helpston to Northborough in 1832, Clare's "walking" further petrifies into hard, sharp memory of his "old home of homes," and his tendency toward anxiety and depression increases. Five years later, Clare voluntarily enters the care of Dr. Matthew Allen in High Beach, nearly one hundred miles from Northborough.

My favorite piece is not a poem but a kind of prose travel log from Clare's four-day "Journey out of Essex." This is really an escape on foot from Dr. Allen in Essex four years after his admittance to High Beach, and a return to Northborough. Like any good adventure, there are "gipseys," traces of symbolic language (the first public house he encounters is called the Labour in Vain), sleeping out of doors, getting lost, hunger and fatigue, and, of course, a goal to reunite with lost love that ends in devastation. The longer Clare is on the road and the longer he goes without food, the more uncanny the journey becomes until it finally ends anticlimactically with Clare feeling "homeless at home," a phrase that resembles the paradox of *unheimlich*. The most striking discrepancy

between what he expects and what is true is the absence of Mary Joyce, who burned to death a year after he left for High Beach. The two songs he composes for her the night he returns reflect Clare's disappointment at the truth and simultaneously his unwillingness to accept it as such. In one, he writes "Truth never acts contrary," an ambivalent admission of both reality and persisting disbelief that marks the peripatetic point of view and, as an uncanny logic, resembles the physical labyrinth.

The ascendant, in its distanced perspective, bears witness to these shifts between certainty and uncertainty, and uses grammar as a shunt through which to guide the peripatetic. Yet the seeming coincidences, resemblances, and labyrinths of the peripatetic reciprocally describe in the landscape meaning and outlined space in foot-shaped paths. The peripatetic and the ascendant are one and the same in lyric prose; this mongrel resembles something uniquely human. The ascendant categorizes the potential recklessness of representation, and then enters the laws of representation it has fashioned through the peripatetic as a means of dismantling them. This adventurous mode is both aggressive and resigned. It manifests easily if the ascendant invests in its catalogues, if patterns seduce it, if idiosyncrasies in color, form, and composition hold its gaze, for instance, but its intentionality requires self-reflection at that point of absolute desire. It is a sentence of absolute time and space.

Systems of thought whose appearance of order and rationality seek to curtail the contingency of the other

can only be reckoned from the point of view of an external, steadfast gaze. Yet entering into the system by representing it forefronts and creates contingency, showing that systems of order are only representations and that the ungraspable “essence” of things remains. No point of view, even the impossible point of view, can be entirely stable, entirely accurate. For writing to be also an ethic, it must include contingency. Uncertainty must weave into the text in an obvious and useful way. This is how authority and point of view are undermined. The ascendant and peripatetic points of view do not pass themselves off as natural or as realistic, although what they experience may be natural to their artificiality. If the authority of a text can be undermined, then other kinds of authoritative structures may be as well, including time.

Yet this is nothing new. The Russian Formalist’s basic concept of “defamiliarization” wrests literature’s strange effects from the authority of Freud’s psychoanalysis, by proposing that the literary work is uncanny not by virtue of its failures at repression but by the way it forces the reader to attend to the text, the impossibilities it makes possible. And it keeps these impossibilities always present, avoiding the “natural attitude” of realism. This is especially relevant for the sentence of absolute time, for the ideology of time (its telos, obsession with the past and with discrete ideas and existences) is perhaps most insidious because of the way it limits our responsibilities in the world, cutting us off from each other, treating thought as ether that simply dissipates.

A final paradox persists: the tawdry dialectic of heaven and earth at the center of Western metaphysics. The privileged ascendant, of course, relates to the forms, the soul, to weightlessness and to mastery. We could trace this perspective throughout much of human thought. Human flight and winged beings are complicit with divinity or at least with the ethereal threshold that joins heaven and earth, suggesting that weightlessness engenders insight and union with the supernatural. The peripatetic relates to the earth, decay, sensuality, confusion, and myopia. Its heaviness keeps it earthbound and, therefore, subject to natural laws.

We’ve had enough of these binaries. To approach the difficult task of joining terms, let us also acknowledge the very real and even urgent wound that I have tenderly marked by my avoidance, and, in doing so, invite a third notion—thought—to disrupt the dialectic.

While repetition compulsion usefully models the overlay of the synchronic here-and-now with the diachronic past, it also functions like the Stations of the Cross or similar religious pilgrimages, in which the ascendant masters all time through the wound of time while the peripatetic must doggedly revisit the wound through the abjection of its body. Nostalgia also marks a kind of return that on the surface seems predicated in pleasure, while, at its root, the past’s pleasure, uncannily tethered to “home,” reappears in the present as pain. Trauma throbs at the center of the ascendant/peripatetic and diachronic/synchronic binaries. Ossified thought that envisions time and space as

fragmented and the soul and body as separate threatens the buoyancy of absolute time and space.

Where is the thought that breathes? Where is the breath that lifts us like the bird that flies without thinking flight? How will we write the sentence that takes flight and returns, that glows, that accounts for all time and infinitely progresses? Abundant with time, space, and these absences, our sentence is abeyant, withheld by the breath and then spilling beyond retraction. It cannot end until it becomes other than itself, an other contained in its firm self.

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