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Melancholic Remembrance in the Trilogy of W.G. Sebald

by

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**Introduction: Tracing Sebald**

Nursing the losses accrued as a result of historical calamites, a melancholic historian such as Walter Benjamin seems, according to his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” to face a crisis that works against his very nature. As Freudian theory conjectures, a melancholic internalizes loss so deeply that it violates contemplation. Yet if a German citizen such as W.G. Sebald were haunted by a mass horror such as the Holocaust, but encountered a national amnesia with regard to its recent unfolding, the ethics of how to represent and critique its legacy forces a melancholic to examine his relation to history in an oddly glaring light. As Sebald realizes in his trilogy, constituted by *Vertigo, The Emigrants,* and *The Rings of Saturn,* historical representation is fraught with political and cultural dangers intensified by the fundamental problems of human memory that dictate its stylization. To respond critically to such issues facilitates a discourse that can barely survive its own condemnations. Grappling with concerns such as the fallibility of human memory, the tricky ethics involved in representing personal and or historical trauma, or forms of historical oppression that portend a certain kind of nihilism experienced by the fatigued historian, may tempt one to retreat into a melancholic disposition.

A historiographic melancholia, in Sebald’s writings, reworks itself into a Benjaminian advocacy to resist surrendering to the imperialist agenda that dictates the traces left behind by history. One such influence from which my reading of Sebald’s trilogy draws is Friedrich Nietzsche, with particular regard to *The Use and Abuse of History.* Nietzsche’s charge to interrogate the past validates Sebald’s unease with a representation of history that overlooks its victims. Nietzsche calls upon aspiring historians to forge a criticism that not only rakes the past for its offenses, but also pushes for a reckoning with the inheritability of past offenses. The construed horizon such a criticism might yield grounds a historian’s hope with regard to the
future. As the trilogy progresses, Sebald implicitly takes up Nietzsche’s concerns about whether history is indeed doomed to repeat its errors.

The suspension of a hope to escape historical repetition recalls Benjamin’s reflections on the philosophy of history. Benjamin is perhaps the single most influential philosopher for Sebald’s novels. Rejecting the paradigm of history as a progressive narrative that might redeem the past, Benjamin problematizes the notion that we could ever fully determine our place in history, a point that Sebald both affirms and also deviates from in his trilogy. The impending “tiger’s leap into the past” in the “open air of history” that Benjamin posits to counter the idea of historicism becomes a feature of Sebald’s own philosophy of history. While Nietzsche depicts the chains of history as unbreakable linkages, Benjamin perceives a disordered, fractal sequencing of history that might effectively represent Sebald’s worst fears, and yet provides a technique that could break with the tyranny of historical order.

Sebald’s form of melancholia becomes unique for what could be thought of as a Nietzschean activism infused with the uncertain prognosis of Benjamin’s formulation of historic disruption. The instability that ensues, along with the intuition-based discursiveness of Sebald’s texts, poses a practical problem for a reader interested in tracing the volatile arc of his melancholic relation to the past. Yet this is ultimately what my thesis sets out to do.

Chapter 1 marks the beginning of Sebald’s journey in Vertigo, a text ultimately concerned with the problem of his dependence on literary predecessors, given the unreliability of memory. Fickle and transient products of the mind, memories are all too susceptible to their formative circumstances, and as a result, are often disrupted by faulty impressions caused by trauma as well as cultural priorities that selectively honor past figures or events. Sebald’s attempt to identify a means to adequately represent history in light of these issues turns into the despair
and self-alienation of a narrator who cannot quite trust his precursors to provide his bearings. Whether through photography, his own intuition, which at times takes the form of paranoia, or maps, Sebald explores the topological potential of literary representation, leading him to retrace the footsteps of his predecessors, Kafka and Stendhal, in an endeavor to recuperate their historical positioning in his current state. Sebald remains bound to exploring the limits of rationalism to explain the uncanny coincidences of his own life. While limited by the constraints of a secular rationalism that wards off melancholia or superstition, Sebald articulates the ethical stakes in salvaging historical relations, especially for disenfranchised literary characters who have failed to be adequately represented. His fiction serves as the locus for their revival.

Chapter 2 recapitulates—and then extends—Vertigo’s discourse on the ethics of representation. By mechanizing his impulse to represent, Sebald, in The Emigrants, examines the impossibility of representing trauma, or is trying to contain the trauma by limiting it to the detached relationship of chronicler to subject. He hereby appears to resolve the ethical issue of empathically over-identifying with his subjects while maximizing the productivity of his recording, which often suffered in his prior vertiginous travels. Yet, his newly forged model reflects Sebald’s dissatisfaction with its visionary inadequacy; the model tries to historicize its subjects up to their deaths, and yet, cannot explicate the spectral quality of history’s survivors, who return to haunt the present. The beginnings of a full-fledged melancholic superstition are in the works by the end of The Emigrants because Sebald cannot shake off the feeling that he is haunted by the spectral survivors of historical representation.

Chapter 3 examines Sebald’s turn to melancholic superstition as a direct response to the uncanniness that rationalism cannot explain away. The metaphysics of the universe his text occupies become subject to the pull of the melancholic planet Saturn. Drawing upon the
community of literary predecessors he evokes in *Vertigo* and reexamining the relation to his rationalism in *The Emigrants*, Sebald configures a mode of historical superstition that incorporates, transcends, and redeems the cultural losses accrued by a rationalist’s representation of history. Mourning for martyrs who have been forsaken by various societies, Sebald’s vision of melancholia adopts a prophetism that fortifies a sense of a collective history in which the foreboding of historical materialism becomes the revelation of both apocalypse and redemption. Sebald’s melancholia crystallizes the movement of the histories he traces and contemplates a redemptive apocalypse that could be conceived in his literary representation of history.
Chapter 1: Forsaking Memory

“I still find it astonishing that we all seem to be connected with one another somehow. And in view of this, the whole history of persecution, even if one knows its roots and reasons, seems all the more incomprehensible.”

- W.G. Sebald

1990. *Vertigo* alternates between quasi-autobiographical travelogues and biographical sketches of Beyle, better known as Stendhal, and Kafka. The fluctuation of subject with apparently little regard for the reader’s bearings and the thematic dramatization of its title together produce a combination suited for narrative disorientation. Indeed, Sebald’s melancholy seems willing to surrender the novel’s structural cohesion in favor for its whimsically varied attentions. What begins with Beyle’s recollections of a Napoleonic battle morphs into an obsession over the plaster of a hand of a woman who has spurned his affections. The focus on Beyle shifts to the narrator’s own wanderings throughout Italy without warning. A documentation of Kafka’s tribulations reverts to the meditations of the narrator’s return to his hometown. All the while, the novel’s anxieties over memory’s unreliability make for a text that keeps questioning the efficacy of its representation. *Vertigo* could be understandably read as a flummoxed response to its own question, “What is it that undoes a writer?”

Contrary to the impression of what a skeptic may diagnose as the ruminations of a scatterbrained melancholic, *Vertigo* organizes its stream of consciousness with the directionality of narrative cohesion. Rather than simply affirm the ironic hopelessness of a forgetful chronicler, Sebald has written a plot that attempts to surmount its central conflict in a more ambitious and systematic fashion than what may be at first conceived. To do so, *Vertigo* assumes from the very

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beginning that Stendhal’s and Kafka’s legacies function as crucial referents for the narrator’s own experiences. First claiming its inheritance of their legacies, including the tribulations that previously plagued both authors, the text reverse engineers the nature of their influences to prove the narrator’s literary birthright.

The beginning section called “Beyle, or Love as Madness Most Discreet,” for example, serves as a collage of referents that are sporadically deposited intra-textually throughout the narrator’s own travels. This collection of imagery, such as the carried dead body, the opera house, and the disorientation owed to historical turmoil, all recur as the narrator’s own experiences. The undoing of a realist writer due to his unraveling memory is therefore claimed and reenacted by the narrator. Under this order, Beyle has, in a sense, already undergone for Sebald the literary sickness of perceived inadequacy, both on the level of lovesickness, which persists in relation to the unattainable object of each writer’s affections, and artistry. The unattainability that spurred Beyle’s literary productivity drives the narrator’s own chronicling. The status of the narrator’s own memories has been set up so that it can be explicated in relation to Beyle’s and, later, Kafka’s. Historic uncanniness is, to an extent, a contrived literary sensation.

Nonetheless, while a constructed heredity may suggest the breakthrough possibility that Sebald’s narrator attains an enlightenment that eluded his predecessors, the inherited irony posed by memory similarly afflicts the narrator as well. Beyle’s volatile memory of the past, which fluctuates between “grey patches” and images of “extraordinary clarity [Beyle] feels he can scarce credit them,” remains intact as a condition that the narrator describes under near-identical terms: “I sat down for a while . . . and . . . as I still remember with undiminished clarity, all of a sudden no longer had any knowledge of where I was . . . A menacing reflection of the darkness
spreading within me loomed up."² That human memory, the most fundamental device of remembrance, is found to be unreliable remains a crisis. What, if anything, can be written to the satisfaction of a writer aiming to represent history when memory has chronically failed him?

For a significant stretch, the novel appears unable to advance past its characteristic disquiet over the status of memory. Remembrance’s disorientation, stemming from the slippages of memory, establishes itself as the novel’s title and primary theme, and reveals the narrator’s understanding that a fallacious recollection is primarily a problem of memory’s structure. According to the narrator’s imagery, memory is constructed as stacked perspectives and experiences, all of which ultimately fail to capture either the lived or remembered essence of the moment in question. Beyle, a war veteran who journeys to return to the sites of the battles he fought during his youth, realizes that a memorial, whether in the form of his memories or a constructed monument, fails to embody the moment either form attempts to revive:

Now, however, he gazed upon the plain, noted the few stark trees, and saw, scattered over a vast area, the bones of perhaps 16,000 men and 4,000 horses that had lost their lives there, already bleached and shining with dew. The difference between the images of the battle which he had in his head and what he now saw before him as evidence that the battle had in fact taken place occasioned in him a vertiginous sense of confusion such as he had never previously experienced. It may have been for that reason that the memorial column that had been erected on the battlefield made on him what he describes as an extremely mean impression. In its shabbiness, it fitted neither with his conception of the turbulence of the Battle of Marengo nor with the vast field of the dead on which he was now standing, alone with himself, meeting his doom.³

Vertigo, the dizzying sensation when one loses his balance, is pertinent to the heights that elicit its feeling. The peaks to which both his memories and the monument rendered its viewer airborne suddenly dissipate at the discovery of their conceit; the artificial height of the monument and the bird’s-eye perspective of his memory never existed, and gravity draws the viewer back to the narrowed perspective limited to one’s own position. At the end of his

² Sebald, Vertigo, 5, 115-116.
³ Ibid, 17.
figurative tumult, Beyle stands in a confusion of tenses: standing in the present, remembering the past, with no commensurability between either conception, creates an emergency of temporal unlocatability. The warning of Beyle’s prologue, in effect, serves as the premise of the rest of the novel: the status of allusion in *Vertigo* teeters at the brink of collapse when the narrator has no standing metaphor to ground his work as a writer of history.

Confronted by this figurative void that perplexes the direction and movement of his narrative, Sebald’s narrator gravitates towards a mode of scientific empiricism to systematically experiment with different forms of evidence such as his own intuition and photography. In turn, these possible remedies to memory’s unreliability are quickly disproven and scrapped, but then are returned to for cynical reconsideration. After the nearly insoluble dilemma depicted by Beyle’s encounter with monuments, the narrator transitions in the next section to his own perspective, as if in a retreat to safety wherein he can only believe his own eyes; but not even the narrator’s own intuition can be trusted because of his hyper-paranoia. Plagued by a sense of imminent calamity that is fortified by superstitious signs, the narrator grows more afraid by virtue of his suspicions’ chronic unfulfillment. “Plainly this was the moment immediately before a disaster,” the narrator foretells as he sits in a pizzeria in Verona, Italy. The foreboding seems confirmed when he next picks up a newspaper whose headlines describe a series of murders committed by a mob, one of which appears to have taken place in the very same pizzeria. The suspense causes the narrator to flee to another train where he “[prepares] for the worst,” only to reach an anticlimactic end when nothing, in fact, happens. “Gradually I began to feel better,” the narrator allows before the passage runs out of breath and ends on silence: “And a heavy silence lay upon the place, broken only by the bellowing of some nameless animals waiting in a siding to
be transported onwards.”

We follow the narrator as he flees when the symbology is unequivocally aligned to foretell a certain doom that awaits, but the momentum dissipates in the anti-climactic emptiness that seems to mock his paranoia. Intuition becomes painfully inadequate as a compass for a writer whose paranoia is continuously found to be unfounded.

An abandonment of his empiricism never formally follows, however, when his predecessors’ influences manifest in the form of doppelgängers. When their doppelgängers thereby appear as a critical sign of a historic uncanniness his intuition fails to predict, his attempts to photograph their incursions are nonetheless thwarted and ridiculed.

Not long before the bus departed at twenty-five past, a boy of fifteen climbed aboard who bore the most uncanny resemblance imaginable to pictures of Franz Kafka as an adolescent schoolboy . . . I remained motionless on that bus seat from then on, embarrassed to the utmost degree and consumed with an impotent rage at the fact that I would now have no evidence whatsoever to document this most improbable coincidence. Continually I heard the sniggering of the two lads behind me, and in the end it was affecting me so badly that, when the bus stopped in Limone sul Garda, I took my bag down from the luggage net and got out.

Claims with no proof record an outlandish and ultimately fictitious trail of thought. The reader’s suspicion that the narrator’s desperation to prove his memories may be, from the very beginning, an impossible project because he imagines rather than remembers starts to gain momentum as his failures to produce photographic evidence continue. In another incident in which, seven years later, the narrator returns to the same Pizzeria Verona he once fled from, he hallucinates that “two men in black silver-buttoned tunics, who were carrying out … a floral-patterned drape, what was plainly the body of a human being.”

After this haunting apparition passes, the narrator describes how difficult it was to finally have someone photograph the front of the pizzeria, the site of his premonitions that were conceivable but not conclusively proven:

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4 Sebald, Vertigo, 81.
5 Ibid, 90.
6 Ibid, 125.
When I asked the photographer in the shop next door why the business had closed down, he was unwilling to say anything, nor could I persuade him to photograph the front of the building for me . . . Out on the pavement I wandered irresolutely to and fro before at length I approached a passer-by . . . and asked him to take a photograph of the pizzeria for me, which he did, after some hesitation . . . When, however, I added an urgent request to photograph the flock of pigeons that had just flown from the pizza into the Via Roma, and had settled on the balcony rail and the roof of the building, the young Erlanger, who, as I now thought . . . was not prepared to oblige me a second time, probably, I suspected, because his newly-wed bride, who had been eyeing me the whole time with a distrusting and even hostile air and had not budged from his side even when he was taking the picture, was plucking impatiently at his sleeve.  

Despite the narration’s meticulous level of detail, the single accompanying photo to this passage, in contrast, is ambiguous and hazy; one cannot definitively decide, from scrutinizing the photograph, whether the pizzeria is even truly closed at the time of the shot. The narrator seems to realize his photograph’s futility as well; he puts down the camera for a long photographic hiatus, seemingly discouraged that photography alone cannot function as the unambiguous evidence the narrator seeks. Photography documents the negative space around his most provocative claims, but unwittingly renders its own narrow precision as a gaping absence that continues to leave the narrator’s memories up for contestation.

Witnessing history’s redundancies in a manner overwhelmingly palpable and yet unconfirmable, the narrator glimpses the verge of a self-recursive madness:

It might be shown, though, that when Dr. K. stood in the porch once again, on the threshold between the dark interior and the brightness outside, he felt for a moment as if the selfsame church were replicated before him, its entrance fitting directly with that of the church he had just left, a mirroring effect he was familiar with from his dreams, in which everything was forever splitting and multiplying over and again, in the most terrifying manner.  

This crisis of ontology devolves into a kind of endless regression in the unremitting absence of external validation. The stakes of identifying a form of adequate evidence intensify as the narrator grows increasingly desperate to prove his sanity.

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7 Sebald, *Vertigo*, 127.  
8 Ibid, 149.
The final mode of evidence left available to the narrator’s devices is maps in both a literal sense (i.e., maps we use to find our way) and a figurative sense (i.e., a reasonable claim to delineate what it represents). Maps are the alternative most intriguing to the narrator, who time and again returns to and explores their potentiality; however, maps are initially no different from the other forms of evidence he discredits due to a number of issues that crop up. As the opening case study of Beyle demonstrates, maps, despite their intentions to squarely pinpoint the user within a space, are drawn according to the warped legend of their maker: a map drawn by Beyle, who believes he has reproduced the scene with traumatic clarity, purports to depict the battlefield he found himself embroiled in during the year of 1800, complete with the delineations of positions and paths of the ambush labeled with the assurance of a survivor’s omniscience. Despite the significant narrative effort to decipher Beyle’s map, the narrator subsequently discredits the map’s veracity: “Yet, of course, when Beyle was in actual fact standing at that spot, he will not have been viewing the scene in this precise way, for in reality, as we know, everything is always quite different.”\(^9\) Indeed, the nascent skepticism is proven true: Beyle later comes across a newspaper article, which renders an engraving that matches his recollections of the mountainous scene supposedly grounded in direct experience. His memory is merely a copy of the engraving, displaced easily by a representation he had fleetingly seen on one of his travels.

Still, the narrator cannot bring himself to dismiss entirely this topological fantasy of representation. The aestheticism of maps, in essence, illustrates a compelling oxymoron: could generative reiteration lie as a nascent realization at the borders of realist representation? What are maps, if not representations that retrace the steps we already know that can still lead us to new

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destinations? Their exposing, detailing quality eventually leads the narrator to consider in a new light the shortcomings of representation as possibly redeemable.

The allure of maps becomes explicit during an encounter with the artist Pisanello and his artwork, in which the narrator openly admires the realism of his work:

What appealed to me was not only the highly developed realism of his art, extraordinary for the time, but also the way in which he succeeded in creating the effect of the real, without suggesting a depth dimension. Upon an essentially flat surface, in which every feature, the principals and the extras alike, the birds in the sky, the green forest and every single leaf of it are all granted an equal and undiminished right to exist.10

The democracy evoked in Pisanello’s piece relays that each detail, which has been weighed and figured into the artist’s calculus, synergistically lends itself to the complete impression that all there is to be seen has been duly recorded. In the face of the painting’s orchestrated presentation, the viewer cannot help but appreciate the complete, splendid utopian ideal of what aesthetic works could accomplish by mapping. The egalitarian appeal arises again when the narrator sets about reading a book for beginners learning Italian:

In this little booklet . . . everything seemed arranged in the best of all possible ways, quite as though the world was made up purely of letters and words and as if, through this act of transformation, even the greatest of horrors were safely banished, as if to each dark side there were a redeeming counterpart, to every evil its good, to every pain its pleasure, and to every lie a measure of truth.11

Yet the indulgence of such an impression suspends its disenchantment by ignoring the complicating presence of depth: the fantasy of some distilled truth and interpretive mastery apparent in certain two-dimensional literary or aesthetic works of history is impossible to discern in a poly-dimensional world. Historical representation that utilizes the principles of topology is, at best, an approximation of an omniscient perspective designed to capture and chart the its most dominant features; however, the complicating element of depth, the arc that rotates about the

10 Sebald, Vertigo, 73.
11 Ibid, 105.
axes that topology inhabits in all of its flat glory reminds the viewer of its relativist rather than absolutist depiction. In a fictitious scene wherein Dr K (Sebald’s thinly veiled pseudonym for Kafka) meets an old general at a sanatorium, the general shares a piercing observation that simultaneously challenges the abilities of representation, which pales in comparison to the complexity of reality: “Tiny details imperceptible to us decide everything! . . . It is a fundamentally insane notion, he continues, that one is able to influence the course of events by a turn of the helm, by will-power alone, whereas in fact all is determined by the most complex interdependencies.” The general’s insistence upon the workings of dispersive forces that underpin a single event rejects the notion that an aesthetic survey, no matter how comprehensive, could recuperate the “interdependencies” that otherwise function as chance. Any kind of meaningful configuration retrieved from what are essentially mishaps of circumstance is cobbled together by the retrospective-facing narrative, which self-selectively suggests the presence of Fate.

The lure of topography and guidebooks may initially teeter due to the implicit rebuke of rationalism, which insists that full representation is impossible, but the disappointment over their inadequacy is short-lived. The narrator begins to experiment with fictionalization as a means to fill in narrative voids uncovered by the method of topological representation. His aspiration to represent in a manner faithful to his own introspection as well as the general’s interconnectivity produces a hybridity that is both guilty and yet transcendent of a self-validating form of representation. The narrator’s retracing of Kafka’s journey from Verona, for example, conveys an apparent intersection that manages to retain the impression of coincidence:

12 Sebald, Vertigo, 156-157.
14 Ibid.
As I washed my hands I looked in the mirror and wondered whether Dr. K, travelling from Verona, had also been at this station and found himself contemplating his face in this mirror. It would not have been surprising. And one of the graffiti beside the mirror seemed indeed to suggest as much. Il cacciatore, it read in awkwardly formed letters. When I had dried my hands, I added the words nella selva nera.\textsuperscript{15}

Although the narrator is intermittently seized by the fear that retracing could indicate that, in fact, nothing has changed from the past at all, his “trial runs” that follow parts of the route that Kafka once embarked on has proven otherwise. The narrator’s retracing of Kafka’s steps does not add up to mere repetition, but rather, a renewed engagement with a historical predecessor that bears its own unique scrawl. The empiricism the narrator employs then seems to mitigate the condemnation of the general’s rationalism and defends the aspirations of aestheticism as not exactly misguided, but as melancholically generative. Perhaps it is only by charting trodden courses that limitations, whether memorially or aesthetically, can be trespassed—and then surpassed.

If Part II of \textit{Vertigo} somewhat tentatively skirts this recombinant approach to writing memoirs, Part III discards the scruples of its conscience. \textit{Dr K. Takes the Waters at Riva} fully commits to mapping the tribulations of Kafka throughout his time in Italy and furthermore trespasses his subject’s privacy by constructing a psychological and emotional portraiture on the premise of the narrator’s conjectures. Such fictional interventions are refigured to be necessary; after all, since veracity cannot be entirely preserved no matter what method is employed, the narrator can ethically potentiate fiction to fill in the voids of memory. The narrator follows Kafka as far as the records can trace him, and upon finding unsatisfactory disappearances where Kafka has slipped from the archives, the narrator intervenes before the archival silence can end the narrative thread.

\textsuperscript{15} Sebald, \textit{Vertigo}, 86-87.
In tears, so Dr K. recorded the following day in Desenzano, he sat in the surrounding darkness, observing the transformation into pictures of the minute particles of dust glinting in the beam of the projector. However, there is nothing in Dr K.’s Desenzano notes to tell us of what he saw on that 20th of September in Verona . . . was it, as I initially supposed, . . . the story of the unfortunate Student of Prague, who cut himself off from love and life . . . ? The extraordinary exterior shots in this film, the silhouettes of his native city flickering across the screen would doubtless have sufficed to move Dr K. deeply, most of all perhaps the fate of the eponymous hero, Balduin, since in him he would have recognized a kind of doppelgänger, just as Balduin recognizes his other self in the dark-coated brother whom he could never and nowhere escape.16

The narrator’s sleight of hand marks a transition nearly imperceptible to the account that becomes a fictive musing on a contingency that can never be neither validated nor disproven; inculpable fiction ultimately does not lie. While at first a memoirist’s clean break from the faculty of memory as the primary tool to record memorable passages of time appeared too radical to be performed with a clean conscience, the narrator has found a pivot point of justification. In the act of forsaking memory when it reaches its own cul-de-sac, he sets about to forge hypotheses that derive from the research he had formerly abandoned with a new kind of artifice made only by a writer finally unbounded by stringent literary ethics with regard to factual veracity.

The enhanced creative freedom produced by the narrator’s revised suppositions, in turn, provides opportunities that come from this recombinant approach of memoir-making. Given that the reader is at least somewhat aware of the cautioning suppositions that render Sebald’s memoirs speculative rather than factually accurate, the opportunity for the narrator to give literary form and shape to—or in other words, to map out—the steps of a fictional Kafka is unabashedly in the narrator’s hands. Relishing the role of a fugitive scientist who follows his musings, the narrator finds ethical refuge in the assertion that his works are now comfortably nestled within the domain of fiction; the transitions between biographical records to his

16 Sebald, Vertigo, 151.
imagination oscillate back and forth with ease. The account of Dr. K becomes, in effect, if not self-evident, at least self-evidence.

Facilitated by the introduction of this cross-genre and its quasi-factual qualities, fictive characters are transfused with the blood of its own author. In a letter that Kafka writes to his confidant, the narrator notes Kafka’s suppressed homoeroticism that never amounts to an open confession:

Do you understand, my dearest, writes Dr K., can you understand (please tell me!) why it was that I followed this man down Zeltnergasse, veritably lusting . . .? . . . At this point Dr K. surely came within an inch of admitting to a desire which we must assume remained unstilled. But instead, remarking that it is already late, he hastily concludes his letter, one which he had begun writing with comments on a photograph of a niece of Felice’s, writing: Yes, this little child deserves to be loved.17

Yet with the knowledge of such suppression of desire, the narrator can no longer read Kafka’s work under the same light. The story of Gracchus the huntsman, who is cursed to wander for eternity, absorbs the biographical information of its author so that it also transforms Gracchus into the victim of a punishment that seems to likewise castigate him for his desires: “But as it was Dr K. who conjured up this tale, it seems to me that the meaning of Gracchus the huntsman’s ceaseless journey lies in a penitence for a longing for love.”18 Cursed to a morbid solitude of humble submission to the winds that guide his helmless boat, Gracchus becomes a compelling figure that embodies the curse of a traveling writer due to his capacity to represent his author. The moments where self-control is lost, the moments of distraction compelled by their desires, result in Kafka’s incomplete confession that evaporates mid-composition and in parallel, Gracchus’ “touching, in a moment of distraction, the knee of the man who was to have been our salvation.”19 Indulgence, the only staying force that may halt one’s wanderings, also

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17 Sebald, Vertigo, 167
18 Ibid, 165.
19 Ibid, 167.
opposes the requisite solitude of a writer who travels to document his findings. The fragile self-assurance of Gracchus in his immortality is intertwined with his circumstances that his ship is perpetually lost at sea. To rest at shore of one’s homeland is to die, but to lie prostrate while being borne by the sea is to live for centuries. The currents seize Gracchus’ boat and denies him his final rest.

The restless abstinence undergone by Gracchus-like figures not only denies them a kind of dissolution they initially sought, but also a silencing that discredits their failure as unfortunate slips rather than punitive predicaments that brought about their demise. The narrative closure of Gracchus’ cause of death obviates his suicidal impulse and instead substitutes for it a cliché that looks the other way: “[Gracchus] went in pursuit of a chamois—and is this not one of the strangest items of misinformation in all the tales that have ever been told?”

Similarly, the omission that seems truly unsuspecting of the hand suicide may have played in one’s death recurs in the case of Hans Schlag, the huntsman, who formerly managed the Black Forest before moving to the narrator’s hometown, W. Although the autopsy upholds the narrative closure that the whole ordeal was an accident that led to Gracchus’ unfortunate death, a slight tremor of cognitive dissonance remains, voiced only by the narrator’s grandfather,

> In my grandfather’s opinion it was out of the question that Schlag, who must have known his own territory like the back of his hand, should have ended up on the other side purely by mistake. By the same token, nobody knew what the hunter, if he had deliberately gone out of his way, had been doing there, over the Austrian border, at this time of year of all times and with the weather closing in.

Although the evidence subjectively testifies to extraneous causes that lie outside the explaining power of a mere accident, the taboo of voicing the possibility of suicide muffles and perpetuates the denial of desire even in the realm of the narrative. Forced abstinence, which denies Kafka

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20 Sebald, *Vertigo*, 165.
21 Ibid, 246.
and Gracchus respectively their ideal of consummation, pervades in utter totalization that
dictates both the interpretive core and periphery of the incident. Sebald’s critique of this manner
of forbiddance, which enacts itself as unforgiving retribution to those who indulge in their
desires, sympathizes with those who submit to the vertigo of the cliffs they fall from. The
impossibility of respite in the form of escapism carries the tragic undertones of a figure who has
not been adequately recognized for their efforts; in response to this commemorative absence,
Vertigo doubles over the original edition by writing in its tribute. The second time around, the
narrator provides critical insight that contextualizes both Kafka’s desperation over his
bachelorhood and Gracchus’ seemingly chance fall.

The literary disenfranchisement of fundamentally misunderstood characters leads to the
construal of madness that renders such characters illegible. Having been deemed psychologically
unstable, whether by self-admission or by social ostracism, those deemed mad are led to an
experience of erasure. Erased characters dot Vertigo’s pages despite the novel’s efforts to
resuscitate their lives. For instance, succumbing to his own peculiarity as inferred from his
intense feeling of isolation due to his inability to commit to his betrothed, Dr K. checks himself
into a hydropathic establishment in the hopes to electrify himself into the tranquility that
otherwise seems unattainable. During this period, Dr K. submerges into anonymity and goes so
far that even social interactions are in a manner untraceable: “In accordance with the expressed
hopes of Dr K., they agreed that neither would divulge the other’s name, that they would
exchange no pictures, nor a shred of paper, not even a single written word, and that once the few
days that remained to them were over they must simply let each other go.”22 Another character,
“Uncle Peter,” who has been known to be eccentric by his family and friends, has at one point

22 Sebald, Vertigo, 159.
built an observatory from which he could gaze at the stars all day and night. Despite the entreaties of his family, Peter could not be persuaded to leave and instead, sat in the comfort of the illusion he built for himself, as if he were “in a planetarium, that the star-lit heavens were vaulted above his head.”23 Yet as the end of World War I draws to a close, Peter is sent off to a camp for non-commissioned officers, after which he spirals into madness. The onset of darkness he once treasured becomes an impending trigger of “fear that he had to cover his ears with hands or flail about wildly.”24 “Not till the sawmill burned down did anyone think of the lookout again,” which is the same year Peter is sent to a hospital for his condition.25 After a single night, Peter leaves behind a note, which read: “My dear Doctor! I have gone to the Tyrol. Yours most sincerely, Peter Ambrose,” and is afterwards, never seen or heard from again.26 The pressure of assimilation, whether beset by prevailing cultural norms or by circumstances bred by war, leads to a sense of incongruous environment that exiles unassimilable characters. Those who cannot conform without traumatic psychological cost are expurgated from the schema of representation that has deemed them unsuitable for historical remembrance.

This self-selective repertoire of documentation adds to the narrator’s impetus to rectify the agnotology related to madness, but his efforts must contend with the destabilization of his reading inherent to marginalized subjects who have been erased from memory (i.e., in their absence of documentation). Retracing their footsteps as far as he can follow them before resorting to speculation over their psychical whereabouts, the narrator’s reconstitution of them likewise absorbs the qualities of madness that prevent a stable reading of the narrator’s own work. The majority of Vertigo’s biographical production therefore transpires in the epistemic

23 Sebald, Vertigo, 203.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid, 204.
gaps of available biographical information, and just as Gracchus reflects the unmoored anguish of its author, so the narrative reproduces the profound alienation its subjects endure. Madness—by which the narrator’s chosen subjects are often afflicted—cannot be understood through a logic grounded in material reality: photographs, physical monuments, and maps in their own right are insufficient to understand the subjects they portray. It is the affective mode that has been written off as a kind of socio-cultural incoherency that gestures towards the critical but ostracized psychology in the epistemological register of the culture that Vertigo attempts to recuperate.

Stendhal and Kafka’s returns as uncanny doppelgängers are fully embraced with a new valence of sympathy, as the narrator cannot quite bear the potential loss of their epistemic contributions after their respective sanities deteriorate. Their reappearances are typically depicted as independent manifestations until the narrator recounts a memory of the attic he was forbidden to venture into as a child. Despite the warnings of Mathild, his family’s dear friend, of a chasseur who haunted the largely abandoned garret, the narrator’s transgression is set as compulsory for a child in an environment that coaxes him to follow his piqued curiosity: on the top landing on which he would perch to pore over his favorite atlas was a painting of a leaping boar that scattered the frightened hunters from their breakfast in the forest. Yet it is the illustration’s caption that most compels the narrator to venture into the attic, where he meets the merged form of his predecessors. The atlas leads him to the painting, which persuades him to enter the Ardennerwald of the house, where he thereby meets the grey chasseur, or the grey huntsman:

I became aware of something like an apparition, a uniformed figure . . . But when I stepped closer, not entirely trusting my eyes, and touched one of the uniformed sleeves that hung down empty, to my utter horror it crumbled into dust. From what I have been able to discover since, that uniform, trimmed in the colours pike-grey and green, almost certainly belonged to one of the Austrian chasseurs who fought against the French as irregulars around 1800 . . . It seems that one of the more distant Seelos forebears led a contingent of one thousand men levied in the Tyrol.
across the Brenner Pass, down the Adige, past Lake Garda and onto the upper Italian plains, and there, with all his troops, was killed in the terrible Battle of Marengo.\textsuperscript{27}

The Tyrolean grey \textit{chasseur} as the climatic fused allusion to both Kafka and Stendhal at the height of its anticipated discovery, however, crumbles into dust the moment the narrator reaches out to touch the figure. What initially appears as pre-destined, in retrospect, are the futile signs to caution the writer against his temptations to lumber into history with the air of the chosen. The narrator’s gauche leap into the past adopts the unmistakable proportions of the boar who follows the scent of the hunters’ meal and leaps into the clearing to claim the food it has deemed as its unmistakable right. The disastrous encounter extinguishes the recursive point of historical preservation that seems to abide by its own private processes, contingent on the absence of entitled intrusions: “It was easy to imagine that this entire assemblage of the most diverse objects had been moving, in some sort of secret evolution, until the moment we entered, and that it was only because of our presence that these things now held their breath as if nothing had happened.”\textsuperscript{28} The destructive aftermath of topological fantasies has been forewarned, but is once more ignored and carried out to its tragic consequences.

To revisit the past is to follow out the grim conclusion that everything touched even by the well-intentioned historian is irrevocably ruined. \textit{Vertigo} cannot escape the devastating implications of its project of historical representation, but it continues to document the narrator’s experiences despite the cost. The imperative to record that such artifacts have once existed, even if their very discovery ruins their state of preservation, becomes the novel’s stance. The narrator’s mandate to retrace the vestiges of the past at the cost of those traces actualizes a self-conscious tension of a writer aware of his work’s accumulating liabilities that can collectively

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Sebald, \textit{Vertigo}, 228.
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid, 224.
\end{itemize}
undermine the value of his enterprise. The narrator, far from making claims of a totalizing logic that boldly asserts his understandings as both valuable and vindicated, presents instead a diffident critique that is a far cry from the arrogance of, say, an Adornian conception of a cultural critic. Reaching deep into the past, the narrator essentially wills his predecessors into existence due to the perceived injustice of their incomplete historical representation, and by doing so, as Adorno would claim, he shows how they “contribute directly to the perpetuation of the system as . . . edification.”

The critic’s cry of injustice can only “[ek] out its existence of injustice already perpetrated in the sphere of production.” Nonetheless, the narrator cannot help entertaining the possibility that his project is not altogether doomed by its entangled ironies. In rare instances, the narrator will sometimes admit that even the world seems to validate his ambitions, even if for a fleeting moment:

And I could hardly believe my eyes, as the train was waiting at a signal, to see a yellow brimstone butterfly flitting about from one purple flower to the other, first at the top, then at the bottom, now on the left, constantly moving. But that was many months ago, and this butterfly memory was perhaps prompted only by a wishful thought.

The resulting ambivalence, despite its cynical leanings, never quite fully dismisses Vertigo’s redemptive potential.

Insofar as the novel is concerned, Vertigo’s narrator carries ambitions unique to the predecessors whose footsteps its project assiduously follows. Recovering their presences, mildly successful even if by a kind of desperate resuscitation that requires fictionalizing to overcome documentary amnesia, he still retains qualms about the moral efficacy of his project. While literary preservation necessitates a kind of destruction by virtue of its interference, it remains indifferent to the ethical or traumatic valence of the events it seals. The ending of Vertigo, in

30 Ibid.
31 Sebald, Vertigo, 260.
which the narrator peruses Samuel Pepys’s diary recounting the Great Fire of London, cautions against an optimism that assumes a progressive want or need for history. The vivid vicariousness of which the narrator dreams of the fire grimly revitalizes the ashes that once fell down upon a ruined city and in essence, resurrects a disaster still capable of ontological trauma. Pepys’s horror reconstitutes itself in the narrator’s dreams to ask the same breathless question that doubles over as an uneasy interrogation of preservation itself: “Is this the end of time?”32

32 Sebald, *Vertigo*, 262.
Chapter 2: Mechanism of Remembrance

“The whole sphere of authenticity eludes technological . . . reproduction.”

- Walter Benjamin

1992. *The Emigrants*, a homesick text of four displaced characters each of whom bears an affective relation to Jewish legacy, dwells uneasily in the shadow of the Holocaust. Its characters wander in exile, but the haunted, posthumous quality of the narrative stems as much from the characters’ lives as the writing itself. W.G. Sebald commits to the imperative of representing the narratives of his lost emigrants as a means to break the unbearable silence that followed after the death knells that Germany, his country of birth, had tolled a few decades before. How is one, in the position of a writer of history, to make sense of a violence that robs one’s breath when contemplating its monstrous immensity? To what extent can a writer document trauma of overwhelming proportions, so pervasive that even the mundane aspects of his characters’ lives seem uncanny, and not surrender to the devastation that ultimately claims them as well? The ethical, historical, and literary dilemmas that arise crowd Sebald’s project nearly to the brink of incoherency, but Sebald’s urgency to record the traces of characters who are already half-gone by the time of our encounter with them is just enough to sustain our continuing to read on without merely sinking into their despair. We begin with Dr Henry Selwyn, a married Anglo-Lithuanian Jew who dwells in his memories of a past lover, and who eventually commits suicide. Paul Bereyter, whose one-fourth Jewish bloodline destroys his prospects as a schoolteacher, ultimately lays himself to rest on the railroad. Ambros Adelwarth, the narrator’s great-uncle, who serves as the butler of a family of German-Jewish emigrants, later dies during electro-shock therapy delivered by the very institution which also admitted the son he once dearly served. And
lastly, Max Ferber, a German-Jewish painter, who after being sent abroad to England as a child soon after the start of Holocaust, learns of his parents’ death after their deportation has already claimed their lives. Sebald reconstructs their lives and ventures to postulate a form of literary remembrance immersed in the eldritch narratives of his protagonists. His ambition, however, begets a volatile relation to his ontological involvement as memoirist with his subjects. Initially committed to refraining from exercising a prerogative of empathy or understanding, Sebald draws on a mechanical understanding of remembrance, spurred by the rise of industrialism, and its appealing automatic production in the aftermath of devastating destruction. As his evocation of Manchester reveals, the lifecycle of an industrial city that was once boomed during the inter-war years undergoes decline as the business of war slowed. Similarly, Sebald’s resultant chronicling mechanism, while so crucial to the understanding of his movement throughout his own text, then becomes unhinged by virtue of its own inadequacies. Its built-in distance from and precarious dependence on other subjects become the very means by which the artifice of his remembrance is revealed and critiqued.

The narrative restlessness of *The Emigrants* travels through documentary evidence in a seeming onslaught upon the reader, inviting the question: what is worth literary preservation? In the face of this question, Sebald’s narrator transforms his stream of consciousness into a mechanism of democratic chronicling that designates nearly every detail to hold epistemological potentiality. As a result, his melancholic aversion to historical loss technologizes its documentation’s processes: films, photographs, journals, and interviews are all tools for an agitated author to bind what the world has inscribed onto him, but the deluge challenges the psychological limits of what a person’s memory can bear. In response to this flood of experiences, Sebald forms, in effect, a narrative dam by which to regulate the currents that run
through the text. Rather than attempting to wade hermeneutically through a never-ending flux of memories, Sebald has built a mechanism that identifies and selectively recycles currents of energy, which then erupt into his narrator’s consciousness through acts of remembrance.

Take, for example, a moment wherein the cinema, Sebald’s narrator watches a film in which Kaspar Hauser distinguishes

for the first time between dream and reality, beginning his account with the words: I was in a dream, and in my dream I saw the Caucasus. The camera then moved from right to left, in a sweeping arc, offering a panoramic view of a plateau ringed by mountains . . . follies, in a pulsing dazzle of light, that kept reminding me of the sails of those wind pumps of Lasithi, which in reality I have still not seen to this day.33

Upon watching Kaspar on screen, the narrator suddenly recalls from years before a memory where his friends, Edwin and Dr Selwyn, are walking him through photographs of their past mountain-climbing excursions:

In the last of the pictures we saw the expanse of the Lasithi plateau outspread before us, taken from the heights of one of the northern passes. The shot must have been taken around midday, since the sun was shining into our line of vision. To the south, lofty Mount Spathi, two thousand metres high, towered above the plateau, like a mirage beyond the flood of light . . . [T]he orchards and clumps of other trees, and the untilled land, were awash with green upon green, studded with the hundreds of white sails of wind pumps.34

This circumstantial alignment is precise: the wind pumps of Lasithi, as the shared machinery of both landscapes, channel the narrative currents to facilitate the linked remembrance. Notably, Sebald’s metaphorical wind mills successfully—and powerfully—harness and regenerate the captured energy. As a result, an alignment of memories generates the usurpation of one memory by the other: Kaspar’s memory of his uncertainty over the delineation between memory and reality dictates the ongoing, present experience of the narrator, and it becomes ambiguous who exactly has never seen the wind pumps of Lasithi, or the Caucasus, or the Lasithi plateau “to this

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34 Ibid.
day.” For an instant, the narrator’s voice blurs into that of Kaspar, and it is unclear whose voice is addressing the reader due to the precise nature of Sebald’s recording.

Yet even a literary model dedicated to recovering memories is unsustainable in its own right. The problem that any wind pump faces is the velocity of its captured winds: too-high wind speeds outpace the mill’s ability continuously to harness its energies, and too-low speeds produce a negligible output that can hardly justify the mill’s necessity. According to the former case, the wind pumps of Lasithi are indeed confronting potent winds that catalyze a powerful recollection on the narrator’s part, but all too quickly, the mill’s blades are outpaced and unable to continue. Accordingly, Kaspar’s memory charges into the narrator’s consciousness, but dissipates in the next instance; Sebald writes on, never pausing to deliberate on the incursion of memory, as if he has already forgotten the memory as soon as the coincidence has been duly recorded. The narrator’s hold over his memories for hermeneutic purposes barely exists, save for the only discernible purpose of conveying a sense of déjà-vu cataclysm. The narrator is merely a body through which these operations churn. The wind mills await another configuration of chance circumstances to facilitate another remembrance, on another unforeseeable day.

In the absence of the narrator’s personal contemplations, *The Emigrants* centers on Sebald’s ethical prerogative to represent the victims of history, which, in turn, launches a hyper-fixated quest to document what his subjects confide in him. On one hand, Sebald’s narrator offers others the opportunity for introspection as he furiously scribbles down their transcriptions; on the other, he retains a remarkable detachment from what he faithfully records without empathetically undergoing the pathologies that so often afflict his subjects. Take his interaction with the artist, Max Ferber, for instance, who painstakingly describes to the narrator the experience of a traumatically physical agony. After Ferber relays his memory of excruciating
pain, Sebald’s narrator perfunctorily records the artist’s “lengthy pause,” and promptly resumes the clip of his transcription after the artist collects himself and continues to reflect. While the narrator closely transcribes Ferber’s personal history, he remains unconcerned, despite the inherent intimacy his work requires. If there is no triggered remembrance catalyzed by what his subjects tell him, the narrator maintains his identity as a chronicler, as his pointed insertions of “said Ferber” and “Ferber continued” incessantly remind the reader. Here we run into another limit of Sebald’s model of remembrance: confrontations with the memories of others refuse empathetic relations and only recur when triggered by chance circumstances. Confirming this mode of approach, which leans towards an objectivity devoid of such empathy, Sebald writes,

This, as I have come to realize, was merely a fabrication of our minds, because, even though Paul knew and understood us, we, for our part, had little idea of what he was or what went on inside him. And so, belatedly, I tried to get closer to him, to imagine what his life was like in that spacious apartment . . . Such endeavors to imagine his life and death did not, as I had to admit, bring me any closer to Paul, except at best for brief emotional moments of the kind that seemed presumptuous to me. It is in order to avoid this sort of wrongful trespass that I have written down what I know of Paul Bereyter.

Empathetic distance does not necessarily transfer to all aspects of their interaction; critic Eric L. Santner contends that the narrator remains “in proximity to the ‘neighbor’ when we have entered the enigmatic space of his or her hauntedness . . . One is not so much trying to see the world from someone else’s point of view as trying to register the blind spots of that point of view and to unpack the stresses condensed in this blindness.” Yet such a reading potentially overlooks the critical disorientation that Sebald’s narrator confesses time and again, and may overemphasize the degree to which his narrator performs the labor to “unpack the stresses condensed in this blindness” of his storytellers. Rather, all energies are devoted to the instance of

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36 Ibid, 28-29.
transmission, so much so that the potential to reflect on his own productions is essentially lost. Hence, as soon as the sense of urgency which once drove the narrator to document his stories has vanished, the narrator forgets about Max Ferber:

If I had still occasionally thought of Ferber and Manchester during my months in Switzerland, my memories faded steadily in the period in England which followed and which, as I sometimes note with amazement, has continued up to the present. Of course Ferber did come to my mind at various times over the long years, but I never succeeded in picturing him properly. His face had become a mere shadow. I assumed that Ferber had been drowned in his labours, but avoided making any closer enquiries.  

The intimacy derived from an active empathy retrospectively registers as a loss in order to construct the immersive style of transcription the narrator has chosen. The inadequacy of the model becomes apparent when the impression left behind the instance of documentation fades away; even for the purposes of his own preservation, the recording device cannot even recall the face of the voice it logs.

Any time the narrator is left to his own devices, he suffers from his own unproductivity. His wanderings through Manchester reveal an inability to generate outside the means of his production: “The day of my arrival at the Arosa, like most of the days, weeks and months to come, was a time of remarkable silence and emptiness.” Such days of unemployment reveal a dependence on the model’s activity: Sebald’s narrator is inseparable from the mechanical structure of his own chronicling process. Transcribing functions smoothly in the presence of a subject: the writer churns away, proliferating sketches and observations, but, when left alone, the narrator and his mechanism jointly fall into disquieted disuse: the winds are hardly blowing, and the mills are standing still. He struggles to justify his own purpose as a writer to himself as he

38 Sebald, *The Emigrants*, 177.
confesses on one of his aimless outings, “I would regularly be overcome by such a sense of aimlessness and futility that I would go out, purely in order to preserve an illusion of purpose.”

The absence of a subject also spurs the narrator to reflexively keep track of time. Before he meets his next subjected devotion, Max Ferber, the narrator is compelled to activities that orient him according to a schedule: watching Gracie carefully go through her notes and coins every Saturday evening, watching her leave Sunday morning with her leather briefcase and return the following day during lunch, the cry of the starlings at 3 o’clock at dusk, and his electric teapot alarm clock, which “kept [me] holding on to life at a time when I felt a deep sense of isolation in which [I] might well have become completely submerged.” Throughout these periods of aimless peregrination, the narrator lapses into surviving upon a conception of time that marches forward, a linear temporality of which he himself has become wary. As the narrator has subconsciously processed from previous encounters, individuals who are led by the mechanical hands of clockwork seem always to anticipate their own death. The morbid irony in which a suicidal impulse emerges in a literary project of preservation becomes increasingly problematized until it becomes unbearable for the purposes of his project.

This vigilance towards such individuals originates from the narrator’s documentation of Paul Bereyter, a figure with whom the narrator takes exceptional liberty so as subjectively to reconstruct Paul’s history. The aberrant nature of the narrator’s chronicles of Paul stems from the facts that Paul has already died by the time the narrator’s interest develops and Paul has left little to no records behind, save for a handful of photographs and a close confidant, Mme Landau. We first hear of Paul, the narrator’s elementary school teacher, through the morning news, which

40 Sebald, The Emigrants, 156.
41 Ibid, 154-155.
publishes his obituary and the accompanying notice that he has committed suicide. Taken aback, the narrator is dissatisfied by the gap between the circumstances of Paul’s life and his death, but for the first time, is deprived of a subject who can explain himself:

Almost by way of an aside, the obituary added, with no further explanation, that during the Third Reich Paul Bereyter had been prevented from practicing his chosen profession. It was this curiously unconnected, inconsequential statement, as much as the violent manner of his death, which led me in the years that followed to think more and more about Paul Bereyter, until, in the end, I had to get beyond my own fond memories of him and discover the story I did not know.42

Already, a problem of primary sourcing arises: the knowledge through which both the narrator and the reader learns of Paul always arrives posthumously, compromised by being second-hand. The narrator’s original mechanism of remembrance cannot be applied here; since Paul is no longer alive to labor on behalf of the chronicler’s otherwise passive operations, the chronicler himself must now attend to the tricky business of concurrently chronicling and re-telling. Presiding over this dual role of teller and writer, the narrator must resort to his own childhood memories of Paul—and then later, Mme Landau’s— which attempt to sketch and preserve Paul’s subjectivity in his stead. The structure of the biographical profile accordingly shifts. The windmills and notions of sustainability are left aside and instead, his intent focuses upon manually scavenging recollections that emerge from the desolate heap left behind by natural history. This pivot to metaphorize remembrance as an archaeological expedition of natural history is indeed inspired by the teacher himself:

[Paul] taught us the rudiments of algebra, and his enthusiasm for natural history once led him (to the horror of his neighbors) to boil the flesh off a dead fox he had found in the woods, in an old preserving pan on his kitchen stove, so that he would then be able to reassemble the skeleton with us in school.43

43 Ibid, 38.
The narrator attempts in earnest to preserve Paul’s story according to the methodology by which his subject was intrigued: “It was not until I was able to fit my own fragmentary recollections into what Lucy Landau told me that I was able to understand that desolation even in part.”

To write about Paul Bereyter is to piece the fragmented skeleton of Paul back together and to do so invokes the fallacies of object lessons.

Though the conceptual transformation of remembrance turns to studiously applying the object lessons his teacher once taught, Paul’s resultant narrative cracks from its forged presumptions. A natural historicist approach to reconstructing personal histories leads to a historicist fallacy that one’s interrogations are answerable, if one only ventures to the apposite sites: “What Paul termed his ‘object lessons’ to us, in the course of time, to all of the nearby locations that were of interest for one reason or another and could be reached on foot within about two hours.”

Object lessons become problematic, for they kindle ambitions that one can know what needs to be known about an individual’s personal history; Sebald’s mechanism of documentation excessively relies on the efficiency of its operations to excavate a truthful narrative.

The result of the narrator’s venture leads to an overdetermined story that illusively promises to explain away the cause of Bereyter’s ultimately illegible suicide. As the story goes, Mme Landau, the last individual to see him alive, awakens to find him gone and has the yet-unconfirmed but incontestable premonition that she would never see him again; however, the instance of Paul’s death is unwitnessed, leaving behind only speculative negative space around its event. In that void, both Mme Landau and the narrator’s recollective heavy-handedness

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44 Sebald, The Emigrants, 42.
inadvertently saturates the lines of Paul’s biography. Beginning with the knowledge of Paul’s suicide, the narrator searches for and identifies, with certainty, characteristics that supposedly allude to his eventual suicide. As the narrator recollects his memories as a student, he describes Paul thus:

In well-structured sentences, he spoke without any touch of dialect but with a slight impediment of speech or timbre, as if the sound were coming not from the larynx but from somewhere near the heart. This sometimes gave one the feeling that it was all being powered by clock-work inside him and Paul in his entirety was a mechanical human made out of tin and other metal parts, and might be put out of operation for ever by the smallest functional hitch.46

The rest of Paul’s account is written according to its inherent logic, abiding by a fatal distributive property: Paul’s death touches upon all of his life’s events, a conviction reinforced by the backward reconstruction of his biography. Mme Landau discloses Paul’s story beginning with his suicide and ends with her unchanging, final conclusions regarding Paul’s suicidal intent. The narrator and Mme Landau eagerly adhere to the historicizing assumptions of narrative accountings, and thus process his death under the terms of the perfectly explainable by the rhetoric of logic. Her rationalization of Paul’s decision reveals the historicizing temptation to seek his suicide’s justification when one copes with the sharp-edged passing of a close companion’s death, even when the subjectivity in question can no longer speak for itself.

It was only the manner in which he died, a death so inconceivable to me, that robbed me of my self-control at first; yet, as I soon realized, it was for Paul a perfectly logical step. Railways had always meant a great deal to him – perhaps he felt they were headed for death. Timetables and directories, all the logistics of railways, had at times become an obsession with him, as his flat in S showed. I can still see the Marklin model railway he had laid out on a deal table in the spare north-facing room: to me it is the very image and symbol of Paul’s German tragedy . . . It is hard, said Mme Landau, when I told her about those railway lessons, in the end it is hard to know what it is that someone dies of. Yes, it is very hard, said Mme Landau, one really doesn’t know. All those years that he was here in Yverdon I had no notion that Paul had found his fate already systemically laid out for him in the railways, as it were. . . 47

Person and symbology neatly align in the reflections of her grief; Paul has, after all, died by way of his fascination with railways and their timetables. Object lessons applied in the realm of memory are therefore fallible paradigms of historical reconstruction. Through the hermeneutic mastery exerted upon other stories, the narrator could begin to stake out the claim that even death can potentially arrest itself to comprehensible meaning for those of us still living:

I suppose I did not immediately see the innocent meaning of Paul’s uncle’s expression, *end up on the railways*, and it struck me as darkly foreboding. The disquiet I experienced because of that momentary failure to see what was meant – I now sometimes feel that at that moment I beheld an image of death – lasted only a very short time, and passed over me like the shadow of a bird in flight.\(^{48}\)

The violation of a historicizing reconstruction of Paul’s history refutes the far more spontaneous nature of the speaker’s narrative windmills. Prior to Paul’s chapter, the Sebaldian narrative dam alternatively embraced incursions of redeemed memory, which left unheeded the causal bonds that historicism carefully constructs to link one time and event to the next; his preceding model invokes a temporality that is effectively anti-historical. However, the narrator’s conceptual model of remembrance has been influenced by Paul’s and, by extension, Mme Landau’s, object lessons of historicism that contend outcomes are attributable to their corresponding circumstances. Their (over)productive melancholy has been accordingly internalized and employed by the narrator as a kind of muscle-memoried unease; the windmills spontaneously draw upon their influence and incorporate historicism into their operations. As a result of a now hybridized model of remembrance, the narrator draws on triggered *mémentoires involontaires* of Paul’s fascination with mechanical time (e.g., timetables, clocks, schedules), forming a new understanding of time that contradicts itself in its utterance; spontaneous,

\(^{48}\) Sebald, *The Emigrants*, 63.
ahistorical redemption ironically redeems a naturalist methodology of historicism during his aimless Manchester wanderings.

How, then, are we to understand the narrator’s own death impulse while his model precariously hinges on this contradiction? After his encounter with Paul Bereyter, the narrator subconsciously holds onto the object lessons of foreseeable death he excavates from Paul’s spectral body. The narrator continues to worry over the manifestations of his death impulse from the tailwinds of Paul’s memory. As the narrator is recording these lived moments, he gestures to the nature of his own possible upcoming death, as if one could guess what the ending of one’s own story will be midway through, and can therefore claim right before the instant he dies, at least self-aware, that his premonitions have been justified. Not to be caught unawares, he draws on his Paul-like fascination with mechanical time, while also recording paranoid death prognostications, such as when he has been “frightened to death” or insists that everything appears “utterly unreal.”  

His own death impulse is rendered unstable, however, due to the dilemma that Walter Benjamin ties to the historical materialist, who views history as single catastrophe; yet “the idea of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the idea of redemption.” The hope for redemption that ultimately supersedes the horizon of death that historicism anticipates cannot help but reassert itself to recalibrate the narrator’s morbidity. The uneasy equilibrium struck leaves a lingering sense of inconclusiveness: opposing the destructive resolution to which historicist temporality resigns itself, the narrator’s own wanderings subconsciously seek the next story of extemporaneous, redemptive potentiality.

49 Sebald, *The Emigrants*, 157, 158.
The first explicit articulation of what I will call spectral materialism actualizes from this tension, in which neither historiographical pole can cleanly reconcile its conflicting impulses between an awareness of an irrecoverable past and the promise of redemption. When the narrator finally comes upon Max Ferber and watches the artist fervently work on his portrait with his willow-wood charcoal sticks, the narrator looks on as the ashes of erased sketches accumulate just enough to trace a spectral appearance of his subject’s face, when Ferber finally lifts his charcoal from the canvas:

I often thought that his prime concern was to increase the dust. He drew with vigorous abandon, frequently going through half a dozen of his willow-wood charcoal sticks in the shortest of time; and that process of drawing and shading on the thick, leathery paper, as well as the concomitant business of constantly erasing what he had drawn with a woolen rag already heavy with charcoal, really amounted to nothing but a steady production of dust, which never ceased except at night. Time and again, at the end of a working day, I marveled to see that Ferber, with the few lines and shadows that had escaped annihilation, had created a portrait . . . [which] had evolved from a long lineage of grey, ancestral faces, rendered unto ash but still there, as ghostly presences, on the harried paper.

Max’s artistic labor offers itself as the allegorical resolution to the narrator’s dilemma of historical orientation, on which the narrator relievedly seizes: the uncanny manifestation of spectral materialism takes into consideration both the pessimism of historicism and the redemptive impulse by holding them in uneasy correlation. Ferber’s artistic project begins with the premise of destruction as the charcoal tip wears down, and the remaining debris inadvertently allows for a spectral configuration to emerge from the ashes, unbidden and as if from a distance. This revision to the narrator’s understanding also corrects for the gravitation towards the all-explaining power of naturalist object lessons: the faces which transpire in Ferber’s work resist the reductive assumption that the symbolism behind patterns can be grasped if one were only to

52 Sebald, The Emigrants, 162.
look and study hard enough. Rather, Ferber’s spectral faces recall a Benjaminian stance wherein the faces of natural history gaze back as unreachable ruins:

Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the facies hippocratica of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. . . . Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.53

Spectral materialism in its aesthetic realization contends with its limitations that may outstrip its worth due to its inherently recursive nature. One qualifier that has arisen from the reading of Max Ferber’s artistry comes from Simon Ward, who offers a compelling account of the implications of its retroactive process:

That process leaves the artistic representation in a state of ruin, rather than the traces of the thing that was to be represented. Whereas time or some other process of destruction has ruined the material, the artist sets about destroying his signifiers in order to arrive at an approximation of the trace.54

While Ward focuses on how this “process of destruction becomes the aesthetic strategy of ‘preserving’ the signified once it has entered the realm of the textual,” he underemphasizes the potential role of spectral materiality by his focused claims on the structural limits of text. There certainly is a self-recursive quality to the text, as he helpfully describes:

As with all the ‘models’ of production presented in the text, in trying to describe Sebald’s poetics through these models, we are in the position that Nietzsche describes with reference to things in the mirror: ‘If we try to observe the mirror itself, then we discover nothing but things upon it. If we want to grab hold of the things, then in the end we come across nothing other than the mirror again’ (Nietzsche 1966: 1172).55

Yet as Ferber’s artistic representation demonstrates, even from the ruins of artifice peripheral and novel allegory can emerge, as something beyond the “approximation of the trace” which the

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55 Ibid.
artist originally seeks to represent. This is the spectral materialism that Sebald unequivocally observes and introduces.

Still, Ferber refrains from conceiving of spectrality as a means to transcend, especially in religious terms, the oppression that leaves behind such traces. When Max Ferber first recounts his trip to see Matthias Grünewald’s piece, *The Entombment of Christ*, he concludes that the subject of suffering lends itself all too easily to its aesthetic representation: its triggering portrayal suggests the effects of oppression as perhaps the most horrifically capable form of perpetuation both historically and aesthetically.

Ferber’s fascination with the Christian eschatology that posits resurrection as a means to overcome human mortality is unequivocally renounced. As Ferber studies the painting, he breaks from the Christian logic that resurrection could be posited in glorified, victorious terms. Notions of a respite from humanity’s insufferable condition disintegrate under the aesthetic portrayal of the artwork he looks at: oppression’s prowess inoculates not only the corpse, but also its witnesses and the very landscape that the scene comprises. The Christian paradigm contradicts itself in its aesthetic portrayal. Mental suffering, Ferber grimly declares, “is effectively without end.”

Indeed, rather than posit that its subject of annihilation can be transcended, Sebald’s technique of spectral materialism traumatically stresses the inadequacies involved in the act of aesthetic representation. An acute awareness of their limitations, the narrator conveys, plagues

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57 Ibid.
artists who become immersed by their preservation project that destruction inevitably seeps into the very materials they work with and botches their attempts to represent: “he [Max Ferber] not only overlaid it time and again but also, whenever the canvas could no longer withstand the continual scratching-off and re-application of paint, he destroyed it and burnt it several times.”

The totalizing reach of the aesthetic portrayal of oppression also touches the artist on a biographic level: Max himself escapes to Manchester in order to evade the influence of his parents’ deportation on his life, only to find it inescapable. Max describes the condition as a curse: “There is neither a past nor a future. At least, not for me. The fragmentary scenes that haunt my memories are obsessive in character. When I think of Germany, it feels as if there were some kind of insanity lodged in my head.”

The brooding sense of insanity becomes a nearly overpowering sense of disempowerment: Max Ferber recognizes, but can never exceed, the spectral materialism he intuitively perceives in his art, and so he weeps: “The despair at his lack of ability which already tormented him quite enough during the day now invaded his increasingly sleepless nights, so that soon he wept with exhaustion as he worked.”

The lofty ambitions of art definitively to represent humanity as more than its entrenchment in a suffering that outdoes its own limitations fall short of their intentions. Not even the radical understanding of his own work can compensate for the inevitable blind spot that clouds Ferber’s vision and leads to his torment as an artist. As the narrator observes, Ferber’s inadequacy becomes apparent to any viewer who looks at his work:

> When I think back to our meetings in Trafford Park, it is invariably in that unremitting light that I see Ferber, always sitting in the same place in front of a fresco painted by an unknown hand that showed a caravan moving forward from the remotest depths of the picture . . . The painter lacked the necessary skill, and the perspective he had chosen was a difficult one, as a result of which both the human figures and the beasts of burden were slightly distorted . . . And especially on

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58 Sebald, *The Emigrants*, 175.
59 Ibid, 181.
60 Ibid 175.
Hyperconscious of his inadequacy, Ferber continues to attempt to correct for his incompetence, but his ongoing efforts only assimilate him into his own flawed mural. Reprieve from the relentless pain of a brutal history of genocide fails to rescue even the perceptive artist, even at the very limits of his artistry.

Yet it is his inadequacy that is necessary to catalyze the moments of suffering that mitigate history’s capacity to wreak complete destruction. Only through grappling with his artistic limits can these futile efforts lead to marks of erasure and the charcoal ash that depict loss as an ongoing, spectral presence. Although the artist himself, involved in his project’s pursuits, may never perceive the evidence of his failure otherwise, the narrator’s interpretation of Ferber’s work is a positive externality. Even when one is working from the context of historic annihilations, namely the Holocaust, the narrator, in Ferber’s stead, realizes that loss returns to take presence on paper; erased, charcoal marks still leave an impression on paper and evoke a lineage of erased faces. Ferber’s futility is, unbeknownst to him, inadvertently generative. With an ever-growing and ever-present lineage of witnesses involved in aesthetic representation, the fraught concept of finitude breaks apart into an enduring spectrality, since even annihilation cannot make its destruction absolute.

Consumed by his obsession over his inadequacies as an artist, Max Ferber has no share in the revitalizing quality his viewers perceive. Isolated in his futility, Ferber considers the option of suicide as a means to escape the conditions of hermeneutic powerlessness of which artistry cannot avail him. He ruminates aloud to the narrator, “I gradually understood that, beyond a

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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.” And Ferber nearly does follow out this impulse; at the climax of his despair over the unreachability of his aspirations—“that world, at once near and unattainably far”—he climbs a mountain and would nearly have taken the fatal leap, if it were not for a man of about sixty [who] suddenly appeared before him—like someone who’s popped out of the bloody ground. He was carrying a large white gauze butterfly net and said, in an English voice that was refined but quite unplaceable, that it was time to be thinking of going down if one were to be in Montreux for dinner.

After this startling appearance, Ferber has no recollection of how he made the descent with the butterfly man, and the cause for this obliviousness remains a mystery to him, “however hard he thought about it.” While the butterfly man whom Sebald includes to depict Nabokov within *The Emigrants* is polyvalent in meaning, this instance, in which Nabokov rescues Ferber from his own suicide, delineates a nearly absurd rupture of the historical pattern of annihilation. From an inconceivable nowhere, the butterfly man intervenes and sets Ferber back on his way down from the mountain. Afterward, Ferber sets out to sketch out a new portrait, titled “Man with a Butterfly Net,” but comes to regard it as “one of his most unsatisfactory works, because it conveyed not even the remotest impression of the strangeness of the apparition it referred to.” The single moment in which Ferber catches a fleeting but quite literally altering act of redemption, Ferber cannot aesthetically represent such a radical moment; his artistry can only depict incompetent iterations of its occurrence.

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63 Ibid, 174.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
Despite the curse of the artist to strive to represent beyond his means, the narrator remains compelled by the artificial nature of ruins that have survived their times. His interest in these relics would signal the demise of his own model of remembrance. Manchester, for all of its prior industrial glory, has become a “necropolis or mausoleum,” but as the narrator’s observations dwindle, seems to offer nothing more beyond its listless constructions: “Even the grandest of the buildings, such as the Royal Exchange, the Refuge Assurance Company . . . which had been built only a few years before, seemed so empty and abandoned that one might have supposed oneself surrounded by mysterious facades or theatrical backdrops.”66 Initially, before the narrator encounters Max, his temptation to fill in the desolation left behind Manchester’s demolition halts itself prematurely, partially because the material environment appears devoid of any possibility for life: “Once the demolition rubble had been removed, all that was left to recall the lives of thousands of people was the grid-like layout of the streets.”67 Residents who remained in the area seem only to amount to “restless shadowy figures.”68 The lure of industrialism’s promise of societal advancement has left behind only remains of equally enormous proportions. Upon the completion of Max Ferber and his mother’s accounts by Sebald’s largely intact windmills (albeit under refurbished operations previously discussed), the narrator seeks Ferber to deliver his promised transcriptions, only to find the artist dying in the hospital. The discovery that his final subject is also about to succumb to death pushes the meaning of representation to the brink of its crisis. Once assured by the technical competence of his windmills’ operations to reproduce the memories Ferber has confided to him, the narrator’s

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67 Ibid.
68 Ibid, 158.
confrontation with Ferber’s mortality induces the realization that even an aesthetics inspired by technological reproducibility cannot capture the visceral, living presence of Ferber:

During the winter of 1990/91, in the little free time I had . . . I was working on the account of Max Ferber given above. It was an arduous task. 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 paralyzing 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.⁶⁹

The Benjaminian critique of technology comes into fruition in this moment: “In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence—and nothing else—that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject. . . .”⁷⁰ The narrator’s ambitions to represent his subjects based on technical reproducibility realize their vanity. Although the error of historicist materialism has been avoided by his developed self-consciousness, his industrialist model of remembrance irrevocably falls into a Manchesterian state of ruin; every one of its subject has been seized by a death tied to the aftershocks of the Holocaust. With no surviving subjects left, his windmills become useless.

As the sole survivor who has outlived all of his subjects by virtue of a mechanism of remembrance that has permanently fallen out of production, the narrator is, for the first time, truly left to his own demise. Following a sudden compulsion, the narrator journeys to the resting place of Max Ferber’s mother in Kissingen, Germany. There, he wanders but no longer keeps track of time or finds another human subject whose life he might chronicle; instead, intrigued by

“the peculiar sense of history” apparent in the town, he begins a documentary exploration of its monuments.\textsuperscript{71} Coming upon a cemetery, the narrator climbs over the gates and finds before him “a wilderness of graves, neglected for years, crumbling and gradually sinking into the ground amidst tall grass and wild flowers under the shade of trees, which trembled in the slight movement of the air.”\textsuperscript{72} The coexistence of artifice in the forms of tombstones arranged into deliberate rows and nature growing around stony edges inspires an understanding of loss derived not so much from the absence of those who passed, but from their reincarnated returns kept strangely alive through the seemingly hollow, artificial acts of tradition:

A shock of recognition shot through me at the grave of Maier Stern, who died on the 18\textsuperscript{th} of May, my own birthday; and I was touched, in a way I knew I could never quite fathom, by the symbol of the writer’s quill on the stone of Friederike Halbleib . . . I imagined her pen in hand, all by herself, bent with bated breath over her work; and now, as I write these lines, it feels as if I had lost her, and as if I could not get over the loss despite the many years that have passed since her departure . . . it was only when I was about to leave that I discovered a more recent gravestone . . . of Fritz and Luisa Ferber . . . The inscription says that Lazarus Lanzberg died in Theresienstadt in 1942, and that Fritz and Luisa were deported, their fate unknown, in November 1941. Only Lily, who took her own life, lies in that grave. I stood before it for some time, not knowing what I should think but before I left I placed a stone on the grave, according to custom.\textsuperscript{73}

The graves he witnesses at the cemetery inspire the narrator to deliberate upon the potentiality of a melancholic representation that abstains from the technical replication he once fixated over.

The narrator retains a compassion that settles peacefully on his unknowing. Afterwards, an observation of Nature mid-process seems to confirm his sentiments:

At length I sat down on a bench in one of the balcony-like landings off the gallery, and all that afternoon immersed myself in the sight and sound of that theatre of water, and in ruminations about the long-term and (I believe) impenetrable process which, as the concentration of salts increases in the water, produces the very strangest of petrified or crystallized forms, imitating the growth patterns of Nature even as it is being dissolved.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{71} Sebald, \textit{The Emigrants}, 221.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid, 223.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, 225.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid, 230.
If the violent workings of history are inevitably incomprehensible, then interpretations of literary representation could be offered not as ultimate truths, but as preserved subjectivities that may only accumulate to unknown ends. His melancholy that anticipates its nonfulfillment evolves by phenomenologizing its intent; the narrator suddenly cannot document enough. He passes by countless deserted buildings, the ruins of once mechanically significant sites, but this time, ventures to imagine and fill in the silence with his qualified interpretations: “In one such interval (though it was utterly impossible) I thought I heard the orchestra tuning their instruments amidst the usual scraping of chairs and clearing of throats. . . .” At least this way, memory can have the last word.

*The Emigrants* ends with a contemplation of a photograph of women seated behind a loom, taken by Walter Genewein who wished to document the inhabitants of the Łódź ghetto at work during wartime. “Who the young women are I do not know,” Sebald acknowledges, but it seems not to matter; after all, he has decided that subjectivity self-conscious of its construction only purports to offer itself up to the inscrutable workings of fate that will determine its worth anyway. And yet the weavers within the photograph are staring back in judgement:

The light falls on them from the window in the background, so I cannot make out their eyes clearly, but I sense that all three of them are looking across at me . . . The young woman in the middle is blonde and has the air of a bride about her. The weaver to her left has inclined her head a little to one side, whilst the woman on the right is looking at me with so steady and relentless a gaze that I cannot meet it for long. I wonder what the three women’s names were – Roza, Luisa and Lea, or Nona, Decuma and Morta, the daughters of night, with spindle, scissors and thread.

There is no difference between the position inhabited by Sebald and the photographer who wished to show off the “exemplary organization” of an industrious ghetto— both of them had wanted to remember.

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75 Sebald, *The Emigrants*, 234.
76 Ibid, 237.
77 Ibid.
Chapter 3: Melancholic Superstition

“There is no book of mine which I more thoroughly feel that I swear by every sentence as having been written with my best blood.”

- George Elliot on Romola

1995. Rings of Saturn begins with a conjecture: “I wonder now, however, whether there might be something in the old superstition that certain ailments of the spirit and of the body are particularly likely to beset us under the sign of the Dog Star.” 78 In the context of the trajectory his series has thus far followed, the casual remark instigates an outright rebellion in contrast to the prior energies Sebald expended to negotiate his rational materialism with his melancholia. While spectrality has been entertained by both Vertigo and The Emigrants, its exploration remained tethered to the rationalist paradigm that either depreciates or fails to account for the phantasmal quality of history’s incursions on the present. Stendhal and Kafka’s uncanny relations with Vertigo’s narrator could be explained away by the structuring of the text that invited such links. The industrialist model of remembrance is abandoned in The Emigrants for its inadequacy to capture the spectrality he witnesses in Max Ferber’s charcoal ashes. Sebald’s dissatisfaction with such a framework has impelled him to recover disenfranchised characters and later, adjust the vision of his melancholia according to more phenomenological leanings— to preserve for the sake of preserving. The historicist philosophy his narrative arc follows has always been interested in destabilizing modes of modernist thinking that have ruined non-conformers. Following the postmodernist brush that concludes The Emigrants, the trilogy’s final installment finally embraces an alternative register of thought no longer centered on rationalism. In The Rings of Saturn, Sebald’s melancholia becomes his superstition.

Now full-fledged ontology, his melancholia becomes ambitious enough to posit an index of proof for the supernatural claims of his melancholia. Rembrandt’s “Anatomy Lesson” asserts itself as near universal object lesson and the appearance of silk and silkworms is followed by a death trail that spans eras and continents; even a study of herrings reveals a source of mysticism inexplicable by reason:

An idiosyncrasy peculiar to the herring is that, when dead, it begins to glow; this property, which resembles phosphorescence and is yet altogether different, peaks a few days after death and then ebbs away as the fish decays. For a long time no one could account for this glowing of the lifeless herring, and indeed I believe that it still remains unexplained.79

Other phenomena such as migrating towns that retreat from the coastline are not only noted for their striking recurrences, but also interpreted with the causality of superstition: a “large number of our settlements are oriented to the west and, where circumstances permit, relocate in a westward direction. The east stands for lost causes.”80 As he accumulates such observations, Sebald’s walking tour morphs into a tracking process, recording where History’s footsteps double back on themselves until it seems the entire walk has stumbled upon History’s guilty secret: the whole affair is one enormous ring of violent repetition. The convinced superstitious melancholic senses a historic design in his sensitivity to loss and makes no secret of it:

No matter how often I tell myself that chance happenings of this kind occur far more often than we suspect, since we all move, one after the other, along the same roads mapped out for us by our origins and our hopes, my rational mind is nonetheless unable to lay the ghosts of repetition that haunt me with ever greater frequency.81

Rationalism alone, Sebald maintains, is an inadequate form of epistemology that ultimately fails to explain the uncanniness of history’s movement.

79 Sebald, The Rings of Saturn, 58.
80 Ibid, 159.
81 Ibid, 187.
Being no stranger to the ideologies that exert dominance by exorcising deviant forms of thought amongst societies, Sebald remains self-conscious of his radicalism. The stakes of his project’s reception have led him to validate his position with a coherence that therefore borrows from the terms of cultural respectability. Having been formerly admitted as a patient in a sanatorium from the brunt of his own superstitious revelations, Sebald recollects and adjusts his recollections for both temperance and plausibility to avoid the diagnosis of insanity. Thus, Sebald evokes the discipline of science through a stylization focused on the aestheticism that emerges from science’s findings in order to avoid subordinating the superstitious rhetoric to its summoned counterpart; the allusion works to undo the perceived unreasonableness of superstitious thinking and reconcile it to a type of logic already proven to be true. For instance, Sebald pursues a discussion of nature as the site of elegant formulations replicable by quincunxes that are each countered by its corresponding mutation:

Browne identifies this structure [the quincunx] everywhere, in animate and inanimate matter . . . And indeed, while on the one hand the study of Nature today aims to describe a system governed by immutable laws, on the other it delights in drawing our attention creatures noteworthy for their bizarre physical form or behaviors.  

Shortly after, Sebald forges an implicit simile between Nature’s dualism and the movement of history when he asserts the claim, “On every new thing lies already the shadow of annihilation.” According to his argument’s form, the conversion of melancholy into superstition mimics the symmetry of nature’s order to disorder as a parallel of enacted belief to its corresponding effect. The rhetoric deriving from a culturally legitimate enterprise such as science continues as a categorical impulse that further drives the impression that Sebald’s superstition can be independently corroborated. Through the clinical looking glass, the

82 Sebald, The Rings of Saturn, 21.
83 Ibid, 24.
semblance of order can be extracted from what otherwise appears to be a haphazard catastrophe of events upon events that confirms the causality of superstition. As a result, while his rhetoric on the surface may validate the skepticism that arises over his superstitions, the rhetoric actually pushes for a reconsideration. Although his subterfuge questions the presence of superstition, in practice, it influences the reading to persuade the reader of its credibility.

The foreboding intuited from the unsustainability of human progress demands an urgent dissemination of his claims when Sebald encounters the historical amnesia in response to world trauma:

To my astonishment, however, I soon found the search for such accounts invariably fruitless. No one at the time seemed to have written about their experiences or afterwards recorded their memories. Even if you asked people directly, it was as if everything had been erased from their minds. As for myself, though, whenever I close my eyes, to this day, I see. . . .

Superstition alone, however, is a highly individualized reflex of an affective instinct that does not easily translate in circulation. If melancholy is, as Eric Santner postulates, a strategy of attachment that counteracts dominant ideological formations and superstition is an active force that tends towards proselytizing, then melancholy as superstition can not only promulgate, but also propagate its claims. As such, this radicalized form of melancholy becomes unprecedently capable of facilitating a community of disbandment, comprising melancholic recluses whose isolations politically reduced them to mad or irredeemable figures who were not worthy of belonging:

The English verses he [Fitzgerald] devised for the purpose, which radiate with a pure, seemingly unselfconscious beauty, feign an anonymity that disdains even the least claim to authorship, and draw us, word by word, to an invisible point where the mediaeval orient and the fading occident can come together in a way never allowed them by the calamitous course of history.

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84 Sebald, The Rings of Saturn, 39.
86 Sebald, The Rings of Saturn, 200.
While the state of exile certainly draws an easy means of connection amongst social pariahs, the intensity of their intra-identification exceeds what merely meets the eye: Sebald has identified centuries of uncanny *doppelgängers* distressed by historical variations of banishments imposed continually upon their reincarnation. The déjà vu experience of oppression with the traceability of heritable lineage suggests the presence of a melancholic community: “Across what distances in time do the elective affinities and correspondences connect? How is it that one perceives oneself in another human being, or if not oneself, then one’s own precursor?” The repeated anachronism of values, which persistently oppose those of the period, relays a precocity continuously punished that the superstitious melancholic can observe and validate by his correspondingly advanced intuition. The interplay of these forces underlying Sebaldian melancholy substantiates his posture into a cultural and political commentary, and at its affective height, into oracles that sense and interpret the traces remaining from what seems to be a conditioned movement of human history.

Even in moments of profound doubt that emerge from the dissonance between melancholy’s overwhelm from loss and superstition’s conviction, Sebald nonetheless insists on their composite function. In a scene, Sebald stands within a structure containing the panorama of the Waterloo Battle painted by Louis Dumontin and comments,

> Across this horrific three-dimensional scene, on which the cold dust of time has settled, one’s gaze is drawn to the horizon, to the enormous mural, one hundred and ten yards by twelve, painted in 1912 by the French marine artist Louis Dumontin on the inner wall of the circus-like structure. This then, I thought, as I looked round about me, is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was . . . Whatever became of the corpses and mortal remains? Are they buried under the memorial? Are we standing on a mountain of death? Is that our ultimate vantage point? Does one really have the much-vaunted historical overview from such a position?"88

87 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 182.
88 Ibid, 125.
The enigmatic inaccessibility to his claim is manifested as the unanswered questions that trail his claim to precocity, but the apparent contagion ends at the moment of their utterance. The reader’s entreaty for such answers is suggested by Sebald, who, as an intense locus of mediation, offers a vision that glimpses the heritage of the literary bodies who have preceded him on the very same grounds he stands upon:

Only when I had shut my eyes, I well recall, did I see a cannonball smash through a row of poplars . . . And then I saw Fabrizio, Stendhal’s young hero, wandering about the battlefield, pale but with his eyes aglow, and an unsaddled colonel getting to his feet and telling his sergeant: I can feel nothing but the old injury in my right hand.  

The nature of his insight indulges the prospect of explicit signification rather than privatize or reject its discernment. The inheritance of ostracism inverts into the rebellion of restitution. His willingness to expose his precocity radically deviates from the expected inclination of a melancholic, who may instead choose to retreat into his own interiority and exile any sense of semiotic mastery because of his superstition. Sebald’s melancholy identifies himself, the carrier, as the reluctant authority over the issues his narrative raises, and proclaims his own version of omnipotence in his reading: “It was as if it were now up to me alone, as if by some trifling mental exertion I could reverse the entire course of history. . . .” The former recluse rises to his calling and begins a melancholic reclamation of power in the margins.

The other empowering consequence of his superstitious melancholia operates on the level of the text’s language. Instead of wading through the vertiginous trauma Sebald works through for the majority of his trilogy, melancholic superstition abides by a Saturnian gravity that operates on the aesthetic level of his representation. Before, the dizziness that ensues from the incommensurability between the past and present is extensively explored as a potential metaphor.

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89 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 126.
90 Ibid, 178.
of helplessness in understanding history, but now, melancholy grants him a levity that uplifts him
to heights he could never reach without succumbing to the fall induced by vertigo:

It is true that, because of the immense weight of the impediments he is carrying, Browne’s
writing can be held back by the force of gravitation, but when he does succeed in rising higher
and higher through the circles of his spiraling prose, borne aloft like a glider on warm currents of
air, even today the reader is overcome by a sense of levitation.91

The omnipercipience achieved by the wings of melancholia nonetheless continues to offer tribute
to what Julia Kristeva terms as denial of negation, the language of melancholiacs who remain in
denial over their mourning and yet, through such semantics, achieve “ascendancy over an archaic
object.”92 Sebald writes as if he can fly.

The insular logic of melancholic superstition may tote the appearance of self-selective
bias, a compilation of epistemologies and evidence that only seeks to confirm rather than contest
his mode of thinking, but Sebald’s misgivings over his own project are already built into the
representation. The tenuous demarcation between skeptic and authority makes for a volatile
writer who strives to dissociate himself from the cultural authoritarianism he critiques, yet also
sets out to organize a community to retaliate against the imperialism that has historically silenced
their protest. The genocide carried out in Bosnia, the Holocaust, British imperialism, the power
grapple leading to the Empress Tz’u-hsi’s tenuous ascent to the throne are part of the tireless
enactment of mass killings that had led to the demise of the predecessors Sebald seeks to protect.
The assertiveness he exerts affords little room to acknowledge the inner doubts he harbors in the
face of conformism fueled by the civilizing mission of imperialism, as King Leopold once
proclaimed, “The aim . . . was to break through the darkness in which whole peoples still dwelt,
and to mount a crusade in order to bring this glorious century of progress to the point of

91 Sebald, The Rings of Saturn, 19.
92 Julia Kristeva, Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 64.
perfection.” While the force of his opposition must also preserve the face of the oppressors by virtue of the antithetical inclinations he embodies, it is not a merely reflective opposition that contrives to posit a new dominant ideology. The polytheism he practices restrains him from upholding any complete commitment to the constitutive epistemologies he infuses together. He shifts according to both his doubts and inspirations, each of which respectively alters his course. In a scene in which the course of his walk becomes a metaphor for the pliability of his stance, Sebald avoids espousing his conviction as deterministic:

I stuck to the sandy path until to my astonishment, not to say horror, I found myself back again in the same tangled thicket from which I had emerged about an hour before, or, as it now seemed to me, in some distant past... The low, leaden sky; the sickly violet hue of the heath clouding the eye; the silence, which rushed in the ears like the sound of the sea in a shell; the flies buzzing about me—all this became oppressive and unnerving. I cannot say how long I walked about in that state of mind, or how I found a way out.

The liminality of his position is the locus of melancholic superstition, his rigorous efforts to prove what is fundamentally unprovable, and his persistence in following the visions that compel him so profoundly past the moments of his doubt. The circularity of the world he has constructed in narrative does not therefore perpetuate the authoritarianism of homogenizing conformity closed onto itself; rather, it implies an opening out for alternate modes of thinking that punctures the totality of an imperialist system.

Sebald’s superstition, which remains wary of the hegemonic imposition requisite of imperialist ideology, retains a hermeneutic flexibility so as to impart meaning to coincidence; it differs from faith that is markedly restrained in the meaning-making it is allowed to produce. To the various assortments of historical relics, the Christian practitioner is faithful to the ultimately static posture that preservation is an undeniable sign of human salvation to those who believe:

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93 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 118.
94 Ibid, 173.
“For Browne, things of this kind, unspoiled by the passage of time, are symbols of the indestructibility of the human soul assured by scripture, which the physician, firm though he may be in his Christian faith, perhaps secretly doubts.”95 Yet the superstitious melancholic suspiciously studies such signage without the assurance of deliverance: “We simply do not know how many of its possible mutations the world may already have gone through, or how much time, always assuming that it exists, remains.”96 Cognizant of but not assuaged by the appearance of order, he remains afraid of the sudden turn of events that can unfold another disaster. As a result, the semiotics of superstition employ a Nietzschean mode of criticism that remorsefully interrogates the past and seeks to protect its victims from erasure. The simultaneous fear and assumption of historical representation’s fallibility warrants a process of edification: “In the final analysis, our entire work is based on nothing but ideas, ideas which change over the years and which time and again cause one to tear down what one had thought to be finished, and begin again from scratch.”97 Informed by the triad of examination, experience and the melancholic sensitivity to destruction, Sebald disidentifies with the cultural abjection of loss and reinstates its presence as a critical need for its elaboration.

Furthermore, the structural conformity expected of religion fixates on the uninterrupted continuity of practice, but in contrast, melancholia hones in precisely on the disruptors who would have been otherwise cast away by prevailing ideologies. His fascination with mutations is a compulsion towards objects that, by their very existence, become singular phenomena, which resist instituted power. While religion cannot bear the sight of botched creations that disrupt the continuity that sacrilegiously insinuates divine oversight, superstition experiments with such

96 Ibid, 154.
97 Ibid, 245.
figures’ capacities to posit their own version of semiotics otherwise forbidden. Religious interest attracts melancholic attention to the deviations that consequently undergo their own literary cataloging to attract a renewed process of resymbolization:

At all events, it is clear from Browne’s account that the endless mutations of Nature, which go far beyond any rational limit, and equally the chimaeras produced by our own minds, were as much a source of fascination to him as they were, three-hundred years after, to Jorge Luis Borges, whose Libro de los seres imaginarios was published in Buenos Aires in 1967. Recently I realized that the imaginary beings listed alphabetically in that compendium include the creature Baldanders, whom Simplicius Simplicissimus encounters in the sixth book of Grimmelshausen’s narrative.\textsuperscript{98}

The aesthetics of literary representation rather than the predetermined interpretation offered by ecclesiastical scripture serves as the ideal site for such melancholic concerns. Through this contention, literary power holds a deeply ontological power that transcends the materiality of its own curiosities. To keep the creature Baldanders alive goes beyond the matter of whether such a monster breathes in the real or in the imaginary realm; the creature Baldanders lives on as long as writings carry out the mandate of melancholia.

Melancholia’s mandate to rescue the outliers of society, then, carries a natural affiliation with the activism of human justice. Embedded within is an inherent cultural critique drawn to sympathize with silenced activists who have also inadvertently synchronized with the instincts of superstition. Sebald’s incorporation of Roger Casement, who was one of the few who chronicled and protested the human right violations in Congo and regions of South America, delineates a lifetime of work to rebel against the prevailing rule of imperialism and its unfettered abuses of power. Casement’s efforts to support the Irish nationalist movement were ultimately put to an end after his capture by the British government. The government’s search for evidence to seal Casement’s sentence of treason with popular support produced the discovery of what would become known as Casement’s Black Diaries, which chronicled his clandestine homosexual

\textsuperscript{98} Sebald, The Rings of Saturn, 23.
relations. The eagerness of the British government to exploit the prospect of an irrevocably offended Christian sensibility by the illicitness of homosexuality was ultimately successful; the ploy alienated Casement from British public opinion and drew disbelief from the Irish freedom movement for which he had become a martyr. The resulting renunciation of Casement and his execution was an outcome leveraged by the alignment of religious politics and imperialist ends, which collectively deemed that Casement constituted too much of a threat to be left alone; his elimination was religiously and politically vital for the upkeep of power as it was. Yet the superstitious melancholic feels his loss keenly as another development of the erasure of those exiled.

For the veterans of the Irish freedom movement it was in any case inconceivable that one of their martyrs should have practiced the English vice . . . We may draw from this the conclusion that it was precisely Casement’s homosexuality that sensitized him to the continuing oppression, exploitation, enslavement and destruction, across the borders of social class and race, of those who were furthest from the centers of power. 99

The inflexible stance of religion has betrayed Casement, but the watchful melancholic, pressed on by superstitious horror, recognizes and recuperates one of its own. Through Sebald’s intervention, the exercise of superstition reveals its ability to conceive of the transmutability of historical oppressions— the crucial insight of melancholic superstition— that once inspired and radicalized Casement. By recognizing a melancholic, kindred spirit within Browne, the renarrativization of Casement demonstrates the potential of melancholia as superstition to rewrite the historical narrative focused on lost characters in ways that institutionalized forms of thinking cannot.

99 Sebald, The Rings of Saturn, 134.
This type of identification is Sebald’s first articulation of what Walter Benjamin describes as historical materialism. The connection between precursors such as Casement and Sebald embodies an extremely localized portal, providing a fleeting means for the past to incur upon the present. The resulting disorientation reflects itself in the itinerant and circumlocutory movement of the text, but it also provides the productive opportunity for history to reinscribe history—in this precise moment of alignment, Sebald succeeds in rearticulating a tiny meaning of history that has sprung itself upon him in a spontaneous moment of recognition. Sebald, representing the present, has recognized himself in Browne, an image of the past: “For it is an irrevocable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image.” By this light, redemption becomes possible in the evanescent moments between past and present, where the latter “perceives oneself in another human being, or if not oneself, then one’s own precursor.” What feels incomplete or unfulfilled may be carried on by future generations that re-narrativize those past claims, culminating in the present’s messianic power that Benjamin writes of in his theses. To remain vigilant to history’s prospects of emergence, the moments in which melancholy becomes a productive state rather than an impediment, keeps alive the flicker of hope of anti-oppression. Thus, by Sebald’s contention, “the tiger’s leap into the past” is a melancholic leap into the past. Sebald exfoliates Browne’s definition of redemption so that redemption is based less on theological faith and more on the revolutionary potential accessible by the superstitious individual who remains alert to the “open air of history.” Through this historical approach,

101 Sebald, The Rings of Saturn, 391.
102 Ibid, 182.
Sebald finds a potential avenue to circumvent the problem of Time in a manner that relies more upon human agency rather than a passive predeterminism which only awaits an apocalyptic salvation in response to an already apocalyptic world of oppression.

It remains difficult, however, for Sebald to labor for a redemptive possibility when the danger of apocalypse relentlessly appears. The descending spiral of existence he sketches out in the opening of his book reiterates itself throughout various parts of the novel:

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.  

From the earliest times, human civilization has been no more than a strange luminescence growing more intense by the hour, of which no one can say when it will begin to wane and when it will fade away.

Where a short while ago the dawn chorus had at times reached such a pitch that we had to close the bedroom windows, where larks had risen on the morning air above the fields and where, in the evenings, we occasionally even heard a nightingale in the thicket, its pure and penetrating song punctured by theatrical silences, there was now not a living sound.

The unerring fear of apocalypse betrays even Sebald’s own hope of historical redemption that he had allowed himself to nourish between optimistic intervals: “In reality, of course, history took a quite different turn, for, whenever one is imagining a bright future, the next disaster is just around the corner.” As long as the reconstitution of figures who have been rescued remain subject to the same structures of power that had displaced them before, no act of redemption can comfort the sense of an imminent apocalypse. His attribution of history’s faults to a systemic problem invokes a Benjaminian warning that repetition will only endure in the absence of a rupturing revolt; we have always lived in a “state of emergency”; the oppression is always in

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105 Ibid, 170.
106 Ibid, 268.
107 Ibid, 226.
more danger of being more violently oppressed.\textsuperscript{108} As the terrible realization dawned upon the Empress Dowager, “history consists of nothing but misfortune and the troubles that afflict us, so that in all our days on earth we never know one single moment that is genuinely free of fear.”\textsuperscript{109} As such, from the perspective of the Angel of History, these chains of events are a single catastrophe, an accumulation of wreckage upon wreckage, that can otherwise be understood as one gigantic ring of self-sustaining violence that will only continue until the collapse of its own universe. In this bleak picture, what use does melancholic superstition have in halting this violent process that Sebald’s historiography relentlessly testifies to?

At the very least, a practical consideration of superstition itself is enough to sustain Sebald’s practice despite the ongoing hopelessness his recoveries have to endure. The commitment to superstition is reinforced by the fear of its own tail: to not heed one’s superstitious inklings forebodes an even more violent consequence, a nihilistic absence of history, that overshadows even the bleakness of his current predicament:

How often this has caused me to feel that my memories, and the labours expended in writing them down are all part of the same humiliating and, at bottom, contemptible business! And yet, what would we be without memory? We would not be capable of ordering even the simplest thoughts, the most sensitive heart would lose the ability to show affection, our existence would be a mere never-ending chain of meaningless moments, and there would not be the faintest trace of a past.\textsuperscript{110}

Thus, despite the fantasies of an end during intense bouts of depression that would finally grind to a halt the workings of a superstitious melancholic, the recursive nature of his mission exceeds the impulse to cease once and for all. Contingent upon the hopes for recovery, Sebald’s own return to his hometown in the hopes of restituting the “life [he] had lost” is the only reason he comes back at all, a contingency of personal historiography that could, in a sense, rehabilitate—

\textsuperscript{109} Sebald, \textit{The Rings of Saturn}, 153.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid, 255.
restore the history of a town nearly forgotten after—“the monstrous events that had happened” since his family emigrated.\textsuperscript{111} No matter the tides of history that bring one calamity after the other, there is a small comfort in knowing that things could have fared worse if he had not taken the superstitious measures of a literary chronicler to avert archival annihilation: “All that was required was a moment of concentration, piecing together the syllables of the word concealed in the riddle, and everything would again be as it once was.”\textsuperscript{112} The hypochondriacal nature of superstition cannot bear to think otherwise.

Sebald, however, remains aware of the systemic forces—namely, the capitalist economy driving the spread of imperialism—that have patronized the history of arts, and therefore implicates his own status as writer concerned with the representation of history. As his companion, Cornelis de Jong, points out to him,

\begin{quote}
many important museums, such as The Hague or the Tate Gallery in London, were originally endowed by the sugar dynasties . . . The capital amassed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through various forms of slave economy is still in circulation, still bearing interest . . . One of the most tried and tested ways of legitimizing this kind of money has always been patronage of the arts.\textsuperscript{113}
\end{quote}

That every artwork is “coated with a sugar glaze or indeed made completely of sugar” becomes a susceptibility to both its literal and metaphorical consumption by aristocracy, as demonstrated by the Empress Maria Thersia, who consumed the confectionary model of the battle of Esztergom “in one of her recurrent bouts of melancholy.”\textsuperscript{114} Thus, sugar is too sweetly tempting as the metaphor of his own literary project that means to last in a manner unpalatable to the patrons he seeks to censure. Rather, Sebald enlists the services of silk, which circulates in similar economies as the sugar trade, but retains a subversiveness due to the nature of its production that

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{111} Sebald, \textit{The Rings of Saturn}, 178.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid, 179.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid, 194.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
marks it as an ideal material, compared to “any later form of factory work,” for literary preservation. Indeed, silk becomes one of Sebald’s most prominent symbols that transmigrate through a vast range of contexts; the silken hanging rope, the silk industry of Norwich, the silkworms of the Empress Dowager, all become a testament to how enduring and ubiquitous silk has become. And of course, silk has piqued his superstitious curiosity, compelled by the mysticism of the historic moth that transmigrates for purposes unknown: “And since the heaviest stone that melancholy can throw at a man is to tell him he is at the end of his nature, Browne scrutinizes that which escaped annihilation for any sign of the mysterious capacity for transmigration he has so often observed in caterpillars and moths.”

On one hand, Sebald evokes silk as materialism that miraculously persists, but on the other, demonstrates its longevity as symptomatic of the problem of historicism. In so far as historicism is the vantage-point of those that choose to view the tides of history as ripples that can only inform their own sources of disruption, the repeated horrors will only continue in the systematic blindness to recognize the strain of barbarism even in the shell of a cultural treasure that provoked past violence. The transmigratory fascination with silk resembles this doomed and most significantly, violent awe. It is just how the Nazis imported silk cultivation, a process that slaughters millions of silkworms after appropriating their labor, as a self-evident project of German nationalism, complementing the ideals of the Holocaust in their aim for national—and at its most ambitious, world-wide—ethnic homogenization. As long as silk workers, strapped to “looms . . . reminiscent of instruments of torture or cages,” exist in parasitic symbiosis, the state of emergency remains in place and oppression continues, uninterrupted and untransformed.

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115 Sebald, The Rings of Saturn, 283.
117 Ibid, 291.
Then, in a strange irony, silk as a lasting material becomes implicated in the problem of oppression that has perpetuated its fabricated fascination throughout history. This consideration brings to the forefront the dilemma of melancholy’s potential; it immortalizes aspects of history that can nurture the possibility of a redemption that breaks pattern with the repeating faults of mankind, but it can also become the breeding grounds to sustain practices and values that should be lost to time. Whether by silken ropes for public hangings or a text woven by its metaphorical thread, in the end, either alternative leads to a particular, peculiar destruction. History requires melancholia as the explosive inspiration to break free from the continuum of the oppression it witnesses, but it can also be lured into the consciousness that traps history in a cyclic mode of recurring violence.

That weavers in particular, together with scholars and writers with whom they had much in common, tended to suffer from melancholy and all the evils associated with it, is understandable given the nature of their work, which forced them to sit bent over, day after day . . . It is difficult to imagine the depths of despair into which those can be driven who, even after the end of the working day, are engrossed in their intricate designs and who are pursued, into their dreams, by the feeling they have got hold of the wrong thread. On the other hand, when we consider the weavers’ mental illnesses we should also bear in the mind that many of the materials produced . . . were of a truly fabulous variety, and of an iridescent, quite indescribable beauty as if they had been produced by Nature itself, like the plumage of birds.\[119\]

Silk cultivation, the transmutation of violence to beauty, from the suffering of oppression to a final good-bye draped by its black silken veil “so that the soul, as it left the body, would not be distracted on its final journey, either by a reflection of itself or by a last glimpse of the land now being lost for ever,” longs for the end of its own project, but whether such a desire is fulfilled can only be told by the end of his spool.\[120\] Is this what it means to have gotten hold of the wrong thread?

\[120\] Ibid, 296.
The thread running throughout *The Rings of Saturn* posits a thematic coherency of the history Sebald binds together, but as a weaver, he strains to keep his eye on the complex patterns he weaves together in a provisional, orbital arrangement prone to its own error. A writer’s historical nostalgia that drives its own preservation could weave in delicate and complex patterns that render history as potentially comprehensible, but in the case in which melancholia becomes more of an impediment to critical historical relationships by obsessing over its own mantle to no meaningful ends, it instead retreats ever more into its own epistemological hollowness. But there are no prescient methods to ascertain that one is weaving with the right thread; a literary silk worker must have his own labor extracted to sustain his historical project at the expense of his own life:

The chronicler, who was present at these events and is once more recalling what he witnessed, inscribes his experiences, in an act of self-mutilation onto his own body. In the writing, he becomes the martyred paradigm of the fate Providence has in store for us, and though still alive, is already in the tomb that his memoirs represent.\(^{121}\)

Thus, the design of the historical project reflects its own inscriptions, a meta-self-consciousness over its adoption of the very mechanisms of oppression it catalogs and critiques to perpetuate itself.

The melancholy of the historical project is an endless project. It simultaneously creates, critiques, and disintegrates its own historical representation. Literary representation serves as a way to lay bare the terms of analysis for how to understand a given historical moment, attending to its own structural determinants, allowing its readers to continuously reconceive the ways one is rewriting history. The next writer will transmigrate the ideas of his predecessor into his own weaving, simultaneously keeping alive both the potential of disruptive revolution and

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\(^{121}\) Ibid, 257.
unreconstructed oppression. Perhaps one day, the inherited needle of one of Sebald’s predecessors will reach the end of its spool, and having the right filament of silk threaded through it, will finally bid good-bye to the universe that had entrapped them for so long.
“I thank you for having listened to me.”

- Kaspar Hauser
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