Narrative Topography:  
Fictions of Country, City, and Suburb  
in the Work of Virginia Woolf, W. G. Sebald, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Ian McEwan

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation analyzes how twentieth- and early twenty-first-century novelists respond to the English landscape through their presentation of narrative and their experiments with novelistic form. Opening with a discussion of the English planning movement, “Narrative Topography” reveals how shifting perceptions of the structure of English space affect the content and form of the contemporary novel. The first chapter investigates literary responses to the English landscape between the World Wars, a period characterized by rapid suburban growth. It reveals how Virginia Woolf, in Mrs. Dalloway and Between the Acts, reconsiders which narrative choices might be appropriate for mobilizing and critiquing arguments about the relationship between city, country, and suburb. The following chapters focus on responses to the English landscape during the present era. The second chapter argues that W. G. Sebald, in The Rings of Saturn, constructs rural Norfolk and Suffolk as containing landscapes of horror—spaces riddled with sinkholes that lead his narrator to think about near and distant acts of violence. As Sebald intimates that this forms a porous “landscape” in its own right, he draws attention to the fallibility of representation and the erosion of cultural memory. The third chapter focuses on Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go, a novel in which a cloned human being uses descriptions of landscape to express and, more often, to suppress the physical and emotional pain associated with her position in society. By emphasizing his narrator’s proclivity towards euphemism and pastiche, Ishiguro intimates that, in an era of
mechanical and genetic reproduction, reliance on perspectives formed in past and imagined futures can be quite deadly. The fourth chapter analyzes Ian McEwan’s post-9/11 novel, *Saturday*—a reworking of Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*. In reading these two novels side-by-side, it reveals how London, its suburbs, and the English countryside might be imagined differently in the contemporary consciousness. Together these chapters investigate why novelistic treatments of the English landscape might interest contemporary readers who live outside England (and/or read these works in translation), especially during an era in which the English landscape has ceased to function as the real or metaphorical center of empire.
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This dissertation was conceived of and written in a variety of landscapes: the campuses and libraries of Columbia University and the University of Michigan; homes in New York City, Long Island, and outside Detroit; towns, villages, and unpopulated stretches of the English countryside; and the “generalized elsewhere” of cafes, trains, planes and parked cars. Yet this project was motivated less by such landscapes than by the people within them. It is with great humility and gratitude that I acknowledge some of the remarkable individuals who made completing this project possible.

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DEDICATION

For John and Frances McArthur
SOURCE ABBREVIATIONS FOR PRIMARY TEXTS

The following abbreviations are used throughout in parenthetical references.

The editions of these books used are as indicated.

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**Introduction**

*Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind.*

—Simon Schama, “Landscape and Memory”

The idea of landscape entered English cultural discourse via the visual arts, specifically seventeenth-century Dutch landscape painting, whose interest in perspective coincided with the discovery of optics, the evolution of navigational techniques, and a growing interest in human perception. In its primary meaning, the word landscape denotes a picture representing inland scenery. In 1606, T. Dekker described a “Drollerie” or painting, as being a “Dutch peece of Lantskop.” In 1683, Dryden used the word in *The Life of Plutarch*: “Let this part of the Landschape be cast into shadows, that the heightnings of the other may appear more beautiful.” Yet even as early as the seventeenth century, the word landscape also became used to signify the representation of scenery in language. In 1689, Bp. G. Burnet wrote, “I will not describe the Valley of Dauphine, all to Chambery, nor entertain you with a Landskip of the Country, which deserves a better Pencil than mine.” While literary works have long been thought of as presenting landscapes, this dissertation makes the case that novels can be considered to produce landscapes in their own right. As this dissertation argues, writers manipulate novelistic form so as to produce “narrative topographies”—imaginary spaces that dictate the

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perspective and intellectual movement of their readers. For each writer under consideration in this project, the concept of landscape resonates on two levels. It is a way to describe the portion of the material world that might be seen or remembered from a single vantage point. It is also a way to articulate this vision, and allow the reader to re-experience it, through verbal and visual forms of representation.

The idea that novels might produce landscapes may seem to be a surprising claim, especially since landscape is often considered to be a static form. For example, landscape painting and photography depict places that have been suspended in time. Even a distant scene viewed with one’s own eyes can seem static, since it is difficult to register the movement of objects on the horizon. Within narrative, however, representations of landscape function a bit differently. Narratives of place derive their meaning by describing the physical world, not as a static image, but rather terms of time, progression and change. The novel provides a context in which to explore and articulate the nature of this change. In part, this is because it is a pliable literary form, i.e. one that emerged from diverse cultural, literary, and linguistic traditions and one that continues to adapt to meet the needs of evolving cultures. Mikhail Bakhtin attributed the plasticity of the novel form to its “stylistic three-dimensionality,” which he connected to the “multi-languaged consciousness” that could be realized within it. For Bakhtin, the novel form has the potential to effect a “radical change” in the “temporal coordinates of the literary image.” This is largely due to the form’s adaptability to new ways of perceiving and representing the present day. As Bakhtin writes, the novel opened up a “new zone” for “structuring literary images, namely the zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary
reality) in all its open-endedness.**4 We might therefore think of the novel as being able to describe a forever-changing landscape through narrative—and able to present itself as a landscape—while still being a novel.

Simon Schama suggests that a landscape is first experienced as a “work of the mind” before it becomes “a repose for the senses.” While material places may have a presence prior to perception, they only become landscapes when they become apprehended through the senses, and then interpreted from a single, detached point of view. The landscape is therefore always a product of the observing mind. In each novel studied by this dissertation, the English landscape in particular gains importance, not particularly as it functions as a material place, but instead as it becomes a symbolic territory. In these novels, representations of remembered (or anticipated) English landscapes provide a way for writers to address a broad range of sociological concerns to people who live far beyond England. Why, in an age of increased geographic mobility for many and of shifting currents of history, do these authors remain intrigued by fantasies of a landscape that no longer functions as the center of empire? “Narrative Topography” argues that, where once this countryside was presented in fiction as the locus of an idyllic (imagined) rural innocence, over the course of the twentieth century it has increasingly functioned in literature as an unnerving symbol of the injustice that financed its development and preservation. For characters in novels by Virginia Woolf, W. G. Sebald, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Ian McEwan, the English landscape figures not as a site of repose

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but rather as one of paralysis—a setting in which traces of great violence become apparent.

The concern of this project is not, however, only to trace how fictional figures respond to place. It is also concerned with how a selection of innovative writers refines novelistic form to reevaluate their own experience of it. This articulation is often predicated on their distancing of an authorial voice from the perspective of a character or a narrator. (This might be achieved by having a narrator contradict himself, qualify his story, or imitate a genre whose assumptions work against his interest. It can also be achieved by juxtaposing the perspectives of multiple characters or by punctuating a narrative with images—thus inviting the reader to consider the book as forming a visual landscape in its own right.) These strategies lead to the production of a narratological topography: a remapping of the features of an already somewhat fictionalized terrain in literary form so as to provide the reader a way to reconsider features of the world through which the text, itself, circulates.⁵

The chapters that follow discuss novelistic representations of the English landscape. However, the cultural meaning of these representations remains central to their concern. This introduction therefore begins by clarifying how this project uses several terms related to place and space. It provides a brief history of the English planning movement, summarizes how the appearance of the English landscape has changed over the past hundred years, and describes some of the legislation that was

⁵ Rebecca L. Walkowitz’s synthesis of recent debates about the ‘new world literature’ has helped contextualize the argument of this dissertation in light of recent scholarship about how our understanding of how the circulation of texts helps produce their meaning. See Rebecca Walkowitz, Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation (New York: Columbia UP, 2006).
created in reaction to these changes. After offering a brief overview of how characters in works by each of the four authors under discussion respond to the landscapes that they inhabit (and how these authors express their experience of place by modifying novelistic form), this introduction closes by raising the following issue, which is taken up in each chapter and again in the conclusion: Why should novelistic treatments of the English landscape be of interest to contemporary readers who may live outside England, and/or read these works in translation?

A Grounding in the Terminology of Place and Space

This dissertation will start by clarifying how it uses a few deceptively simple terms related to locale, including place, landscape, country, city, and suburb. Place usually designates the physical location or the material setting in which social relations occur. Place is not constrained by scale. As Lawrence Buell writes, “What counts as a place can be as small as a corner of your kitchen or as big as the planet.” The question of scale is critical to each of the authors under consideration as they use descriptions of specific, local places to think about the cultural conditions that contributed to their appearance. Such considerations often lead these authors to reflect upon near and distant violence (class divisions at home, genocide, warfare, the inequalities produced by global

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capitalism, etc.). These writers seldom describe local places in isolation. Instead, they usually present them as a part of a landscape.

Although people often think of landscapes as containing visions of wilderness, cultivated fields, or parks, landscapes can also include scenes from city, suburb or village life. Yet even these place-based terms are not as straightforward as they may seem. As Raymond Williams reminds us, in English the term country refers to both a nation and a part of a ‘land’. It can also be used to designate an entire society or just its rural area. Although a wide range of social practices and forms of organization are associated with country life, the country is often evoked to describe a time of innocence (or limitation and ignorance). The word city also can refer to various forms of social organization. The city tends to be evoked to symbolize progress (or personal ambition and isolation). As Williams demonstrates, the tension between country and city has been a critical structuring force in English literature throughout its history. For example, Williams explains that these country practices include those of “hunters, pastoralists, farmers and factory farmers” and writes that the organization of the country has “varied from the tribe and the manor to the feudal estate, from the small peasantry and tenant farmers to the rural commune, from the latifundia and the plantation to the large capitalist enterprise and the state farm.” He demonstrates that many things, including “state capital, administrative base, religious centre, market-town, port and mercantile depot, military barracks, industrial concentration” define the city (1).
When the word suburb first appeared in English letters during the fourteenth century, it was used to denote the rural outskirts of a country town. By the start of the twenty-first century, it had been used to describe places that range in size from rural villages to edge cities, or range in kind from council housing to groups of mansions. Occasionally linked with utopian dreams of community in twentieth-century fiction, suburban space is more commonly evoked as a way to explore a writer’s anxieties related to changing class and gender dynamics related to modernity and industrialization. As the boundaries between country, city, and suburb continue to blur, the cultural meaning of these terms evolves. This dissertation therefore endeavors to contextualize the meaning of these words with each use.

If place is a physical setting, space is how this setting is experienced by an observing subject. In the most basic terms, space can be considered the area between two objects or the void surrounding one (as in ‘outer space’). In this dissertation, however, the term is employed a bit differently. Following the definition of Henri Lefebvre, space is considered to be a place as refracted through the lens of individual or cultural memory—a socially produced construct. At times, this dissertation also uses space to denote a setting.

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8 The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces some of the first appearances of the word “suburb” in English literature to Wyclif’s *Wks.* (1380): “Þai hadden subarbis to fede þer þe beestis þat shuld be offrd sacrifiœce to god in þe temple” and to Chaucer’s *Canon’s Yeoman’s Prologueue and Tale* (Ellesmere) (1386): “In the suburbs of a tonn.. Lurkyng in hernes and in lanes blynde.” “Suburb,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1961 ed.

that has been entirely constructed within the imagination. Space therefore becomes a plastic term—one that can be used to describe Clarissa Dalloway’s reconstruction of the gardens of Bourton, Sebald’s narrator’s interpretation of the Norfolk and Suffolk coastline, Ishiguro’s narrator’s invention of the “impossible” campus of “Hailsham,” and even McEwan’s protagonist’s imagination of London as seen from an airplane. Since space is a re-imagination of physical geography, it becomes an essential term for negotiating the transition from the perception of material place to its representation in literary form.

The Developing Landscape of Twentieth-Century England

Before we discuss this transition from material place to imagined space, however, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of how the English landscape changed over the course of the twentieth century. This will allow us to contextualize the physical and cultural milieu in which the writers discussed in the following chapters produced their work. The official English planning movement began just before the turn of the century, when the government realized that conditions in urban slums were so bad that only a small percentage of men raised in these environments were fit for military service in the Boer War. By 1918, Neville Chamberlain argued that the “housing problem has got into

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11 Although this historical overview comes from a variety of sources, it owes its greatest debt to Sir Peter Hall’s *Cities of Tomorrow*, a critical history of twentieth-century planning in theory and practice, and a discussion of the social and economic conditions that inspired this movement. Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002).
such a condition that it is a threat to the stability of the State” and a month later Lloyd George expressed his fears that “i[n] a short time we might have three-quarters of Europe converted to Bolshevism … Great Britain would hold out, but only if people were given a sense of confidence…” (Qtd. in Hall, 31). After the First World War, a series of acts were passed that allowed government-subsidized public utility societies to build on the undeveloped outskirts of urban areas. Speculative builders also began to build new homes along public transportation routes in what came to be called “ribbon development.”

Between the World Wars, four million new homes were constructed in England. While some of these were built in Ebenezer Howard’s self-contained “garden cities” (towns that contained areas for housing, industry and agriculture and that were surrounded by rings of parkland), most of these houses were put up in “peripheral satellite” communities that lacked the industry to be self-sufficient. By 1935, there was such an outcry against this unrestricted spate of building that a Restriction of Ribbon Development Act was passed to limit suburban expansion along major transportation lines.

During the interwar years, some urban inhabitants moved to these new suburbs, while others migrated to the English countryside. As white-collar workers, middle-class holiday makers, and retirees migrated to rural areas, English country life, as one critic has


13 The Addison Acts of 1919 and the laws that followed shortly thereafter produced approximately 1.5 million new council dwellings—which were primarily semi-detached or “short-terraced” homes built to accommodate returning war veterans and people removed from cities during slum clearance programs. The other 2.5 million new homes constructed during this period were built for middle-class families. Mark Clapson, Suburban Century: Social Change and Urban Growth in England and the USA (Oxford: Berg, 2003) 61.
observed, became an achievable romantic fantasy. Yet the character of this countryside was itself changing. Between the wars, the number of people working in agriculture, especially as farm workers, fell dramatically. Many traditional country functions (such as providing the raw materials and labor to fuel England’s metropolitan economy) continued to shift to less-developed colonies or foreign territories (Williams, 279). This, in conjunction with England’s declining imperial power, rendered the owners of many hereditary country estates unable to maintain their properties. In 1937, the English National Trust, which had been founded at the end of the nineteenth century to protect the coastline, countryside, and historic buildings, became empowered to accept tax-free gifts of estates. The organization gained more power in 1946, with the establishment of a National Land Fund that enabled the Trust to purchase more properties. Protecting portions of the countryside (and many of England’s great houses) from development had a strange consequence. For many, the idea of rural England became increasingly just that: an idea associated with the past that was disconnected from much of daily life. Going to the country could seem like going to a museum.

During the Second World War, suburban development came to a near stop in England, as the majority of the nation’s material, financial, and human resources went towards fighting the war. Immediately after the war, economic hardship further curtailed growth. During these years, the government’s main concern was the redevelopment of England’s damaged cities and its existing infrastructure. Sir Leslie Patrick Abercrombie,


the principal architect of the County of London Plan (1943), was one of England’s most influential post-war urban planners. In his redesign of the city of London, Abercrombie set aside a large ring of undeveloped land to enclose the most densely developed sections of the city, thus reducing the likelihood of urban sprawl. He then designed a series of footpaths, bridle tracks, bicycle paths, and landscaped parkways that connected this “green belt,” as he called it, to the city center. In Abercrombie’s words, the aim was to make it “possible for the town dweller to get from doorstep to open country through an easy flow of open space from garden to park, from park to parkway, from parkway to green wedge and from green wedge to Green Belt.”

Abercrombie’s vision reinforced a notion that England might remain a rural nation, despite the changing geopolitical and economic climate of the post-war era. Peter Hall has eloquently described Abercrombie’s contribution to preserving the green spaces of England as shifting the emphasis of city planning to country planning.

Abercrombie was not alone in his desire to protect the green spaces of England from development. In 1937, Clough Williams-Ellis published *Britain and the Beast*, a collection of essays in which twenty-six writers railed against what he calls “the indignity and discomfort of living in a land where disorder, ugliness, and inefficiency are generally

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16 Abercrombie had similar ideas for the layout of the rest of England: “One would like to see the country, suitably subdivided into Regions, under the autocratic control of a man who was at once a landscapist, a farmer, and a sympathizer with the needs of those unfortunate people who have to work and live in towns and suburbs.” Leslie Patrick Abercrombie and J.H. Forshaw, *County of London Plan* (London, Macmillan & Co., 1943) 133.

17 For an expanded treatment of Abercrombie’s vision, see Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow* 185.
accepted and tolerated both officially and privately as a matter of course.”

In this volume, J. M. Keynes advocates for forming a “Commission of Public Places” that will have the authority “…to issue an injunction against any act of exploitation or development of land or any change or demolition of an existing building where it considered such an act to be contrary to the general interest.” C. E. M. Joad argues: “the people’s claim upon the English countryside is paramount with the grounds for it […] but that the people are not as yet ready to take up their claim without destroying that to which the claim is laid” (64). E. M. Forster aligns rural preservation with anti-militarism, explaining that the “fighting services are bound to become serious enemies of what is left of England,” particularly since they were converting open areas into military camps and test grounds for poison gas. Forster also expresses concern that the National Trust is powerless to protect the “small things” that he loves most about his country—an England made of “oddmants and trifles, which decline to be scheduled—the light thickening, the crow flying into the wood, here a bush and there a sheep, the England of Cowper and Crabbe, Tennyson and Housman” (44-7). For Forster, defense of the English landscape is intimately linked to defense of English literary culture—a connection made by Virginia Woolf as well, as Chapter One demonstrates.

By 1947, nostalgia for England’s rural past was harnessed to garner support for a Town and Country Planning Act which gave local planning authorities the power to restrict the development of open space or low-density areas around cities. However, during the 1950s and 1960s, the birth rate rose in England. This, coupled with an influx

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of new immigrants from former colonies and other parts of the world meant that cities encircled by green belts became increasingly crowded. From 1955-1975, an English government under Conservative leadership embarked upon a plan to clear out urban slums. In many cases this entailed the building of high-rise blocks of apartments. In the late 1950s, units in five- or more-story blocks only accounted for 7 percent of the total public housing. By the mid-1960’s, it accounted for as much as 26 percent (Hall, 241).

The development of this housing coincided with a sustained period of growth in the English economy. As Hall explains, during these years “conventional land-use planning” “served as a means of guiding and controlling explosive physical growth” (379). Many urban dwellers found that the move to the suburbs or rural villages provided a welcome alternative to living in or around high-rise buildings. The trend that began in the 1930s—one in which the more affluent urban inhabitants spent weekends, vacations, and their retirement in the country—became more popular in the latter half of the century, in large part due to an increase in car ownership. As country villages relied less on agriculture to provide the basis of their economies, the character of country life changed. For many villages, economic survival was predicated on appealing to a certain type of nostalgia of what English country life should be.

As nostalgic images of the countryside were promoted within England and abroad, another kind of image found its way into the public consciousness—that of a decaying rustbelt, complete with abandoned factories and desolate industrial towns. During the 1970s and 1980s, hundreds of industrial plants were shut down and millions of workers lost their jobs. As England experienced economic downturns, authorities struggled to find ways to promote economic growth, leading to partnerships being formed
between the public and private sectors, including international investment funds. At the start of the new century, the present economy of England—like that of all nation-states—has become increasingly vulnerable to fluctuations in global economic markets. Meanwhile, the perspectives informing English cultural discourse have grown more diverse—both due to the increased diversity of the English population and due to the inclusion of voices from around the world into the conversation, via the Internet or other forms of global media.

Although 85 percent of the surface of England currently remains undeveloped, 90 percent of the country’s population lives in urban or suburban areas. For many, country life seems increasingly divorced from daily reality. Yet the idea that England might remain either a rural nation one filled with green suburbs persists in political discourse, even at the close of the twentieth century. In his 1993 anti-European Union speech, John Major famously predicted that “Fifty years on from now, Britain will still be the country of long shadows on cricket grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers and, as George Orwell said, ‘Old maids bicycling to holy communion through the morning mist.’” The fact that many in the British press ridiculed Major’s speech suggests that nostalgia for England’s rural past is slowly being replaced by cynicism.

**Literary Developments**

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Before we can shift from this historical overview of the developing English landscape to discussing its representation in narrative and novelistic form, there is one more term to be clarified: pastoral. In his recent book on this subject, Terry Gifford explains that this term has three meanings. In the first use, it describes a literary form that originated in Greek and Roman poetry to describe country life. This form is characterized by “some form of retreat and return, the fundamental pastoral movement, either within the text or in the sense that the pastoral retreat ‘returned’ some insights relevant to the urban audience.” In its second use, pastoral designates any artistic form that contrasts country to city, particularly as it celebrates forms of life associated with nature. In its third use, the term is derogatory and suggests that idealizations of the natural world simplify environmental or social conditions. This dissertation uses the term pastoral in each of these three meanings. For example, in its discussion of Mrs. Dalloway, it uses the word to describe how urban characters use the evocation of country spaces as a means of clarifying their responses to an urban scene. In its consideration of Between the Acts, it uses pastoral to describe a specific literary form (Miss LaTrobe interjects pastoral paeans into her pageant). In its deliberation on Never Let Me Go, it uses the term pejoratively as it likens the narrator’s reconstruction of a rural past to self-deception.

The idea of the pastoral has been attacked in recent years as being irrelevant—either because it fails to address the blurring of boundaries between country and city or because it endorses an unjust status quo that supports the interests of a landowning class. Gifford maintains that it has become increasingly difficult to differentiate English town

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22 Gifford, Pastoral 2.
and country. He quotes John Barrell and John Bull, the editors of *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*, as explaining: “The separation of life in the town and in the country that the Pastoral demands is now almost devoid of any meaning. It is difficult to pretend that the English countryside is now anything more than an extension of the town.” Gifford extends his critique of the pastoral by attacking its political underpinnings. He cites Roger Sales, who argues that such literary forms distracted readers from questioning the power structures that supported a social structure in which only a small segment of the population owned most of the nation’s land. If Woolf anticipated these late-twentieth-century critiques of the pastoral, Sebald, Ishiguro, and McEwan treat them as commonplace as they seek new formal approaches to considering the experience of the landscape. The chapter summaries that follow provide a brief overview of how each of the following four chapters will make such a case.

Chapter One, “‘No one ever suffered so acutely from atmosphere as I do’: Fantasies of English Space in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Between the Acts,*” focuses on how Woolf exposes the limitations of her characters’ perspectives on the design and symbolic function of the places in which they live. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, written at the start of the suburban building boom, Woolf’s urban characters tend to journey, via reverie, from the heart of the modern city directly to an English countryside associated with the pre-war past, without acknowledging the times (and places) that lie in between. Yet the English suburbs do appear in this novel—often in surprising ways. As such, Woolf uses this novel to reconsider her approach to thinking about the differences

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23 Qtd. in Gifford, *Pastoral* 3.

between various forms of English space. As more suburbs were built during the interwar period, Woolf’s perspective on the relationship between English country and city space evolves further. In *Between the Acts*, written at the start of World War Two, Woolf creates characters who project their anxieties about development and the coming war onto suburban bungalows and suggests that the suburbs have already infiltrated the countryside and affected the character of rural space. In this novel, Woolf also reflects on literature’s potential to achieve cultural change through her presentation of a country pageant produced by the female playwright, who vacillates between showing her audience unflattering images of themselves (and the landscape) and deploying saccharine paeans to regain this audience’s sympathy. It is no wonder that the meaning of the play eludes members of this audience. In both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Between the Acts*, Woolf therefore explores what narrative choices might be appropriate for mobilizing and critiquing arguments about the relationship between city, country, and suburb during a period in which the boundaries between such places are coming into question.

If the English countryside is threatened by war and development, where and how might one locate the “rural”—with all its associations with an idyllic, pastoral past—in literary fiction at the start of a new century? Although there is a temporal gap between the publication of *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Between the Acts* and the publication of the work of Sebald, Ishiguro, and McEwan, this dissertation pairs a discussion of modern and contemporary fiction to demonstrate how late-twentieth-century skepticism about the form and symbolic function of the English landscape grew out of (and further developed) themes already present in Woolf’s fiction. Chapter Two, “Sinkholes to History: The Porous Landscape and Unstable Narrative of W. G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn*,”
argues that Sebald presents rural England, not as an idyllic form of space, but instead as a place of horror. As Sebald’s narrator recounts a walking tour of Norfolk and Suffolk, he describes a landscape that has been riddled with sinkholes capable of pulling medieval cities into the ocean, burying church towers whole, and entombing writers in their gardens. Contemplating the eroding coast of England leads this narrator to think about natural disasters and man-made acts of violence that have taken place, both within England and around the world. The memory of the English countryside also causes this narrator to reconsider the relationship between artistic representation and the preservation (and erasure) of cultural memory. Twice, this narrator refers to collections of documents as forming a “paper landscape” or having a “landscape-format.” By interspersing uncaptioned black-and-white images throughout the book (many of which are themselves of landscapes), Sebald encourages his reader to consider The Rings of Saturn in similar terms. Much as the narrator remembers the English landscape crumbling beneath his feet, the reader finds that this text is filled with metaphorical sinkholes (uncaptioned images that provide no illusions of certainty). The content and design of The Rings of Saturn, therefore, provides less a commentary on the particularities of English space than a consideration of the precarious nature of the vast landscape of cultural memory.

Chapter Three, “‘Wherever it was I was supposed to be’: Perilous Pastiche in Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go,” also presents an unsettling portrait of a rural landscape that is based on the English countryside (and on the stories told about it). Ishiguro presents Norfolk, along with other portions of England, through the memories of Kathy H., a cloned human being who has been created so that her body can provide organs and other parts for non-cloned ‘normals.’ Kathy uses descriptions of landscape to
help her to express and, more often, to suppress the physical and emotional pain associated with her social position. As Kathy models her story on English school stories, Ishiguro makes it clear that her approach works against her interests. As this chapter will demonstrate, at the inception of the school story genre, such narratives advocated submission to authority, militant patriotism, and the preservation of a rigid social hierarchy—values that are clearly inimical to a cloned being created to provide spare parts to a society that does not consider her to be an equal member. If Kathy’s proclivity towards euphemism and pastiche provides any indication of Ishiguro’s feelings about narrative in an age of mechanical and genetic reproduction, *Never Let Me Go* implies that literature, in its present state, can be quite deadly. Like Woolf and Sebald, Ishiguro is wary of narrative forms that offer conciliatory, but predetermined, readings of physical, psychological or social space. His novel provokes the reader to take a distant perspective on how they navigate, and get lost in, the landscapes that they inhabit, whether they are located in England or further abroad.

Chapter Four, “Revising the Topography of Woolf’s London: Ian McEwan’s *Saturday,*” provides a short coda to these three others. Since *Saturday* was written as a re-imagining of *Mrs. Dalloway* as set in a post-9/11 context, reading these novels together allows us to contrast how London, its suburbs, and the English countryside are being imagined differently in current popular fiction. In McEwan’s novel, the division between city, country, and suburb that defined the perspective of most characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* no longer applies, as these zones now blend together. This blurring has an interesting effect: rather than becoming nostalgic for rural gardens or ideal English past, McEwan’s protagonist uses pastoral tropes to describe his experience of the millennial
city. This leads him to eulogize the present moment as if it is already past. Rather than presenting a surfeit of subjectivity, McEwan creates a heterodiegetic narrator—or one who describes the experiences of the characters within the novel (in this case, a single protagonist)—from a detached perspective. McEwan’s move away from modernist narrative technique is not, however, a manifestation of nostalgia for a pre-modern worldview. Instead, it is an attempt to discover a locus of safety in an uncertain world in which pastoral tropes continue not to make sense, and even the seemingly objective discourse of science provides only fallible illusions of certainty.

In each of the novels under discussion, rural England figures as a metonym for artifice. The question becomes: to what end, and for what kind of audience? The conclusion of this dissertation, “A last glimpse of the land now being lost for ever,” examines how each of these writers situates his or her reader relative to another iconic place of departure: Dover Beach. In analyzing how these writers reimagine an iconic portion of English geography (along with Matthew Arnold's poem), this section considers how these works contribute to ongoing debates about the relationship between storytelling, the representation of memory, and the construction of individual, national, and cosmopolitan identity. In an era in which local places are increasingly viewed from a distant, global perspective, this dissertation argues, narrative topography serves a critical function—it provides a way to re-conceive, and to remap the relationship between the local and the global and, in so doing, to rethink the ethics of how we, as readers, negotiate both forms of space.
Chapter 1:

“No one ever suffered so acutely from atmosphere as I do”:

**Fantasies of English Space in Virginia Woolf’s**

_Mrs. Dalloway_ and _Between the Acts_

In English literature from the sixteenth century onward, the city was often associated with violent social change while the countryside was linked to a peaceful rural past. As Raymond Williams has shown, this rural-urban divide served a critical function in English letters: it bolstered a notion of national identity predicated on nostalgia for feudal economic and class structures. Over the course of the twentieth century, novelists began to treat the idea of rural England differently in literary fiction, particularly as a third term became important—the suburb. Over four million suburban homes were built in the English countryside between the end of the First World War and the start of the Second. The spreading English suburbs disrupted physical boundaries between “city” and “country” space. This impacted how writers would portray the English landscape as they explored connections between physical space and national identity.

Many early twentieth-century English novelists used the suburbs as a trope through which they could consider social changes related to industrialization and resulting shifts in class and gender dynamics. Literary critic John Carey describes the English modernists as “distinctive in combining topographical and intellectual disdain” in their concept of the “suburban” (53). Virginia Woolf provides a case in point. In her prose, Woolf bristles against the London suburb of Richmond (where she lived from 1914 to 1924) and blames the English suburbs for the spread of what she calls
“middlebrow” values and the decline of English culture. In a posthumously published review of E. M. Forster’s fiction, Woolf argues that Forster’s *The Longest Journey* (1907) “fails” because Forster demands that his readers simultaneously “believe in the complete reality of the suburb and in the complete reality of the soul.” For Woolf, the “conjunction of these two realities,” that of the real and that of the symbol, can “cast doubt upon them both.”

Although Woolf actively denounces the suburbs in this review (and in much of her prose), she ignores them or renders them practically invisible in much of her fiction. In *Mrs. Dalloway* (1924), for example, Woolf figures city and country—despite their very different qualities—as positive spaces that offer opportunities for friendship, love, connection, and memory. By contrast, she pushes the English suburbs—which appeared prominently in her private writings of the same period—to the margins of this novel. Through the use of free indirect discourse, Woolf exposes the thoughts of characters from a range of social backgrounds. For the most part, these characters share a desire to overlook suburban spaces and, by extension, the times and spaces that lie between the present-day city and the countryside that they associate with youth. Like many influential politicians and urban planners of the day, Woolf’s characters push the suburbs to the periphery of their vision.

Yet Woolf is torn between her characters’ exaltation about the city (and nostalgia for the country) and her own concerns about how such idealizations can be used to

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1 This essay was published posthumously and its date of composition is uncertain. Since Woolf mentions the publication of Forster’s *Passage to India* in this text, she must have written it after 1924. Virginia Woolf. “The Novels of E. M. Forster.” In *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942. London: The Hogarth Press) 108.
bolster militaristic propaganda. Furthermore, despite Woolf’s apparent desire to banish the suburbs from this novel, they surface in *Mrs. Dalloway* in surprising ways. The suburbs are not only spaces into which Woolf might deposit minor characters once their use-value in London (and for her plot) has been exhausted. They are also an unexpected locus of fecundity. In a suburb of Manchester, Sally Seton—the woman whom Clarissa Dalloway once associated with youth, love, and the English countryside—experiences a fertility denied to Clarissa within the urban core. Through her presentation of Sally, Woolf begins to explore the possibility that the suburbs have generative potential.

As more housing was built in England between the wars, it became more difficult to marginalize suburban spaces in fiction that was set in modern England. It also became difficult for many writers—Woolf included—to describe the English city or country as spaces that felt entirely stable. As Woolf wrote *Between the Acts*, she presented the English city and country less with nostalgia than with fear. Some of Woolf’s characters recall that it was impossible to walk safely home from the theatre in Victorian London. Others read about a gang-rape that had just occurred at Whitehall. All anticipate that London will soon be the target of German bombs. These characters harbor few illusions that they might escape the dangers of the city by retreating into the country. One character explains that the rural landscape has long been scarred by violence and points out that, from an airplane, it is still possible to see “the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans” (*BA*, 3-4). For a little boy, the present-day garden becomes a site of terror, as his grandfather leaps at him from behind the trees (*BA*, 9). As another character predicts, in the future “guns would rake that land into furrows: planes splinter Bolney Minster into smithereens and blast the Folly” (*BA*, 22). If, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf celebrates the
“foolish” desire to bring people together and to perceive English space not as it is, but as the urban elite might wish it to be, in *Between the Acts* she depicts people, a landscape, and a nation falling apart as they are threatened by change and enervated by fear.

In *Between the Acts*, Woolf’s characters do not overlook the spread of the suburbs in the same way that they do in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Instead, they project anxieties related to the violent destruction of the landscape by war onto bungalows. As an audience gathers to watch a pageant held at Pointz Hall, its members greet one another by echoing the anti-development sentiments of their day: “‘That hideous new house at Pyes Corner! What an eyesore! And those bungalows! –have you seen ‘em?’” (*BA*, 75). As the pageant ends, an anonymous voice broadcast from speakers takes these protests a step further: “Consider the gun slayers, bomb droppers here or there. They do openly what we do slyly. Take for example […] Mr. M’s bungalow. A view spoilt for ever. That’s murder…” (*BA*, 187). While it is not surprising that the characters in *Between the Acts* redirect their fears onto the suburbs, it is more unusual that Woolf, in this novel, uses the same terms that she deploys elsewhere to describe suburbia—flat, repetitive, boring, middlebrow, and suffocating—to describe the countryside itself. For example, when a visitor from London exclaims, “What a view!” even she conceals a yawn: “Nobody answered her. The flat fields glared green yellow, blue yellow, red yellow, then blue again. The repetition was senseless, hideous, stupefying” (*BA*, 67). At the level of language, Woolf suggests, the suburbs have already infiltrated the countryside, affected the character of rural space, and altered its available views.

A comparison of these two novels, one written at the beginning and the other at the end of the interwar period, demonstrates how one author’s understanding of the
symbolic function of the English landscape shifted during the Interwar years. Yet reading these two novels together does something more than expose the change of a single author’s perspective. It also raises a question that would preoccupy a later generation of writers who also took the English rural landscape as their subject: If the countryside has become a suburb (that is to say, a space invaded by developers and suburbanites) and remains threatened by further development as well as pollution, where and how might one locate the “rural”—with all of its ties to the English past—in new literary works? Analyzing how Virginia Woolf’s approach to presenting the English landscape shifted between the wars (both in terms of her descriptions of space and experiments in narrative form) sets the scene for understanding treatments of the English town, country and suburb in fiction of the late twentieth century.

PART I: The Repression of the Suburban in *Mrs. Dalloway*: Woolf’s Conflicted Response to the English Suburbs

At the beginning of the twentieth century, many English writers projected their anxieties related to shifting class and gender dynamics onto the suburbs. For example, in *Tono-Bungay* (1908), H. G. Wells describes a suburban bungalow as a setting in which aesthetic sensibility and intellectual curiosity become squelched. His narrator complains that one suburban home is decorated to satisfy “some limited, clearly seen and experienced ideal—that excluded all other possibilities […] There wasn’t a place where one could sit and read in the whole house.” In *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), one of Rebecca West’s upper-class characters considers “Wealdstone” to be a “red suburban
stain which fouls the fields three miles nearer London than Harroweald” and worries that “One cannot now protect one’s environment as one once could.” In *Coming Up for Air* (1939), George Orwell’s narrator describes a suburban road as “a prison with the cells all in a row. A line of semidetached torture-chambers where the poor little five-to-ten-pound-a-weekers quake and shiver.” Virginia Woolf expresses similar sentiments in her prose. Yet, in her early fiction she tends to ignore the suburbs altogether. In part, this is because Woolf was conflicted about how she felt about the English suburbs—particularly the one in which she spent ten years of her life.

Virginia and Leonard Woolf lived in the London suburb of Richmond from 1914 until 1924, the same period in which she wrote the short story “Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street” and conceived and composed over half of her great urban novel *Mrs. Dalloway.* Located eight miles from Charing Cross station in London, Richmond experienced its largest period of growth after its railway station opened in the mid-eighteen hundreds. Since this expansion was not predicated on the popularity of the automobile, Richmond

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may not seem suburban to twenty-first-century American readers, who are accustomed to sprawling forms of development. For Woolf, however, Richmond was decidedly so. In essays and diary entries that Woolf wrote while living in Richmond, she often criticized Richmond. On January 28, 1915, Woolf declares that “after a day or two of Richmond” she wants to go to London: “Somehow, one can’t take Richmond seriously. One has always come here for an outing, I suppose; & that is part of its charm, but one wants serious life sometime.” If visiting Richmond represents an “outing,” it follows that “serious life” exists primarily for her within the urban core.

Five years later, Woolf extends her disdain for Richmond to suburban villas. Describing a walk in Putney (another London suburb) that she takes on January 28th of 1920, Woolf writes, “The streets of villas make me more dismal than slums. Each has a cropped tree growing out of a square lifted from the pavement in front of it. Then the interiors—But I don’t want to dwell on this. […] Its partly that I’m a snob. The middle classes are cut so thick, & ring so coarse, when they laugh or express themselves. The lower classes don’t do this at all.” As Woolf links suburban space with “cropped” trees struggling to break out of pavement (and the “coarse” forms of self-expression that she associates with the “middle class”), she describes a kind of confinement that is in direct opposition to the kind of freedom that she seeks through writing (and the refinement to which she aspires in prose). Furthermore, she frames an elitist argument in spatial

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5 Virginia Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 2, 15.
terms—a pattern that would recur within her fiction. In addition to making Woolf feel “dismal,” being confined in a suburb (even one that Woolf describes as charming) occasionally renders Woolf unable to write. In 1922, Woolf describes the “depression of a return from Rodmell” (the location of Monk’s House, the Woolf’s Suffolk retreat) as leaving her in a paralyzing state of blankness: “coming back from Rodmell,—blank—reason for blank forgotten as well as blanks contents. If I give my reason, I shall waste my time & energy” (D II: 176 Sunday 11 June 1922). The passage of six weeks hardly changes her mood:

It is only 11.30 to be honest, & I have left off Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street; & really why is it? I should very much like to account for my depression […]. The Squire rejected Leonard’s story; & perhaps I dont like seeing new houses built all about; & get edgy about our field. So no I have assembled my facts—to which I add my spending 10/6 on photographs, which we developed in my dress cupboard last night; & they are all failures. Compliments, clothes, building, photography—it is for these reasons that I cannot write Mrs. Dalloway […]. No one ever suffered so acutely from atmosphere as I do; & my leaves dropped one by one; though heaven knows my root is firm enough (D, II: 190-1 Tues 22 August, 1922)

While the assertion that “No one ever suffered so acutely from atmosphere as I do” may seem excessive, Woolf diagnoses her mental state as “depression” and attributes it to the fact that new houses are being built and to her concerns about the fate of her field. If Leonard’s rejected story and her own “failed” photographs spur Woolf’s negative
feelings, than the appearance of new houses provides a screen onto which she might project her anxieties about these individual failures. That said, Woolf was not wrong to feel “edgy” about the fate of the fields surrounding Monk’s House, or that of fields all throughout England. During the 1920s and 1930s, the English countryside was in a period of decline as government-subsidized public utility societies were building new housing on urban outskirts and speculative builders were creating ribbon development following the lines of public transportation routes. Whether these new suburbs took the form of expensive garden cities or more hastily constructed cluster housing, their rapid development was altering the appearance of large sections of the English countryside and the fabric of rural life.

In addition to disliking the growing suburbs, Woolf resented the changes being made to the roads that connected them. In an essay that she wrote in 1924, Woolf addresses these concerns directly. In “The cheapening of motor-cars,” Woolf declares that lowered car prices contribute to “the ruin of the country road,” which

…is rapidly losing its old character—its colour, here tawny-red, here pearl-white; its flowery and untidy hedges; its quiet; its ancient and irregular charm. It is becoming, instead, black as cinders, smooth as oilcloth, shaven of wild flowers, straightened of corners, a mere racing-track for the convenience of a population seemingly in perpetual and frantic haste not to be late for dinner.6

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By contrasting the “old,” “ancient,” “untidy” and (seemingly) natural landscape with a “straightened” world in which “haste” replaces “charm,” Woolf indicates her anxieties about racing forward without first looking back. Furthermore, Woolf connects her nostalgia for country roads with a pre-war innocence. In this essay, the approach of the car sends “a signal among walkers and cyclists either to dismount and stand still or risk some perfectly wanton onslaught on the part of the military upon the common amenities of the King’s highway” (E, III, 440). In Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf translates nostalgia for a pre-automobile (and pre-militarized) England into narrative form. Here, she creates characters whose thoughts loop back to the past as they go about their daily routines. She then juxtaposes the “untidy” associative memories of these characters against one another. For the reader, following Woolf’s narrative becomes more like traveling along a winding lane than following the straightened road formed by a linear plot that has been presented from a single point of view. Her development of this narrative style may even express Woolf’s preference of country over suburb.7

In addition to being worried about how straightened roadways create a culture in which “haste” supplants “charm,” Woolf is also concerned about how suburban spaces reinforce power structures that she finds objectionable in imperialism. In the second essay that Woolf writes in 1924 that is related to land development, “Thunder at

7 Woolf’s perspective on motor travel would change in 1927, when she and Leonard used profits from To the Lighthouse to purchase a second-hand Singer. For Woolf, owning a car represented “a great opening up in our lives” and allowed for an expansion “of the map of the world in one’s mind” (D, 3: 147). As Oliver Bell reports, Woolf gave up on driving the car herself after crashing into a hedge. For more on Woolf’s relationship to cars, see Makiko Minow-Pinkney, “Virginia Woolf in the Age of Motor Cars,” Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, ed. Pamela L. Caughie (New York: Garland, 2000) 162-181.
Wembley,” Woolf uses a thunderstorm disrupting a British Empire Exhibition held in a London suburb to critique the oppression that she associates with imperialism and with suburban spaces more generally. The official aim of the 1924 Empire Exhibition was “to stimulate trade, strengthen bonds that bind mother Country to her Sister States and Daughters, to bring into closer contact with each other, to enable all who owe allegiance to the British flag to meet on common ground and learn to know each other.”

Woolf, however, wonders if this “common ground” is one on which it is worthwhile to stand. As she re-imagines a thunderstorm that occurred during the Exhibition, she fancifully creates a world in which the exhibition booths that represent the colonies are thrown into the air:

Colonies are perishing and dispersing in spray of inconceivable beauty and terror which some malignant power illuminates. Ash and violet are the colours of its decay. From every quarter human beings come flying—clergymen, school children, invalids in bath-chairs. They fly with outstretched arms, and a vast sound of wailing rolls before them, but there is neither confusion nor dismay. Humanity is rushing to destruction, but humanity is accepting its doom [...]. Cracks like the white roots of trees spread themselves across the firmament. The Empire is perishing; the bands are playing; the Exhibition is in ruins. For that is what comes of letting in the sky. (E, III, 413)

In Woolf’s fictionalized account of Wembley, she envisions an apocalyptic future for suburban space—one in which the violence of colonial rebellion takes place, not abroad,

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but within England itself. This apocalypse, she suggests, is sanctioned by “nature.” It is a storm that “let[s] in the sky” and destroys “vast, smooth, grey palaces, no vulgar riot of ideas tumbled expensively in their architect’s head.” One of the more interesting features of this essay is the reaction of people in Wembley to the destruction of the space that encloses them. Rather than causing “confusion” or “dismay,” the destruction of such buildings offers welcome release, both for the “livid, lurid, sulphurine” sky and for the “humanity” struggling beneath it. Woolf suggests that certain members of society (clergymen, school children, and invalids) welcome this destruction of suburban space with open arms—even if it might lead to their own “doom.” Melba Cuddy-Keane maintains that, for Woolf, the Exhibition symbolized both British imperial power and “mass democracy on its vast scale.” Woolf’s distrust of imperialism and mass democracy was connected to her advocacy of what Cuddy-Keane calls “a more participatory form of democracy”—one in which individuals have the personal space required for intelligent thought. ⁹ While connecting the form of space that one inhabits to the ability to think intelligently not a gesture unique to Woolf, what is rather unique about this essay is the clear relish that the author takes in imagining the English suburbs not only as being blown to pieces, but also as containing a population eager to see this happen.

If Woolf’s projection of a suicidal impulse onto the masses rings out of tune, this may be because Woolf uses “Thunder at Wembley” to explore the extremes that characterize her own reaction to living in Richmond. While it is true that Woolf was often depressed by being forced to live away from London and that she longed to return to the

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capital, she actually expressed vacillating feelings about Richmond in her prose during the 1920s—a fluctuation that (as we will soon see) also found its way into her fiction. In a 1920 diary entry, Woolf even seems grateful for the security that her suburban house offers her. Despite a huge storm “battering” the windows with “violent gusts leaping out of the heart of complete calm—a suggestion of animal savagery; or human frenzy,” Woolf does not go outside to welcome the storm with open arms (as do the figures in “Thunder at Wembley”). Instead, she credits Richmond, and the privacy that it affords, for the continuation of her “private life” with Leonard. In May, she confesses: “I like coming back to Richmond after Gordon Sqre. I like continuing our private life, unseen by anyone” (D, II: 36 Tuesday, 11 May 1920). In September, she goes so far as to describe Richmond as having a curative function as she attributes the recovery of her longtime servant, Nelly, to being there: “No doubt Richmond has something to do with it” (D, II: 70 Sunday 26 September 1920). Woolf’s strongest praise for Richmond, however, comes just as she prepares to move back to London. In January of 1924, shortly after buying a ten-year lease of 52 Tavistock Square, Woolf credits Richmond and the press that she and Leonard started there with saving their lives:

So I ought to be grateful to Richmond & Hogarth, indeed, whether its my invincible optimism or not, I am grateful. Nothing could have suited better all through those years when I was creeping about, like a rat struck on the head, & the aeroplanes were over London at night, & the streets dark, & no penny buns in the window. Moreover, nowhere else could we have started the Hogarth Press, whose very awkward beginning had rise in this very room, on this very green carpet. Here that strange offspring grew &
throve; it ousted us from the dining room, which is now a dusty coffin; &
crept all over the house.

And people have been here, thousands of them it seems to me. I’ve sat
over this fire many an evening talking, & save for one fit of the glooms
last summer, have never complained of Richmond, till I shed it, like a
loose skin.

[Postscript by VW:] I’ve had some very curious visions in this room too,
lying in bed, mad, & seeing the sunlight quivering like gold water, on the
wall. I’ve heard the voices of the dead here. And felt, through it all,
exquisitely happy. (D, II: 283 Wednesday 9 January, 1924).

Did Woolf really feel “through it all, exquisitely happy” at Richmond? The house
certainly provides her with a place to host “thousands” of guests, with security from the
planes bombing central London during the First World War, with inspiration to engender
her “offspring” the press, and with enough mental space to write Night and Day (1919),
Kew Gardens (1919), Monday or Tuesday (1921), and Jacob’s Room (1922), along with
countless essays, book reviews, letters, and diary entries.10 Yet Woolf’s declaration of
happiness seems particularly suspect when we consider that the image from this passage
of “sunlight quivering like gold water, on the wall” and the notion of hearing “the voices
of the dead” reappear in Mrs. Dalloway in the thoughts of the veteran Septimus Warren
Smith shortly before he jumps out the window.

10 Virginia Woolf, Night and Day (1919. London: Hogarth, 1929); Kew Gardens
(1919. Hogarth, 1927); Monday or Tuesday: Eight Stories (1921. Mineola, NY: Dover,
By reusing an image that she claims made her “exquisitely happy” in the thoughts of a character about to kill himself, Woolf suggests that her last-ditch effort to feel exuberant about Richmond may be the product of a willful misreading of her setting, one that is, as she suggests, a product of her “invincible optimism” rather than of what she might consider to be a clearer form of vision. A certain strand of optimism was pervasive in England between the wars, both among private citizens struggling to rebound from wartime losses and among public figures who were trying to plan their nation’s future. It is this sense of optimism that Woolf captures so adeptly through the content and form of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

“as her needle […] collected the green folds together”: Ideas of English Green Space Between the Wars

As ribbon development extended deeper into rural England, many public intellectuals, politicians, and urban planners fought to preserve landscapes associated with England’s pre-industrial and pre-suburban past. Some, like Sir Leslie Patrick Abercrombie, designed spaces that created the illusion that the city gave way directly onto the country. Abercrombie’s County of London Plan, first conceived between the wars and later put into effect in 1943, reshaped London so that urban dwellers could gaze upon green spaces while in the heart of the city. It also allowed them, at least in theory, to travel from city to country without gazing on industrial or suburban areas.) In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf’s characters harbor similar ideas about English space—especially as they imagine that London is the countryside or travel, via daydreams, directly from the
heart of the modern city to a former rural landscape without acknowledging the times or spaces that lie in between.

Woolf does something similar as she structures her novel. Despite her strong reaction to the suburbs in her prose, Woolf barely mentions the English suburbs in Mrs. Dalloway. She also fails to acknowledge that the English rural landscape had already begun to change in the years before the First World War—the same period during which Clarissa Dalloway and her friend Sally Seton arranged flowers at the country house of Bourton and Septimus Warren Smith's writing “flowered” under the influence of his tutor Miss Isabel Pole (MD, 34, 85). There are good reasons for this. As we have seen, Woolf (in her review of E. M. Forster) maintains that it is necessary to exclude descriptions of suburban spaces from works of fiction that aimed to capture the “reality” of the human soul. In Woolf’s opinion, Forster sees beauty—none more keenly; but beauty imprisoned in a fortress of brick and mortar whence he must extricate her. Hence he is always constrained to build the cage—society in all its intricacy and triviality—before he can free the prisoner. The omnibus, the villa, the suburban residence, are an essential part of his design. They are required to imprison and impede the flying flame which is so remorselessly caged behind them.11

Woolf even finds that the more “lyrical passages” of The Longest Journey, “often of great beauty themselves, fail in their due effect in this broader context” (172). In Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf goes out of her way to avoid such a “failure” as she tries to capture the

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“flying flame” of the human soul. One way that she does this is by using free indirect discourse to explore the private thoughts of an array of different characters. By exposing discrepancies in how multiple figures perceive and interpret a scene, Woolf foregrounds the limitations of any single perspective. Erich Auerbach has argued that Woolf’s multi-personal representations of consciousness give her narrative a “hyper-subjectivity” similar to that which developed in response to the rapid changes in science, technology and economics that began during the First World War. During this period, Auerbach argues modern writers developed an “increasing predilection for ruthlessly subjectivistic perspectives,” which they “transformed into a narrative technique which dissolves reality into multiple and multivalent reflections of consciousness.”

This certainly is the case for Virginia Woolf. Indeed, one thing that all of Woolf’s characters experience as they move through a June day in 1923 is what Georg Simmel has called an “intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli.” To counter this intensity, many of these characters evoke memories of a simpler time in the English countryside. Raymond Williams has written, “the discontinuity, the automatism, of the city were [in Woolf’s fiction] aesthetically experienced as a problem of perception which raised problems of identity—and which was characteristically resolved on arrival in the country.” (Williams illustrated this by presenting a passage from Orlando in which Woolf uses an image of “motoring fast” through the country as a way to explore the fragmentary experience of city life [241]). In Mrs. Dalloway, these country arrivals are


not predicated on making physical journeys from the city to the country. Instead, they are based on importing memories of the country into an urban setting.

The most prominent example of this appears on her novel’s first page. As Clarissa Dalloway opens the doors of her London home, she finds herself transported to the gardens of Bourton, the country house in which she spent the summer when she was eighteen. For Clarissa, these two settings blend seamlessly together. Looking out onto the London morning, Clarissa finds the city air is just as “fresh” as that of Bourton and remembers feeling, “standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen” (MD, 3). Clarissa is not the only character in Woolf’s novel who credits her with having the power to yoke together city and country. Clarissa’s former suitor, Peter Walsh, believes that the “awful” event mentioned on the book’s opening page is Clarissa’s decision to marry Dalloway. For Peter, this turning point happens again and again, since Clarissa has the “awfully strange […] power, as she came tinkling, rustling, still had the power as she came across the room, to make the moon, which he detested, rise at Bourton on the terrace in the summer sky” (MD, 47). The awful rural event that haunts Clarissa is, however, quite different. She saw her sister Sylvia killed by a falling tree. Witnessing such an event gave Clarissa the “notion” “that the Gods, who never lost a chance of hurting, thwarting and spoiling human lives were seriously put out if, all the same, you behaved like a lady. Clarissa’s revenge on fate is to “[enjoy] life immensely.” This, not the random falling of a tree, is what she decides constitutes her “nature” (MD, 78). Throughout the novel, Clarissa seems to be most adept in enjoying connecting disparate places and times when she engages in a repetitive act, such as stitching the folds of her dress. In one of Mrs. Dalloway’s more lyrical passages, Woolf writes:
Quiet descended on her, calm, content, as her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to its gentle pause, collected the green folds together and attached them, very lightly, to the belt. So on a summer’s day waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying “that is all” more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, That is all. Fear no more, says the heart. Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall. And the body alone listens to the passing bee; the wave breaking; the dog barking, far away barking and barking. (MD, 39-40)

By attributing the action in this scene to external forces (quiet descends “on” Clarissa; it is the needle that “draw[s],” “collect[s],” and “attach[es]” the fabric), Woolf describes a character who enters a trancelike state—one that enables her to perceive what is near (“the passing bee”) and what is far (“the wave breaking; the dog barking”) without being limited by physical location. There is something wonderful about the “calm” and “content” feeling that Woolf offers Clarissa in this passive condition—as if the repetitive aesthetic act of sewing permits Clarissa to enter a state of heightened awareness and access a reality usually beyond the ken of the isolated individual. In her place between corporal life and spiritual awareness, Clarissa is reminded of the phrase from Shakespeare’s Cymbeline that she had read in a bookshop window: “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun / Nor the furious winter’s rages.” This line causes Clarissa to reflect on the trauma caused by the war, something that she counters by “recover[ing]” an “image of white dawn in the country” (MD, 9). Although Woolf does not portray Clarissa as
thinking of Abercrombie’s plans to design green belts around the city of London while she stitches the pleats of her green dress into its belt, it is clear that Clarissa’s nostalgia for a pre-war, rural landscape helps her visualize the country while inside the city, a habit of mind that helps her endure her modern situation.

In addition to remembering the rural past as she opens a window, sews a dress, or walks along city streets, Clarissa conflates city and country spaces as she visits urban parks. This is not particularly unusual, since both urban parks and English country gardens are contrived spaces, designed to create a tranquil mindset in those with the leisure to visit them. St. James’s Park, one of the London parks through which Clarissa walks, was a swamp until it became drained to produce a deer park in the seventeenth century (and subsequently became redesigned to accommodate the leisure activities of various monarchs). In 1827, the urban architect John Nash added curves to the canal and replaced formal avenues with winding paths. It is Nash’s Romantic interpretation of “nature” that leads Clarissa to imagine that “the silence; the mist; the hum; the slow-swimming happy ducks; the pouched birds waddling” in St. James’s Park are reminiscent of “looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking” at Bourton (MD, 5, 3). Clarissa is enchanted by the idea of both silent, misty landscapes and longs to be “laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself” (MD, 9).

Like Clarissa, other characters imagine that their bodies and, by extension, their identities might merge with a cultivated version of the English landscape. As Lady
Millicent Bruton, a woman of noble birth who dabbles in politics, retreats into her room after hosting a luncheon, she imagines that her body is “like” a Devonshire field: 

She sighed, she snored, not that she was asleep, only drowsy and heavy, drowsy and heavy, like a field of clover in the sunshine this hot June day, with the bees going round and about and the yellow butterflies. Always she went back to those fields down in Devonshire, where she had jumped the brooks on Patty, her pony, with Mortimer and Tom, her brothers… *(MD, 111-2).*

This apparent loss of Bruton’s waking personality (she becomes “drowsy and heavy”) allows her to transcend, or at least escape, the responsibilities of her position as an influential adult in London society. By emphasizing Lady Bruton’s identification with the rural landscape (she imagines that that her body is “like a field of clover”), Woolf allows readers to make a connection that Lady Bruton does not forge herself: that she is a figure for a rural landscape lobbying to protect itself from further development. Not only does Woolf describe “emigration” as being the “ramrod” of Lady Bruton’s soul (“that essential part of her without which Millicent Bruton would not have been Millicent Bruton”), but also she makes it clear that Lady Bruton’s plan to facilitate the emigration of “young people of both sexes born of respectable parents and setting them up with a fair prospect of doing well in Canada” offers a way to house a growing population without allowing for more suburban development within England—a position that seems rather ridiculous in the context of Woolf’s novel *(MD, 108).*

Lady Bruton is not the only character who journeys from the heart of the city and to the remembered countryside during a post-lunch reverie. One of the men that Lady
Bruton enlists to help her write her letter advocating emigration, Richard Dalloway, also fantasizes that he travels directly from the city to the countryside of his youth. On the corner of the aptly named “Conduit Street,” Dalloway experiences “some sort of lapse in the tides of the body” and pauses, “half thinking” of Norfolk, where

a soft warm wind blew back the petals; confused the waters; ruffled the flowering grasses. Haymakers, who had pitched beneath hedges to sleep away the morning toil, parted curtains of green blades, moved the trembling globes of cow parsley to see the sky; the blue, the steadfast, the blazing summer sky. (MD, 113)

In contrast to Lady Bruton, who imagines that her body is “like a field,” Dalloway keeps his distance from the haymakers and their crop. Indeed, Dalloway “didn’t care a straw what became of Emigration.” Rather than solidify his stance on public policy, Dalloway’s journey to the imagined countryside serves a private function: it helps him clarify personal values. When Dalloway transitions from “half thinking” of Norfolk to contemplating his present-day circumstances, he is left with one certainty: “he adored his Elizabeth” (MD, 114). Dalloway’s recognition of his love for his daughter is one of the “flying flames” that allows Woolf’s novel to glow. Without the fantasy of return to the countryside, Woolf suggests, Dalloway’s recognition of this critical fact might not have been possible.

This pattern recurs as other characters envision the merging of London scenes with rural space. The degree to which these characters identify with national or imperial groups influences the content of their fantasies. Septimus’ Italian wife Rezia seems to channel Clarissa’s vision of Bourton just after taking a sedative: “It seemed to her as she
drank the sweet stuff that she was opening long windows, stepping out into some garden. But where?” (MD, 150). Un-sedated, Rezia’s imagination of the rural past differs from that of Woolf’s “English” characters. In Regent’s Park, Rezia pictures a time “when all boundaries are lost, the country reverts to its ancient shape, as the Romans saw it, lying cloudy, when they landed and the hills had no names and the rivers wound they knew not where” (MD, 24). Unlike Clarissa Dalloway, Lady Bruton, and Richard Dalloway, Rezia’s rural vision predates English settlement. Woolf intimates that Rezia’s “imperial” prejudices (she may be of Roman descent) help her surmise that neither the Britons nor their forebears named the landscape’s geological features.

Peter Walsh provides another case in point. English by birth, Peter has spent at least five years of his adult life working as a colonial administrator in India. When Peter sees his reflection in a London window, he imagines that “[a]ll India lay behind him; plains, mountains; epidemics of cholera; a district twice as big as Ireland” (MD, 48). Peter’s time abroad may explain why he, like Rezia, imagines a form of rural space that extends outside the island nation. At another point, Peter hears the voice of a “battered woman” outside a tube station and imagines that her song is eternal: “Through all ages—when the pavement was grass, when it was a swamp, through the age of tusk and mammoth, through the age of silent sunrise, the battered woman […] stood singing of love […] As the ancient song bubbled up opposite Regent’s Park Tube station still the earth seemed green and flowery” (MD, 81). In Peter’s reverie, London not only reverts to being “green and flowery.” It reverts to a time when the land is neither England nor Great Britain at all.
In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Rezia and Peter’s “pre-English” visions prove to be the exception rather than the rule with regards to the rural scenes that are imported into visions of modern London. More often, Woolf’s characters use fantasies of the English countryside to mitigate their anxieties related to changing notions of individual or national identity. The vision of Mrs. Carrie Dempster provides a telling example of how envisioning London as surrounded by undeveloped fields might provide a way to negotiate fears related to the recent war. As Carrie sits on a park bench, her swollen feet drawn beneath her skirt, she visualizes how London might appear to the “fine young feller” piloting a plane that “shot” away overhead. She imagines this pilot is

soaring over Greenwich and all the masts; over the little island of grey churches, St. Paul’s and the rest till, on either side of London, fields spread out and dark brown woods where adventurous thrushes hopping boldly, glancing quickly, snatched the snail and tapped him on a stone, once, twice, thrice. (*MD*, 28)

Rather than be surrounded by industrial or suburban spaces, Carrie constructs a vision in which London is a finite urban space—one flanked “on either side” by “fields” and “dark brown woods.” That said, the appearance of an unfortunate snail in Carrie’s fantasy (“snatched” and “tapped”) suggests that anxieties about death, and particularly of destruction of the shell or home, are omnipresent, even in her idealized fantasy of English space. Furthermore, although Carrie may not be conscious of this, assuming the aerial perspective affords her the same vantage point assumed by the pilots who bombed the city. By visualizing fields spread out on either side of London proper, Carrie imagines
that she is not far from a relatively safe place of retreat, if she needs to escape foreign bombs again.

“For how late it was getting!”: Mortal Fantasies of Rural England in *Mrs Dalloway*

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf suggests that the fantasy that England might remain a rural nation was prevalent among people at all levels of society in London between the wars. Yet here Woolf also exposes concerns about how nostalgia for the rural past might be manipulated to arouse fears of invasion and promote militant nationalism. Despite reproducing sentimental ideas of rural England in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf distances the voice of the novel from advocating them. Consider Woolf’s presentation of Clarissa Dalloway’s reading of the artwork produced by “her old friend” Sir Harry:

‘Dear Sir Harry!’ she said, going up to the fine old fellow who had produced more bad pictures than any other two Academicians in the whole of St. John’s Wood (they were always of cattle, standing in sunset pools absorbing moisture, or signifying, for he had certain range of gesture, by the raising of one foreleg and the toss of the antlers, “the Approach of the Stranger”—all his activities, dining out, racing, were founded on cattle standing absorbing moisture in sunset pools). (*MD*, 175)

Woolf’s repetition of the words “cattle,” “standing,” “sunset pools,” and “moisture” suggests that Clarissa thinks that Sir Harry’s paintings are comprised of clichéd images rearranged with only minor variation. Yet although Clarissa may mock Harry’s paintings, she considers Harry, himself, to be a “fine old fellow,” largely because of his association with a bygone era. Woolf, who is seldom kind to sentimental Victorian artists in her
criticism, is therefore (somewhat) gentler to “Dear Sir Harry” by presenting him through Clarissa’s eyes. Woolf does something similar as she presents another guest at the party, Mrs. Hilbery, both through Clarissa’s eyes and via Mrs. Hilbery’s own perspective:

It was Mrs. Hilbery, looking for the door. For how late it was getting! And she murmured, as the night grew later, as people went, one found old friends; quiet nooks and corners; and the loveliest views. Did they know, she asked, that they were surrounded by an enchanted garden? Lights and trees and wonderful gleaming lakes and the sky. Just a few fairy lamps, Clarissa Dalloway had said, in the back garden! But she was a magician! It was a park…. And she didn’t know their names, but friends she knew they were, friends without names, songs without words, always the best. But there were so many doors, such unexpected places, she could not find her way. (MD, 190-1)

Mrs. Hilbery, like Peter Walsh, is one of the few figures within the novel who perceives Clarissa as Woolf seems to: as a “magician” with the power to enchant ordinary spaces. Although this trusting form of vision may seem innocuous (Mrs. Hilbery is surrounded by “friends” and finds delight in encountering the “unexpected”), even Mrs. Hilbery is aware that her vision of the English garden cannot last. “For how late it was getting!” Furthermore, Mrs. Hilbery is disoriented by the discord between her vision and the layout of modern space: “she could not find her way.” Perhaps it is little wonder that Woolf has Peter Walsh incorporate “Old” into Mrs. Hilbery’s proper name. Though the moniker “Old Mrs. Hilbery,” Woolf reminds the reader that Mrs. Hilbery’s way of looking at the world, while charming, is antiquated.
Woolf is far less tolerant of sentimental attitudes towards English space when they surface in characters younger than Sir Harry or Mrs. Hilbery. One indication of this is found in Woolf’s subtle approach to naming. Throughout the novel, Woolf uses “Clarissa” to designate moments in which Clarissa Dalloway explores hidden, and more soulful, aspects of her identity. She uses “Mrs. Dalloway” to indicate when this character is acting in a public role or is relying on clichés to structure her thoughts. For example, when Clarissa Dalloway bumps into the “admirable” Hugh Whitbred in the park and announces: “I love walking in London […] Really, it's better than walking in the country’,” Woolf attributes this statement to “Mrs. Dalloway” rather than to “Clarissa” (6). In so doing, Woolf suggests that privileging city over country (or confusing these two forms of space) is a sign of unthinking conventionality.

Although misconstruing the structure and symbolic meaning of the landscape does not harm Clarissa Dalloway, idealizing England’s green spaces kills Septimus Warren Smith, a man whose writing “flowered” under the influence of a tutor and who “went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square” (MD, 86). Like the town planner, Abercrombie, Septimus’ ideal vision of English space involves a triangle of green as being the critical feature of a town square. This vision also cultivates nostalgia for a pre-industrial period in English history (in Septimus’ case, for the Renaissance). After the war, Septimus becomes far more cynical. If Clarissa imagines that the green spaces of London and the remembered gardens of Bourton offer the promise of eternal connection with others, Septimus perceives the modern city and the remembered countryside as grisly, isolating forms of purgatory. In Regent’s Park, Septimus envisions
“trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk” and imagines that Evans, the officer he saw die in the trenches, stands “behind the railings opposite” (MD, 24-5). While traveling outside of London, Septimus has an equally disturbing vision: “It might be possible, Septimus thought, looking at England from the train window, as they left Newhaven: it might be possible that the world itself is without meaning” (MD, 88). Septimus finds little consolation in the kind of human contact made possible within the dynamic city. He has no desire to play the role of the “eternal suffer[er]” or to “renew” modern English society. Instead, he wants to “…get away from people” and to be left alone (MD, 25). Clarissa may have “a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, light, vivacious,” but Septimus is a “young hawk”—a predatory bird with vision so acute that he sees what others cannot (MD, 4, 146). This enhanced form of seeing exposes a horrifying vision of English space. When Septimus throws himself “vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer’s area railings,” he becomes impaled on a boundary that marks a division between public and private realms (MD, 149). Furthermore, his final vision is of a spear and a square of pavement—symbols of war and of land development that are the diametric opposite of the images of green space that motivated his youthful idealism.

The prosaic quality of Septimus’ final vision creates a bathos that mocks the heroism that Clarissa ascribes to Septimus’ leap. When Clarissa hears of Septimus’ suicide, she visualizes the scene in all its horror: “He had thrown himself from a window. Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness” (MD, 184). Although the repetition of “thud, thud, thud” in this passage echoes the three “taps” that Mrs. Dempster imagines hammered the shell of a snail, Clarissa forces an
overly optimistic reading onto the scene of violence. She even tries to convince herself that Septimus’ violent impalement constitutes a loving “embrace”:

She had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine, never anything more.

But he had flung it away. They went on living (she would have to go back; the rooms were still crowded; people kept on coming). They (all day she had been thinking of Bourton, of Peter, of Sally), they would grow old. A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rupture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death. (MD, 184)

Clarissa admires Septimus for having the courage to fling his life away and to cut through the chatter, lies and corruption of daily life. For her, Septimus’ death is wonderful because it involves accepting solitude bravely. Through death, Clarissa imagines, Septimus reaches a “centre” that evades others.

Clarissa’s understanding of this “centre” is, however, muddled. On one hand, she associates it with “closeness” and the “rapture” of communicating the “thing there was that mattered” to others. Yet the closest that Clarissa comes to experiencing connection with others during the course of her June day is via a fantasy of becoming dispersed—“laid out like a mist between the people she knew best” in such a way that “her life, herself” might become generalized into a spreading mist (MD, 9). Similarly, despite being an insider to London society, Clarissa is most centered (and “herself”) when she
stands alone on the top of the flight of stairs at the end of her party. In this inside-outside state, Clarissa Dalloway might be thought of as inhabiting a suburb of the soul—a space in which the center can never properly be reached. It can only be approached from the periphery during scattered moments of exaltation.

“beds… positively beds”: The Persistence of the Suburb in *Mrs. Dalloway*

If Clarissa’s simultaneous self-identification with center and periphery seems strained, it may have something to do with the fluctuation that characterizes Woolf’s own perspectives on English space. Despite Woolf’s professed belief that the city and country were the only kinds of space that she could take “seriously,” she allows another kind of space to find its way into *Mrs. Dalloway*—the English suburb. Initially, the suburb offers a space into which Woolf can project the future of minor characters once their use-value for London society (and for her plot) has been exhausted. For example, Woolf depicts Clarissa’s dress-maker, Sally Parker, as retiring to Ealing, an area to the west of London known in Woolf’s time as the “Queen of the Suburbs.” Although Clarissa considers Sally “a real artist,” one who “thought of little out-of-the-way things; yet her dresses were never queer,” she assumes that her own green dress was among “the last almost [Sally] ever made.” Although Clarissa tells herself that she will visit Sally “if I ever have a moment,” Woolf’s presentation of a parenthetical phrase in this sentence, “(but never would she have a moment any more.” As such, she makes it clear that Clarissa will never pay homage to a suburban queen (*MD*, 39). Another minor character whom Woolf relegates to the suburbs (in theory) is Peter Walsh’s younger lover, Daisy Simmons. Daisy has two children and is married to a major in the Indian army. Peter’s confidante in
India, Mrs. Burgess, has warned Peter that, should he marry Daisy, she is likely to become “a widow with a past one of these days, dragglng about in the suburbs, or more likely, indiscriminate (you know, she said, what such women get like, with too much paint)” (MD, 157). For Mrs. Burgess, “dragglng about in the suburbs” implies lack of good judgment and the desperation suggested by excessive use of make-up. This perspective is not terribly different from these that Woolf espouses in “The cheapening of motor-cars” and “Thunder at Wembley.”

Despite these negative examples, Woolf also situates another character in the suburbs: the adult Sally Seton. This is the same Sally that Clarissa once associated with her youth in the English countryside and who had the sort of beauty that Clarissa “most admired”: “dark, large-eyed, with that quality which, since she hadn’t got it herself, she always envied—a sort of abandonment, as if she could say anything, do anything; a quality much commoner in foreigners than in Englishwomen.” The youthful, exotic Sally made Clarissa “feel, for the first time, how sheltered the life at Bourton was.” It was she who read philosophy and poetry “by the hour” and who had “power” that, to Clarissa, “was amazing, her gift, her personality.” For Clarissa, Sally’s youthful charm came from her being down-to-earth (Clarissa’s first impression of Sally is that “they sat on the floor”); from her taking unusual liberties with flowers (she “picked hollyhocks, dahlias—all sorts of flowers that had never been seen together—cut their heads off, and made them swim on the top of the water in bowls); and from her taking unexpected liberties with Clarissa (she gave Clarissa “the most exquisite moment of her whole life” as she picked a flower and kissed her). As Clarissa muses: “The strange thing, on looking back, was the purity, the integrity, of her feeling for Sally” (MD, 33-5).
Peter Walsh also remembers as Sally as having been “an attractive creature, handsome, dark with the reputation in those days of great daring.” He is surprised that Sally has chosen “to marry a rich man and live in a large house near Manchester, the wild, the daring, the romantic Sally!” (MD, 59, 72). Yet Peter does not dismiss the older version of Sally in the same way that Clarissa does. Peter is perhaps less likely to judge Sally for her suburban situation because he, as a colonial administrator, also inhabits a space peripheral to Clarissa’s insular model of English city and country. The mature Sally seems to sense that Peter would be a sympathetic confidant and reveals to him her disappointment that the Dalloways never visited her suburban home.

All these years the Dalloways had never been once. Time after time they had asked them. Clarissa (for it was Clarissa of course) would not come. For, said Sally, Clarissa was at heart a snob—one had to admit it, a snob. And it was that that was between them, she was convinced. Clarissa thought she had married beneath her, her husband being—she was proud of it—a miner’s son. (MD, 190)

Sally assumes that Clarissa rejects her both because she has married outside her social class and moved to a suburb.

Woolf then emphasizes the perils of the geographic and social situation that the novel seems to prioritize: Clarissa’s urban existence. Clarissa sleeps “badly” in a “narrow” bed in the attic of her urban home. Despite giving birth to a daughter, Clarissa has become strangely innocent (she “could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet”). Furthermore, Clarissa has a heart ailment. By associating Clarissa’s situation with not having procreated, as well as isolation,
discomfort, and even heart disease, Woolf implies that being “at heart” an urban snob is dangerous. She then credits living in a suburb with some of Sally’s fecundity. While Woolf may be ambivalent about Sally’s ability to engender “five enormous boys” outside Manchester (and the repression of lesbian desire and flight into heteronormativity that this entails), she presents Sally’s ability to grow rare lilies in a suburban garden as an astounding achievement. In fact, while Clarissa’s bed contracts in the city (forcing her to “buy” flowers “herself”), Sally’s flower “beds” expand outdoors and prove remarkably fertile (Sally grows “plants, hydrangeas, syringes, very, very rare hibiscus lilies that never grow north of the Suez Canal”) (MD, 3, 190). Sally’s presence at Clarissa’s party seems to offer a corrective in a novel in which most characters block the suburbs from their line of vision. It is through Woolf’s presentation of the adult Sally Seton that she admits the possibility that a life in the English suburbs may have some generative potential.

Does this suggest that Woolf is rethinking her ideas about the value of the English suburbs as she writes *Mrs Dalloway*? As we have seen, at the start of 1924 Woolf credits the London suburb of Richmond for her security and some of her literary fruitfulness in her diary. It is here, she realizes, that she produced an exorbitant amount of writing and she and Leonard engendered their “offspring” the Hogarth Press. Yet, Woolf’s presentation of Sally’s suburban station is uneven in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Here, Woolf has Clarissa acknowledge that Sally looks “happier” as a middle-aged woman inhabiting the middle-ground of suburbia, yet she also describes Clarissa as taken aback by Sally’s appearance: “For she hadn’t looked like *that*, Sally Seton, when Clarissa grasped the hot water can, to think of her under this roof, under this roof! Not like that! […] The luster had gone out of her” (MD, 171).
One of the curious features of *Mrs. Dalloway* is that Woolf does not close her novel from Clarissa’s perspective. Instead, she offers Clarissa’s perspective in the novel’s penultimate scene. Here, Clarissa retreats into a private room where she contemplates the life of an old woman across the way (“It was fascinating to watch her, moving about, that old lady, crossing the room, coming to the window”) and the death of Septimus (“The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on”) (*MD*, 186). Just before Clarissa returns to her guests, a familiar line from *Cymbeline* echoes in her thoughts: “Fear no more the heat of the sun.” Earlier in the day, the repetition of this line had allowed Clarissa to become consoled by an image of “white dawn in the country” (*MD*, 186, 9). Bolstered by familiar patterns of importing the country into the city, Clarissa Dalloway finds the strength to return to her party. That said, the final bits of dialog in this novel express the viewpoint of Peter Walsh. At the end of the book, Peter decides to return to India and bring Daisy and her two children to England. Peter thinks that he “would like to tell Sally” about Daisy, “He would like Sally to know her.” When Peter declares, “I will come,” his statement is a reply to Sally’s bid for him to visit Manchester (*MD*, 193-4). Peter’s thoughts, unlike those of Clarissa, are set on the future. Indeed, the surprise in *Mrs. Dalloway* is that Woolf begins to distance herself from a perspective of her protagonist and questions the notion that city and country should provide the exclusive models of English space. By juxtaposing Sally Seton’s fecundity with Clarissa Dalloway’s isolation, Woolf acknowledges that new life might flourish in the landscapes that one associates with one’s youth—even though they may not look as they once did. Yet, Woolf shies away from embracing such a vision completely.
PART II: The Country as Suburb in *Between the Acts*

“betwixt and between”: The Threat of the “Middlebrow” to Virginia Woolf

Over the course of the Interwar period, Woolf became increasingly agitated as she considered how the spread of the suburbs was changing English culture. This agitation would find its way into Woolf’s essays and novels alike. If, in the early 1920s, Woolf meekly identified with vegetation tarnished by a suburban context (“No one ever suffered so acutely from atmosphere as I do; & my leaves dropped one by one; though heaven knows my root is firm enough”), she becomes emboldened and no longer passively “wilting” in later life (*D*, II: 190-1 Tues 22 August, 1922). In the early 1930s, Woolf goes on the offensive and bristles against what she called “middlebrow” people and culture. In an unsent 1932 letter to *The New Statesman*, written in response to a series of BBC debates about the highbrow and the lowbrow, Woolf writes:

I ramble round my garden in the suburbs, middlebrow seems to me to be everywhere. “What’s that?” I cry. “Middlebrow on the cabbages? Middlebrow infecting that poor old sheep? And what about the moon?” I look up and, behold, the moon is under eclipse. “Middlebrow at it again!” I exclaim. “Middlebrow obscuring, dulling, tarnishing and coarsening even the silver edge of Heaven’s own scythe.”

Although Woolf may have intended for this letter to be humorous, her anger about the change in atmosphere is serious enough. As “Middlebrow” indicates, Woolf perceives the

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suburban garden to be a diminished pastoral—one in which cabbages and sheep are infected and a tainted atmosphere blocks one’s view of the moon and ability to apprehend “Heaven’s own scythe.” In this letter, Woolf extends her critique of the setting to its inhabitants. For Woolf, “middlebrows” are

not highbrows, whose brows are high; nor lowbrows, whose brows are low. Their brows are betwixt and between. They do not live in Bloomsbury which is on high ground; nor in Chelsea, which is on low ground. Since they must live somewhere presumably, they live perhaps in South Kensington, which is betwixt and between. The middlebrow is the man, or woman, of middlebred intelligence who ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige. The middlebrow curries favour with both sides equally. (CE II, 198-9)

Here, Woolf explicitly discusses culture in geographical terms. Yet while many of Woolf’s fellow modern novelists explored anxieties related to changing social and gender dynamics by setting their work in less affluent suburbs, Woolf is more democratic in her disdain. As Melba Cuddy-Keane has written, when Woolf groups people into different “brows,” she does so on the basis of cultural perspective rather than solely on that of social or economic class (26-31). In so doing, Woolf explicitly locates the “middlebrow” in a social and intellectual space that is “betwixt and between.” While Woolf’s concern about the habits of mind that living in a suburb might foster was not, perhaps, the principal worry of politicians advocating to curtail further suburban development,
snobbery was at the center of most anti-suburban sentiments. Although Woolf may criticize “middlebrow” people of all economic strata, there is no way around the fact that the plight of those who might experience a real improvement in their living conditions by moving to a suburb was outside Woolf’s area of concern. Woolf was so eager to preserve the status quo of cultural aesthetics that she seems uninterested in how or why the suburbs were spreading so rapidly. Instead, she perceives such changes as an attack on herself and on the values that she holds most dear.

Woolf addresses the threat of suburban development far more directly in *Between the Acts*, written between 1938 and 1941, than she does in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Here, Woolf portrays the English landscape as marked for destruction by foreign armies and suburban developers alike. What becomes surprising is that Woolf does not portray rural England as an object of nostalgia. Instead, she presents the English countryside as already having been tainted by the “middlebrow”—even though the red bricks and concrete of suburbia have not yet altered the physical view from the terrace of Pointz Hall.

**“the intolerable burden of sitting silent, doing nothing”: Prospects of Complacency in *Between the Acts***

Woolf began writing *Between the Acts* (first imagined in her diary as *Poyntzet Hall*) in the spring of 1938. She submitted her manuscript to the printers weeks before her suicide in 1941. Initially, Woolf intended the writing of this novel to provide her with a pleasurable diversion from the “grind” of working on a biography of Roger Fry. In her diary entry on April 26, 1938, she writes:
Let it be random & tentative; something I can blow of a morning, to relieve myself of Roger: don’t, I implore, lay down a scheme; call in all the cosmic immensities; & force my tired & diffident brain to embrace another whole—all parts contributing—not yet awhile. But to amuse myself, let me note: why not Poyntzet Hall: a centre: all lit. discussed in connection with real little incongruous living humour; & anything that comes into my head; but “I” rejected: ‘We’ substituted; to whom at the end there shall be an invocation? “We” … composed of many different things … we all life, all art, all waifs & strays—a rambling capricious but somehow unified whole—the present state of my mind? And English country; & a scenic old house—& a terrace where nursemaids walk? & people passing; & a perpetual variety & change from intensity to prose. & facts—& notes; & —but eno?¹⁵

Although Woolf sets the main action of Between the Acts at Pointz Hall, a “homely” estate located in “the very heart of England,” reflecting on the “present state” of her mind and country proves to be anything but amusing (BA, 5, 12). Instead, Woolf distances herself from the “invincible optimism” that characterize some of her early diary entries, particularly as she creates characters who are concerned both by the coming war and by how the landscape around them is changing.

Few characters in Between the Acts share Clarissa Dalloway’s “foolish” love of London. By and large, they fear the city. Mrs. Lynn Jones and Mrs. Etty Springett, two audience members of the pageant held at Pointz Hall, remember the Victorian city as a

¹⁵ Woolf, Diary, vol. 3, 135.
place of violence and civic unrest. They remind one another: “you couldn’t walk—Oh, dear me, no—home from the play. Regent Street. Piccadilly. Hyde Park corner. The loose women... And everywhere loaves of bread in the gutter. The Irish you know round Covent Garden...” (BA, 108). Other characters recognize that the modern city is an equally violent space, especially for women. Isa Oliver is disturbed by a report that has just appeared in the *Times* of a rape that occurred in some Whitehall police barracks:

‘The guard at Whitehall …’ which was romantic and then, building word upon word, she reads ‘The troupers told her the horse had a green tail’ but she found it was just an ordinary horse. And they dragged her up to the barrack room where she was thrown upon a bed. Then one of the troopers removed part of her clothing, and she screamed and hit him about the face… (BA, 14)

Via newspaper stories (and therefore via language), the violence of the city travels to the country. For Isa, this violence leaves its mark on Pointz Hall. Isa imagines that she can see “the Arch in Whitehall” on the panels of the library door. She also believes that the phrase “The girl screamed and hit him about the face with a hammer” reverberates beneath each chime of the village church bells (BA, 16). For Isa, distant violence alters the appearance and tenor of country life.

Since Whitehall is the legal and administrative center of England and its colonies, Woolf allows her readers to imagine that the rapes that occur in the barracks might repeat (if only on the level of metaphor) throughout the empire. Yet Woolf does not suggest that rural or colonial space only becomes violent when invaded by the city or reports thereof. Instead, she creates characters who recognize that the countryside is, and has always
been, violent in its own right. Mr. Oliver, the patriarch of the family that owns Pointz Hall, explains that the fields surrounding the estate have been scarred by centuries of occupation and cultivation: “From an aeroplane, he said, you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons, by the Romans, by the Elizabethan manor house, and by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars” (BA, 4). Woolf’s characters also believe that the estate itself is the site of past violence. Although Pointz Hall was built in a north-facing hallow so its occupants might “escape from nature,” there is no escape from the violence of human nature in this remote setting (BA, 6). Servants believe that a wall in the kitchen larder conceals a passage “where somebody once hid” and that the pond outside the kitchen contains the remains of a lady “who had drowned herself for love” (BA, 23, 31). Furthermore, for some of Woolf’s characters, the country continues to be the site of trauma in the present day. As young George Oliver stops to examine a flower near the terrace of Pointz Hall,

there was a roar and a hot breath and a stream of coarse grey hair rushed between him and the flower. Up he leapt, toppling in his fright, and saw coming towards him a terrible peaked eyeless monster moving on legs, brandishing arms.

“Good morning, sir,” a hollow voice boomed at him from a beak of paper.

The old man had sprung upon him from his hiding place behind a tree. (BA, 9)

George is frightened by his grandfather’s leap from the tree and by how the elder Mr. Oliver treats his dog (he bawls at it until the creature “cringe[s] at the old man’s feet”).
When George bursts into tears, Oliver calls his grandson “[a] cry-baby—a cry-baby” (*BA*, 9). In this moment, as Woolf’s narrator later explains, Mr. Oliver “destroyed the little boy’s world” (*BA*, 137).

Despite the fact that most of the characters in *Between the Acts* recognize that the city and country are dangerous, they remain tempted by the idea that retreat into the English garden might still shelter them from foreign violence. As the audience gathers to watch the pageant, Woolf uses free indirect discourse to reveal that its members instinctively

stared at the view, as if something might happen in one of those fields to relieve them of the intolerable burden of sitting silent, doing nothing, in company. Their minds and bodies were too close, yet not close enough. We aren’t free, each one of them felt separately, nor yet to fall asleep. We’re too close; but not close enough. So they fidgeted… (*BA*, 65).

Unable to speak or act, these characters remain in an awkward middle ground in which they feel too close to express themselves freely and too far apart to muster the energy of a crowd. In this in-between state, they do little more than twitch. Rather than providing motivation (or even consolation), the repetitive flat fields inspire an inability to act.

Woolf associates such passivity with “flatness.” When she describes the terrace of Pointz Hall as being “broad enough to take the entire shadow of one of the great trees laid flat,” she invites the reader to imagine the tree felled and on its side—thus creating an association between flatness and death (*BA*, 8). Furthermore, by describing the tree as a “shadow,” Woolf treats it as an object whose value is less intrinsic (based on its qualities as a thing unto itself) than symbolic (based on the impression it makes on an external
observer). She handles the fields surrounding Pointz Hall in much the same way. When she explains that the view from the terrace “laid bare by the sun was flattened, silenced, stilled,” she transforms a living space into a passive object that gains significance only when illuminated and observed by her narrator (BA, 45). Without dimensionality, noise, or movement, the land is reduced to a “view.”

Giles Oliver is one of the few characters who intuits the dangers of perceiving the landscape as a “view” rather than as being a more dynamic form of space. Giles, who has just arrived in the country from London, is aware that flattened space can be foreshortened: “Had he not read, in the morning paper, in the train, that sixteen men had been shot, others prisoned, just over there, across the gulf, in that flat land which divided them from the continent?” (BA, 32). Giles intuits that the “flat land” that divides those at Pointz Hall from the violence in Europe offers little protection from the guns of the coming war. He also recognizes that staring at the bucolic views can be a dangerous distraction from stopping the war or taking up arms. Giles blames his aunt and, by extension, all those gathered at Pointz Hall for “looking at views, instead of—doing what?” Yet at times he, too, becomes seduced by these views: “Giles glared. With his hands bound tight round his knees he stared at the flat fields. Staring, glaring, he sat silent” (BA, 37, 46). Giles protests the feeling of being “bound tight” by engaging in useless and harmful actions. He kicks a stone, a symbol of the land, across a dry field. For Giles, each kick becomes an expression of hostility towards a person and a vice: “The first kick was Manresa (lust). The second, Dodge (perversion). The third, himself (coward). And the fourth and the fifth and all the others were the same.” When kicking offers insufficient relief, Giles crushes a snake with his foot: “The white canvas on his
tennis shoes was bloodstained and sticky. But it was action. Action relieved him” (*BA*, 69). Although Giles’ violent “action” may relieve him, Woolf makes it clear that it does nothing to alter world events or to relieve the unhappiness of others. (Since the sight of Giles’ bloody shoes only causes other characters to realize how “damnably unhappy” they are, Giles’ emotional response proves to be as “flat” and uninspiring as the two-dimensional landscape around him.)

Elsewhere, Woolf explicitly connects this flattened perspective on English space to the spread of suburban architecture. One villager describes her middle-aged daughter as diminished due to the commonplace way that she lives: “Well, look at my daughter. To the right, just behind you. Forty, but slim as a wand. Each flat has its refrigerator …” (*BA*, 109). As the subject of the sentence slips from the “slim as a wand” daughter to the flat one-story dwelling, the speaker connects her daughter’s un-rounded shape to the confined structure of her home. “Middlebrow” has not only invaded the English garden. It has also altered the structure of the home and, by extension, the shape of the human body. Elsewhere Woolf’s narrator makes a related assertion as she explains that the song of swallows predicts: “Homes will be built. Each flat with its refrigerator, in the crannied wall. Each of us a free man; plates washed by machinery; not an aeroplane to vex us; all liberated; made whole” (*BA*, 124). By connecting domestic appliances tucked into the flat’s “crannied” walls with personal “liberation,” the narrator ironizes the false promises of modern advertising. Furthermore, by having swallows and martins, species adapted to

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16 “Flat” had been used to designate a suite of rooms on one floor, forming a complete residence since the start of the nineteenth century. By the 1940s, the term was quite commonplace in England. "Flat," *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1961 ed.
nesting in and around human habitations, embody the natural world, Woolf suggests that survival of a species has to do with its ability to adapt to a developing world.

The “middlebrow” perspective has not only invaded the English home, body, and garden. It has also found its way into the English library. As Julia Briggs has argued, Woolf’s idea of “Englishness” was integrally connected to the relationship between English landscape and literature. To illustrate this point, she quotes a portion of Woolf’s 1919 essay “Reading” in which Woolf’s narrator imagines the words on the page of a book that she is reading merge with the landscape outside the window of a the library of a country house:

it seemed as if what I read was laid upon the landscape not printed, bound, or sewn up, but somehow the product of trees and fields and the hot summer sky, like the air which swam, on fine mornings, round the outlines of things.

These were circumstances, perhaps, to turn one’s mind to the past. (E, III, 142, qtd. in Briggs, 193)

In this passage, the trees, fields, and sky of rural England produce the English language. This language then takes on its own life. Words swim “round the outlines of things” and render the contours of the physical world visible. Given that this alchemy takes place somewhere between the library and the landscape—we might think of Woolf’s ideal rural landscape as existing less in affixed time and space than within the expansive realm of personal reverie.

In Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf exposes how characters willingly misread the world around them. In Between the Acts she explores how characters cling to pre-war habits of
mind and notions of English culture despite the undeniable facts of change. In this new context, Woolf’s narrator explains, only the “foolish, flattering lady” might still believe that books are the “mirrors of the soul.” The contents of the bookshelves at Pointz Hall reveal why this is the case:

> For as the train took over three hours to reach this remote village in the very heart of England, no one ventured so long a journey without staving off possible mind-hunger, without buying a book on a bookstall. Thus the mirror that reflected the soul sublime, reflected also the soul bored. (BA 12)

These books have found their way to Pointz Hall by following the path of train lines (the path taken by suburbs as they spread in ribbon development). As such, they provide an illustration of what Woolf suggests happens when the “middlebrow” perspective invades the countryside. In *Between the Acts*, Woolf repeatedly describes her characters as becoming mesmerized by repetitive rural views: “They looked at the view; they looked at what they knew, to see if what they knew might perhaps be different today. Most days it was the same.” “Meanwhile, there was the view. They looked at the view” (BA, 37, 107). Looking at views does not stave off “possible mind-hunger.” Instead, it makes Woolf’s characters more complacent. When members of the pageant audience first arrive at Pointz Hall, they greet each other by echoing the anti-development sentiments of their day: “‘That hideous new house at Pyes Corner! What an eyesore! And those bungalows! – have you seen ‘em?’” (BA, 52). Rather than do anything about the situation (such as organize collective political protest) these characters quickly take their seats where they
fidget in uncomfortable silence. Their initial protests prove to be in vain—a repetition of an ineffective echo rather than an impetus to take control.

“thinking is my fighting”: LaTrobe’s Charge

Against the misdirected violence of Giles and the placid complacency of other characters, Woolf presents the vitriol of the playwright Miss LaTrobe, writer, director, and producer of the pageant at Pointz Hall. While Woolf celebrates female artists in her other novels, she is more conflicted in her treatment of Miss LaTrobe. At times, she suggests that Miss LaTrobe is a figure of violence—LaTrobe has “the look of a commander pacing his deck,” who is like an “Admiral,” who commands “little troops” of actors, and who strides “about the fields […] often with a whip in her hand.” Since the term “theatre of war” had gained currency in England between the wars, Woolf seems to have intended for Miss LaTrobe’s observation that the lawn of Pointz Hall “was flat as the floor of a theatre” to resound with her readers on another level—that it is a battlefield (BA, 52). Although the word “theatre” had been used to describe a place in which action takes place as early as the seventeenth century, the term was explicitly linked to war in 1720, when J Ozell used the phrase “The Theatre of a Civil War.” In 1914, Winston Churchill began applying such usage to battlegrounds of the First World War (In a letter he wrote, “The hand of war will I expect be heavy upon us in the Western Theatre during the next four weeks”). By 1940, the phrase had become common in England. In Into Battle (1940), for example, Churchill used it again: “Far larger operations no doubt impend in the Middle East theatre.”

Most villagers are wary of Miss LaTrobe, rumored to be a failed actress who once shared a “four-roomed” cottage with another woman. The villagers speculate that she “wasn’t presumably pure English. From the Channel Islands perhaps?” and nickname her “Bossy” (BA, 40, 44, 143). Perhaps they are not wrong to be wary. Miss LaTrobe, like Giles, is tempted by anti-social action for its own sake: “One of these days she would break—which of the village laws? Sobriety? Chastity? Or take something that did not properly belong to her” (143). For the time being, Miss LaTrobe limits her provocations to the theatre. If, as Woolf’s narrator explains, it was “the conglomeration of things [that] pressed you flat; held you fast, like a fish in water,” Miss LaTrobe’s “words” have potential to break through the flatness that renders others complacent: “Words this afternoon ceased to lie flat in the sentence. They rose, became menacing and shook their fists at you” (BA, 33, 41).

Miss LaTrobe does not rely on words alone to move her audience. Miss LaTrobe’s menacing fist takes the form of scripted dialog, music, and stagecraft. One way that Miss LaTrobe shakes things up is by staging her pageant in the open air. This makes her performance vulnerable to interruption. Before a young girl can deliver the pageant’s opening line, a sound erupts from behind the bushes: “Chuff, chuff, chuff, sounded from the bushes. It was the noise a machine makes when something has gone wrong” (BA, 53). The racket of this proverbial “machine in the garden” causes the young girl (identified in the program as “England”) to forget her lines.18 The implication is that this soliloquy about the origins of English national identity has come into question in an

era when England continues a transformation already underway from an agricultural- to an industrial-based economy. This is not a message that the members of Miss LaTrobe’s audience want to hear.

Throughout the pageant, Miss LaTrobe vacillates between presenting an unpleasant insight into modern England and reclaiming the sympathies of her audience with saccharine clichés about the timeless, pastoral landscape. After the machine disrupts the young girl’s soliloquy, for example, Miss LaTrobe broadcasts a “pompous popular tune [that] brayed and blared.” The subject of this tune is the arrival of warriors. Mrs. Manresa, a visitor from London, is particularly swept up by the song. The narrator describes Mrs. Manresa as finding herself “afloat on the stream of the melody. Radiating royalty, complacency, good humour, the wild child was Queen of the festival. The play had begun” (BA, 55). By suggesting that Mrs. Manresa is floating on a stream, the narrator connects a pastoral image to the passive acceptance of warfare. By slipping the word “complacency” between “royalty” and “good humour”—two characteristics associated with English national identity—Woolf interjects a powerful critique of her countrymen into this passage.

Through the structure of Miss LaTrobe’s pageant, Woolf suggests how easily the idea that England should remain a rural nation can be used to influence public opinion. Miss LaTrobe constantly engages in a push-pull with members of her audience—first she jolts them into contemplating unpleasant facts about the present day, then she reclaims their attention by presenting a pastoral trope. At one point, Miss LaTrobe leaves her stage empty, while allowing a gramophone to tick. Woolf reveals the effect of this on members of the audience:
Could they talk? Could they move? No, for the play was going on. The stage was empty; only the cows moved in the meadows; only the tick of the gramophone needle was heard. The tick, tick, tick seemed to hold them together, tranced. Nothing whatsoever appeared on the stage. (*BA*, 57)

Some members of the audience struggle to reconcile the rural views with the discordant sound. Old Mr. Oliver reads the “tick, tick, tick” of the gramophone as “marking time,” something that his sister, Lucy, realizes “no longer exists for us. We’ve only the present” (*BA*, 57). By contrast, members of the younger generation interpret the “tick” as the very thing that “held them together” (*BA*, 105). For these younger characters, the rhythm of the machine seems to have become the rhythm of their lives. This idea echoes the sentiments of I. A. Richards who, in 1929, argued that “No one at all sensitive to rhythm, for example, will doubt that the new pervasive, almost ceaseless, mutter and roar of modern transport, replacing the rhythm of the footstep or of a horses’ hoofs, is capable of interfering in many ways with our reading of verse.”

In *Between the Acts*, Woolf does not only suggest that it is modes of transport that achieve this effect. Be it the sound of farm machinery or the tick of a gramophone needle, she suggests that mankind’s understanding of rhythm and of verse is influenced by technology of all kinds. In both cases, the juxtaposition of the gramophone’s “tick, tick, tick” with the rural scene proves unnerving.

After the gramophone stops ticking, Miss LaTrobe reclaims the sympathy of her audience by presenting a consoling image of rural England. A figure (identified in the program as “Reason”) describes a landscape in which “No longer fears the unwary

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wanderer the poisoned snake. And in the helmet, yellow bees their honey make” as he soliloquizes about the importance of commerce, military force, and personal sacrifice to nation and empire (BA, 86). As “Reason” speaks, actors weave between the trees and sing about a world in which “the earth is always the same, summer and winter and spring, and spring and winter again; plowing and sowing; eating and growing; time passes” (BA, 86).

The world that Miss LaTrobe presents in this scene is a timeless pastoral. It is a bucolic landscape whose security has been assured by past violence (as symbolized by the “helmet”) and England’s continued status as an agricultural nation (where the “bees their honey make”). Yet Woolf’s own narrator emphasizes that there is a discord between this pastoral fantasy and the modern setting in which Miss LaTrobe’s pageant takes place. When Woolf’s narrator informs the reader that “The wind blew the words away,” she positions language and wind as competing forces. In so doing, she suggests that the artifice of this fantasy is out of synch with the reality of a landscape in flux.

This pattern appears again as Miss LaTrobe presents a mini-play within her pageant. “Where There’s a Will There’s a Way” is a tribute to eighteenth century drama. The subject of this play is the swindling of a young girl of her inheritance of land and money. This is a particularly unsettling prospect to members of the audience, who are also concerned that their rural prospects are imperiled by developers and foreign armies alike. Just as the drama begins to provoke uncomfortable reflections along these lines for members of her audience, LaTrobe interjects a rather over-the-top series of pastoral clichés into her script, which Woolf’s narrator describes as follows:

The gramophone, while the scene was removed, gently stated certain facts which everybody knows to be perfectly true. The tune said, more or less,
how Eve, gathering her robes about her, stands reluctant still to let her
dewy mantle fall. The herded flocks, the tune continued, in peace repose.
The poor man in his cot returns, and, to the eager ears of wife and child,
the simple story of his toil relates: what yield the furrow bears; and how
the team in the plover on the next has spared; while Wat her courses ran;
and speckled eggs in the warm hollow lay. Meanwhile the good wife on
the table spreads her simple fare; and to the shepherd’s flue, from toil
released, the nymphs and swains join hands and foot it on the green. Then
Eve lets down her somber tresses brown and spreads her lucent veil o’er
hamlet, spire, and mead, etc., etc. And the tune repeated itself once more.

*(BA, 92)*

The tune becomes the musical equivalent of Sir Harry’s paintings in *Mrs. Dalloway*. It
contains cattle standing in sunset pools and absorbing moisture. It unabashedly celebrates
“herded flocks,” a “dewy” “Eve,” shepherds, nymphs and even “swain.” By concluding
this passage with “etc., etc. And the tune repeated itself once more,” Woolf’s narrator
draws attention to the fact that the basic elements of this song can (and will) be repeated
*ad nauseam*, both within Miss LaTrobe’s pageant and within the minds of the audience.
By having Miss LaTrobe present the song via the gramophone (rather than having her
actors perform it live), Woolf calls attention to the song’s status as a work of art in an age
of mechanical reproduction.²⁰ The implication is that the pastoral paean is less a
spontaneous expression of human feeling than the product of mindless repetition. Like

staring at rural “views,” falling sway to pastoral clichés lulls Miss LaTrobe’s audience into insipid complacency.

Woolf’s cynicism towards pastoral fantasies was already apparent in *Mrs. Dalloway*. What is novel about *Between the Acts* is that, here, Woolf suggests that these hackneyed narrative forms have altered the shape of the landscape itself. As Woolf’s narrator concludes the scene above, she explains that the view beyond Pointz Hall “repeated in its own way what the tune was saying.” In so doing, she suggests that rural England is a mutable form whose structure is dictated by the perceptions (and perhaps delusions) of those who inhabit it. The notion that a very small, populated country that has been cultivated for centuries is a designed space is not particularly shocking. What becomes more disturbing is the assertion that members of Miss LaTrobe’s audience “beheld gently and approvingly” the message conveyed by such a designed landscape “without interrogation”—that is to say, that they confuse the constructed landscape with nature itself.

A few characters in the novel recognize the pernicious effects of such naïveté. As we have seen, Giles Oliver transforms his frustration at the passivity provoked by being seduced by such views of rural England into a misguided form of action. Mrs. Manresa, a middle-aged Londoner on a weekend drive to the country, has a less aggressive approach to interacting with the landscape: she transforms the idea of the natural into a theatrical production with herself as its star. After arriving unannounced at Pointz Hall, Mrs. Manresa entertains her hosts by stating, preposterously, that she is a “wild child of nature.” She even claims that she removes her stays (and rolls in the fields) each time that she arrives in the country. Manresa’s appearance is hardly wild. She wears gaudy jewelry
and retouches her makeup in full view of others. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Mrs. Burgess associates wearing make-up with the desperation of the middle aged widow left “dragging about in the suburbs.” In *Between the Acts*, Manresa harnesses the power that comes from making herself up. For the most part, she is successful. Giles associates Mrs. Manresa with “lust.” His father fantasizes that Manresa’s presence in a room is enough to return him to youth and to India. While most characters think that being exposed as a series of flattened, broken reflections by Miss LaTrobe’s mirrors is “cruel,” Mrs. Manresa alone “…preserved unashamed her identity, and faced, without blinking herself. Calmly she reddened her lips” (*BA*, 125-6).

Yet not all the characters are inclined to celebrate artifice for its own sake (or to remain calm when presented with a two-dimensional vision of themselves and the world that they inhabit). For Isa Oliver (whose husband desires Mrs. Manresa), the modern landscape becomes a terrifying no-man’s-land. As she walks towards a stable during a break in the pageant, Isa wonders:

‘Where do I wander?’ she mused. ‘Down what draughty tunnels? Where the eyeless wind blows? And there grows nothing for the eye. No rose. To issue where in some harvestless dim field where no evening lets fall her mantle; nor sun rises. All’s equal there. Unblowing, ungrowing are the roses there. Change is not; nor the mutable and lovable; nor greetings nor partings; nor furtive findings and feelings, where hand seeks hand and eye seeks shelter from the eye.’ (*BA*, 106)

As Isa passes through “draughty tunnels,” she discovers a place of blindness (the “eyeless wind”), sterility (nothing grows), and darkness (a sunless sky). Here, human contact
seems impossible: nothing changes, there are no “greetings nor partings,” there is no “shelter” to be found in others. Rather than being entirely “harvestless,” however, this setting produces a bitter crop of “Memories, possessions.” Isa’s burden is heavy. It is that of “…what we must remember; what we would forget” (BA, 106). This vision of rural England is similar to the fantasy of the modern city suggested by T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*. For Isa, the country, like the city, becomes a place of isolation, horror and exposure.

Much as Isa’s fascination with the newspaper report of the rape in the police barracks at Whitehall subtly gestures towards violence in foreign territories governed by this police force, Miss LaTrobe also tries to remind her audience that the burden of “…what we must remember; what we would forget” is not to be borne solely within the heart of rural England. When she casts Budge, a local publican, in the role of a Victorian traffic cop, she suggests that it is rather absurd to think that one man might direct the movement of the whole empire from his box at Hyde Park Corner: “Let’ em sweat at the mines; cough at the looms; rightly endure their lot. That’s the price of Empire, that’s the white man’s burden. And, I can tell you, to direct the traffic orderly, at ‘Yde Park Corner, Piccadilly Circus, is a whole-time, white man’s job” (BA, 111). Like Sir William Bradshaw in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Budge becomes a foot-servant for the sister goddesses of Proportion and Conversion—a figure charged with maintaining order on the streets of London as well as in country mines, industrial looms, and throughout the colonies. Despite Miss LaTrobe’s efforts to show her audience the absurdity of Budge’s position, however, Woolf’s narrator reveals that members of the audience continue to read him in a
different fashion as: “A very fine figure of a man he was, everyone agreed, his truncheon extended; his waterproof pendant” (*BA*, 11).

In fact, few of Miss LaTrobe’s efforts entirely achieve their desired effect in altering the perspective of her audience. Miss LaTrobe reveals the extent of her desperation to convey a message as she broadcasts one final condemnation at her audience from speakers hidden in the bushes: “Consider the gun slayers, bomb droppers here or there. They do openly what we do slyly. Take for example […] Mr. M’s bungalow. A view spoilt for ever. That’s murder…” (*BA*, 127). Miss LaTrobe desperately wants her audience to recognize their active and passive role in creating or sanctioning the forms of oppression that characterize modernity—war and imperialism. She does this by associating these threats with a form of violence that seems closer at hand: the destruction of rural views by suburban development.

“A view spoilt for ever” and Other Visions Inspired: The Legacy of Woolf’s Treatment of Landscape

The fact that Woolf presents this message via Miss LaTrobe’s “anonymous” broadcast distances Miss LaTrobe’s point of view from that of the larger narrative of *Between the Acts*. Woolf knows very well that “a view spoilt for ever” is not the same as “murder.” Between 1938 and 1941, as she composes *Between the Acts*, Woolf’s diaries record her horror about the coming war and particularly of Hitler’s rise to power. In a diary entry from August 28, 1940, she describes hearing “a whole valley of pops (like bags burst)” as a German plane dropped bombs outside the city of Lewes, near Monk’s House. Although it was safer to be in the country than the city during the war, Woolf is
aware that retreating into country cannot assure a lasting form of safety. Yet she still
glamorizes dying in such a setting. Woolf writes: “It wd have been a peaceful matter of
fact death to be popped off on the terrace playing bowls this very fine cool sunny August
evening.” While Woolf may believe that a sudden, impersonal death in the gardens of
Monk’s House might be relatively pleasant, she is also aware that a more horrifying form
of death may await her, even within rural England. Woolf knew that she and Leonard
were on Hitler’s blacklist. She was terrified about how her fellow citizens might act
should the Nazis invade. In a diary entry, Woolf exposes her fears that Jews will be
beaten up and mentions that she and Leonard stored gasoline in their garage and even
planned to commit joint suicide should such an invasion take place (D, V, 284).

In *Between the Acts*, Woolf questions the ability of the pageant (and of art in
general) to raise the consciousness of her countrymen or provide them with the tools that
they need to inspire meaningful protests against violence. As her narrator explains,
members of Miss LaTrobe’s audience leave Pointz Hall engulfed in “the tender,
uninquisitive but searching light of evening [that] reveals depths in water and makes even
the red brick bungalows radiant” (*BA*, 133). The juxtaposition of “uninquisitive” with
“searching” is critical. In a period of air raids, the “searching” light might evoke the
searchlight—something that looks for signs of imminent danger without questioning the
political events and social attitudes that precipitated the violence. What kind of “depths”
might such a light reveal? In this case, Woolf’s narrator suggests that “Beauty” might be
found while contemplating “red brick bungalows” as shapes reduced to pure geometric
form. In a world where homes, and the landscape itself, have lost their power to provide

21 Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 5, 313.
“shelter” from the elements (or from unpleasant truths), pastoral narratives also lose their conciliatory power (*BA*, 219). Perhaps, Woolf suggests, it is not entirely bad for the individual to be left thus exposed.

Woolf closes her final novel as the two figures who have come the closest to apprehending the violence of the landscape, Giles and Isa, find themselves alone at night. Woolf’s narrator predicts that this couple will fight “in the heart of darkness” and then “embrace”—in theory repopulating their fallen Eden. By referring to the landscape that this couple inhabits as a “heart of darkness,” Woolf’s narrator compares rural England to Conrad’s Congo (a terrain that his narrator re-imagines as he sits on a boat on the Thames). In so doing, Woolf suggests that Pointz Hall might likewise be understood as existing on several planes: as a physical location located in the “heart” of the English countryside, as the setting of a work of fiction, and as an imaginary topography that will be remapped within the minds of future readers. Woolf ensures that these readers will be skeptical of idealizing any of these topographies. Yet Woolf does offer one glimmer of hope in this otherwise utterly pessimistic novel: that Giles and Isa will manage to speak at all. Although Woolf does not define the form that this discourse will take, she intimates (as she suggested in her 1938 diary entry) that “all lit.” might continue to be “discussed in connection with a real little incongruous living humour”—despite the horrors likely to take place in the coming acts of history.

Like *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Between the Acts* represents a serious attempt to refine the form of the English novel so as to better understand the symbolic function of rural England in twentieth-century literature. It also reveals Woolf’s thoughts about what narrative choices might be appropriate for mobilizing and critiquing arguments about the
relationship between city, country, and suburb. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf creates characters who, for the most part, figure city and country as positive spaces that offer opportunities for friendship, love, connection, and memory as they push the suburbs to the margins of their line of vision. Yet Woolf is conflicted in how she presents the suburb in this novel. At times, they are places of despair. At times, they are an unexpected locus of fecundity. Woolf even begins to toy with the notion that the English suburbs might have some form of generative potential. As more suburbs are built throughout the English countryside between the wars, Woolf’s perspective on English space (and how it might be represented in fiction) changes. In the late 1930s, Woolf finds it increasingly difficult to celebrate the idyllic notions of city and country space held by most urban characters in *Mrs. Dalloway*. In *Between the Acts*, characters who live in both the city and the country project their anxieties about the coming war onto the bungalows that have begun to be built in the countryside near Pointz Hall. However, Woolf is less concerned that the bricks and mortar might alter the appearance of rural England. Instead, she portrays the countryside as already having been invaded by the “middlebrow.” By using terms often used to describe suburbia to describe rural space, Woolf suggests that the “middlebrow” on the level of language has already invaded the countryside. Through the figure of Miss LaTrobe, Woolf explores different approaches to showing the population new ways to see themselves and their context. Yet Miss LaTrobe’s pageant only partially achieves its desired effect. As its audience disperses, its members remain confused as to the production’s purpose. Woolf’s own novel closes with a similar degree of inconclusiveness. Although Woolf suggests that her characters will “speak,” she leaves the substance of their conversation unclear.
Examining two novels written at the beginning and at the end of the Interwar period raises a question of concern to novelists working in the latter half of the twentieth century: If the English countryside has become a suburb and is constantly threatened by further development, where and how might one locate the “rural”—with all its associations with the pastoral past—in literary fiction? As Chapter Two argues, the German-born writer W. G. Sebald finds it impossible to associate rural England with an idyllic form of space, as he uses the memory of a walking tour through Norfolk and Suffolk as the impetus to reflect on humanity’s proclivity towards violence. Much as Woolf experimented with literary form to better capture the lived experience of time and space, Sebald is concerned with how texts might try (if only to fail) to represent individual and cultural memory. As the next chapter illustrates, in *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald’s takes Woolf’s charge to discuss “all lit.[...] in connection with a real little incongruous living humour” quite seriously, as his narrator contemplates extreme acts of violence that occurred within England and further abroad. Even a character as cynical as Giles Oliver is not likely to have been able imagine the scope of destruction considered by Sebald’s narrator, a man who recalls rural England as being filled with sinkholes that perpetually give way to mass graves.
Chapter 2:

Sinkholes to History:

The Porous Landscape and Unstable Narrative of

W. G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn*

*It was as if I were passing through an undiscovered country, and I still remember that I felt, at the same time, both utterly liberated and deeply despondent. I had not a single thought in my head. With each step that I took, the emptiness within and the emptiness without grew ever greater and the silence more profound.* —Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 234

Towards the end of Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*, twelve English fighter planes thunder over Pointz Hall, interrupting Reverend Streatfield’s plea to raise money to illuminate a village church. As Woolf’s narrator explains, the roar the planes make cuts the word “opportunity […] in two. A zoom severed it. Twelve aeroplanes in perfect formation like a flight of wild duck came overhead. That was the music. The audience gaped; the audience gazed. The zoom became a drone. The planes had passed” (*BA*, 131). This “V” is an abstract symbol in Woolf’s novel—a form that severs language and supplants music. Not only does it bisect the word “opportunity,” but also it causes Woolf’s characters to recognize that certain views that they have of rural England and of English national identity are changing. The physical damage that these planes would cause in Germany is not their primary concern. The damage caused by such bombing raids is, however, a major concern of the German-born writer W.G. Sebald, who spent much of his adult life as a Professor of Modern German Literature and Professor of Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. The son of a captain in the German army, Sebald was raised in a community in which, as he has said, “the so-called
conspiracy of silence” related to the Second World War and particularly the Holocaust “was at its most present.”¹ As an adult, he found it difficult to address such topics directly in writing. “To write about concentration camps in my view is practically impossible,” he once explained: “…the only way in which one can approach these things, in my view, is obliquely, tangentially, by reference rather than by direct confrontation.”² In The Rings of Saturn (originally published in German, 1995; first English translation, 1998), Sebald uses descriptions of rural England to indirectly address the violence of human history and problems related to its representation. Although this book initially seems to be a memoir of a walking tour taken through Norfolk and Suffolk, two predominantly rural counties along the eastern coast of England, it can also be categorized as a scrapbook, philosophical treatise, work of speculative historiography, work of literary criticism, and novel. Sebald has explained that his impulse to combine diverse literary genres grew from a “temptation to work with very fragmentary pieces of evidence, to fill in the gaps and blank spaces and create out of this a meaning which is greater than that which you can prove.”³ Critic James Wood has described Sebald’s hybrid form in useful terms—as a “natural corollary to a world where the rules are no longer clear, where the events of history have undercut the certainties, where we—and his narrators—are essentially making it


up as we go along.” While Sebald’s repurposing of diverse genres, prose styles, and texts may make him seem “paradigmatically postmodern,” he has asserted that this technique was not intended to create formal plurality for its own sake. Instead it was meant to encourage the reader to regard the present from a distant perspective. This “distant” perspective is critical, especially with regard to Sebald’s experiments with mapping—both within the narrative of The Rings of Saturn and through the layout of the book.

The Rings of Saturn is told from the perspective of a homodiegetic narrator, or a character within the novel who describes his experiences, yet does not know the internal thoughts of other characters. This narrator shares many characteristics with Sebald. Raised in post-Second World War II Germany, this figure is a scholar who teaches literature at an English university. Not only does he have nearly encyclopedic literary knowledge, but also he is fascinated by obscure historical, scientific, and cultural details. Like Sebald, this narrator is too young to have direct memories of Second World War firestorms, battlefields, or concentration camps. As he remembers such events through conversations with others, printed stories, photographs, and films, he is horrified by and skeptical of forms of violence that he has not witnessed directly. Marianne Hirsch has called the experience of those whose own stories have been displaced by the tragedies of a prior generation as “postmemory.” She describes “postmemory” as characterizing the experiences of those who “have grown up dominated by narratives that preceded their

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birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the powerful stories of the previous generation, shaped by monumental traumatic events that resist understanding and integration. It describes as well the relationship of the second generation to the experiences of the first--their curiosity and desire, as well as their ambivalences about wanting to own their parents’ knowledge.\(^6\) Although Sebald’s narrator is often highly precise, he acknowledges that the version of the past that he recounts is often likely to be inaccurate. Like many of his generation, he is aware that his knowledge of the Holocaust has been acquired at a remove. As such, he understands it as being partially a construct of the moment in which he remembers it. This skepticism even informs how he considers his memories of physical landscapes. For Sebald’s narrator, the remembered English countryside becomes a terrifying space that offers no lasting form of shelter from past, present, or future violence.

Instead, Sebald’s narrator perceives rural England as riddled with sinkholes capable of pulling medieval cities to near oblivion, bury church towers whole, and entomb writers in their gardens. For him, contemplating the eroding coast of England provides an impetus for contemplating the violence of the past and the erosion of cultural memory. Indeed, physical sinkholes in the English landscape function as portals to disturbing places and times in human history. Remembering a journey through rural England makes this narrator “preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom” that he remembers experiencing as he walked along the coast, but also renders him overcome with “the paralyzing horror” of being “confronted with the traces of

destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place” (RS, 3). In thinking about the lives of the dead for whom there is little or no trace, Sebald’s narrator becomes aware of his role in reconstructing a past that he has not observed directly.

As this narrator’s story sinks into the broader landscape of Sebald’s text (one that includes a series of uncaptioned images), Sebald directs his reader to consider the modes of representation presented within *The Rings of Saturn* in similar terms. *The Rings of Saturn* is a visual text, one which Sebald directs his reader to consider as producing its own kind of terrain. Once, Sebald’s narrator uses the phrase “paper landscape” to describe papers scattered across the floor of a fellow scholar’s office. Like this paper landscape, *The Rings of Saturn* is an amalgam of stories removed from their original context and jumbled together. In fact, by failing to use quotation marks to set this narrator’s reproduction of conversations and portions of published texts apart from the rest of his speech, Sebald makes it seem as if his narrator, on occasion, genuinely confuses his voice with the voices of others. At another point, Sebald’s narrator uses the term “landscape format pages” to describe the layout of a ship’s log. Like this ship log, *The Rings of Saturn* is filled with “occasional entries” (entries prompted by the occasion of the narrator’s thoughts) that are interrupted by uncaptioned black and white images often framed by wide margins, thus introducing a great deal of empty space into the text.

While many of these images are of photographs or documents that seem to support claims made by Sebald’s narrator, most provide inadequate forms of documentation. Acting on their own, as part of a series, or in tandem with the surrounding text, these images give the reader further reason to doubt the narrator’s
claims. Given that looking these images can cause the reader to lose his place in the narrative (or lose track of the timeframes presented therein), their presence slows the reader’s forward progression through the text. As such, they function much like the portions of the English landscape that cause Sebald’s narrator to catalog mankind’s immense capacity for destruction.

“How ought such a natural history of destruction to begin?” Sebald asked in a lecture delivered two years after publishing the original German edition of Die Ringe des Saturn, Eine englische Wallfahrt. “With a summary of the technical, organization, and political prerequisites for carrying out large-scale air raids? With a scientific account of the previously unknown phenomenon of the firestorms? With a pathographical record of the typical modes of death, or with behaviorist studies of the instincts of flight and homecoming?” In The Rings of Saturn, Sebald leaves his reader destabilized in a porous landscape of individual, collective and cultural memory—a dangerous space that proves precarious to inhabit. Much as several gardeners described in The Rings of Saturn suffer sudden, unexplained deaths, several scholars presented in the narrative (including Sebald’s narrator) become immobilized, if not destroyed, by what they unearth. If The Rings of Saturn can be said to guide the reader anywhere, it is to a physical and mental terrain in which no present-day foothold (or understanding of the past) proves stable. Since fostering radical uncertainty seems to be this author’s primary objective, this condition seems as close as one might come to achieving a state of grace at the close of the twentieth century, at least in the mind of W. G. Sebald.

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It is essential to know something of Sebald’s background to understand his approach to memorializing the past. Born in 1944 in the remote Bavarian town of Wertach im Allgaü, Germany. Sebald has said that he knew little about English language, history, culture, or topography before he moved to Manchester. He has said that he found himself overwhelmed by the “industrial wasteland” that he observed when he first arrived there. The feeling of being overwhelmed by modern space led Sebald to settle in an old rectory outside Norwich. Sebald described this setting as being “very much out in the sticks.” Being “in hiding,” as Sebald called living in rural England, made him feel “better” than he would “elsewhere in the centre of things.” This context also enabled Sebald to cultivate his unique form of writing—one in which he uses descriptions of nature and of the landscape to consider violent episodes in world history from a remove.

Sebald has credited Virginia Woolf as providing inspiration for this indirect approach to representing the violence of the past. In an interview, he explained that he was particularly impressed by how Woolf used a description of the death of a moth to allude to First World War battlefields:

there’s no reference made to the battlefields of the Somme […] but one knows, as a reader of Virginia Woolf, that she was greatly perturbed by

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8 W. G. Sebald, qtd. in Bigsby, Writers in Conversation 149.

the First World War, by its aftermath, by the damage it did to people’s souls, the souls of those who got away, and naturally of those who perished. So I think that a subject which at first glance seems quite far removed from the undeclared concern of a book can encapsulate that concern.  

By describing physical landscapes and the “landscapes” of various texts that he recalls reading, Sebald’s narrator exposes the undeclared concern occupying his thoughts—the damage that the war did to those who lived through it as well as to those who came to understand its violence through secondary forms of representation.  

In addition to the influence of Woolf, Sebald also credited the German prose writer Thomas Bernhard for inspiring his tangential approach to representing the past. Bernhard, Sebald explains, “invented, as it were, a kind of periscopic form of narrative. You’re always sure that what he tells you is related, at one remove, at two removes, at two [sic] or three. That appealed to me very much.” In the context of describing The Emigrants (first English translation, 1996; originally published in German, 1992), Sebald described his writing style in much the same terms:

Everything is related round various corners in a periscopic sort of way. In that sense it doesn't conform to the patterns that standard fiction has established. There isn't an authorial narrator. And there are various

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\(^{10}\) W. G. Sebald, qtd. in Silverblatt, “Poem of an Invisible Subject” 80-1.

\(^{11}\) W. G. Sebald, qtd. in Silverblatt, “Poem of an Invisible Subject” 83.
limitations of this kind that seem to push the book into a special category.\(^\text{12}\)

In *The Emigrants*, Sebald’s narrator, a figure who is also much like the author, describes his research into the lives of four different figures, each of whom has left a community under German control. The text contains several uncaptioned black and white photographs. Similarly, in *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald confuses the patterns established by standard fiction by experimenting with narrative voice. In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald creates a seemingly “authorial” narrator whose self-critical style puts his own authority in question. Sebald then compounds the Bernhardian sense of “remove” that this creates by having this narrator speak in a detached voice that seems to be from another era. In the German text, Sebald heightens this disjointed effect by using an antiquated style of prose. Michael Zeeman has described Sebald’s style as “an elegiac resurrection of the sonorousness of German literary syntax and style as practiced before the damage to the regard for German culture and its language in the modern world was inflicted by Germans themselves.”\(^\text{13}\) Since Sebald worked closely with his translators and occasionally rewrote passages for his English editions himself, his prose continues to seem “alien,” even in English translation.\(^\text{14}\)

Sebald credited his retreat into the English countryside with fostering this approach. For Sebald, rural England provided an environment in which he felt at liberty

\(^{12}\) W. G. Sebald, qtd. in Wachtel, “Ghost Hunter” 37.


to reconsider the Holocaust, and particularly the average citizen’s role in allowing it to occur, from what might, on the surface at least, seem to be a safe remove. Yet Sebald never confused this kind of retreat with returning to a state of innocence in a setting unmarred by the meddling of mankind. Rather, he imagines his rectory near Norwich to be a “potting shed”:

You go into your potting shed…. For me, when I wrote my first texts, it was a very, very private affair. I didn't read them to anybody, I have no writer friends and so on. So the privacy which that ensured me, for me was something that I treasured a great deal, and it isn't so now. So my instinct is now to abandon it all again until people have forgotten about it, and then perhaps I can regain that position where I can work again in my potting shed, undisturbed.\(^\text{15}\)

In another interview, he repeats this metaphor and elaborates:

Demands of all kinds are made at the same time as family pressures begin to mount and you feel that at that midway point in life your personality is being eroded and you must think of measures of self-defense. One of the best means of self-defense, as one knows, is to go into the potting shed and build something that no one understands or no one knows what it is meant to be [.....] I certainly often think that the very first phase, before anything was published and when I was sitting in the potting shed, was the best one.\(^\text{16}\)

\(\text{15} \) Sebald, qtd. in Wachtel, “Ghost Hunter” 61.

\(\text{16} \) Sebald, qtd. in Bigsby, *Writers in Conversation* 152, 165.
A “potting shed” is a place of artifice, of manipulation, and transposition—a zone in which organic matter is transplanted from one container to another. Far from representing the natural world, the English potting shed becomes a setting in which Sebald imagines that he might shield himself from the public, from his family, and, more broadly, from the entropy of erosion long enough to think about complex issues, such as the ethics of memorialization and the limitation and potential of literary form.

Yet even within his potting shed, allegedly a place of creation and growth, Sebald cannot avoid confronting his anxieties of erosion. Sebald repeatedly uses descriptions and images of objects sinking into the rural English landscape (and the landscape of his text) to show how readily historical records, private narratives, and even individual personalities erode and become submerged over time. He does so to provoke the reader to reconsider what he thinks he knows of history and to encourage him to engage in a different approach to cultural memory—one that acknowledges the uncertainty of one’s knowledge while actively seeking to understand human history by whatever flawed means possible.

II. “days drawing to an end”: The Erosion of Time and Space

The superficial setting of The Rings of Saturn is the eastern coast of England, a region from which large quantities of land erode into the North Sea each year. Initially, the premise of the narrative presented within The Rings of Saturn seems simple enough: nearly a year after undertaking a walking tour of Suffolk (and a small portion of Norfolk), Sebald’s narrator is recovering in a Norwich hospital from a mysterious injury that he sustained during his trip. In the narrative present, such as it is, this narrator reflects on his
journey, his stay in the hospital, and the associations that the memory of both experiences brought, and continues to bring, to mind.

This opening premise is complicated by the narrator’s strange relationship to time. At the start of the book, Sebald’s narrator claims that he began “in my thoughts to write these pages” in the hospital a year after his trip had concluded (RS, 4). Yet less than a page later, he explains that it took “more than a year after my discharge to begin to assemble my notes” (RS, 5). By the end of the book, he admits that it took yet another year to bring his “notes” to what he calls “a conclusion” (294). Although thinking about a project and beginning to set one’s thoughts to paper are not, exactly, the same thing, both acts can be thought of as constituting the time of composition—an elusive time-frame that informs the structure of the narrative present. According to Sebald’s narrator, this time-frame therefore seems to encompass three years. Yet even the fixed date on which the narrator claims to have completed his project, “13th of April, 1995,” points towards distant times and places (the narrator explains that various historical events, ranging from the first performance of Handel’s Messiah to the Amritsar massacre, also occurred on April 13th). Since “13th of April, 1995” happens to be a Maundy Thursday, the narrator finds reason to reflect on Christ’s washing of his disciples’ feet and on the lives of several saints. For Sebald’s narrator, the present moment becomes a sinkhole into the distant past.

Much as the narrator imagines that the present contains the past, he also indicates the present moment has already past. When he explains: “Maundy Thursday, the 13th of April 1995, was also the day on which Clara’s father, shortly after being taken to hospital in Coburg, departed this life. Now, as I write, and think once more of our history,” he
refers to the present moment, “Now, as I write,” in the past tense: it “was also the day…” (RS, 294-5). Here, Sebald’s narrator projects himself into the position of a future reader, someone who both is and is not himself. The conflation of the narrator with the reader proves disorienting, especially when the narrator fails to provide the reader with the backstory that is required for his comments to make sense. For example, in this passage the narrator seems to be on intimate terms with Clara (he knows the circumstances of her father’s death). Yet this passage, which appears at the end of the book, is only the second time that he mentions Clara. The reader is therefore left with more questions about Clara at the conclusion of the narrative than he would have had at any other point during the reading process. If, as Peter Brooks has written, “[t]he very possibility of meaning plotted through sequence and through time depends on the anticipated structuring force of the ending,” Sebald ensures that *The Rings of Saturn* will not function as this kind of organizing force.\(^\text{17}\) For the reader, a linear progression through the narrative proves to be more disorienting than conclusive.

In *The Rings of Saturn*, the idea of understanding the past as history proves equally problematic. Here, Sebald’s narrator presents the past as expanding forward to encompass both the present and the future. In the book’s opening line, he uses the past progressive to describe the timeframe during which his journey occurred. By stating: “In August 1992, when the dog days were drawing to an end…” he suggests that the continuing past action, “dog days drawing to an end,” may have begun prior to August, 1992 and continued after the month’s end (RS, 3). By using the word “drawing,” he

stresses the storyteller’s role in designing the landscapes that are allegedly “of” the past. Furthermore, by explaining that the Romans named the hottest days of summer *caniculares dies* after the “Dog Star” Sirius, the narrator implies that these literary constructions exist on the order of myth. From the very first lines of the book, therefore, it is apparent that the past described by Sebald’s narrator is being reconstructed during a three-year-long present and is a mythological timeframe that might be “drawn” differently each time that it is reimagined. In *The Rings of Saturn*, linear time becomes subsumed into the time of wonderment—a time in which Sebald’s narrator recalls wandering through (and pondering) times past, present and future.

Adopting such a perspective aligns this narrator with the victims of persecution—at least according to Sebald’s definition of how such victims might perceive linear time. In an essay about the writer Jean Améry, Sebald argues as follows:

*For the victims of persecution, however, the thread of chronological time is broken, background and foreground merge, the victim’s logical means of support in his existence are suspended. The experience of terror also dislocates time, that most abstract of all humanity’s homes. The only fixed points are traumatic scenes recurring with a painful clarity of memory and vision. (NH, 150)*

In *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator’s perception that chronological time has been broken (and his tendency to allow background and foreground to merge as he remembers rural England) raises an important question: what could possibly have terrorized this scholar so intensely? By all accounts, this narrator leads a relatively calm life. He teaches literature, lives in a tranquil portion of the world, and has the leisure and means to travel for weeks
at a time. Is the pull of postmemory so great that it can dislocate a man from such a position of safety?

The answer seems to be affirmative, especially since this figure perceives physical space to be as malleable as linear time. Sebald divides his book into ten sections. Each section seems to identify the place and time of the episode that the narrator will discuss by describing a landscape that seems to expand or contract. At the start of the first section, this narrator recalls the Suffolk “expanses” as having shrunk “once and for all to a single, blind, insensate spot.” Then he describes the “familiar city” of Norwich (which we might think of as a dot on a map) as extending “to the far horizon” (RS, 4). Each subsequent section opens with a similarly unsettling description of space. The second opens between two stops on a moving train; the third, in the indeterminate “three or four miles south of Lowestoft”; the fourth, as the narrator walks “around” Southwold while being in the town center; the fifth, in a hotel room which the narrator confuses with the setting of a televised BBC broadcast; the sixth as the narrator gazes at a dragon painted on a train that seems highly unlikely to exist; the seventh, as this figure is in motion and “climbed to Dunwich Heath”; the eighth, in the bar of the Southwold Crown Hotel, a venue that sells beverages that might be considered to provide a liquid form of disorientation; the ninth, as he “headed inland traveling on one of the Eastern Counties Omnibus Company’s red buses”; and the tenth, as he is apparently back in the Norwich hospital (RS, 29; 51, emphasis added; 75, 169, 137, 193, 241, 271). In The Rings of Saturn, space contracts, expands, moves, and becomes virtual. It can even have the potential to be made tipsy.
Some critics have argued that Sebald appropriates elements from the physical landscape (what Henri LeFebvre calls “absolute space”) to produce an exclusively literary space in which image, text, and dream intertwine. Deane Blackler maintains that Sebald’s landscapes are “discursively constructed” “palimpsests of cultural memories created by the associating, constructing consciousness or mind of the reflecting and remembering subject, the ‘dead’ author’s, the constructed narrator’s (also the ghost of the author), and her own contingent one.” Along a similar vein, Tess Lewis argues that “The past is another country, and it is always Sebald’s true destination. His geographical sites, however picturesque or fraught with significant correspondences, are merely gateways into a past that is most likely absurd and appalling.”

To a large part, this is true. Tourists do not usually visit Norfolk and Suffolk, the alleged destinations of Sebald’s narrator, to find “traces of destruction” (RS, 3). Instead, the appeal of these counties is that they offer quiet holidays. The interior of Norfolk and Suffolk contains marshes; areas of woodland, farmland, and heath; and small villages. The coastline along the North Sea is mainly composed of gentle cliffs and shingle beaches. Sebald himself once said that the “intriguing thing” about Suffolk is “that it is untouched by history […] There hasn’t been a war on English soil since the seventeenth century.”

Similarly, he describes his narrator as initially believing that taking a walking tour of this region will help him counter “the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of

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work” (RS, 3). Both writer and narrator are predisposed to think that visiting a setting associated with England’s rural past might help mitigate anxieties associated with the present. In short, they are vulnerable to the temptations of rural fantasies. For Sebald’s narrator, this fantasy proves untenable for two reasons. The first is because he conflates the past, present and future—thus making the backward glance requisite for this kind of nostalgia unfeasible. The second is because he tends to confuse city and country space—thus making it difficult to idealize the rural past from the vantage point of an present. For example, while remembering looking out the window of a Norwich hospital room, this narrator imagines that he gazes “from a cliff upon a sea of stone or a field of rubble, from which the tenebrous masses of multi-story carparks rose up like immense boulders” (RS, 5). There are moral implications to this. By rendering the backward glance problematic, Sebald suggests that it is impossible to achieve the distance required to learn from and move beyond the violent events of history. In other words, Sebald situates his narrator in a mental space where past violence constantly recurs.

Imagining that the modern city might transform into a pre-human countryside seems to be a relatively benign fantasy for Sebald’s narrator. However, imagining that the countryside might contain traces of an urban (and imperial) past is a far more unsettling prospect, especially as this figure describes a visit to Somerleyton Hall, a grand English estate turned museum. (The narrator’s descriptions of Somerleyton Hall provide a useful jumping-off point for understanding how rural England functions more broadly within Sebald’s text.) Sebald’s narrator claims that he physically arrived at Somerleyton Hall from the vantage point of the past—that is to say, by train rather than by car. Train travel, like walking, provides an antiquated form of ambulation that allows him to fantasize that
his movement takes place outside of linear time.\textsuperscript{20} When the narrator first disembarks from the train, he pictures the estate as it was during its heyday. In turn, he characterizes the modern day by its relative lack of \textit{éclat}: “now there was nothing any more, nobody, no stationmaster in gleaming peaked cap, no servants, no coachman, no house guests, no shooting parties, neither gentlemen in indestructible tweeds to ladies in stylish traveling clothes” (\textit{RS}, 31). This initial celebration of the past soon shifts to criticism. After describing the exploits of the speculative developer who created the estate’s mid-nineteenth century “comfort and extravagance,” the narrator contemplates the lives of the people whose labor created the wealth that financed the renovation. He is moved by traces of departed servants, images of distant battles, and faded and shrunken imperial trophies. He is particularly “saddened” by the memory of a Chinese quail, “evidently in a state of dementia,” that he recalls seeing running back and forth in its cage (\textit{RS}, 36). Much as Woolf’s Isa Oliver considers Pointz Hall to be a shelter-less no-man’s-land, Sebald’s narrator speculates concerning Somerleyton Hall, “whether one is in a country house in Suffolk or some kind of no-man’s-land, on the shores of the Arctic Ocean or in the heart of the dark continent. Nor can one readily say which decade or century it is, for many ages are superimposed here and coexist” (\textit{RS}, 36).

Juxtaposing references to First World War battlefields, an uninhabitable Arctic terrain, and a colonized continent in one sentence does more than compress distant geography verbally. The structure of the sentence also imports the violence of

Continental warfare, natural destruction, and imperial violence into an English setting. Sebald’s narrator imagines that each corner of an English field is filled with the traces of foreign dead.\textsuperscript{21} We may think of his treatment of space as an inversion of Rupert Brooke’s “There is some corner of a foreign field that is forever England.” This inversion of Brooke’s line resonates on another level. Given that “The Soldier” celebrates the British position in the war (and may even suggest that warfare is glorious), the inversion of the spatial metaphor can be taken as a rebuttal of such sentiments. Sebald’s narrator would be aware that England’s victory in the First World War, and the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles, precipitated suffering and contributed to the economic conditions that facilitated Hitler’s rise to power. By seeing traces of the foreign dead within the English countryside, Sebald’s narrator resists the temptation to view picturesque settings with nostalgia, or the pain associated with the loss of one’s homeland. Instead, he views the English landscape with a different kind pain, the pain of recognizing how many distant homelands had been destroyed to finance and preserve rural England’s superficially peaceful appearance.

In addition to being saddened by the thought of those whose labor financed the estate, those who were brought to England against their will, or those who died in distant battlefields, Sebald’s narrator is also affected by the imagined plight of those who owned Somerleyton Hall during the twentieth century. As he describes the family portraits hanging in the great hall made “between 1920 and 1960 by an artist not untouched by Modernism,” he notes that the faces in these paintings were covered with “scarlet and

purple blotches” (*RS*, 36). Elsewhere, he uses similar terms to describe the skin of people that he has imagined dead or seen dying. He describes the scholar Michael Parkinson as allegedly “found dead in his bed” with a “face curiously mottled with red blotches.” He mentions that a waitress in a decrepit Lowestoft hotel who “dressed in the style of the Thirties” had become disfigured by “scarlet blotches which appeared from the neckline of her blouse and crept up her throat.” He also uses this image to describe non-human life forms in their death throes. He explains that the cheeks of dead herring become filled with blood much like those of a human: “Once the life has fled the herring, its colours change. Its back turns blue, the cheeks and gills red, suffused with blood” (*RS*, 6, 43, 58).

By suggesting that similar blotches afflicted the modern inhabitants of Somerleyton Hall, Sebald’s narrator intimates that seclusion on a grand English estate offers little protection from the despair, physical afflictions, and pollution that he associates with modernity. For him, retreat into rural England provides no security from the present violence.

Far from representing a pastoral ideal, therefore, the country estate exposes a version of mankind that is particularly at odds with the natural environment. As the narrator explains, although Somerleyton Hall was once “famed for the scarcely perceptible transitions from interiors to exterior” and considered a place in which it was difficult “to tell where the natural ended and the man-made began,” this illusion was created by Argand burners that were used in the Victorian era to provide light. The poisonous gas that these burners emitted proved deadly. According to Sebald’s narrator, a portion of the house was “burnt out in 1913 after a gas explosion and subsequently demolished” (*RS*, 33). According to real-world historians at Somerleyton Hall, however,
this explosion never occurred. By having his narrator imagine that the illusion of unity between the man-made and the natural was disrupted in 1913, Sebald invites the reader to ponder why the narrator might have imagined that such an event occurred in this particular year. (In addition to being the final year of peace before the start of World War I, 1913 was also the year in which Henry Ford developed the first moving assembly line. 1913 might be considered as marking a turning point for England—both in terms of its role in European history and in its continued evolution from an agricultural- to an industrial- based economy.) That said, Sebald has already made it plain that his narrator does not harbor any illusions that humanity was less violent or more in harmony with the natural world prior to 1913. The narrator’s assertion that this imaginary fire took place in this 1913 therefore serves an ironic function in the larger context of the book in which it appears: it pinpoints the death of the pastoral fantasy for a figure who never took such fantasies seriously. This death, it would seem, is one of the few that Sebald’s narrator might celebrate because it marks a turn from fantasy to poetic (if not mimetic) form of realism that has the potential to inspire a more comprehensive and sobering assessment of the relationship between one’s present day prospects and the forms of injustice that make them possible.

IV. “Sand conquered all”: The Trail of the Unspeakable

In The Rings of Saturn, Sebald is less interested in discrediting debunked pastoral fantasies than in exploring how it might be possible to come to a more sophisticated understanding of the past and memorialize those who one has known personally or about

whom one derives knowledge through second-hand sources. One way that Sebald achieves this is by creating a narrator who is obsessed with the afterlife of bones. This narrator is particularly fascinated with tombs: those that are undisturbed, including an urn-topped tombstone in the remote Norfolk village of Ditchingham; those that are overgrown, including a cluster of gravestones beneath the round tower of Ilketshall St. Margaret in Suffolk; and those that are aggrandized and then neglected, including the mausoleum of the writer Edward FitzGerald. Sebald’s narrator is also interested in burial sites that have been desecrated. After a lengthy digression about the sepulchral urns that Sir Thomas Browne describes in his 1658 treatise *Urn Burial*, Sebald recounts a story about the fate of Browne’s skull. This digression serves a critical purpose. Although it seems to bury the reader with unnecessary (and possibly erroneous) detail, it leads him to contemplate how little he understands about those whose graves have been robbed or for whom no physical trace remains. Through them, the reader is encouraged to contemplate the lives of those whose deaths were engineered to be forgotten. In fact the narrator’s story is filled with digressions about the unaccounted-for dead—including the victims of various genocides: the Balkans, the colonization of the Congo, the exploitation of South American Indians, the repression of Irish nationalists, and (of course) the Holocaust. These digressions function as a narratological version of a geological sinkhole—they pull the narrator beneath the surface of recollections of the rural English present-day and submerge him in thoughts of distant mass graves. Sebald once explained that the power of literature comes from its capacity to provoke reflection on the nature of memory:

The moral backbone of literature is about that whole question of memory.

To my mind it seems clear that those who have no memory have the much
greater chance to lead happy lives. But it is something you cannot possibly escape: your psychological make-up is such that you are inclined to look back over your shoulder. Memory, even if you repress it, will come back at you and it will shape your life. Without memories there wouldn't be any writing: the specific weight an image or phrase needs to get across to the reader can only come from things remembered - not from yesterday but from a long time ago.23

If memory indeed forms the moral “backbone” of literature, The Rings of Saturn is a work that suggests that this bone is just as vulnerable to burial, neglect, desecration, and erasure as any other.

Sebald’s narrator is inevitably drawn to consider thoughts such as these as he reminisces about sandy soil. The first time that he mentions sand is in the context of a story about a friend named Janine, a scholar of Romantic literature. The narrator quotes Janine as explaining that Flaubert’s “fear of the false” can be traced to the relentless spread of stupidity which he had observed everywhere, and which he believed had already invaded his own head. It was (so supposedly once he said) as if one was sinking into the sand. This was probably the reason, she said, that sand possessed such significance in all of Flaubert’s works. Sand conquered all […] In a grain of sand in the hem of Emma Bovary’s winter gown, said Janine, Flaubert saw the whole of the Sahara. (7)

In Janine’s reading of Flaubert, sand spreads, invades, and threatens to sink one into the “stupidity” of “the false.” Sand serves a similar function for Sebald’s narrator. In his memory, sand disorients him in time and space. For example, recollecting a hike along the “sandy path” through the Dunwich Heath causes Sebald’s narrator to feel as if he had been led “back again at the same tangled thicket from which I had emerged about an hour before, or, as it now seemed to me, in some distant past” (RS, 171). The narrator’s temporal and spatial disorientation becomes more pronounced as he remembers how the path appeared to him in a dream. In this dream, he explains, the path led to the center of a maze that represented “the topmost point of the earth.” From this vantage point it became possible to see various “scenes of devastation”—including land eroding from the coast, houses falling to ruin, and a solitary man mourning. It also became possible to perceive an example of monumental modern-day architecture, the Sizewell nuclear energy plant, as a “lowering mausoleum” in the future (RS, 174-5). The narrator’s projection of this literary plot onto his memory of standing on a sandy plot of land may seem arbitrary—an example of false mapping and narrative geography gone awry. Yet this remapping of space serves a useful purpose: it allows Sebald’s narrator to impose an organizing structure onto the chaos of memory. In so doing, he starts to become aware of concerns on the periphery of his consciousness—namely those related to the violence and sense of loss that categorizes so much of human experience.

For Sebald’s narrator, the memory of sandy patches of soil evokes a series of associations that allow him, albeit peripherally, to think about extreme violence. Sometimes, he simply needs to stand still for long enough to notice that the ground below
him is hollow. At Covinthe, observing the flight of “sand martins” reveals that the cliffs on which he rests are “perforated”:

The sand martins, I now saw, were flying solely at the level that extended from the top of the cliff where I was sitting out into empty space. Not one of them climbed higher or dived lower, to the water below them. Whenever they came towards me, fast as bullets, some seemed to vanish right beneath my feet, as if into the very ground. I went to the edge of the cliff and saw that they had dug their nesting holes into the topmost layer of clay, one beside the other. I was thus standing on perforated ground, as it were, which might have given way at any minute. (RS, 68)

Traveling “fast as bullets,” these sand martins become harbingers of death, even as they disappear into their “nesting holes.” If, in *Between the Acts*, the presence of martins seems to “foretell” that “[h]omes will be built” and that human beings will be crushed into “flats,” in *The Rings of Saturn*, the flight of such birds indicates an even more dismal fate. After showing the narrator that he stands on “perforated ground,” the flight of these birds draws his eye to another “nesting hole”—a couple in what appears to be a deathly embrace at the bottom of the cliff. The narrator remembers the scene on the strand as follows:

In the startled moment when that image went through me, which lasted an eternity, it seemed as if the man’s feet twitched like those of one just hanged. Now, though, he lay still, and the woman too was still and motionless. Misshapen, like some great mollusk washed ashore, they lay there, to all appearances a single being, a many-limbed, two-headed
monster that had drifted in from far out at sea, the last of a prodigious species, its life ebbing from it with each breath expired through its nostrils.

(RS, 68)

This posture appears to be a perversion of that assumed by the kissing couple—Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr—in the film “From Here to Eternity”24 For Sebald’s narrator, human sexuality becomes a deathtrap: the man twitches like one “just hanged” and the woman lies “motionless.” In his memory of this scene, time collapses as a single “moment” and contains an unpleasant “eternity.” Furthermore, land and sea life merge to produce a horrible creation—the “two-headed monster” that “drifted in from far out at sea.” While some observers might interpret such a sight as filled with creative possibilities (regeneration of the species being one), Sebald’s narrator classifies it as one of “expiration.”

The memory of this embrace leads the narrator to contemplate various other graves through a series of associations. Just before describing the view from the Covinthe cliffs, the narrator explains that the genes of North Sea herring have mutated due to pollution. Like the “two-headed monster” formed by the embracing humans, the females of some rare varieties of fish (the narrator explains) have begun to develop male organs. As a result, their “ritual patterns of courtship” has become reduced to “no more than a dance of death” (RS, 53). “This process,” the narrator explains, “inspired by our thirst for knowledge, might be described as the most extreme of the sufferings undergone by a species always threatened by disaster.” Comparing fish to humans is of course

24 From Here to Eternity, dir. Fred Zinnemann, perf. Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr, 1953.
problematic in a text concerned with memorializing the violence of the Holocaust. While
the connection between dying herrings and victims of the Holocaust is tenuous based on
this passage alone, it becomes stronger as the narrator explains that he derived his
knowledge of the herring industry from “flickering short films that teachers would
borrow from local film and slide libraries.” In these films, he explains, “Everything
happened as if in a black void, relieved only by the gleam of the white underbellies of the
fish, piled high on the deck, and of the salt they were mixed with” (RS, 53). The subtext
of this description is another slaughter that took place in the 1930s and 1940s and was
memorialized in black and white films—the genocide that took place in the concentration
camps. Guards from these camps sometimes photographed prisoners being cataloged,
tortured, and murdered. Images made by these guards, along with images of piles of dead
bodies that were created by the camps’ liberators, were widely circulated in post-war
documentaries. 25

Sebald had been quite affected by one of these films when he was a student in
Germany. In an interview, he explained that when he and his peers were “confronted
with” such a film at school, they had such a difficult time getting their “minds around”
the subject of the film that they returned to the playing fields without mentioning what
they had just seen. It wasn’t until Sebald moved to England that he became able to
connect what he had seen to the lives of actual human beings. The film, he explains,
“preoccupied me all the more when I came to this country, because in Manchester, I

25 Hirsch explains that many of these photographs have been collected in the
catalog for an exhibition called “The German Army and Genocide: Crimes Against War
realized for the first time that these historical events had happened to real people.” Yet, as we have seen, Sebald is hesitant to represent “real people” directly in *The Rings of Saturn*. Although some figures are based on historical figures, they appear through the lens of a narrator’s unreliable memory. As such, they become semi-fictional constructs.

Similarly, Sebald shies away from having his narrator describe the dead human bodies. Instead, he has his narrator present them through the lenses of metaphor and memory. If Sebald guides his reader to associate a species of fish with a persecuted group of humans, he invites this reader to dehumanize Hitler’s victims. The horror of this is that he situates him in a position similar to that of Hitler’s executioners. Sebald extends his critique to scientists and academics. As the narrator explains that scientists once tortured herring in order to understand their “capacity to survive,” Sebald evokes the kind of damage that has been done in the name of the “search for knowledge” (*RS*, 57).

Sebald has his narrator reinforce the connection that he makes between herring and concentration camp victims by introducing another species into his series of associations: the silkworm. Towards the end of the book, Sebald has this narrator describe another documentary allegedly made in the 1930s as follows:

> We see the hatching, the feeding of the ravenous caterpillars, the cleaning out of the frames, the spinning of the silken thread, and finally the killing, accomplished in this case not by putting the cocoons out in the sun or in a hot oven, as was often the practice in the past, but by suspending them over a boiling cauldron. The cocoons, spread out in shallow baskets, have to be kept in the rising steam for upwards of three hours, and when a batch

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is done, it is the next one's turn, and so on until the entire killing business
is completed. (RS, 294)

Here, Sebald’s narrator draws attention to how logical-sounding terms (killing is a
“process, inspired by our thirst for knowledge” as well as a “business”) can be used to
mask the violence of human aggression and of profiteering on it (in this case, via the
production of silk). Hovering on the periphery of this description although not said
outright is Hannah Arendt’s phrase “The Banality of Evil,” the subtitle of Eichman in
Jerusalem (1963). Yet Sebald’s narrator counters the banality of the methodical
slaughter of great numbers of silkworm by evoking the agony that might have been
experienced by an individual larva, suspended above “rising steam for upwards of three
hours.” Although the reader can never know the pain of the larva (or any other form of
life), narrative can lead him to at least try to imagine it, even if this process of capacity
for such imagination is limited.

Much as Woolf uses the death of a moth to reflect on the Somme, in The Rings of
Saturn Sebald creates a narrator whose reflections about a porous landscape allow him to
consider the Holocaust from what he perceives to be a safe remove in time, physical
distance, language, and even literary style. As this narrator’s thoughts slip from a sandy
heath, to the downward flight of sand martins, to a human nesting hole, to the polluted
sea, to the plight of herring, to films about the “killing businesses” in which humans
destroy herrings and then (following Woolf) slaughter insects, Sebald explores the
Holocaust tangentially—that is to say, without confronting it directly. Yet he also takes

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this process a step farther as he invites his readers to consider the potential flaws of assuming a “distant” perspective—namely the problems of relying on secondary forms of representation to structure private or cultural memory.

Sebald is not simply concerned that historical texts may be inaccurate. He is also concerned about how even these texts can be misremembered. Consider, for example, how Sebald presents his narrator’s memory of reading a 1933 Daily Express publication that he claims to have found in the Sailor’s Reading Room in Southwold. Sebald’s narrator claims that the captions in the book that he recalls were “almost without exception bitterly ironic” (RS, 94). The book in question is Laurence Stallings’ The First World War: A Photographic History. In the introduction to this book, Stallings emphasizes that the captions were in fact “designed not only to indicate the march of time but to suggest the moods and backgrounds of the War in all its phases” (emphasis added, Publisher’s forward). While “bitter” irony does describe some of these captions, it does not describe them all. Furthermore, Sebald also has his narrator misremember the wording of specific captions. For example, his narrator describes one caption that appears below an image of a crater as: “There is some Corner of a Foreign Field that is Forever England!” In Stallings’ book, the quotation from Brooks had been truncated and had appeared in all capital letters: “…SOME CORNER OF A FOREIGN FIELD THAT IS FOREVER ENGLAND.” While making such an error is understandable for Sebald’s narrator, who does not have the book before him, it is more mysterious that Sebald would repeat this mis-remembering as he edited The Rings of Saturn for publication. By

expanding the caption and adding an exclamation mark, Sebald indicates how the significance of the quote expands in his narrator’s memory. Furthermore, by switching from all capitals to capitals only at the start of certain words, Sebald manipulates how his readers will understand this quote (Stallings, 119-20; RS, 95). For example, by de-capitalizing the word “some,” Sebald deemphasizes the unspecified or unknown quality of the space that he describes. By capitalizing “Corner,” he then creates the impression that he is describing a specific place. In so doing, he allows the reader to imagine that the “Corner” of a “Foreign Field” that contains the body of the dead (a space that is “Forever England!”) may exist at the other end of the “sinkholes” that appear throughout Norfolk and Suffolk. If the local English spaces described by his narrator can be said to expand to encompass distant places and times, these distant corners may be said to contract to contain a small bit of England.

Recording the memories of those who witnessed the horrors of recent history directly (those who observed the fire-bombing of German cities or the Holocaust, for example) becomes imperative—even though he registers that these memories can become distorted within the individual mind and as they become translated to the printed page. In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald encourages his reader to imagine the past as a landscape through which it is nearly impossible to navigate yet absolutely impossible to escape. He does so to force the reader to indirectly consider the unspeakable horrors perpetrated by mankind.

V: “on the edge of the abyss”: Dunwich as Countermonument
For Sebald, the eroding eastern coast of England provides the perfect metaphor for exploring the erosion of cultural memory. By means of his treatment of the sinking city of Dunwich—both through narrative and (as we will see in a later section of this chapter) via images included in the text—Sebald connects coastal erosion to the impermanence and unreliability of the historical record.

Dunwich was built as a trading port on cliffs above the North Sea during the Middle Ages. Due to storms and coastal erosion, portions of the city have been crumbling, sometimes slowly and sometimes dramatically. Only a handful of buildings, including a small museum, remain where a city once thrived. In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald’s narrator fluctuates between describing what he remembers of his visit to Dunwich and reminding his audience that these descriptions are not to be confused—entirely—with fact. One way that Sebald creates this effect is through his narrator’s excessive use of poetic language. For example, while describing the effects of a 1328 hurricane, Sebald’s narrator explains that the people of Dunwich stood on the edge of the abyss, leaning into the wind, gazing in horror through the clouds of salt spray into the depths where bales and barrels, shattered cranes, torn sails of windmills, chests and tables, crates, feather beds, firewood, straw and drowned livestock were revolving in a whirlpool of whitish-brown waters. (*RS*, 158)

Despite the factual authority implied by the list (“bales and barrels, shattered cranes, torn sails,” etc.), the narrator’s use of overly abstract phrases (“the edge of the abyss”) and alliteration (“bales and barrels,” “a whirlpool of whitish-brown waters”) emphasizes that this description is a poetic construction that uses scenes of horror to create an aesthetic
effect. Elsewhere, Sebald has been quite critical of how one might aestheticize violence. In a critique of the Alfred Andersch’s novel *Sansibar oder der letzte Grund* (“Zanzibar, or the Last Reason), Sebald writes:

> But it is one thing for the words really to take off, another for them to be tastelessly overloaded, as in this much-cited passage, with recherché adjectives, nuances of literary color, a tinselly glitter, and other cheap ornaments. When a morally compromised author claims the field of aesthetics as a value-free area it should make his readers stop and think. The burning of Paris was, for Ernst Jünger, a wonderful sight! Frankfurt burning, as seen from the Main, is for Andersch a terrifyingly beautiful image. (*NH*, 131)

Although there is clearly a difference between the violence of war and that of erosion, the narrator’s description of the demise of Dunwich also walks a fine line between “tak[ing] off” and being “tastelessly overloaded.” Sebald’s narrator seems to check himself, however, by integrating qualifiers into his prose. While describing how a tower sank into the sand, he explains:

> Until about 1890, what was known as Eccles Church Tower still stood on Dunwich beach, no one had any idea how it had arrived at sea level, from the considerable height at which it must once have stood, without tipping out of the perpendicular. The riddle has not been solved to this day, though a recent experiment using a model suggests that the enigmatic Eccles tower was probably built on sand and sank down under its own weight, so gradually that the masonry remained virtually intact. Around
1900, after Eccles tower had also collapsed, the only Dunwich church that remained was the ruin of All Saints. (RS, 156)

Here, qualifications (including “about,” “what was known as,” “no one had any idea how,” “The riddle has not been solved,” “enigmatic,” “probably,” and “virtually”) allow the narrator to signal the limits of his knowledge and, as such, direct the reader not to take his literary flourishes too seriously.

Sebald’s words are often, echoing John Sears, “the hollow traces left by things that have been erased, often by acts of violence, and which exist only in their representation as symbolized memories.” This is particularly true as the narrator describes the vanished Eccles Church Tower, itself a hollow form of space in which rituals of belief once were carried out. For Sebald’s narrator, the disappearance of this tower symbolizes more than just loss. Given that this tower is a symbol of the possibility of belief, its displacement from the narrator’s line of vision transforms it into a monument, of sorts, to the concept of radical doubt. In this light, we might consider the sinking Eccles tower as a countermonument. Unlike a traditional war monument, which offers a visible object to memorialize and encourages a specific reading of history, a countermonument presents the viewer with a real or metaphorical blank surface and invites him to construct his own reading of the past. Jochen and Esther Gerz’s Monument against Fascism in Harburg, Germany (1986) is an example. This one meter square steel shaft was coated with lead so visitors could write on it. As the lower portion of the shaft became covered with writing, it was lowered in increments, giving subsequent visitors a

clean space on to which they could write. Once the entire shaft was lowered into the ground, an empty space appeared where the tower had once been. The function of this empty space was to serve as a reminder of absence and unrepresentability of the past. James Young has described this kind of vanishing monument as refusing to become a placeholder for memory. Instead it asserts its power by requiring the visitor “to rise and to remember for himself.”

In *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator’s descriptions of the sinking Eccles Church tower function as a similar kind of countermonument, both for Sebald’s “memory-tourist” narrator and for Sebald’s reader himself. As this reader watches the authority of the narrator’s various assertions about Dunwich crumble before his eyes, he may feel inclined to “rise and remember” the past in his own way. Some readers may take this quite literally: they may visit what remains of Dunwich, research the history of the church, or locate where the tower once stood on a map.

Yet each of these approaches reveals one simple fact: the “Eccles” tower was not located in Dunwich at all. Instead, it was located in Eccles-on-Sea, about 50 miles north of Dunwich in Norfolk. Why, then, might Sebald have included such a glaring error in the narrative this book? It is unlikely that Sebald had his narrator make a “mistake” inadvertently. Sebald had lived near Norwich for 30 years when he wrote the original German language *Die Ringe des Saturn, Eine englische Wallfahrt*. Given that the book is filled with accurate descriptions of extremely remote stretches of the North Sea coastline, it is clear that Sebald was on intimate terms with both Norfolk and Suffolk geography. Furthermore, had Sebald made what he considered to be an error in the German book, he had ample time to correct the text before republishing *The Rings of Saturn* three years

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later for an English audience. If we allow that Sebald’s attribution of a geographic location to the Eccles Tower does not serve a mimetic function (and that the tower’s presence in the narrative comes to signify a certain, abstract form of absence), then Sebald’s decision to have his narrator displace the tower serves as a further reminder of the failure of language to do justice to the past. It also can remind the reader of his own gullibility (and laziness) as he relies on reports of others to define the space-time of history. Yet, on a more positive note, it also gives testament to the imaginative nature of Sebald’s cartography.

Throughout *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator’s descriptions of other objects (and people) sinking into the sand serve a related function. Consider, for example, the narrator’s presentation of the rather fantastic life of a certain “Major George Wyndham Le Strange.” Le Strange’s unusual name seems to have been made up by the author. As Adrian Daub reports: “No Major George Wyndham Le Strange ever lived in Henstead, no Florence Barnes appears in the voting registers, and the Eastern Daily Press has no record of the clipping Sebald provides ever appearing in the pages of the newspaper.” Daub suggests that “Major George Wyndham Le Strange” may even be a rearrangement of the author’s own name, “Winfried Georg Sebald.” According to the narrator, Le Strange served in an English regiment that “liberated the concentration camp at Belsen” (this is, incidentally, one of the only times that the narrator overtly mentions the Holocaust). Whatever Le Strange witnessed at Belsen caused him to become a recluse on the family’s estate, where he employed one housekeeper “on the condition that she dined

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31 Adrian Daub, “‘Donner a Voir’: The Logics of the Caption in W. G. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn* and Alexander Kluge's *Devil's Blind Spot,*” *Searching for Sebald* 324.
with him in silence every day” (RS, 63). Rather than finding refuge within a bucolic, maintained landscape, Sebald’s narrator explains, Le Strange allows his fields to become “overgrown and neglected, while scrub and undergrowth encroached on the fallow fields.” Like the sinking Eccles tower, Le Strange figures in the text as another hollow signifier that sank into English soil. According to Sebald’s narrator, the ground into which Le Strange allegedly sank was as sandy as that of Eccles beach: “Some said that one summer Le Strange dug a cave in his garden and sat in it day and night like St Jerome in the desert” (RS, 63-4). In this narrator’s telling, rural England becomes a sandy desert of historical erasure.

Even lush English gardens, for Sebald’s narrator, have the power to turn individuals into ash. Much as Le Strange represents the dangers of repressing the past, another figure that the narrator describes, Frederick Farrar, exposes the perils of succumbing to nostalgia. Farrar, the narrator explains, grew up in Victorian Lowecroft, which was then a prosperous coastal city. After the fishing and tourism industries that supported Lowecroft declined, Farrar transformed his grief over the demise of his town, the loss of his childhood innocence and the deaths of his three sisters, Violet, Iris, and (the English) Rose, into a passion for gardening. As the narrator explains, “His garden was one of the loveliest in the whole region, and towards the end of his life, after a stroke had left him very frail, I often sat there with him, listening to tales of Lowestoft and the past.” The narrator’s description, however, quickly turns gothic:

And it was in that garden, one cloudless day in May, that Frederick died; as he was making his morning round, he somehow managed to set fire to his dressing gown with the cigarette lighter he always kept in his pocket.
The garden boy found him an hour later, unconscious and with severe burns from head to foot, in a cool, half-shaded place, where the tiny *viola labradorica* with its almost black leaves had spread and established a regular colony (*RS*, 47).

Much as Le Strange buries himself in his desert-like garden to retreat from the horrors that he witnessed at Belson, Farrar turns himself to ash in a memory cave of nostalgia. By juxtaposing the severity of Farrar’s burns with a description of the cool shade in which he died, Sebald’s narrator gives the English garden a stifling quality. Furthermore, when he mentions that *viola labradorica* formed a “colony” on the floor, the setting becomes more pernicious, since the black leaves of this plant are the color of mourning. The use of the world “colony” here, like allusions to colonial space in the narrator’s descriptions of Somerleyton Hall, leads the reader to consider the relationship between this depiction of an English garden and territories beyond England. By having his narrator mention that Farrar “managed” to set himself on fire, Sebald does more than suggest that Farrar took his own life. He also invites the reader to think about such an action in terms of a broader historical context.

In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald’s narrator’s descriptions of figures sinking into English soil allow him to explore the difficulty of confronting the past and memorializing those who suffered within it. For this narrator, retreating into the English countryside does not provide a place of greater safety. Instead, the remembered English landscape is riddled with sinkholes. In some cases, these sinkholes are literal—quicksand, perforated cliffs, hollowed graveyards. In others, they are metaphorical—symbols of historical erasure (the Eccles Church Tower), the dangers of repression (Le Strange), and the perils
of dwelling on nostalgic love for a rural ideal (Farrar). Even in memory, the narrator’s reflections on such sinkholes (and the mental associations they bring to mind) paralyze him with horror. They are designed to have a similar effect on Sebald’s reader.

VII: “a virtual paper landscape”: Sinkholes in the Landscape of the Text

Sebald does not provide many suggestions about how to avoid falling into the kind of mental sinkholes that plague his narrator. Instead, he sends the reader on a dangerous journey of his own through *The Rings of Saturn*. This seems to be the price that one pays for a meditative relation to history and the soul. Sebald guides his reader to consider the pages of *The Rings of Saturn* as forming a paper landscape. Twice, he has his narrator use the word “landscape” to refer to other collections of documents. As already mentioned, the narrator describes the pages spread across his friend Janine’s study as forming a “virtual paper landscape.” Building on this metaphor, he imagines that these papers form a “flood,” resemble a “glacier when it reaches the sea,” and suggest “snow in the fields” (*RS*, 8). Much as the narrator associates the “paper landscape” of Janine’s scholarship with a geography in transition between solid and liquid states, *The Rings of Saturn* can also be thought of as a geography in transition between two forms of (literary) matter—that of prose and that of fiction. Furthermore, like the papers on Janine’s floor, the book is a strange amalgam of documents removed from their original context.

The second time that Sebald’s narrator refers to papers as forming a landscape is in reference to the log of a petrol ship named “Southwold” that he claims to have found in the Southwold Sailors’ Reading Room. The narrator describes this book as containing
“large, landscape-format pages” and as filled with “occasional entries surrounded by a good deal of empty space” (93). Although neither the original German editions of Die Ringe des Saturn, Eine englische Wallfahrt nor the American and English translations of The Rings of Saturn are printed on particularly large sheets of paper, there is no mistaking the “landscape-format” of all editions of this text—especially since the images that interrupt the narrative emphasize the book’s visual qualities. The narrator’s “occasional entries” (that is to say, the entries inspired by the “occasion” of his thoughts) and the uncaptioned images that Sebald presents among them are surrounded by a “good deal of empty space,” just like those of a ship log. We might ask, then, why Sebald did not demand a large-format printing of the book. The answer to this question may be related to Sebald’s desire to have the book also participate in another generic tradition—that of the guidebook. (The smaller scale means the book might fit into the pocket of a walker.)

These black and white images are interesting on several levels. On the most basic level, they draw attention to the book’s status as a physical object. If analyzing the words that comprise the narrative requires close reading, interacting with these images requires a different focal length. Consider the book’s first double-page spread:
Holding the book at arm’s length and regarding it as a distant landscape produces an important effect. As this page shot shows, Sebald’s placement of six lines of text above and six lines below the image of a window creates the shape of a letter “I.” As critic Lise Patt has written, the physical layout of Sebald’s books (particularly his unusual intermingling of image and text) forms a “third space” for the reader to navigate: “Layout is the size of the codex that reveals Sebald’s hand, not the hand on the pen or the hand holding the camera or sorting through images, but the place where eye and hand meet, where the image and text are ‘handled’.” It is through layout that the author’s voice might be apprehended and identified as different from that of his narrator.\(^\text{32}\)

In this case, this giant “I” serves a complex function. Initially, Sebald (much like Proust, to whom Sebald is often compared) seems to indicate that this “I” will be his book’s primary subject. Yet, as we have seen, in the surrounding text Sebald presents his narrator as a fractured being—one who both is, and is not, Sebald himself. While this figure is quite learned and often is incredibly precise, he can also be inaccurate about matters in which he seems to be certain. In other words, much as this narrator is an unreliable “I,” or representative of Sebald’s subject position, he proves to be an unreliable eyewitness. In a postscript written upon publication of his Zürich lectures on the “Air War and Literature,” Sebald reveals his skepticism towards most eyewitness reports: “Among the central problems of ‘eye-witness reports’ are their inherent inadequacy, notorious unreliability, and curious vacuity: their tendency to follow a set routine and go over and over the same material” (NH, 80). The dominant graphic of the giant “I” at the start of The Rings of Saturn therefore seems to serve an ironic function. Sebald has written that irony is often used to communicate emotions that evade more direct forms of language. In an essay on Jean Améry, he explains that this writer “resorts to irony where otherwise his voice would be bound to falter. He knows that he is operating on the borders of what language can convey. ‘If someone wanted to impart his physical pain,’ he writes, ‘he would be forced to inflict it and thereby become a torturer himself’” (NH, 153).

Sebald’s awareness of the failures of language to convey the violence of the past informs his decision to incorporate images into The Ring of Saturn. This becomes apparent as the reader pulls the book closer inward. The image at the center of the “I” seems to be of a cloudy sky seen through a mesh-covered window. As such, the image
seems to support a claim made by the narrator: when he was in the Norwich hospital, “all that could be seen of the world from my bed was the colourless patch of sky framed in the window […] which for some strange reason, was draped with black netting” (RS, 4). However there are no markers that prove that the picture was taken from a hospital window (or even that it depicts the sky above England). Furthermore, the black grid covering the windowpanes could have been superimposed on the image. If the picture neither proves (or disproves) the narrator’s claims, why is it there? Sebald once stated that images serve two functions in his work: “verification” (they “allow the narrator to legitimatize the story he tells”) and “arresting time” (they “slow the reader’s forward progression through his book”). If we can agree that this image does little to legitimize the narrator’s story, its primary function seems to be to slow the reader’s progress through the text and force him to dwell on the mental associations evoked by a combination of picture and prose. As such, images act as another kind of sinkhole in the paper landscape of The Rings of Saturn.

While some images achieve this paralyzing effect independently, others generate meaning as they work as part of a series. Consider the relationship between the following five images presented in short succession. The first image is of men surrounding a pile of fish.

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33 Wachtel, “Ghost Hunter” 41-2.
Sebald includes this image just after he has his narrator conclude a story about the documentary film about herring. At first glance, the picture seems to be a still shot from the film. However, given that the words “A Morning Catch of Herring, Lowestoft” appear in handwriting on the top left corner of the picture, the image seems to have come from a photograph that had been reproduced on a postcard. This poses the question of whether the film that the narrator describes existed. It also invites the reader to consider what the documentary function of the image might be. Aside from indicating that fish of some kind were plentiful after the dawn of black and white photography, the photograph and the writing on it prove little about herring in particular. It is, however, a reminder that several artists were involved in its creation: the photographer who framed the shot, the
archivist who labeled the photograph, and the author who reproduced the image in *The Rings of Saturn* (among possible others).

The next image in the series is a detailed etching of a fish.

Figure 3: *The Rings of Saturn* © 1998 New Directions Cloth Edition (*RS*, 56-7)

The presence of this hand-drawn image provides another reminder of the artist’s role in memorializing the dead. However, it produces an even more chilling effect. Sebald includes this drawing just after his narrator observes, “we do not know what the herring feels” (*RS*, 57). This invitation to imagine the pain of the herring becomes more moving as we consider the circumstances that enabled the line drawing to come into being. The artist who drew the fish would have painstakingly “studied” the creature at the moment of his death. Whether or not he pulled the fish from the water, the artist is therefore
implicated in its nearly unimaginable suffering. The viewer who takes pleasure from looking at the drawing becomes implicated in this violence as well. Marianne Hirsch has argued: “When we confront perpetrator images, we cannot look independently of the look of the perpetrator […] All is touched by the death that is the precondition of the image.”

Sebald makes a similar argument as he describes how Peter Weiss reacted to the Frankfurt trials. Since, “no meaningful or satisfactory legal redress was or could be made at the trial,” Sebald explains that Weiss felt compelled “to resume the investigation on a literary level”:

> it becomes increasingly clear to [Weiss] that rulers and ruled, exploiters and exploited are in fact the same species, so that he, the potential victim, must also range himself with the perpetrators of the crime or at least their accomplices, and not just in a purely theoretical sense either. (*ND*, 185-6)

For Sebald, Weiss’ “willingness to take this heaviest of all moral obligations on himself” is what “raises his work far beyond all other literary attempts to ‘come to terms with the past’ (*ND*, 186). In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald takes on a similar moral obligation on himself (and encourages his reader to do likewise). By including this line drawing of a fish in this sequence of images, Sebald subtly leads the reader to think about how the fisherman, the artist, and the viewer all profited from this particular death (despite the fact that they may have had varying degrees of culpability for it).

Of course, many readers would not be particularly moved while imagining the suffering of fish. To reassert the connection between herring and humans that the narrator

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hints at within the text, Sebald includes a third image in this series that appears to be a photocopied etching of a group of men.

Figure 4: *The Rings of Saturn* © 1998 New Directions Cloth Edition (*RS*, 58-9)

Figure 5: *The Rings of Saturn* © 1998 New Directions Cloth Edition, Detail (*RS*, 58)
Two men (in the bottom right of the picture) wear what appear to be military caps. The stance of the man on the left is similar to the fisherman gloating over their surplus: he juts his chest forward and rests his right hand on his hip with authority. To his right, a man in a similar position regards something beyond the frame. At first glance, he seems to be holding a gun. (Closer inspection reveals that this illusion is created by the shadow of a third figure, standing behind the other two and whose shadow looks like an arm.) Since, in the prose surrounding the image, the narrator explains that nineteenth-century scientists tried to use the “glowing of the lifeless herring” to illuminate cities, the incongruous line drawing of a military occupation seems out of context. It only begins to make sense when read retroactively—that is to say, in conjunction with a caption-less, photograph of a dreary landscape that appears on the following two pages.

The fourth image in the series is of a forest filled with tarp-covered masses.
Since the dark areas of the image are overly saturated (apparently the result of the picture being photocopied), it is difficult to ascertain what lies beneath the tarps. In their number and anonymity, the shapes beneath the tarps create a visual echo of the herring depicted in the first image in the series. Given that it is (almost) possible to identify human legs in the foreground of the picture, the scene seems to be the outcome of a military action like that depicted in the etching. Yet the exact location of the scene presented in the photograph remains unclear. Much as Sebald has his narrator describe the times and locations that he remembers as expanding and contracting, he allows the subject of this image to remain timeless and ungrounded. Yet he does offer the reader one way to interpret the photograph—in conjunction with the final image of this series.
The fifth image is of a newspaper article describing Major George Wyndham Le Strange’s response to liberating the camp at Belsen.

but immediately after VE-Day returned home from Germany to manage his great uncle's estates in Suffolk, a task he had fulfilled in exemplary manner, at least until the mid-Fifties, as I knew from other sources. It was at that time too that Le Strange took on the housekeeper to whom he eventually left his entire fortune: his estates in Suffolk as well as property in the centre of Birmingham, estimated at several million pounds. According to the newspaper report, Le Strange employed this housekeeper, a simple young woman from Belsey by the name of Florence Barnes, on the explicit condition that she take the meals she prepared together with him, but in absolute silence. Mrs Barnes told the newspaper herself that she abided by this arrangement, once made, even when her employer's way of life became increasingly odd. Though Mrs Barnes gave only the most reciscent of responses to the reporter's enquiries, my own subsequent investigations revealed that in the late Fifties Le Strange discharged his household stuff and his labourers, gardeners and administrators one after another, that thenceforth he lived alone in the great stone house with the silent cook from Belsey, and that as a result the whole estate, with its gardens and park, became overgrown and neglected, while scrub and undergrowth encroached on the fallow fields. Apart from comments that touched upon these matters of fact, stories concerning the Major himself were in circulation in the villages that bordered on his domain, stories to which one can lend only a limited credence. They drew, I imagine, on the little that reached the outside world over the years, rumours from the depths of the estate that occupied the people who lived in the immediate vicinity. Thus in a Henstead house, for example, I

Figure 7: *The Rings of Saturn* © 1998 New Directions Cloth Edition (*RS*, 62-3)

While the *Eastern Daily Press* is a real publication, this clipping was never published in the paper.35 The author’s decision to include an image of a fabricated news article therefore serves less a documentary function than it does as a kind of signpost, directing the reader to project a certain reading onto the images in the series that came before it (a reading that is itself guided by a news article that is actually fiction). The heap of bodies beneath the tarps, it suggests, represents a sight such as that which Le Strange would have witnessed at Belsen.

35 Daub, “Donner a Voir” 322.
Lise Patt also considers these images as representing a series; however, she only includes the first four images detailed above in her group. In Patt’s reading, these images in conjunction with the surrounding text enable Sebald to “move from a practitioner writing a language of trauma to an artist working in the (refigured) idiom of post-traumatic ‘effects.’” Patt goes on to discuss how Sebald’s use of these images relates to representational strategies of late-twentieth-century photography. This chapter is also interested in the effects of Sebald’s combination of word and image, however it does so to a different end. By suggesting that the image in the fourth image represents a sight such as that which Le Strange would have witnessed at Belsen (and reminding the reader that such a vision paralyzed this character), Sebald uses The Rings of Saturn to raise a critical question: What is it about assuming such a perspective, particularly in the role of a liberator, that might render the encounter so paralyzing? The punishment that Le Strange inflicts upon himself—silence, seclusion, and (possibly) suicide—does not seem commensurate with recognizing the horror of which other human beings are capable. Perhaps, returning to Hirsch’s argument, Le Strange became paralyzed by his realization that, although he liberated the camps, he assumed the “look” of the perpetrators as he made real (or mental) photographs of the scene. In a text in which temporal and spatial blurrings disallow assuming a backward glance, Le Strange seems unable to look away from what he witnessed, even long after he has left the scene of the crime.

If the perspective of the liberator (and survivor) can be this disorienting, how might anyone confront the violence of the past without succumbing to some form of paralysis? What, if any, forms of representation are appropriate to convey such

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36 Patt, “Introduction” 56-60.
representation-defying horrors as the Holocaust to subsequent generations? An unnerving answer to this question comes in the form of another image—that of the sinking Eccles Church Tower discussed earlier. Just after Sebald has his narrator claim that, prior to 1890, “what was known as Eccles Church Tower still stood on Dunwich beach,” he includes this image of the tower in the book on the left-hand side of a double page spread (an image of a crumbling church on the Dunwich cliffs is on the facing page):

Figure 8: *The Rings of Saturn* © 1998 New Directions Cloth Edition (RS, 156-7)

Through his narrator’s use of language, Sebald gives the reader reason to be skeptical that this tower “stood on Dunwich beach.” Why, then, provide visual evidence to back up an erroneous assertion? A possible answer is related to the provenance of this particular image. Sebald has said that he found many of the black and white images that he included
in his work in “shops in the seaside towns of East Anglia.”

This photograph is prominently featured in the only guidebook that is exclusively devoted to Dunwich, Jean and Stuart Bacon’s Dunwich Suffolk. A new edition of this book had just been released in 1988, just as Sebald began researching The Rings of Saturn. Given that Dunwich Suffolk was prominently displayed in Southwold’s High Street bookstore in 2008, it is likely to have been available when Sebald was visiting the area. While it cannot be said that the Bacon’s guide was Sebald’s only possible source for this image, it is highly probable that Sebald consulted this book. Whether or not this is the case, Dunwich Suffolk is interesting in its own right because this book also suggests that the Eccles tower was located in Dunwich.

In this guidebook, the same image of the Eccles tower that Sebald presents in The Rings of Saturn appears at the end of a chapter called “Dunwich Bells,” and just before a chapter called “The Death of a City.” Neither of these chapters mentions the town of Eccles. In fact, given that the caption beneath the picture reads: “Eccles Church Tower on the beach, circa 1893” (emphasis added), it would be perfectly natural for a hasty reader to assume that “the beach” refers to the beach in Dunwich. For the Bacons, who were locals, this implication would have been inadvertent—a function of their book’s layout rather than an intentional attempt to send readers on a detour. Yet for those unfamiliar with local Suffolk geography, the guidebook proves as misleading as a post-modern work of prose-fiction. Sebald’s presentation of false information about the location of the Eccles Church Tower within the narrative therefore serves as a reminder of how readily

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37 Sebald, qtd. in Atlas, “W. G. Sebald: A Profile” 278.
the unknowing reader believes what is written (and that allegedly historical books can be inaccurate maps to time and space).

Against this seemingly documentary (but ultimately deceptive) image, Sebald offers another way to consider what is unknowable about the past. He populates *The Rings of Saturn* with several images of empty beaches and other unpopulated stretches of land. The picture below provides a case in point.

![Figure 9: The Rings of Saturn © 1998 New Directions Cloth Edition (RS 154-5)](image)

This photograph appears immediately after the narrator describes Dunwich as being “so far in the distance as to be quite beyond my reach” (*RS*, 154). This suggests that someone walking south from Lowenstoft towards Dunwich created the photograph. Although the geography depicted seems to be that of the eastern coast of England, the photograph
could have been made at multiple points along the coast. Furthermore, although the sea appears on the left side of the picture (suggesting that it was made by someone walking south), the negative could have been reversed. Once again, the image itself does not provide a particularly reliable form of documentation. The very fact that it appears in Sebald’s book framed, as it were, by quasi-fictional prose provides another reminder that it has been cropped and, as such, produced by an artist.

In fact, the language immediately framing this picture is couched in particularly speculative terms. Just beneath the picture, Sebald has his narrator state: “It was as if I had been walking for hours before the tiled roofs of houses and the crest of a wooded hill gradually became defined…” It is only “as if” the narrator had been “walking for hours.” Given that the “crest of a wooded hill” only “gradually became defined” its contours seem to be in flux. Again, Sebald defines a time and space by what it does not contain—that is to say, in terms of what critic John Sears describes as an “ekphrastic indifference,” or recognition of the impossibility of using language to represent the visual. By demarcating a boundary between what readers can and cannot know via the textual encounter, Sebald projects lines onto the “map” of associations inspired by the text. Such lines can be reassuring in that they suggest that it might be possible to control (or at least impose an imaginary order on) the chaos of associative memory. *The Rings of Saturn* is, in fact, filled with such grids. These grids appear on the window on the book’s second page, on a map of Orfordness, on aerial photographs of fields, and on a picture of a Chinese quail inside a cage at Somerleyton. When these grids appear graphically, they

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represent a desire to control the landscape and to freeze time by arresting it a singular image. Grids serve a similar function when they are evoked through verbal descriptions. As Sebald’s narrator explains that the radar that was developed at Bawdsey Manor (not far from Dunwich) “now spreads its invisible net through the entire airspace,” he allows the reader to imagine an unseen grid hovering over the landscape and protecting those within it from bombing raids. While the grids in The Rings of Saturn do not protect Sebald’s reader from the memory of violence, their function can be one of distraction—that is to say, by presenting the reader with a series of puzzles, they offer the seductive possibility that such puzzles might be solved. In The Rings of Saturn this can be consoling because it seems to provide a way around focusing on the unimaginable suffering to which the book constantly alludes.

VIII. “land now being lost for ever”: Towards an Ethics of Reading

Sebald makes it clear that becoming captivated by literary puzzles can be dangerous. As Major George Wyndham Le Strange and Frederick Farrar die solitary deaths (possibly at their own hand) after retreating into English gardens, Michael Parkinson and Janine Dakyns, two scholars presented in the novel, do not fare much better. Michael, an unmarried lecturer in Romance languages in his forties, dies “in his bed, lying on his side and already quite rigid, his face curiously mottled with red blotches, a verdict to which [the narrator] added the words, in the deep and dark hours of the night” (RS, 6). Janine, an unmarried scholar of the nineteenth-century novel, shares an

39 For more on Sebald’s use of grids in The Rings of Saturn, see Christina Kraenzle, “Picturing Place: Travel, Photography, and Imaginative Geography in W.G. Sebald’s Rings of Saturn,” Searching for Sebald 138.
“ingenuous, almost childlike friendship” with Michael, and dies shortly thereafter as a result of succumbing “to a disease that swiftly consumed her body” (*RS*, 7). While the narrator does not explicitly call these deaths suicides, his assertion that both died of “unknown” causes at an early age suggests that they might be.

What precipitated these untimely deaths? Sebald’s narrator describes Michael Parkinson as a peripatetic scholar who navigates mental associations prompted by literary encounters by exploring the countryside. Michael, the narrator explains, was particularly interested in the twentieth-century Swiss poet Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz. Ramuz, much like Sebald, is known for using descriptions of quotidian objects to allude to large-scale disasters in prose without a plot. One Ramuz scholar, Denis de Rougemont, has described his texts as “prose poems, epic descriptions. His books have no plots, or at least the plots are reduced to the most elementary simplicity.”

For him, these texts represent an attempt to “translate the incarnation of the catastrophe into the concrete details of everyday life”—a description that could very well be applied to Sebald’s own project. In *The Rings of Saturn*, following the trail of Ramuz appears to have led Michael Parkinson to contemplate acts so violent, that the horror they inspired in him proved impossible to endure.

Sebald’s narrator describes Janine Dakyns as following an equally disorienting path through the “paper landscape” of her notes on the nineteenth-century novel and on Flaubert’s private writings. As we have seen, Janine remaps Flaubert’s “fears” in geological terms. In her opinion, Flaubert was terrified “that he was sinking into the

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sand,” felt that “every speck of dust weighed as heavy as the Atlas mountains,” and found little protection from the “relentless spread of stupidity which he believed had already invaded his own head” (RS, 7). Much as Flaubert worried that he was “sinking into the sand” while sitting on his couch, Janine seems to have disappeared into an unstable mental terrain prompted by her studies and by the loss of her friend. The dismal fate of these scholars puts Sebald’s reader in a precarious position as he navigates *The Rings of Saturn*.

Sebald does, however, present one figure whose retreat into rural England (and gathering of stories about violence) does not cause paralysis: William Hazel, allegedly the gardener at Somerleyton Hall. Hazel, according to the narrator, described wartime planes taking off from English fields as follows:

Every evening I watched the bomber squadrons heading out over Somerleyton, and night after night, before I went to sleep, I pictured in my mind's eye the German cities going up in flames, the firestorms setting the heavens alight, and the survivors rooting about in the ruins. One day when Lord Somerleyton was helping me prune the vines in this greenhouse, for something to do, said Hazel, he explained the Allied carpet-bombing strategy to me, and some time later he brought me a big relief map of Germany [....] In that way I got to know the whole country by heart; you might even say it was burnt into me. At all events, ever since then I have tried to find out everything I could that was in any way connected with the war in the air. (RS, 38-9)
These bomber squadrons are like the plane formations that roar over Pointz Hall at the conclusion of Woolf’s *Between the Acts*. Rather than cutting the word “opportunity” in two, their memory inspires Hazel to imagine the plight of Germans “rooting about in the ruins.”

Hazel is, in certain ways, a figure for Sebald himself. As Hazel receives his inspiration in a greenhouse, Sebald composed in a “potting shed.” Furthermore, Hazel’s speech reads as a dress rehearsal for some lectures that Sebald delivered in Zürich in 1997, just two years after publishing *Die Ringe des Saturn* in German, called “Air War and Literature.” Hazel learns all that he can “that was in any way connected with the war in the air.” He studies German so that he, like Sebald, “could read what the Germans themselves had said about the bombings and their lives in the ruined cities.” He even interviews German citizens about their wartime experiences. Furthermore, as Hazel discovers that it is “as if everything had been erased” from the minds of the witnesses, he freely acknowledges the limitations of his “postmemory.” Yet he does not give up his search for enlightenment as he allows the “strange letters” and “symbolic pictures” that he sees on a map of Germany to become “burnt into” his mind. In his essay on Peter Weiss, Sebald quotes Nietzsche as explaining “there is nothing more terrible and mysterious in the whole prehistory of mankind than our mnemonic technique. We burn something into the mind so that it will remain in the memory only what still hurts will be retained” (*ND*, 183-4). In *The Rings of Saturn*, it is William Hazel who most blatantly opts for this brand of punishment.

Yet Sebald seems as dubious about Hazel’s approach to cultural memory as he is of his own. Much as Hazel tries to collect the stories of German victims of bombing raids
who cannot (or will not) speak for themselves, Sebald creates a narrator who incorporates Hazel’s story—along with the published, spoken, or merely imagined stories of others—into his narrative. We might think of each storyteller represented in (and through) *The Rings of Saturn* as occupying a position inside a series of concentric rings. The innermost ring contains those who have experienced physical pain directly (victims of bombing raids). The subsequent ring holds Hazel, as he tries “to find out everything [he] could” about these victims. The following ring houses Sebald’s narrator, as he repeats Hazel’s story. The next contains Sebald, as he remaps his narrator’s tale within the text. The outermost ring holds the reader, as he interprets *The Rings of Saturn*. (The reader of this chapter hovers somewhere in the surrounding ether.) The boundary between each “ring” becomes nebulous. For example, by failing to use quotation marks to set this narrator’s reproduction of conversations and portions of published texts apart from the rest of his speech, Sebald suggests that this narrator at times confuses his voice with those of others. This confusion becomes more a more pressing concern as Sebald implicates his reader in this process.

If we are to consider the “rings” as mapping a kind of spiritual space, then they chart a region that is neither heaven nor hell, nor Earth as we know it—a space that we might think of as forming a dangerous purgatory. (We might keep in mind that the real rings of Saturn are destroyed bits of moon that are kept in place by gravity.) The text places its readers in a similar kind of orbit. As we have seen, Sebald opens the book with a description and a photograph of a windowpane covered with mesh. At the end of the book, Sebald has his narrator suggest a meaning of his presenting a landscape veiled in this manner. In the Holland of Sir Thomas Browne’s time, the narrator explains,
it was customary, in a home where there had been a death, to drape black mourning ribbons over all the mirrors and all canvases depicting landscapes or people or the fruits of the field, 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. (RS, 296)

If all the grids in *The Rings of Saturn* (whether they take the form of verbal or visual representations) are abstract representations of mourning veils, this reader assumes the position of the bodiless soul hovering over the text and straining to understand landscapes “now being lost for ever.” These landscapes are not specific to Norfolk or Suffolk (although they can be). Instead they can also be thought of as representing a far broader landscape of cultural memory. In this context, the reader has three choices: to look away, to confront the violence of the past (whatever this may entail), or move forward on his “final journey” (like the various characters in the book who seem to take their own lives). That said, the logic of even these three assumptions is based on unstable ground: Sebald’s narrator admits that he can no longer can “find” the passage of the *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* that grounds his knowledge about Dutch mourning customs. Once again, Sebald leads his reader into yet another form of purgatory—this time related to how to approach his own book.

For Sebald, however, the sensation of being in purgatory is critical for literary production: “Because there is something to be remembered,” Sebald writes in an essay on Peter Weiss, the writer “embarks on his literary work and enters purgatory.” Purgatory is the proverbial “potting shed”—the place where the poet finds himself subject to physical pain and mental destabilization. As Sebald writes:
On the threshold stands that angel who also incises the letter “P,” for *peccatum*, on Dante’s brow with the point of his sword, in token of the consciousness of sin. The task here imposed on the person who is to be disciplined, as the way to an understanding of his true condition, is to elicit the significance of the letter carved in the skin by patient endurance of the pain—an archaic ordeal. (*ND*, 183)

The “archaic ordeal” provides certainty—not that others have sinned or suffered—but rather that the poet himself is a sinner and will be made to patiently endure a form of suffering. For the reader who takes this message seriously, *The Rings of Saturn* is the sword that incises a capital “P.” Here, Sebald (like Woolf) uses descriptions of nature and landscape to reflect indirectly on the “experiences exceeding what is tolerable” (*NH*, 79). Yet, here Sebald also takes Woolf’s charge to discuss “all lit.[...] in connection with a real little incongruous living humour” a step further as he directs his reader to imagine his own role in producing (or benefiting from) the suffering of distant others.\(^{41}\) Although *The Rings of Saturn* is a playful text filled with engaging anecdotes, beguiling images, and endless riddles, its humor is so engulfed by scenes of horror, as to be nearly unrecognizable. Instead, *The Rings of Saturn* presents the remembered English landscape as a porous terrain that traps the journeyman in dangerous, and sometimes fatal, pockets of introspection. Like this somewhat imaginary geological landscape, the paper landscape of the text proves to be an equally unstable terrain. For Sebald, writing is “the résumé of a terrible apprenticeship, is a dubious business, merely more grist to the mill. And yet, considering the superior force of objectivity, it is even less defensible to refrain from

\(^{41}\) Virginia Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 3, 135.
writing than to go on with it, however senseless it may seem” (NH, 155). If writing *about* such a work represents an equally “terrible apprenticeship,” it, too, represents one in which it becomes indefensible to stop working, even (and especially) at those moments in which this endeavor seems the most “senseless.”
Kazuo Ishiguro also imagines the English countryside as a nexus of past and future tragedies. In *Never Let Me Go* (2005), he presents Norfolk, along with other portions of England, through the memories of Kathy H., a cloned human being who has been created so that her body can provide organs and other parts for non-cloned “normals.” In the narrative present, Kathy has not yet begun to “donate” her organs. Instead, she works as a “carer,” or a companion who calms clones after surgery. As Kathy recounts her past to a fellow “carer” like herself (and, by extension, to Ishiguro’s reader),¹ she uses descriptions of landscape to explore terrors about the future, conflicted memories of childhood relationships, and a deep-seated guilt about outliving most of her friends. As Kathy fantasizes about English space, she initially imagines that Norfolk might be a repository for lost people and objects—a space in which she imagines that she will never have to let go of those that she loves. Much as Woolf associated driving on paved roads with a “straightened” world in which “haste” replaces “charm” (and linked walking on “untidy” country lanes with the unpredictable workings of associative memory), Kathy imagines that the “dark byways of the country” might inspire a

¹ For more on how Ishiguro positions his reader as his novel’s ultimate “carer” (and what this might have to do with the welfare state) see Bruce Robbins, “Cruelty is Bad: Banality and Proximity in *Never Let Me Go,*” *Novel* 43:1 (2007) 289-304. Here, Robbins argues that Ishiguro “assumes […] that at some point we will ask, defensively: who does want to contemplate the Big Picture? Who can afford to?” and posits that Ishiguro’s “scenes of intimate cruelty […] register, if only partially and distortedly, the pressures of moral responsibility to the long-term and the far away.”
comforting form of retrospection (E, III, 440). According to Kathy, such roads “existed just for the likes of us [clones], while the big glittering motorways with their huge signs and super cafés were for everyone else” (N, 249). As she describes other country settings, including a boarding school, a dilapidated farm, and a flooded marsh, Kathy’s stories about the landscape help her to express and, more often, to suppress the physical and emotional pain associated with her social position. Kathy often views this landscape through a car windscreen. This perspective both flattens the landscape, and, by virtue of the car’s movement, situates it in relation to the fourth dimension of time. The first portion of this chapter argues that Ishiguro presents Kathy’s identification with a fleeting and two-dimensional version of the remembered English landscape contributes to a sinister form of self-deception.

The second portion of this chapter argues that the two-dimensionality of Kathy’s vision affects her choice of words, syntax, and narrative mode. This is evident through Kathy’s reliance on euphemisms. “Donors” have not chosen to give up their organs. ‘Guardians’ do not protect young clones from their violent fate. “Carers” distract their peers from protesting their circumstances. “Completing,” or dying, involves losing one’s body parts, or becoming incomplete. Since these words are the tools by which Kathy convinces her peers (and herself) that sacrificing their organs is what they are “supposed” to do, Kathy’s word choice is more than ill advised. It renders her actively complicit in a crime against humanity (as well as a victim of that crime). Since the use of euphemisms is common among victims of trauma, readers might not be inclined to condemn Kathy for her word choice alone. Indeed, when Sebald analyzed eyewitness reports of fire-bombing, he noted how often ordinary words and clichés were used often to “cover up
and neutralize” the effects of violence: “The apparent unimpaired ability—shown in most of the eyewitness reports—of everyday language to go on functioning as usual,” Sebald writes, “raises doubts of the authenticity of the experiences they record.”\(^2\) However, Ishiguro also exposed the dangers of Kathy’s choice of narrative mode. As Kathy tells her story to a fellow “carer,” she makes her fearful childhood sound like a typical coming-of-age story—one in which she learns to overcome hardships at an English boarding school and then applies these lessons to adult life. Indeed, Kathy models much of life story on the English school story, a genre popularized in 1857 by Thomas Hughes’ \(\textit{Tom Brown’s Schooldays}\).\(^3\) English school stories are not the a “bland, sneaky-clean idiom” that they may seem.\(^4\) \(\textit{Tom Brown’s Schooldays}\), for example, uses suggestive prose to advocate blind submission to authority, militant patriotism, and the preservation of a rigid social hierarchy. Such values are clearly inimical to Kathy, a cloned being, who has been created to provide spare parts for a society that excludes her. If Kathy’s proclivity towards euphemism and pastiche provides indication of Ishiguro’s feelings about narrative in the current era, \textit{Never Let Me Go} implies that literature, in its present state can be deceptively comforting and quite deadly.

Given that Ishiguro offers this insight via a work of fiction, a complete dismissal of literature (and of storytelling more generally) is not the ultimate point of his novel. In \textit{Never Let Me Go}, Ishiguro relies on situational irony and a poetics of restraint to create a


\(^3\) Thomas Hughes, \textit{Tom Brown’s Schooldays}. (1857; New York: Grosset and Dunlap, undated edition).

“doubly voiced discourse” that encourages readers to question Kathy’s assumptions and to become active agents in producing the meaning of his text. On a formal level, *Never Let Me Go* is less experimental than *Mrs. Dalloway, Between the Acts* or *The Rings of Saturn*. Ishiguro does not dally with free indirect discourse, interrupt his prose with play scripts, or deconstruct the division between actor and audience (as Woolf does). Nor does he, like Sebald, present fictional testimonies and documents as fact, introduce misleading materials into his text, or confuse the author with the narrator (as Sebald does). Instead, *Never Let Me Go* is a work of speculative fiction in the tradition of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* or P. D. James’ *Children of Men*. Here, Ishiguro encourages his readers to use Kathy’s self-deception as an impetus to reflect on their own habits of evasion. The issues that this novel raises obliquely—such as the ethics of cloning humans for spare parts or the relationship between one’s humanity and the ability to produce art—while interesting, do not give this novel its emotional force. Instead, *Never Let Me Go* has value both as it functions as allegory, and as it simultaneously resists this kind of allegorical reading.

The third portion of this chapter presents three possible readings of this text. In the first, the notion that Kathy was raised to supply a population who “preferred to believe these organs appeared from nowhere, or at most that they grew in a kind of vacuum,” allows the novel to be read as a plea to reconsider the treatment of animals, especially those raised for food. In the second, Kathy’s comparison of the cloned body to

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as a “rubbish”-filled “territory” enables her to be understood as a figure for a late twentieth century landscape narrating its own environmental crisis (a crisis furthered by the social and environmental impact of motorways and cars). In the third, Kathy’s description of her body as a “territory,” combined with her repurposing of the school story to describe her past, allows her to be interpreted as being a figure for an English nation relying on myths related to its rural past as it tries to function in an increasingly globalized economy. The ability of Ishiguro’s novel to evoke a range of interpretations, no matter how far-fetched they may seem, and to simultaneously resist them is integral to the author’s project. Like Woolf and Sebald, Ishiguro is wary of narrative forms that offer conciliatory, but predetermined, readings of physical, psychological or social space. His novel does not really provide a lens through which to view the English landscape. Instead, it provokes readers to take distant perspectives on how they navigate, and get lost in, the various landscapes that they inhabit, whether they happen to be located within England or further abroad.

I. “‘Maybe that’s it! I’ve found it! This actually is Hailsham!’”: The “Impossible” Rural Landscapes of Never Let Me Go

In the front of Never Let Me Go, Ishiguro describes the novel’s setting as “England, 1990s.” Within the narrative, he has Kathy describe landscapes that are similar to those of England at the end of the twentieth century. Yet Ishiguro quickly makes it clear that his narrator inhabits an alternate kind of time-space. In her “England, 1990s,”
human beings have been cloned for decades. Ishiguro maps a kind of alternate universe (one grounded, so to speak, in England of the 1990’s yet in which science has evolved farther than it had in England of the first decade of the twenty-first century). As a result, the layout physical places that his narrator describes are less important than how they become remapped in the memories of his fictional characters. Some of Ishiguro’s early critics attributed his method of treating the English landscape as an almost mythological construct to his “foreign” status. Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki in 1954 and moved to England in 1960 when his father accepted a job in the North Sea oil industry. Although Ishiguro’s background may have enriched his perspective, it is less relevant to argue about whether he should be considered an “English” or “Japanese” writer than to think of him as a “hybrid writer” according to the definition of Kumkum Sangari: one who is “already open to two worlds and is constructed within the national and international.”

Furthermore, Ishiguro crafts his novels with a similarly “hybrid” reader in mind—a


figure who many or many not have first-hand exposure to the landscapes that he describes, but who is certainly familiar with how they have been represented in British fiction (whether read in English or in translation). Ishiguro is quite conscious of the fact that his own fiction will be read in many languages. Indeed, he has even stated that the knowledge that his work will be translated affects the formal structure of his writing. As he composes his novels, Ishiguro concentrates on the “shape, structure, and vision” of the overall text, rather than on individual “sentences” and “phrases” (units that would eventually become translated). Critic Rebecca Walkowitz demonstrates how Ishiguro's novels offer an opportunity to consider the relationship between “the ontology and the phenomenology of world literature.” The language that Ishiguro uses does have a familiar, yet strangely distant, quality to it. The distant familiarity of the words that Ishiguro uses is much like the distant familiarity of the landscapes that he uses this language to describe.

This linguistic effect is similar to that produced by Sebald who, as we have seen, relies on an antiquated style of German prose to compound the Bernhardian feeling of “remove” in his combination of prose and fiction. However, Ishiguro has publicly distanced himself from the German-born writer. Despite the fact that Ishiguro was a student in the Creative Writing program at the University of East Anglia while Sebald was teaching comparative literature there, Ishiguro claims that he is not influenced by Sebald’s work:

Of course I've read Sebald, and I met him a few times before he died. But I can't say I was influenced by him. I read him for the first time only a few years ago. He'd been teaching in Britain for many many years, but we only
noticed his books several years ago, when The Emigrants was translated [in 1996]. Then everyone was interested. And then in 2001, tragically, he died in that car accident. I had been to the University of East Anglia where he taught, and nobody noticed him at the time. They were trying so hard to create this culture at UEA, with so many exciting writers, and probably the best writer to come out of the university had been teaching there quietly as a professor of comparative literature. I think that's very funny.9

Putting aside the issue of why this idea might strike Ishiguro as “funny,” the more serious question is why two writers working in roughly the same period and geographical context would make similar choices, particularly as they consider how representations of the rural English landscape might be used to explore the role of literature in preserving (and eroding) cultural memory. In the same interview, Ishiguro states: “I remain fascinated by memory. What I would like to tackle next is how a whole society or nation remembers or forgets. When is it healthy to remember, and when is it healthy to forget?” In Never Let Me Go, as in The Rings of Saturn, Ishiguro uses a narrator’s reading (and misreading) of the English countryside to expose violence. Yet there is an important difference in the perspective that each writer takes on rural England. In The Rings of Saturn, Sebald’s narrator recalls Norfolk and Suffolk as filled with sinkholes that pull external objects, his body, and his thoughts beneath the tranquil surface of daily life. Recording these recollections allows the narrator to obliquely consider recent genocides. In Never Let Me Go, Ishiguro’s narrator describes visually and emotionally flattened images of rural

England to distract her peers from the fact that they are being routinely slaughtered _en masse_. In so doing, she motivates them to stay alive, or above ground, slightly longer. Whether a narrator’s approach to storytelling leads to the unearthing of memory (as in Sebald) or the burying of awareness (as in Ishiguro), both writers figure it as a precarious endeavor. Ishiguro has used descriptions of landscape to explore questions related to English national identity before. In _The Remains of the Day_ (1988), an English butler drives through the West County in 1956 (the year of the Suez Crisis). As this figure contemplates what constitutes “dignity” and “greatness” in the English landscape, he reconsiders his relationship with his former employer, an influential Nazi appeaser. For this butler, the English manor house figures as a prominent object of nostalgia due to its associations with continuity with English traditions and its ability to promote an understanding identity based on self-sacrifice, nostalgia for values associated with country life, and the preservation of class hierarchies. In writing _The Remains of the Day_, Ishiguro has said, he hoped to “…rework a particular myth about a certain kind of mythical England… an England with sleepy, beautiful villages with very polite people and butlers… taking tea on the lawn…” For him, although such myths may seem like “harmless nostalgia for a time that didn’t exist,” such “mythical” landscapes were, as Ishiguro was aware, used as a “political tool” and “a way of bashing anybody who tries to spoil this ‘Garden of Eden.’”^{10} In _Never Let Me Go_, Ishiguro achieves a similar effect by producing a narrative in which the English boarding school takes the place of the manor

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house as the primary object of his narrator’s nostalgia. The school story, in turn, replaces the estate novel, as the primary narrative model. Yet there is an important difference between the settings of these two novels. In *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro explores English national identity in 1956, the year of the Suez crisis and the symbolic “remains of the day” of the empire. In *Never Let Me Go*, he considers this topic long after the sun has set on the empire. Although myths related to England’s past still have political currency in the 1990s (as evidenced by John Major’s 1993 anti-European speech), this currency has been devalued. Ishiguro represents this shift in perception is by transforming a landscape once associated with “greatness” into one associated with “impossibility.”

As a result, Ishiguro seems to feel that he must work hard to give his readers reason to “care” about the fate of his cloned narrator (or, of the “impossible” landscapes that she remembers). One way that he humanizes this fictional figure is by emphasizing her desire to inhabit more intimate forms of space. Kathy spends most of her adult life sitting in settings whose repeated and interchangeable features call to mind her own status as a copy—interchangeable roadside service stations (*N*, 43, 114, 206, 250); bleak “recovery centers” (*N*, 2, 14-5, 80, 99, 128, 212, 277), or under skies “big and grey and never changing mile after mile” (*N*, 63, 206, 275, 284-5). Anthropologist Mark Augé coined the term “non-space” to describe mass-produced buildings (fast-food restaurants, gas stations), modes of circulation (freeways, train routes), places of consumption (supermarkets, malls), and modes of communication (airwaves, the internet). To imagine herself outside these “non-places,” Kathy retreats into imaginary mental

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“nooks.” Kathy explains that she learned to creatively re-envision space when she was a child at Hailsham, the institution for cloned children where she was raised. At Hailsham, Kathy’s favorite hiding places had been “cupboards, nooks, bushes, hedges”—confined areas into which an adult could not fit. Physical retreat allowed Kathy to hide from adults. It also shielded her from realities that she associated with the adult world. As an adult, Kathy admits that some of her childhood hiding places were purely imaginary: “Maybe all of us at Hailsham had little secrets like that—little private nooks created out of thin air where we could go off alone with our fears and longings” (N, 67-8). Kathy’s childhood habit of inventing imaginary spaces continues into her adult life. As Kathy drives across England while working as a “carer,” she idealizes two landscapes: the campus of Hailsham and a cluster of dilapidated farm buildings that she calls the “Cottages.” The memory of each landscape functions as a different kind of “nook” for the adult Kathy. Hailsham represents a time and space in which she felt protected from immediate physical harm and had been somewhat shielded from the knowledge of her future as a “donor.” The “Cottages” represent a time and space in which Kathy used retreating into novels (and the literary landscapes that they promise) as a way to avoid thinking about the future.

As Kathy drives across England, she is always on the lookout for signs of Hailsham:

Driving around the country now, I still see things that will remind me of Hailsham. I might pass the corner of a misty field, or see part of a large house in the distance as I come down the side of a valley, even a particular arrangement of poplar trees up on a hillside, and I’ll think: ‘Maybe that’s
it! I’ve found it! This actually is Hailsham!’ Then I see it’s impossible and
I go on driving. (N, 5, original emphasis)

Returning to Hailsham is “impossible,” neither because the campus is located in a remote
setting nor because its buildings have been destroyed (this would make finding Hailsham
difficult, but not “impossible”). Instead, returning to such a setting is “impossible”
because “going there”—to borrow a colloquial expression—requires confronting feelings
of loss, absence, and fear. Kathy’s quest for Hailsham is not exactly a search to reclaim
a state of innocence. Instead, it is a quest to understand when and where this innocence
became lost.

Kathy’s first step in understanding how she arrived at her current situation
requires recognizing that she has allowed herself to “hail” a space that she knows is a
“sham.” As an adult, Kathy understands that Hailsham’s mission has always been to raise
clones who would passively accept their fate as organ “donors” without engaging in any
form of protest. Yet Kathy still wants to believe that this campus provided a setting that
was far removed from the violence of her adult reality. As Kathy describes Hailsham to a
fellow clone, she emphasizes the school’s physical isolation as a means of distinguishing
its pastoral setting from the less idyllic context in which she narrates her story. Of
Hailsham, she explains:

Days could sometimes go by without us seeing a vehicle coming down
that narrow road, and the ones that did were usually vans or lorries
bringing supplies, gardeners or workmen. A car was a rarity, and the sight

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12 This description of nostalgia comes from an article about post-memory by
Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer. For more on “the creativity of reconstruction,” see
of one in the distance was sometimes enough to cause bedlam during a class. (N, 31)

At Hailsham, “bedlam” ensues because “students” fear that “Outside, outside there, they sell everything. Students believe that their hands and feet will be chopped off if they go into the woods surrounding campus and even rightly associate the sight of cars with an unpleasant aspect of the future (N, 28). Much as Hailsham figures as a space in which clones remain protected from physical mutilation, it also figures as a space where they were protected from knowing about the future. Kathy seems grateful for this period of innocence. She is eerily calm as she describes meeting one of Hailsham’s directors in later life and learning that the Hailsham “guardians” had deliberately refrained from telling clones what would happen to them in the future:

…we were able to give you something, something which even now no one will ever take from you, and we were able to do that principally by sheltering you. Hailsham would not have been Hailsham if we hadn’t. Very well, sometimes that meant we kept things from you, lied to you. Yes, in many ways we fooled you. […] What should you have done, knowing what lay in store for each of you? You would have told us it was all pointless, and how could we have argued with you? (N, 245, original emphasis)

Woolf and Sebald describe physical landscapes that have lost their ability to provide shelter and create characters who harbor few illusions that stories about a rural past can provide a lasting form of solace. Ishiguro also describes a physical world that is superficially tranquil but incredibly dangerous. Yet his narrator still turns to narratives
about an idyllic past as a form of retreat. Ishiguro, however, makes it clear that this narrator’s habits of mind are a threat—not only to her, but also to all those exposed to her story (perhaps even his own readers). Indeed, rather than express rage at learning that the “guardians” intentionally “fooled” her, Kathy takes her former “guardian,” Miss Emily’s, question: “What would you have done?”—not as it was intended (What she would have done if she were a cloned child and knew what “lay in store”?), but rather as if it had been directed to her as if she were a “normal” human being (“What would you have done if you were me?”). Kathy is quite eager to adopt the role of being the guard, rather than the victim (the shelterer rather than the sheltered). Kathy self-consciously models how she acts as a “carer” on Hailsham “guardians”: “This was one thing we’d been told over and over,” she explains, “that after Hailsham there’d be no more guardians, so we’d have to look after each other. And by and large, I’d say Hailsham prepared us well on that score” (N, 107). Like her “guardians,” Kathy uses storytelling to distract the “donors” for whom she “cares” from their physical pain and earnestly believes that she is helping them as she does so. In describing her interaction with one “donor,” Kathy explains:

What he wanted was not just to hear about Hailsham, but to remember Hailsham, just like it was his own childhood. He knew he was close to completing and so that’s what he was doing: getting me to describe things to him, so they’d really sink in, so that maybe during those sleepless nights, with the drugs and the pain and the exhaustion, the line would blur between what were my memories and what were his. (N, 4-5, original emphasis)
Kathy is a gifted storyteller. Her tales are moving, suspenseful, and filled with salient detail. (Given that these stories comprise the entire narrative of *Never Let Me Go*, they entice Ishiguro’s readers as well as his characters.) Yet Ishiguro makes it plain that Kathy’s stories, like all memory, involve embellishment. In the passage quoted above, Kathy encourages the “donor” to “blur” the line between private memories and shared stories. In so doing, she quells his need to testify to his own suffering (something that may prevent him from protesting his horrific circumstances). Kathy justifies her role by imagining that the “donor” is an active agent in this exchange (he is “getting” Kathy to tell him stories) and brags that most of her patients fare better than others (“Their recovery times have been impressive, and hardly any of them have been classified as “agitated” even before the fourth donation”) (N, 3). Yet Kathy fails to recognize that her stories do not help these “donors” “recover.” Instead, they merely keep them calm enough to endure further (increasingly painful) surgeries. Kathy’s stories may keep “donors” alive for a bit longer than usual. However, their primary function is to help mediate her own anxieties related to repeated contact with the sick and dying. As such, they help her function as a “carer” for longer than most of her peers, thus postponing the date in which she becomes a “donor” herself. If Kathy’s “narrative medicine” can be said to have a significant impact on anyone’s longevity, it is on her own.

We can see how Kathy’s method of constructing narrative helps her manage extreme stress in the scene in which she remembers watching her close friend Ruth struggle with post-operative pain. In Kathy’s telling, Ruth has lost the ability to communicate. Kathy imagines that Ruth mitigates her pain by
willing her eyes to see right inside herself, so she could patrol and marshal
all the better the separate areas of pain in her body – the way, maybe, an
anxious carer might rush between three or four ailing donors in different
parts of the country. (N, 215)

In this scene, Kathy imagines that Ruth overwrites the topology of the countryside with
that of a territorialized human body. This creative remapping requires several steps. The
first involves distancing the mind from the body. Kathy imagines that Ruth wills her eyes
“to see right inside” herself. This allows Ruth to observe her body from a distant vantage
point, almost as if she were surveying a landscape from above. The second requires
learning to “patrol,” or guard, spaces that have been contaminated by disease. The third
involves finding a way to “marshal,” or channel, the energy created by this pain to fuel a
healing counter-narrative. While it is impossible for Kathy to know whether her friend
engages in such a process, it is clear that she does something similar herself as she copes
with mental duress.

Kathy explains that she developed a related method of using storytelling to handle
psychological pain at the “Cottages,” a dilapidated farm where she lived after leaving
Hailsham and before starting to work as a “carer.” Here, Kathy explains, clones eased
their transition to the adult world by immersing themselves in novels. Kathy and her
friends believed “that how well you were settling in at the Cottages—how well you were
coping was somehow reflected by how many books you'd read" (N, 112, original
emphasis). Kathy is nostalgic for this rural setting—a space in which she remembers
experiencing:
easy-going days drifting in and out of each other’s rooms, the languid way the afternoon would fold into evening then into night. I think of my pile of old paperbacks, their pages gone wobbly, like they’d once belonged to the sea. I think about how I read them, lying on my front in the grass on warm afternoons, my hair - which was growing long then - always falling across my vision. (N, 109)

The physical act of reading is not second nature for Kathy. It defines her concept of nature itself. Reading connects Kathy with an ocean that she, as a young adult, has never seen (books “once belonged to the sea”) and it ties her to the earth (Kathy lies “on [her] front in the grass”). She even imagines that the afternoon “fold[s]” into the night, like a page in a book. Much as reading makes Kathy feel connected to the elements, writing about books helps ground her in the realities of the adult world. Kathy explains that, shortly before leaving Hailsham, “students” chose an essay topic that might “absorb us properly for anything up to two years.” Such an assignment represents a “farewell gift from the guardians” because it provides them with a way to stay “afloat” in their “new surroundings” (N, 105). Although Kathy becomes too busy to read and to complete her essay, the memory of reading and the idea of writing function as another kind of “nook” into which Kathy retreats when she wants to avoid thinking about her adult reality. In the moments when Kathy becomes aware that she uses storytelling to numb her emotional pain, she reveals that she may be more sophisticated than she may seem.

How then, do Kathy’s stories work? As we have seen, Kathy imagines that thinking about her body as a kind of territory helps her friend Ruth manage physical pain. It should not come as a surprise, then, that spatial metaphors (and the language of
territory) dominate Kathy’s own discussion of painful topics. For example, Kathy explains that Hailsham “students” “knew just enough” about organ donation to become “wary of that whole territory.” A sentence later, she elaborates: “We hated the way our guardians, usually so on top of everything, became so awkward whenever we came near this territory” (N, 63). A dozen pages later, she asserts such spatial comparisons more strongly:

We must have absorbed quite a lot of information, because I remember, around that age, a marked change in the way we approached the whole territory surrounding the donations. Until then, as I’ve said, we’d done everything to avoid the subject; we’d backed off at the first sign we were entering that ground […] We still didn’t discuss the donations and all that went with them; we still found the whole area awkward enough. […] But now it was okay, almost required, every now and then, to make some jokey allusion to these things that lay in front of us. (N, 76, emphasis added)

While the word “territory” is often used to describe a field of knowledge, Kathy’s use of this word (and related spatial metaphors) serves a psychological function: it allows Kathy to use language to map a painful subject onto a discrete form of space. By “mapping” the source of her pain, Kathy seems to think that she might avoid confronting it directly.

Kathy’s treatment of Norfolk, a largely rural county in the east of England, illustrates how this process gets projected onto a specific physical landscape. Since Kathy could not leave Hailsham when she was a child, she learned about the counties of England by looking at outdated calendars. “After all these miles I’ve covered as a carer,”
Kathy explains, “the extent to which my idea of the various counties is still set by these images.” As an adult, Kathy looks for landscapes that conform to her memory of these pictures: “I’d be driving through Derbyshire, say, and catch myself looking for a particular village green with a mock-Tudor pub and a war memorial—and realize it’s the image Miss Emily showed us the first time I ever heard of Derbyshire” (N, 59). The “guardians” did not, however, have a picture of Norfolk to show their “students.” One “guardian” described Norfolk to the “students” as a “lost corner” (what Kathy claims is what her friends call Hailsham’s “lost and found”). This prompts Kathy and her friends to fantasize they “could always go and find” anything that they had lost by visiting this county (N, 61). Initially, Norfolk figures as a space of hope for Kathy—a setting in which (she imagines) everything lost might eventually be found.13 When Kathy is a young adult, this fantasy seems to come true. During a trip to a village on the Norfolk coast, Kathy discovers a copy of a cassette that she had lost as a child, Judy Bridgewater’s Songs After Dark. One song on the album, “Never Let Me Go,” has particular significance for the sterilized Kathy (she imagines that it is about a woman who could not have babies).

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13 Kathy’s quest for Norfolk evokes a scene in Julian Barnes’ England, England, which describes the creation of an England-themed amusement park that operates as an independent state. Here, a middle-aged female executive named Martha recalls assembling a jigsaw puzzle of the counties of England. When her father abandons her family, he takes the piece representing Nottinghamshire with him and Martha imagines that her father left to search for that county. As an adult, Martha comes to accept her abandonment by getting rid of the remaining jigsaw puzzle pieces one county at a time. Critic Dominic Head has interpreted Martha’s loss of faith in the puzzle, “with its bald certitude about the composition of England” as indicating a “haziness about origins” and as emphasizing “the novel’s point that the pursuit of unshakeable origins is entirely dubious.” Something similar might be said of Ishiguro’s treatment of Norfolk in Never Let Me Go. Julian Barnes, England, England (1998; New York: Vintage, 2000). Dominic Head, The Cambridge Guide to Modern British Fiction (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 120.
Although Kathy’s theory about Norfolk seems validated when she discovers a copy of the cassette in a charity shop, this cassette is not likely to be the same artifact that Kathy once lost. More likely, it is another copy made from the same master.

Such subtleties do not ruin Kathy’s Norfolk fantasy. Instead, this fantasy becomes destroyed after she and some friends fail to find Ruth’s genetic model during a trip to a seaside town. When the clones realize that a woman who resembles Ruth is not their friend’s model, they recognize that certain lost things can never be found—namely their connection to a genetic family and, by extension, their assurance that they are full members of the human race. Since the Norfolk trip represents a time in which these clones acted on hope only to have it dashed, it becomes a “guilty secret” that the clones “hardly talked about” as adults (N, 169).

Instead, the adult Kathy uses the phrase “the Norfolk effect” to refer to another moment in which she experienced another devastating realization: that clones never were allowed to defer “donating” their organs—even if they created a work of art so profound (or experienced a love so strong) that it became undeniable to “normals” that they had human souls (N, 170). However Kathy does not relinquish her Norfolk fantasy completely. At the end of the book, she describes a dream in which her friend Tommy, who has since died, comes back to life in a Norfolk field:

I was thinking about the rubbish, the flapping plastic in the branches, the shore-line of odd stuff caught along the fencing, and I half-closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I’d ever lost since my childhood had washed up, and I was now standing here in front of it, and if I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across
the field, and gradually get larger until I’d see it was Tommy, and he’d wave, maybe even call. The fantasy never got beyond that—I didn’t let it… (N, 263)

Kathy believes that she can manage her fantasy, yet she in far less control than she thinks. In general, her ability to marshal various forms of “territory” flounders when she recognizes that most of the spaces that she idealizes are actually polluted. In this passage, for example, “flapping plastic in the branches” echo the movement of Tommy’s arm. Kathy repeatedly associates the bodies of clones with garbage. Much as garbage is the physical trace of everything that is desired, consumed, and expelled from a society’s line of vision, Kathy’s references to loose garbage allow her to perhaps inadvertently express her irrepressible fears and uncanny thoughts.

When Ernst Jentsch originally defined the “uncanny,” he attributed its success on its ability to “leave the reader in uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton and to do it in such a way that his attention is not focused directly upon his uncertainty, so that he may not be led to go into the matter and clear it up immediately.”14 This definition provides insight into Kathy’s dream of Norfolk, and her imagination that Tommy’s body is both dead and alive. It also appears as she expresses uncertainty as to whether clones are fully human. When Kathy asserts, “Carers aren’t machines!” she does so too forcefully to seem as if she is convinced (N, 4). A more direct example occurs as Kathy explains that Ruth realized that only “trash” would allow their DNA to be copied to produce clones. According to Kathy, Ruth announced that

clones need to “look in the gutter. You look in rubbish bins. Look down the toilet” to find their place of origin (N, 152, 166).

Freud’s elaboration of Jentsch’s theory of the uncanny can be used to show how loose garbage corrupts the landscapes described by Kathy (and the psychological illusions for which they come to stand). Freud defined the “unheimlich” as being a manifestation of impulses that are usually repressed in order to maintain societal norms. When such impulses are acted upon (and create visible outcomes) they evoke horror. In Ishiguro’s novel, the cloned body creates a physical reminder of the human instinct to avoid death (and humanity’s cruelty while interacting with those that it considers to be less than human). As a former head of Hailsham tells Kathy, for a long time clones were “kept in the shadows, and people did their best not to think about you. And if they did, they tried to convince themselves you weren’t really like us. That you were less than human, so it didn’t matter” (N, 240). Kathy describes speculations that clones’ body parts will be chopped off if they enter the woods beyond Hailsham as “rubbish,” she decries Tommy’s explanation that he did not try to make art when he was a student (because it would not influence his fate) as “rubbish,” and she accepts Tommy’s explanation that his later drawings of animals with machine-like insides were “rubbish” as well. Perhaps most telling, Kathy also uses this word to dismiss speculations that clones will continue to be mutilated after they make their fourth “donations,” even if they are still conscious: “It’s just a lot of rubbish, Tommy. Just talk, wild talk. It’s not even worth thinking about” (N, 47, 22, 99, 256).

Over the course of her narrative, Kathy becomes more accepting of polluted landscapes. This is particularly apparent as she describes a marsh containing an abandoned fishing boat. Initially, Kathy simply describes the marsh as a subject of fascination—another “nook,” or imaginary landscape, into which clones might retreat via their daydreams to avoid thinking about “donation” surgeries. This marsh, like Hailsham, represents an isolated, rural landscape. It can only be reached by driving along a “near-empty road” and down “narrow, twisting lanes.” The rest of the journey must be made by foot—first by passing through a forest of sycamore trees (a species that sometimes symbolizes a division between prosaic and spirit worlds) and then by crossing a “tilted and rusted” barbed-wire fence (the same kind of fence that appears in Kathy’s descriptions of Hailsham). Inside this fence, Kathy explains, lies an other-worldly landscape—one in which broken tree trunks rise like severed limbs (“ghostly dead trunks [are] poking out of the soil, most of them broken off only a few feet up”) and an abandoned boat is unable to sail (it is “beached in the marshes under the weak sun”). Although Kathy remembers that Ruth found this setting “just like my friend said it was [. . .] quite beautiful,” the adult Kathy is less interested in ascribing beauty to the scene based on its ability to conform to a prior description (that is to say, based on how good a copy it is) than she is on remembering the boat on its own terms (its “paint was cracking”

16 In the Egyptian Book of the Dead, two sycamores at the gate of heaven mark the transition from the physical world to a spiritual plane. Here, the sycamore is considered a manifestation of several goddesses, including Hathor (“Lady of the Sycamore”) and is planted near tombs or used to construct coffins (The Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani, trans. E. A. Wallis Budge, 1895) <http://www.sacred-texts.com/egy/ebod/>. In the Christian Bible, Zacchaeus climbs a sycamore to get a better view of Jesus—an act that helps him leave his prosaic job as a tax collector to follow Christ (Luke 19:1-4). Once again, this tree marks the passage from material life to communion with a higher plane of existence.
and “the timber frames of the little cabin were crumbling away”). In describing the boat, Kathy starts to consider the “frail” bodies of her post-operative friends.

In addition to allowing Kathy to consider the fate of the disintegrating cloned body, memories of the marsh inspire her to pose a broader question: how the boat (and, by extension, how the clones) “got here.” Kathy recalls that she could not communicate this question while inside the marsh: “I’d raise my voice to let it get to the others and had expected an echo. But the sound was surprisingly close, like I was in a carpeted room.” For Kathy, an open marsh transforms into a confined space in her memory—a mindscape that is defined by her private thoughts rather than by the sense that communication (and communal action) remains possible. One vehicle does seem to transcend the confinement of this landscape. According to Kathy, Ruth had been distracted by the “vapour trail” of an airplane moving “in the far distance, climbing slowly into the sky” (N, 205). In recollecting this detail, Kathy (perhaps unconsciously) raises another critical question—not about how the clones “got here” but about why they did not try to “get away.”

Presumably, the clones might have been able to illegally obtain passports and sneak abroad after they had been released from Hailsham and before they started to work as ‘carers.’ In a foreign country, clones might have explained their odd habits simply as a virtue of their being Englishmen. Yet Ishiguro was not interested in creating figures who would try to escape their circumstances: “I knew from the start,” he has stated, “that I didn't want to write a story about an enslaved, exploited class that would then rebel. My subject matter wasn't going to be the triumph of the human spirit. I was interested in the human capacity to accept what must seem like a limited and cruel fate.”

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17 Kazuo Ishiguro, “I Remain Fascinated by Memory” 1.
This “capacity to accept” is related to how Kathy comes to terms with the polluted landscape as well as her ambiguous social position within it. This is apparent in Kathy’s description of one more flooded landscape: Hailsham, after it has closed and as it appears to Ruth in a dream. Although Ruth sees “rubbish floating by under [her] window, empty drinks cartons, everything,” Ruth finds this landscape “nice and tranquil.” Like the bodies of post-operative clones (presumably), these “empty drinks cartons” float where they are no longer “in any danger” (N, 205). The Hailsham of Ruth’s imagined future, like the Hailsham of Kathy’s “impossible” past, represents a landscape in which the cloned body exists out of harm’s way—either because it is still innocent of the dangers that threaten it, or it exists in a relatively calm afterlife during a time when the worst has already happened. Kathy realizes that she will not be able to “float” in either setting until she spends time in one last final landscape: the “recovery centre” where she will wait between “donation” surgeries. Of course, Kathy will not fully “recover” from her physical or psychic wounds in such a setting. This is because Ishiguro sets Never Let Me Go in a version of England in which there is no truly safe ground (even, and especially, that produced by fiction). In this novel, Ishiguro suggests that stories about the past and the landscapes associated with it, while able to persuade a willing audience, still provide a dangerous form of medicine—especially as they distract patients from protesting the injustice of their position.

II. “What is it? What can it be that thwarts us?”: Euphemism, The School Story, and a Language of Deception
In *Never Let Me Go*, Kathy is so concerned with how storytelling might dull pain that she does not seem to notice that her stories distract her, and others, from protesting their circumstances. At Hailsham, Kathy explains, “how much you were liked and respected, had to do with how good you were at creating” (*N*, 15). Kathy goes to great lengths to describe the care that Hailsham “students” put into creating art from scraps of material donated from the outside world. Since these “students” used discarded scraps as the raw materials for their art, they might be considered *bricoleurs*, or figures who treat the materials at hand as “as a set of actual and possible relations.”

This term also applies to literary creation. In Kathy’s telling, Hailsham “students” have unusual ideas about what constitutes an original poem. Although they could easily copy a poem, they use “tokens” to buy hand-written editions. While this may give the poem a Benjeminian “aura,” “students” fail to notice that the language within the poem is “pre-constrained,” as Levi-Strauss writes, “like the constitutive units of myth, the possible combinations of which are restricted by the fact that they are drawn from the language where they already possess a sense which sets a limit on their freedom of maneuver.” As we have seen, much of the language that Kathy uses carries a meaning quite different than the one that she ascribes to it. The same can be said for her use of narrative form. Although Kathy imitates the English school story as she tells her coming-of-age story (perhaps in an attempt to normalize it), her choice of template proves problematic. This section of this chapter analyzes the genre that Kathy copies as she tells her story. The purpose of this

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detour is two-fold. First, to describe the constituent features of works of this genre in order to demonstrate that Kathy’s narrative follows its pattern. Second, to provide a brief gloss of the history of the genre in order to illustrate how the values that such stories often uphold work against the interest of many of their readers.

The English school story genre is commonly thought of as being a motivational coming-of-age narrative. Writing in 1938, Edward C. Mack describes the basic plot of a school story as follows:

[A] boy enters school in some fear and trepidation, but usually with ambitions and schemes; suffers mildly or severely at first from loneliness, the exactions of fag-masters, the discipline of masters, and the regimentation of games; then makes a few friends and leads for a year or so a joyful, irresponsible and sometimes rebellious life; eventually learns duty, self-reliance, responsibility, and loyalty as a prefect, qualities usually used to put down bullying or overemphasis on athletic prowess; and finally leaves school, with regret, for the wider world, stamped with the seal of the institution which he has left and devoted to its welfare. (qtd. in Steege, 155-6)\(^{19}\)

Kathy closely follows the plot sequence of a traditional English school story as she describes her childhood at Hailsham. Her remembered campus is Arcadian: peaceful, well-groomed, and geared towards personal and artistic development. Yet Kathy also recognizes that the idyllic campus can be confining: a place with defined borders, rigid

rules, and a strict internal hierarchy. Indeed, in Kathy’s memories, positive experiences of growth overlap with incidents of competition, jealousy, bullying, and sexual confusion. For example, Kathy describes forming close bonds (with her friends Tommy and Ruth) and experiencing a short period of joy and rebellion (reading, learning about sex, experimenting with art). Yet she also details heartbreakingly lonely moments (remembering herself as a sterile child cradling a doll), the taunting of schoolyard bullies (Tommy being their primary victim), and stifling confinement (students cannot cross the fence surrounding the campus). Although Kathy’s memories are often of periods of difficulty, she looks back to the rural setting for guidance about how to navigate the adult world and justify its horrors.

Yet Kathy also uses the school story to critique her adult world. This is characteristic of the genre. In addition to representing an appealing coming-of-age narrative, school stories often use the division between the isolated school campus and the external adult world to critique the culture in which the storyteller lives. David Lodge has written that a school’s physical isolation (and often, its location in the countryside) enables the academic novel to function as a version of the pastoral.²⁰ To an extent, this has always been true of works of this genre. The earliest example of the English public school story was about girls, Sarah Fielding’s 1749 novel The Governess: or Little Female Academy. As Margaret Maison reports, during the nineteenth century, the genre quickly became dominated by stories about boys, including Sir Richard Phillips’ “Going to School, or, the story of Tom Brown and his Sisters” (1809). Thomas Hughes used the same name for the protagonist of his 1857 Tom Brown’s Schooldays. In Hughes’ hands,

this “common” name became a generic one—that is to say, one that would come to be associated with a particular family of stories.\textsuperscript{21} Despite the fact that Blackwood’s Magazine first described “scholastic novels” as a genre of Victorian literature in the 1840s, Hughes’ stories made the genre truly popular. Tom Brown’s Schooldays sold 11,000 copies in its first year of publication. It was already in its seventieth edition when Hughes died in 1896.\textsuperscript{22}

Prior to the First World War, school stories tended to contain amusing anecdotes about students getting into trouble as they tested the limits of authority. In P. G. Wodehouse’s humorous tales, Mike and his friend Psmith test institutional authority seemingly for the fun of engaging in conflict. Over the course of the narrative, this rebellion is tempered as Mike becomes a productive and loyal member of the school community. Much as Wodehouse’s characters test school authority, Wodehouse mocks literary authority. When Psmith asks Mike: “Are you the Bully, the Pride of the School, or the Boy who is Led Astray and takes a drink in Chapter Sixteen?” Wodehouse has him draw attention to the clichéd aspects of the genre. Elsewhere, the book’s narrator describes Mike’s bad performance in a fight by saying that he acted like “Tom Brown did at the beginning of his fight with Slogger Williams, and the result was the same as it was

\textsuperscript{21} Margaret Maison, “Tom Brown and Company: Scholastic Novels of the 1850s,” English: The Journal of the English Association 12.69 (1958) 100-03.

\textsuperscript{22} Peter Parker, The Old Lie: The Great War and the Public School Ethos (London: Constable, 1987) 49.
on that historic occasion.” By treating a fictional event as an “historic occasion,” Woodhouse playfully ridicules the canonical reception of Hughes’ work.23

After the First World War, somber nostalgia for a pre-war nation often replaced this kind of playfulness in English school stories. The stories of Alec and Evelyn Waugh offered acrid critiques or both boarding schools and the broader society in which they existed. As Alec Waugh’s scandalous “Loom of Youth” glamorizes the loosely disguised Sherborne School, it also exposes the hypocritical stance of its leaders and English society more broadly towards homosexual relations. Evelyn Waugh’s “Charles Ryder’s Schooldays,” which is based on his interwar Lancing Diaries, uses images of decay (such as dust-filled air, failing light, a campus is “lost in shadow”) to describe a society in decline.24 However, not all post-war narratives were this somber. Enid Blyton’s Malory Towers series presents a world in which adult worries are subordinated to narratives about personal development and female friendship. That said, Blyton’s message may not be entirely congenial to twenty-first century feminists, since she describes a school whose ethos primarily involves learning to sacrifice themselves for the well-being of others. (As the headmistress Miss Grayling explains, the school’s goal is to produce “good strong women the world can lean on.”)25 As we have seen, this ethos of self-sacrifice reappears in Kathy’s narrative to a deeply disturbing end.


25 Enid Blyton. *Malory Towers Series* (1946-1951; London: Edgmont, 2006). Theo Tait has compared Ishiguro to Blyton before, as he described Ishiguro’s method of
Today, the record-breaking publication history of Rowling’s Harry Potter series attests that the school story is more popular than ever. One of the attractions of Rowling's novels is the fantasy that individuals with a magical ability to harness nature can prevail in banal, post-industrial (“Muggle”) England.\(^{26}\) While Rowling’s books may be less xenophobic than their predecessors (largely because she self-consciously wrote them for a multicultural Britain as well as a global audience), the *Harry Potter* books, like others of the genre, still advocate turning to lessons learned in a boarding school, a setting associated with English customs and England’s rural past, for moral instruction as to how to navigate the present-day.\(^{27}\) Ishiguro has stated that he was “completely obsessed” with the *Harry Potter* series as he was writing *Never Let Me Go*: “This Harry Potter craze has taken over all my daughter’s friends […] And it’s taken me over. I’m quite hooked.”\(^{28}\)

\(^{26}\) Christopher Hitchens has argued that the Harry Potter series counters “the extreme banality and conformity of school life as it is experienced today, with everything oriented toward safety on the one hand and correctness on the other”; that it offers “a world of youthful democracy and diversity”; and that it describes a place where characters “have a strong moral code and a solid ethical commitment.” Christopher Hitchens, “The Boy Who Lived: Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows,” *The New York Times Book Review*. 12 Aug. 2007. 7 May 2010 <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/12/books/review/Hitchens-t.html>.

\(^{27}\) For essays on the international success of the Harry Potter series, see Daniel H. Nexon and Iver Neumann, *Harry Potter and International Relations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

This being “hooked” seems to have informed his decision to create a narrator that imitates school stories as she describes her childhood.

For Kathy H., the attractions of modeling her life story—particularly the parts involving her childhood at Hailsham—on traditional English school stories are clear. School stories provide a template for a romantic coming-of-age narrative. By squeezing her stories into this mold, Kathy normalizes her experience and tries to convince herself that she is a full member of English society. The question that Ishiguro raises is whether it is worthwhile to belong to such a society. Although the English school story might thrill readers, it still has pernicious qualities hammered into its mold—especially as when it is used to inspire unquestioning patriotism or the maintenance of strict social hierarchies. Writing in 1940, George Orwell described school stories as the kind of “blood-and-thunder stuff” that was “sodden in the worst illusions of 1910” and argued that they disseminated values like Horace’s *Dulce et Decorum est. Pro patria mori*—the “old lie” writ loud and in the vernacular (even more so than in Owen’s poem). Orwell argued that they offer “a perfectly deliberate incitement to wealth-fantasy”:

in England education is mainly a matter of status. The most definite dividing line between the petite-bourgeoisie and the working class is that the former pay for their education, and within the bourgeoisie there is another unbridgeable gulf between the ‘public’ school and the ‘private’ school. It is quite clear that there are tens and scores of thousands of
people to whom every detail of life at a ‘posh’ public school is wildly thrilling and romantic.\textsuperscript{29}

This is certainly true of Tom Brown’s Schooldays. In addition to describing the “wildly thrilling and romantic” escapades of a young boy, Hughes had a didactic purpose in penning this work: to “preach” specific values to young boys. As Hughes explains in his Preface to the Sixth English Edition:

My sole object in writing was to preach to boys [....] I can’t see that a man has any business to write at all unless he has something which he thoroughly believes and wants to preach about. If he has this, and the chance of delivering himself of it, let him by all means put it in the shape in which it will be most likely to get a hearing; but never let him be so carried away as to forget that preaching is his object. (11)

In Tom Brown’s Schooldays, the proponent for these views is a fictionalized version of Doctor Arnold, the headmaster of the Rugby school (and father to Matthew Arnold). As Edward Mack writes, Hughes’ Doctor Arnold is a vulgarization of the historical figure:

Hughes’ Arnold has neither the fanatic idealism, the other worldliness, nor the over-developed sense of sin that the real Arnold possessed. He has become a glorified boy scoutmaster whose strenuous spirituality has been made palatable to Englishmen by presenting it under the guise of the honest manliness of a [Charles] Kingsley hero.\textsuperscript{30}


\textsuperscript{30} Mack, Edward C. Public Schools and British Opinion Since 1860 (New York: Columbia UP, 1938) 331.
In Mack’s opinion, Hughes’ reduction of Arnoldian principles to “an almost exclusive” valuation of athletics is a “cheapening of Arnold’s conception of a Public School.”

The danger of Hughes’ valuation of athletics comes from his tendency to use militant terms to describe schoolyard games. Through subtle manipulations of language, Hughes encouraged his readers to associate the games played at Rugby with military conflict. He even uses military metaphors to describe Arnold’s style of elocution. (Arnold’s voice fluctuates from being “now soft as the low notes of a flute, now clear and stirring as the call of the light-infantry bugle.”) Arnold uses this voice to convince students that he is acting in their best interests (“fighting for us and by our sides”), that their lives had a preordained meaning that would involve personal sacrifice (on “a battlefield ordained from of old, where there are no spectators”), and that they should trust a leader who did not reevaluate his battle plans (a “true sort of captain” “had no misgivings, and gave no uncertain word of command”). In Hughes’ account, Arnold’s militant rhetoric was so powerful that even Tom Brown, once fiercely independent, “hardly ever left the chapel on Sunday evenings without a serious resolve to stand by and follow the Doctor” (TBS, 166-8).

In Never Let Me Go, the rhetorical style that Hughes attributes to Arnold resurfaces in Kathy’s representations of the Hailsham “guardians.” Much as Tom “couldn’t enter into half of what we heard” during Arnold’s assembly speeches, Kathy describes herself baffled by her “guardian’s” lectures. She explains that although Miss Emily was, in the classroom, “clear as anything,” she, during assemblies, relied on vague,

31 Mack, Public Schools 332.
weighted phrases ("unworthy of privilege," or "misuse of opportunity"), trailed off without completing her thoughts ("she’d be going on very intensely then come to a sudden stop"), and posed rhetorical questions that students could not possible answer ("What is it? What can it be that thwarts us?"). As a result, “students” were left in what Kathy describes as a “fog” (N, 39-40). It is no wonder: if individual sacrifice in a place where “there are no spectators” has political meaning in the world of Tom Brown’s Schooldays (it provides assurance that England will conquer distant territories and protect its own borders), the meaning of such sacrifice is far more nebulous for Ishiguro’s clones (who receive no benefit from extending the lives of “normals”).

In modeling her story on the school story genre, Kathy endorses another set of values that work against her interests. Although Kathy may not realize this, English school stories advocated for the maintenance of a rigid social structure. This is certainly the case for Tom Brown’s Schooldays. Hughes stated that he wanted to encourage educated Englishmen to value rural customs and improve social and economic conditions without altering the existing social framework. This view is similar to that held by the historical Doctor Arnold and many Victorian conservatives, who translated their discomfort with social change and technological progress into strong anti-modern sentiments. According to the historian Peter Parker, the historical Doctor Arnold sought to stabilize an agriculture-based economy under socially elite leadership, and resisted the idea that society should be restructured (or rural laborers should be socialized). This perspective on land management and maintenance of extant social structures was widespread among the aristocratic classes of his day. Indeed, Hughes’ narrator preaches

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32 Peter Parker, The Old Lie: The Great War and the Public School Ethos
that it is essential for proper “Christian” Englishmen to know their birthplaces: “O young England! young England! You who are born into these racing railroad times [...] why don’t you know more of your own birthplaces?” (TBS, 22-24). The narrator goes on to extol his own place of origin: “I was born and bred a west-countryman, thank God! A Wessex man, a citizen of the noblest Saxon kingdom of Wessex, a regular ‘Angular Saxon,’ the very soul of me “adscriptus glebe” (TBS, 33).33 Later, Hughes expresses concerns that the rapid industrialization and development of England would lead to famine, crime, violence, and the destruction of property. For Hughes, unchecked town growth inevitably leads to horrific outcomes—“the old, sad story” in which hungry men, starving wives and children, listless and miserable young adults turn to crime, violence, and the destruction of property (TBS, 268-9).34 Such violence might be prevented, Hughes argues, by encouraging the next generation to study the rural landscape (to know


33 Hughes’ narrator refers to “the Vale of White Horse” by its Anglo-Saxon name, Wessex, thirty-eight years before Thomas Hardy credited himself for re-introducing the term into common Victorian parlance. Like Hardy, Hughes uses descriptions of Wessex to explore the impact of new economic relations on the English social order. For more on Hardy’s “naming” of Wessex and literary representations of the English country and city in the nineteenth century, see Williams, The Country and the City 197.

34 During the 1830s, the situation for rural laborers was indeed, as Raymond Williams has written, “as bad as anything in the long centuries of exploitation and degradation.” Although agricultural production was not actually declining in the 1850s, he explains that there was a disjuncture between market practices and the state of political reform. He explains that the increasing exposure of the rural economy to the “disciplines of wage-labour and the market” coincided uncomfortably with the on-going rule of a “self-styled aristocracy and squirearchy.” Among other things, this forced 300,000 people (among the 686,000 families of agricultural laborers) to be on poor relief during the 1830s—the same decade during which Tom Brown first went to the Rugby school. Williams, The Country and the City 182-185.
its “lanes and woods and fields”) and copy the actions of certain elders, such as Tom Brown’s parents, who use their “professional” training to improve social conditions of country folk without altering the broader class structure. Tom’s father, “Squire Brown, J. P. for the county of Berks,” is a grumpy but well-meaning figure, torn between his love of country traditions and his desire for modern improvements. His wife, Madame Brown is an equally diligent “trainer of servants,” who “spent her self freely in the profession; for profession it was, and gave her more trouble by half than many people take to earn a good income” \((TBS, 39)\). As such, these figures serve as Hughes’ example of responsible rural citizens. For Hughes, appreciating the English rural landscape is related to appreciating the English literary tradition. This involves listening to local legends and reading about English history. Hughes’ hope for “young England” is partially a literary hope—one in which the landed and educated aristocrats who “have your ways made for you” use stories about England’s rural past (including his own) to guide their actions in the present day. In \textit{Never Let Me Go}, Ishiguro presents a narrator who would very much like to follow Hughes’ advice—that is to say, who would like to know her birthplace, imitate the behavior of upstanding parents, and turn to legends about the past and novels about England’s history for moral guidance. Since the first two aspects of this are impossible for Kathy, she is left with only one option: to model her life story on a quintessentially English literary form in an attempt to make her past seem to fit into a genre, or \textit{family} of stories. Kathy’s desire to belong is so strong that she seems to overlook the fact that the genre that she emulates, from its inception, spread values likely to work against her interest—either by telling her that she is “supposed” to give her life for a nation of which she is not fully a part, or by encouraging the maintenance of a social
hierarchy that does not allow her to protest or change her position.

Earlier, this chapter demonstrated how Kathy might be considered a *bricoleur*, a figure who uses found objects (and extant narrative forms) to express her joys, fears and longing. For Levi-Straus, *bricolage* was an heroic act of self-expression: a triumph over limited circumstances. As *Never Let Me Go* progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that Kathy’s approach to story-telling is less an heroic act of self-expression than a mode of deflection. Kathy’s appropriation of the school story seems less an act of *bricolage* than one of pastiche. Pastiche, as Fredric Jameson has described it, involves masking one’s being in another person’s language. It is

like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists.\(^{35}\)

Kathy’s story not only lacks satire but is delivered by an “abnormal,” “borrowed” (cloned) tongue. By mimicking a specific genre, while simultaneously diverging slightly from its form, Kathy follows arbitrary rules that have little to do with her lived experience. As Kathy describes horrible events in a flat, mechanical way, she gives the impression that—even if some “healthy linguistic normality still exits”—she has not been exposed to it. Kathy expresses her impressions of the ‘normal’ world without being “one

with” that world itself (another aspect of pastiche, according to Jameson). Furthermore, after experiencing the “shock” of recognizing her “confinement” in an historical situation, Kathy becomes “condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach.” Kathy becomes so enraptured by her story that she even claims to “look forward” to donating her organs because this will provide more time to refine it.

Since Kathy’s mode of storytelling is a method of making do, not of making change, it seems to produce a false and ineffective echo—one that does nothing to convince the un-cloned members of her society that she is fully human (and should be treated as such). Yet, we should not think of Kathy as being a bad writer. On the contrary, we might think of her as a dangerously good writer—one whose use of suspense, pathos, sexual tension, and even humor provide compelling distractions for the clones for whom she ‘cares,’ for the ‘carer’ who listens to her story, and even for Ishiguro’s readers. After captivating the interest of her audience, Kathy shares her vision of what she is “supposed” to do. It is up to the reader to distance himself from such a perspective on his own. Through his use of situational irony, Ishiguro makes this process somewhat easier.

Why does Ishiguro go to such efforts to critique the concept of the pastoral (an idea that he can assume few of his contemporary readers take seriously) or debunk a popular generic form (one that even he has become engrossed by through the *Harry Potter* phenomenon)? Another way to phrase this question is by asking, what does Ishiguro expect his readers to *do* with the obvious platitudes presented by his novel?

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III. “the song was about what I said, and I used to listen to it again and again, on my own, whenever I go the chance”: Text and Interpretation

In contrast to Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled* (1995), a challenging, 544-page novel that is narrated by a figure for whom time and space warp to conform to the workings of his unconscious mind, *Never Let Me Go* is far more accessible. Although the narrator of *Never Let Me Go* may be unreliable, she labors to describe the events of the past in a linear fashion, to use clear prose, and to fill her story with carefully considered, salient detail. In creating a narrator so concerned with how her audience might process her story, Ishiguro reveals his conflicted thoughts about how his own novel might be received. On one hand, the accessibility of *Never Let Me Go* makes it a popular choice for reading groups and course adoptions, even at the secondary school level. Indeed, this novel has already inspired a Hollywood film. In such contexts, Ishiguro might have expected his novel would prompt conversations about topics that Kathy explicitly mentions within the text: issues such as the ethics of cloning, the relationship between art and humanity, and what it might mean to “let go.”

Ishiguro even seems to reflect on what such “reader-response” criticism might signify through his presentation of another text called “Never Let Me Go” inside the novel: the song on the cassette that Kathy finds again in Norfolk. Kathy believes that the song’s lyrics are “special” due to their ability to evoke personal feelings:

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I didn’t used to listen properly to the words; I just waited for the bit that went: ‘Baby, baby, never let me go…’ And what I’d imagined was a woman who’d been told she couldn’t have babies, who’d really, really wanted them all her life [...] Even at the time, I realised this couldn’t be right, that this interpretation didn’t fit with the rest of the lyrics. But that wasn’t an issue with me. The song was about what I said, and I used to listen to it again and again, on my own, whenever I got the chance. (N, 64)

If finding the “right” interpretation is not “an issue,” the pleasure of listening “again and again” can come from two sources: the reinforcement of one’s initial reading (an enactment of a repetition compulsion) or recognizing how the text might signify differently during each encounter. Indeed, Ishiguro’s narrator recognizes that the song “Never Let Me Go” has different meanings for different people as she quotes Madame, a Hailsham founder, as describing her own reaction to watching a younger Kathy dance to this song while holding a doll in her arms:

I was weeping for an altogether different reason. When I watched you dancing that day, I saw something else I saw a new world coming rapidly. More scientific, efficient, yes. More cures for the old sicknesses. Very good. But a harsh, cruel world. And I saw a little girl, her eyes tightly closed, holding to her breast the old kind world, one that she knew in her heart could not remain, and she was holding it and pleading, never to let her go. (N, 248-9)

By juxtaposing her reading of “Never Let Me Go” with that of Madame, Kathy suggests that words need not have a fixed value. Instead, the individual reader determines their
meaning. Since Kathy makes this point so overtly, Ishiguro creates the sensation that she is telling his readers how to approach reading her own copy of *Never Let Me Go*. And yet, as we have seen, Ishiguro does not present Kathy as being a particularly reliable narrator. Might Ishiguro seek to mock the very audience that he solicits, an audience of well-meaning “carers” who speculate about the point of his novel?

In certain ways, it is easier to determine what this novel is not about than what it is. Given that debates about cloning Dolly the sheep had died down in the English press by the late 1990s (when Ishiguro began to write this novel), *Never Let Me Go* does not particularly seem to be about the ethics of cloning animals or human beings for their spare parts. Similarly, despite the fact that Kathy is concerned by the relationship between the ability to produce art and what it means to be fully human, Ishiguro does not intimate that she and her peers are anything but human, even (and perhaps especially) when they fail to produce good art. These issues, therefore, are unlikely to represent the sum total of what Ishiguro hopes to inspire his readers to consider. This is where Ishiguro’s handling of landscape is important. As we have seen, Kathy’s repeated identification with the English landscape of the 1990s provides her with a means to express and, at times, to suppress the pain associated with her social position (and its implications for the fate of her body). Furthermore, her decision to model her coming-of-age narrative on the English school story (a genre that, at its inception, spread specific views about the relationship between the individual, the landscape, and national identity), allows us to speculate about what Ishiguro’s presentation of the cloning debate might contribute to our thinking about contemporary social issues of more pressing concern.

Putting Ishiguro’s possible critique of reader-response criticism aside, and experimenting
with the idea that his novel might indeed be “about what I said,” this section postulates three ways that Ishiguro’s presentation of the English landscape provides insight into the present day for Ishiguro’s readers. The readings that follow are neither internally conclusive nor mutually exclusive. Instead, they are presented here in sketch form to provoke further inquiry.

In the first reading, Ishiguro’s juxtaposition of the landscapes imagined by his narrator with actual English geography opens a discussion related to the ethics of meat production. Although most of the landscapes described in this novel are imaginary “nooks,” Ishiguro occasionally has Kathy incorporate disarmingly realistic descriptions of actual places into her story. Kathy’s description of Littlehampton, West Sussex provides a case in point. As Kathy describes a walk from Littlehampton’s “pedestrian district” to a residential area where the “pavement ran out” and only the “tops of the beach huts lining the seafront” could be seen, her account is so accurate that it can be used as a walking guide to the present-day city (N, 225-6). While only readers familiar with this area are likely to fully appreciate this fact, even distant readers can see that a town with the rather memorable name of “Hailsham” is less than an hour’s drive from Littlehampton simply by looking at a map. Given that “Hailsham” is written on the sign for the main motorway leaving Littlehampton, Ishiguro is bound to have seen the word written in this context as he was researching his novel. While Ishiguro might simply have been drawn to the poetic qualities of this name, there seems to be more to his juxtaposition of real and imagined geography in Never Let Me Go than this. In the late 1990s, the 750-year-old Hailsham Cattle Market was under threat of take-over by the Aldi supermarket chain, part of a German-based multinational conglomerate. For local
farmers, Aldi represented a major threat to the English cattle industry. According to the National Farmers’ Union website, preserving this cattle market (and the industries that it supported) was critical to maintaining the rural character of this region and protecting its landscape from development. The fact that Aldi’s profits would go to a German corporation was also unlikely to sit well with this farmers’ union. For customers, an Aldi takeover represented a change in the kind of meat available for purchase in that it creates a greater likelihood of livestock being raised in a large-scale production facility rather than on a bucolic farm. While a traditional market primarily sells locally-raised livestock, retail chains tend to sell commercially produced meat from a variety of regions that appears wrapped in air-tight, leak-proof packages. In Ishiguro’s novel, Kathy quotes a former Hailsham ‘guardian’ as musing: “This was what the world noticed the most, wanted the most. And for a long time, people preferred to believe these organs appeared from nowhere, or at most that they grew in a kind of vacuum” (N, 240). Ishiguro’s novel even offers one further perspective on such changes: that of the proverbial livestock, or the cloned sheep, Kathy. Even Kathy recognizes that the kind of “sheltering” provided at Hailsham was problematic as she reflects on conversations had with her former “guardians” on the subject. Despite her overuse of euphemisms, Kathy cannot repress the fact that society created her for her spare parts. What, then, are the implications for the reader? On a basic level, this novel may the reader to aggressively question the language


39 For further discussion of how this novel raises questions about the ethics of meat production, see Eluned Summers-Bremner, “‘Poor Creatures’: Ishiguro’s and Coetzee’s Imaginary Animals,” Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature, 39.4 (Dec. 2006) 145-60.
of the pastoral. It may also encourage her to probe the kinds of stories that she tells herself about the origins of her food. Although the urban reader may find comfort in the idea of a traditional cattle market, or the notion that the meat that they consume has been raised on “organic” farms or led a bucolic free range existence, *Never Let Me Go* may even remind this reader that these circumstances have little to do with the pain experienced by an animal at the moment of its butchering. Furthermore, even traditional forms of animal husbandry degrade land, contribute to greenhouse emissions, harm water resources, and hurt biodiversity.\(^4^0\) By juxtaposing a real with an imagined space, Ishiguro directs his reader to become aware of the way that he, like Kathy, might use storytelling to shelter himself from such obvious, but at the same time, virtually unthinkable truths.

Ishiguro’s treatment of landscape can also be interpreted as encouraging the reconsideration of broader ecological issues, such as the relationship between pollution and popular concepts of nature. In the second reading, the clone is read as a figure for a polluted late-twentieth-century landscape narrating its own environmental crisis. This reading is based on Kathy’s repeated assertions that the cloned body is a: “rubbish”-filled “territory.” From this perspective, the operative moral discourse evoked by the novel is ecocentric. Lawrence Buell has described the ecocentric text as one in which the “nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that

begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. In Ishiguro’s novel, man-made Augéian “non-places” (cars, roadside service stations, and “recovery centers”) constitute this “nonhuman environment.” By extension, so does the cloned body (something modeled on and composed from “rubbish.” By “caring” for Kathy, the reader might believe he is “caring” for the natural environment. From this standpoint, the idea of “deferring” donating organs may have a corollary in the movement to protect English green spaces (including greenbelts, public parks, National Trust sites) from further development. Since the novel presents Kathy’s hopes as being impractical, the reader may consider whether it is possible to permanently protect such spaces—especially given the need to house a growing population. The reader might also become inclined to think about the degree to which such spaces are already contaminated. Since Great Britain has been occupied continuously for thousands of years, many English landscapes associated with the “natural” world are designed landscapes. Furthermore, atmospheric pollution and other forms of shared environmental risk impact even “natural” places, such as forests and seemingly wild moors. In a sense, Kathy’s body figures as another organic “landscape” meddled with by mankind. Although Kathy may looks like a normal human being, her form is the product of genetic engineering. If we read Ishiguro’s novel as being about the human capacity to “accept what must seem like a limited and cruel fate,” this work provides less of an argument for rural preservation than a plea for readers to reconsider how they conceptualize and interact with a designed, manipulated, and polluted landscape. Such a realization might prompt another uncomfortable form of self-

criticism. As we have seen, Ishiguro’s narrator uses reading (and storytelling) to retreat from the world. Similarly, Ishiguro’s reader may experience a vicarious moral satisfaction by “caring” for the characters and landscapes in his novel without feeling compelled to produce positive change in the world beyond the text. To the contrary, it is arguable that simply possessing a novel implicates one in vast systems of pollution, since the chemicals that bleach the pages, the ink that forms the words, and the glue that binds the book together are all likely to be toxic in large quantities. Lawrence Buell has argued, “all inquiry into artistic rendition of physical environment must sooner or later reckon with the meta-question of how to construe the relation between the world of a text and the world of historical or lived experience.”42 The territorial metaphors presented in Ishiguro’s novel can prompt such a reckoning.

A third reading of the territorial analogies presented in *Never Let Me Go* involves considering Kathy’s body as a form of the “body politic” —that is to say, as a figure for an English nation still relying on myths related to its rural past to sustain its sense of self-identity within a global economy. If Ishiguro aimed to comment on the decline of the British Empire, why would he have had his narrator repurpose schoolday narratives in particular? After all, the unique social structure of English public schools has often been credited with the creation of the empire. A large percentage of colonial administrators were drafted directly from public schools with the assumption that the character traits that they had acquired there would make them exceptional leaders. The prefect system—in which upper classmen handled justice and its administration—made public school boys comfortable with a governance system based on rank. The tyranny and physical abuse

42 Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* 338.
that took place at public schools acculturated boys to martial discipline. The group loyalty that the house system inspired transferred easily onto patriotic sentiment. Finally, separation from family prepared former students to adapt to life in far-flung colonies.\footnote{Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, \textit{The Old School Tie: The Phenomenon of the English Public School} (New York: Viking: 1983) 192.}

On the other hand, some scholars have blamed the social structure of English public schools for the fact that England was able to relinquish so many of its colonies in such a short period of time without altering its sense of national identity.\footnote{Bruce Robbins raised this question in response to an early draft of this chapter.} These historians argue that the evangelical nature of public schools created a pacifistic moral outlook with regards to politics and international affairs; that the schools’ classics-based curriculum caused England to lose its edge in science and industry; and that the idea of “fair play” cultivated on its playing fields (in which it was less important to win a game than it was to play it well) created a mindset in which it was possible to lose wars with honor.\footnote{For a broader critique of the “character” produced in English public schools, see Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, \textit{The Old School Tie} 202-4.} As stories about British public schools spread such values to a wider population, they also spread something a way of constructing national identity that many indirectly have precipitated the fall of the British Empire. By using the concept of “graduation” as a framing device, these stories spread a mindset in which closure comes only when one goes home. Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy makes a similar observation as he explains “school stories and English autobiographies are full of the sadness felt when, after the last day of the last term, [the power of those who dominated them] vanishes away” (108) In \textit{Never Let Me Go}, of course, Kathy does not have a home to which she might return. Instead,
she spends a great deal of energy trying to figure out the location of “wherever it was I was supposed to be” (N, 263). Since she has neither a family nor a rural homestead, she (like the boat that she describes as having been abandoned in a marsh) imagines that she might find solace on one last shore: that of Dover, a port that, for centuries, has functioned as the symbolic edge of England. The concluding chapter of this dissertation will take up this point in greater depth.

The three readings presented above (in which Ishiguro’s treatment of landscape prompts the reader to consider the treatment of animals, his relationship to systems of pollution, and English national identity in a post-colonial context) are presented, not as conclusive readings of Ishiguro’s novel, but rather as illustrations of how Ishiguro’s poetics of restraint leave his work open to a variety of interpretations.
Chapter 4:

Revising the Topography of Woolf’s London: Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*

This final chapter presents a short reading of Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2003), a novel that was written as a reworking of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Prior to beginning, a brief caveat concerning the decision to include McEwan in this study is in order. As prior chapters have demonstrated, Woolf, Sebald and Ishiguro use descriptions of the English landscape to consider the violence of the past and the destructive aspects of human nature. Although these writers set their works in unmistakably English contexts, they look beyond local or national attachments as they explore moral and ethical issues that may be of interest to global readers. As such, they can be said to share a “cosmopolitan” perspective, or one in which human beings, despite their location or national and political affiliations, can belong to a single community.\(^1\) McEwan, by contrast, creates a far more place-bound novel in *Saturday*. Here, he is primarily concerned with capturing how a very specific figure—a successful London neurosurgeon named Henry Perowne—reacts as the events of his Saturday are disrupted by a march protesting England’s involvement in the war in Iraq. This is by no means a perfect work of fiction. It is often difficult to distinguish the voice of McEwan’s protagonist from that of his narrator, or that of McEwan himself. As a result, it can sometimes seem as if McEwan is trying to make his readers feel complicit in the worldview of his main character. Molly Clark Hillard notes that many of *Saturday*’s reviewers were unsure about whether they were meant to view Henry’s

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\(^1\) For a broader discussion of cosmopolitanism and of “cosmopolitan style,” see Rebecca Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia UP, 2006).
derision of sympathy. She argues that the ambiguities of the novel’s voice are an intentional rhetorical strategy that McEwan uses to make his readers aware of their reading practices. This tension becomes apparent when we consider the ways in which McEwan’s main character might be a reworking of Virginia Woolf’s Sir William Bradshaw. In Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf treats Sir William unambiguously as an object of derision, as the “priest of science” who tries, but fails, to treat Septimus’ neurological disorder. Clarissa abhors Sir William and speculates: “one wouldn’t like Sir William to see one unhappy.” Rezia becomes agonized in his presence and thinks that, “Sir William Bradshaw was not a nice man” (MD, 182, 98). Even the narrator, Sir William is a man who is unruffled by the mental suffering of others. He “never spoke of ‘madness’; he called it not having a sense of proportion.” Indeed, the narrator compares Sir William to the goddess “Conversion”—a figure who “feasts on the wills of the weakly, loving to impress, to impose, admiring her own features stamped on the face of the populace” (MD, 96, 100). Like Sir William, Henry is a doctor specializing in the human mind. Henry also tours greater London in an expensive grey car (or at least a silver one) and has

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2 Hillard summarizes the critical reception of the novel as follows: “Jago Morrison has demonstrated that the male professional is a normative standard constantly subverted in McEwan's oeuvre. In reading these protagonists, we discover that ‘at the moment we are encouraged to empathize, we are also encouraged to recoil and critique.’ David James, too, focuses upon ‘the phenomenology of reading such a border-crosser between character and critique,’ contending that the conflict over how to read McEwan is part of the technique of his fiction. He argues that McEwan's oeuvre displays a ‘wryly metafictional practice’ that challenges the very idea of linear realism. Citing our emerging recognition that ‘realism is not a literary form or genre or movement or tradition but a contested space, the scene of an unfinished argument,’ David James, like Morrison, concludes that the effects of this ‘contested space’ are registered in our own reading practices. McEwan's narration implicates readers ‘as they shift between ironic and complicit readings’ (ibid).” Molly Clark Hillard, “‘When Desert Armies Stand Ready to Fight’: Re-Reading McEwan's Saturday and Arnold's ‘Dover Beach’” Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas, 6:1 (January 2008) 188.
an over-developed affinity for proportion. Henry even admires Fitzroy Square, which he sees from his bedroom window, because it is a “triumph of congruent proportion; the perfect square [...] enclosing a perfect circle of garden.” Henry also believes that mental disorders are primarily the result of an imbalance of chemicals: “There is much in human affairs,” he thinks, “that can be accounted for at the level of the complex molecule. Who could ever reckon up the damage done to love and friendship and all hopes of happiness by a surfeit or depletion of this or that neuro-transmitter?” (S, 3, 92). Yet McEwan treats Henry far more tolerantly than Woolf does Sir William. While Woolf describes Sir William as feasting “on the wills of the weakly,” Henry is skeptical of all attempts at conversion—especially those “visionary projects for peaceable realms [...] mirages for which people are prepared to die and kill” (S, 176). Furthermore, McEwan intimates that Henry is ennobled by what he loves—his family, his work, his city, and the form of community that he believes that a shared experience of music makes possible. At times, McEwan creates the impression that he advocates his protagonist’s privileged, first-world urbanite’s mindset. Yet the strange detachment of the novel’s narrative voice also creates the sensation that McEwan is displaying Henry’s thoughts upon a Petri dish for dissection. This tension between seeming to justify Henry’s perspective and presenting it as the subject of analysis often makes it difficult to discern the point of McEwan’s novel.

This is not, however, to dismiss Saturday completely. McEwan’s treatment of place and space through the content and form of Saturday remains of interest to this dissertation in several ways. This chapter begins by making four observations related to McEwan’s presentation of the English landscape. The first is that the divisions between city, country, and suburb registered by most characters in Mrs. Dalloway seem to have
become confused for Henry Perowne—a reflection, of course, on the blurring of such boundaries in the physical world. The second observation has to do with how Henry regards the world around him. For the most part, Henry observes a flattened vision of the world as he looks through car windscreen, watches television monitors, or works on a computer. For Henry, this flattening of visual perspective fosters a detached mindset, which becomes manifest in his use of scientific language (and his related desire to obtain the objectivity promised by this form of discourse). A third observation emerges: Henry believes that it might be possible to understand how London grows, thrives and endures attack by comparing the city to the human brain. He thinks that it might be possible to determine how the city survives and to unravel the mysteries of human consciousness by analyzing both systems scientifically. This leads to a fourth point: Henry’s detached perspective affects the subject and quality of his nostalgia. Unlike most characters in Mrs. Dalloway, Henry does not associate English gardens or childhood memories with an ideal vision of the past. Instead, he appropriates tropes associated with England’s rural history to describe his adult life in the millennial city. If Henry experiences nostalgia for anything, it is for the contemporary city. This becomes problematic because adopting such a perspective situates Henry as a theoretical survivor of a time-space that he imagines has already been lost. As it turns out, Henry’s detachment from the present moment proves to be his greatest liability.

The chapter then goes on to argue two points related to McEwan’s experiments with narrative form. By creating a narrator who does not take part in the narrated action but instead calmly recounts a linear sequence of events from the perspective of one character, McEwan moves away from the surfeit of subjectivity that appears in Woolf’s
novels. McEwan’s rejection of earlier modernist forms is not, however, a manifestation of nostalgia for a pre-modern worldview. Instead, it seems to be a reaction to a time-space in which cell phones, twenty-four-hour news stations, and the internet have become ubiquitous. The second point builds from the first. By creating a scene in which a would-be rapist becomes so moved by a recitation of Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” that he delays his attack, McEwan strikes a note so discordant that he, whether he intends it or not, undermines the believability of his narrative. Furthermore, since the recitation of this poem fails to cure the social and biological ailments that precipitated the conflict, McEwan seems to suggest that retreat into a Victorian mindset, as represented through the form and content of its poetry, is a short-sighted response to the present day. The hours of private introspection evoked by Arnold’s poem do not fit easily into McEwan’s Saturday, a novel in which even the present moment seems oddly passé. Yet, this chapter argues, McEwan does not effectively find a new approach to narrative to take its place.

I: “A day set out from all the rest”: The Space-Time of Saturday

Written in the wake of 9/11, Saturday is very much concerned with the threat of attack—both from abroad and from within. However, the notion that England had to constantly fortify its military position to protect herself from international enemies (or cooperate with former enemies to forestall a future attack) would have been instilled in McEwan long before 2001. McEwan spent most of his childhood on army bases. Furthermore, when McEwan was in his early twenties, something critical took place in the London suburb in which he had been born. In 1972, the Aldershot army barracks were the first target in a series of IRA bombings that were intended to avenge “Bloody
Sunday,” the shooting of Irish civilians during a civil rights protest. These bombings represented a shift in the nature of warfare commonly used against England. Increasingly, foreigners would commit terrorist acts within England with the express purpose of terrorizing a voting population.

In *Saturday*, McEwan creates a protagonist is actually nostalgic for this sort of IRA bombing. After a lengthy speculation about what might constitute the ideal Islamic state, Henry realizes that none of the terrorists involved in the attacks of 9/11 demanded the creation of such nation-state. In his mind “Only hatred is registered, the purity of nihilism. As a Londoner, you could grow nostalgic for the IRA. Even as your legs left your body, you might care to remember the cause was a united Ireland” (*S*, 34). Whatever the reader may make of Henry’s thoughts about politics, it is apparent that he mourns the loss of different political and geographic landscapes than do the characters in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Henry does not, for example, long for a time in which he might retreat into the countryside to be protected from violence. Instead, he simply is nostalgic for a time in which he could understand violence in terms of national struggles over the right to control territory.

The instability of the nation-state and the vulnerability of London to terrorist attack influence how McEwan’s narrator describes Henry’s reflections on the present moment. Although the events of *Saturday* are confined to a single day, their chronology is distorted in time. *Saturday* begins “Some hours before dawn” on Saturday, February 15th, 2003 and concludes shortly before dawn on the following day, as “morning is still dark, and it’s the coldest time now” (*S*, 289). The projection of global time in the form of time zones onto English space influences *Saturday’s* plot. The plane that threatens the
city is coming in from Lithuania, Colin Powell is on TV at the United Nations in New York as Henry prepares dinner, and a demonstration against the invasion of Iraq stops London traffic. Furthermore, far too much happens to Henry in a single day, even as he experiences it within a single time zone. After waking up sitting upright with a body that is “already in motion,” Henry sees a plane on fire, contemplates performing brain surgery, makes love to his wife, has a car accident, is beaten by thugs, plays squash, visits his mother near his suburban childhood home, drives back to the city, prepares for a party, witnesses as his wife is held at knifepoint and his daughter is nearly raped, goes to the hospital, performs emergency brain surgery on the assailant, returns home, has sex again, and then falls asleep. These excesses of incident create the sense that Henry lives in a London that is out of time, both in terms of the harried lifestyle of its inhabitants and in terms of the city’s susceptibility to violence.

Although these excesses of incident are quite different from the avoidance of plot that tends to characterize Woolf’s fiction, Saturday is still, quite consciously, a reworking of Woolf’s novel. Peter Kemp offers one of the more sustained reflections on the relationship between the two works as he explains that both are interested in the idea of “sanity shadowed by unreason” as well as “preparations for a party, the allure of the city, 

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3 Reviewers quickly noted the similarities between these two novels. For example, Michiko Kakutani writes: “Saturday reads like an up-to-the-moment, post-9/11 variation on Woolf’s classic 1925 novel Mrs Dalloway. (...) Mr. McEwan has not only produced one of the most powerful pieces of post-9/11 fiction yet published, but also fulfilled that very primal mission of the novel: to show how we—a privileged few of us, anyway—live today.” Michiko Kakutani, “A Hero with 9/11 Peripheral Vision,” The New York Times, 18 Mar. 2005. 7 Sept. 2011<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/18/books/18BOOK.html>.
intimations of ageing and mortality, medical matters and the reverberations of war.”

To further elaborate Kemp’s thesis: *Saturday* begins as Henry contemplates English space while looking out a London window; has a plot that reaches its emotional climax as the protagonist stands atop of a flight of stairs; contains a cameo appearance by the Prime Minister (Henry recalls being introduced to Blair in a private gallery during a fundraiser); investigates the relationship between contemporary medical practices and theories of human consciousness; reflects on the structure of individual memory; speculates about the necessity of war; and defines the parameters of English city, country and suburban forms of space. Furthermore, as in *Mrs. Dalloway*, these concerns are framed by Henry’s experience of two conflicting sensations: a “lark” and a “plunge.”

For Clarissa Dalloway, opening a door onto the street creates the sensation that she had “burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air.” Clarissa’s “lark” is her ability to love a London June day. It is also her ability to travel from the heart of the city to the countryside of her youth via memory without having to negotiate the spaces and times that lie in between. Such a “lark” is grounded by Clarissa’s uncanny knowledge of Septimus’ “plunge” onto Mrs. Filmer’s area railings (and her intimations of death in other forms). For Henry Perowne, opening the window onto a London morning prompts a similar exuberance—not for a rural past, but instead for an urban present. While looking down at Fitzroy Square, Henry thinks that London “is a success, a brilliant invention, a biological masterpiece—millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of the centuries, as though around a coral reef.

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sleeping, working, entertaining themselves, harmonious for the most part, nearly
everyone wanting it to work” (S, 3). If Henry’s “lark” is his ability to prosper in the urban
context, his “plunge” is related to his intimations that this context will not last. There are
in fact several “plunges” in Saturday. The first takes the form of the burning plane that
Henry sees descending from sky. As he stands at his window, Henry is reminded that “air
travel is a stock market” and that this market “could plunge.” Another involves the fall
that Henry’s assailant takes down a flight of stairs. Like Septimus, this man’s foot strikes
“a row of iron banister posts.” Yet another involves the “sudden fall” that Henry feels
after having sex with his wife. In this moment, Henry (much like Clarissa) realizes: “We
could have been killed and we’re alive.” The final one is Henry’s fall into sleep and away
from conscious thought. The narrator describes his final thought with a reference to
Joyce’s “The Dead”: “And at last, faintly, falling: this day’s over” (S, 14-15, 237, 280,
289).

Although these symbolic and notably non-fatal falls seem inconsequential in
comparison to Septimus’ violent end, they are significant to Henry, who finds little to be
satisfying or original. “Dreams don’t interest him,” the narrator registers, as Henry looks
out of his window. “That this should be real is a richer possibility” (S, 2). One way that
Henry tries to make his world seem more real is by using the language of science to
describe what he sees. At times, he thinks of London as an emergent system—a
“biological masterpiece” in which millions organize themselves without following the
guidance of a centralized command. The crowds, he imagines, are able to reason,
perceive, and intuit conditions in the external world; improve urban neighborhoods; and
create the city’s collective consciousness. At other times, Henry thinks of London as the
product of “invention” and is awed by the artists, landscape designers, engineers, and city planners who conceived the city’s layout from afar.

Regardless of whether Henry views the city from the inside or the outside, he always incorporates suburbs into his vision of greater London—something quite different from the vision of London that Woolf associates with so many of her characters. In Saturday, the sight of an airplane causes Henry to remember being a passenger and hoping to spot his house “among the immense almost beautiful orange-red sprawl” on the ground (S, 13). This perspective contrasts with that of Woolf’s Carrie Dempster, for whom the sight of a plane inspires a fantasy that fields remain “spread out” on “either side” of the city. The decentralization of London and of its city functions comforts Henry, who perceives that this diffusion will protect England from complete destruction, should a terrorist attack on the scale of 9/11 be aimed at his city. Henry puts his faith in city streets: “the self-evident fact of the streets and the people on them is their own justification, their own insurance” (S, 76). He also recognizes that these streets extend beyond London proper: “a sign on the gantry above the traffic lanes proclaims The West, The North, as though there lies, spread beyond the suburbs, a whole continent, and the promise of a six-day journey” (S, 157). Henry is comforted less by the thought of open fields than he is by open roads.

Yet Henry seldom takes advantage of the open road in his expensive car. As the narrator explains: “For months he drove it apologetically, rarely in fourth gear, reluctant to overtake, waving on right-turning traffic, punctilious in permitting cheaper cars their road space. He was cured at last by a fishing rip to north-west Scotland with Jay Strauss” (S, 75). Upon return, however, Henry mainly experiences an “unexpressed longing or
frustration, a sense that he’s denied himself an open road.” Although he speculates about what it might mean to “yearn for the unpredictable and unrestrained,” he tends to retreat into his automobile to shield himself from the banality of contemporary life: “Shamelessly, he always enjoys the city from inside his car where the air is filtered and hi-fi music confers pathos on the humblest details” (S, 28, 76). Henry cannot always remain confined in this manner. After a minor car accident, Henry stands exposed on the street. As he exchanges insurance papers, he fantasizes that he is taking part in an “urban drama.” As the narrator explains, “A century of movies and half a century of television have rendered the matter insincere” (S, 86). When Henry realizes that the accident has been staged and finds himself unable to prevail in a fist-fight, he alters his metaphor. Henry now imagines that the street is a different kind of “theatre”—the operating theatre in which he performs brain surgery. Henry assumes the role of a “droning, pedestrian diagnostician” with the leader of the group of assailants. He even promises that he can mitigate the symptoms of this man’s Huntington’s disease—something that he knows is not possible (S, 92, 98). This recourse to (hack) professionalism reveals that Henry tends to hide behind the supposed objectivity of scientific discourse when he feels most threatened.

Much as Henry uses the language of work to negotiate urban conflicts, he employs geological metaphors to understand the workings of the human brain. Henry considers the healthy brain to be a “familiar territory, a kind of homeland, with its low hills and enfolded valleys of the sulci, each with a name and imputed function, as known to him as his own house” (S, 262). This landscape of “low hills” and “enfolded valleys” is an idea of a feminized, rural England that contains the house in which he grew up. Yet
Henry is aware that the brain also contains motor and sensory “strips” that are “easy to damage, with such terrible, lifelong consequences.” During surgery, he “avoids” these areas as if they were “bad neighbourhoods in an American city” (S, 262). This “Americanization” is curious—especially since Henry, who has just been attacked in London, knows that English cities also have bad neighborhoods (and that violence spreads from one neighborhood to another). McEwan’s presentation of this metaphor seems to invite the reader to consider what differentiates an English from an American urban region. The suggestion that the “motor strip” should be avoided evokes images of American strip malls (and may, for some readers, evoke thoughts about the plight of Detroit, the Motor City). The endangered “sensory strip” suggests billboard-laden commercial avenues, such as Las Vegas’s gambling “strips” or L.A.’s Sunset Strip. The use of such metaphors indicates Henry’s antipathy towards the further development of England, especially if it proceeds along the American model. This antipathy towards development is another feature that links the voice of Saturday to the perspective of most characters in Mrs. Dalloway.

In addition to using geological metaphors to discuss the brain, Henry employs the language of neuroscience to make sense of the physical landscape. In a world where the wild is hidden from sight, Henry thinks of the natural world as having been reduced to an symbol: “a single slab of red in the western sky, almost rectangular, an emblem of the natural world, of wilderness somewhere out of sight, fades slowly as it pursues him in his rear-view mirror” (S, 173). The suburb, by contrast, is all too real and all too visible. Of the London suburb where Henry grew up, the narrator explains: “the streets of frowning, respectable two-storey houses haven’t quite shaken off their air of suddenness” and
maintain “an uneasy, provisional look” (S, 161). Henry associates these “provisional” houses with the setting in which his mother’s cognitive demise occurs: “Henry likes to think that in the misty landscape of her dementia, a sense of familiarity breaks through occasionally and reassures her.” This “sense of familiarity” is not for wilderness. Instead, it represents nostalgia for a pre-suburban landscape in which the land “revert[s] to cereal crops and grazing”—the sort of landscape remembered with nostalgia by many of Woolf’s characters (S, 161). In summary: McEwan presents the wilderness as imperceptible to the human senses. He imagines the suburbs as a space of dementia (and the locus of nostalgia for an undeveloped, but heavily cultivated vision of the natural world). In turn, he positions the city as a “biological masterpiece.” Yet he also describes the city as being a space of infection. Radio and television signals pursue Henry throughout London. Henry even worries whether it might be “possible to enjoy an hour’s recreation without this invasion, this infection from the public domain?” (S, 109). This kind of “infection” alters Henry’s neurological structure (as the narrator explains, Henry’s “nerves, like tautened strings, vibrate obediently with each news release”) and hampers his ability to think clearly (the narrator describes him as having “lost the habits of skepticism, he’s becoming dim with contradictory opinion, he isn’t thinking clearly, and just as bad, he senses he isn’t thinking independently”) (S, 185). When Woolf has the narrator of *Jacob’s Room* (1922) wonder “[w]ether we gain or not by this habit of profuse communication,” even she is not likely to have anticipated the extraordinary “variety of messages” that would bombard London a century later.5 In McEwan’s

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London, there is no shelter from such bombardment—whether attacks take the form of news releases, or just dueling voices that have become internalized in Henry’s mind.

Yet McEwan still presents Henry as being entranced by the millennial city, which appears to be an (almost) pastoral landscape from Henry’s perspective:

During the long crawl towards the lights at Gypsy Corner, [Henry] lowers his window to taste the scene in full—the bovine patience of a jam, the abrasive tang of icy fumes, the thunderous idling machinery in six lanes east and west, the yellow street light bleaching colour from the bodywork, the jaunty thud of entertainment systems, and red tail lights stretching way ahead into the city, white headlights pouring out of it. He tries to see it, or feel it, in historical terms, this moment in the last decades of the petroleum age, when a nineteenth-century device is brought to final perfection in the early years of the twenty-first; when the unprecedented wealth of masses at serious play in the unforgiving modern city makes for a sight that no previous age can have imagined. Ordinary people! Rivers of light! (172)

London produces traffic “jams,” its drivers have “bovine patience,” and car lights form a “red tail.” In a grammatical structure that echoes Clarissa’s “What a lark! What a plunge!” “Ordinary People!” become “Rivers of Light!” Perhaps the most important phrase in this passage, however, is “serious play.” McEwan implies that it requires a trick of perception (and some serious wordplay) to imagine that the millennial city is an urban farm. Furthermore, McEwan suggests that perceiving the city in “historical terms” is quite dangerous, since it involves eulogizing it as if it has already been destroyed. From this perspective, it is too late for the viewer to prevent a hypothetical future destruction.
Much like the characters in *Between the Acts*, who “stared at the view, as if something might happen in one of those fields to relieve them of the intolerable burden of sitting silent, doing nothing, in company,” Henry becomes oddly complacent about the fate of his city (*BtA*, 65). In turn, he becomes mesmerized by various flattened landscapes that he perceives through windscreens, television monitors, or the lens of an oddly detached form of anticipated memory. This flattened perspective becomes that of McEwan’s novel.

In *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Between the Acts*, Virginia Woolf relies on multi-personal representations of consciousness to create a dynamic narrative form that captures her characters’ collective experience of English space. In *Saturday*, Ian McEwan has an emotionally detached narrator recount a linear sequence of events as perceived from the perspective of a single character. In so doing, he creates a narrative form that merges the journalistic pseudo-objectivity of a BBC broadcast with the scientific quasi-certainty of much medical discourse. McEwan’s simplification of perspective may represent a response to a context in which cable and satellite technology have made it possible for many to access a steady stream of information by phone, television, and computer and, as a result, to develop a hyper-subjectivity, or near constant awareness of the thoughts of others. Yet, in practice, being bombarded with data does not usually expand individual perspective. Individuals often tune into an increasingly limited of channels and listen to voices that reaffirm positions that they already hold. Similarly, the supposed objectivity of McEwan’s narrator is not as neutral as it may seem. This becomes problematical because it is very difficult to differentiate the assumptions of Henry from those of the narrator and McEwan himself. By failing to critique Henry’s perspective, this narrator
(and the novel in which his narrative appears) tends to endorse his at times controversial
to endorse his at times controversial views on social justice, terrorism, the Iraq war, and even the arts themselves.

II: “And here we are as on a darkling plain”: McEwan’s return to “Dover Beach”

One way that McEwan may make his perspective a bit clearer is through his introduction of another intertext in this novel: Matthew Arnold’s poem “Dover Beach.”

The first time that this poem appears is during the scene in which Baxter and two other intruders enter the Perowne home, and find Henry, his wife, their two children, and his father-in-law gathering for dinner. Baxter holds a knife to Henry’s wife’s throat; orders Daisy, Henry’s daughter, to take off her clothes; and makes Daisy recite a poem from her newly released book. Following the advice of her grandfather, Daisy recites, “the one you used to say for me”—a coded reference to Arnold’s poem (S, 228). In an unlikely twist of plot, the poem’s description of English cliffs “glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay” render Baxter “suddenly elated” because they makes him think of where he grew up (S, 230-1). Baxter decides not to harm Daisy. When Henry thinks: “Who would have thought that learning poems for pocket money would turn out to be so useful?” the reader is likely to echo the question. After all, it is highly unlikely that the landscapes of an urban hoodlum’s childhood would have looked much like Arnold’s relatively unspoiled nineteenth-century beach. Indeed, the poem that Daisy recites is far more likely to remind Baxter’s memory of hearing Arnold’s poem read to him when he was at school. Baxter is therefore moved by secondary nostalgia for a mediated fantasy of English space. The irony, of course, is that Arnold’s vision of Dover Beach is not particularly consoling. If
Baxter were to think critically about the insights evoked on Arnold’s “darkling plain,” he might very well opt to rape and kill.

The poem’s presence in the novel gives rise to other problems. Even if we were to read the poem, as Elaine Hadley does, as spreading the Victorian fantasy that “a shared faith in the liberal cultivation of the self [is] in itself a good” and provides “a sort of elegy for the individual consciousness,” the poem’s elegy is for a way of thinking about consciousness that has become outdated. Hadley finds herself “taken aback” by this scene and wonders if McEwan “has offered up duct tape and plastic sheeting as a response to the unknown agents and unpredictable consequences of the new world order.” She also points out that the fantasy of Victorian liberalism—of “an abstractly embodied agency, of a cultivated self”—“was always already a political project, a response to terrorism at home and abroad that only summoned its coherence and cogency at times of crisis, and only then with meager results—subject to distractions, to bodily alienations, to ineffectualities of all sorts.”

Within the novel, McEwan makes it clear that it is violence, and not poetry, that subdues Baxter. After Henry leads Baxter to his study, he attacks him, and causes him to fall down a flight of stairs. After administering enough aid for Baxter to survive the journey in an ambulance, Henry accepts the call to return to the hospital and to operate on his own assailant. This unlikely (and quite probably illegal) situation leads to Henry’s only real moment of moral uncertainty in the novel, as he wonders whether saving Baxter’s life is crueler than allowing him to die quickly: “By saving his life in the operating theatre,” the narrator explains, “Henry also committed

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Baxter to his torture”—or slow death to incurable Huntington’s disease (5, 288). The fact that even this debate emerges from such an unlikely moment in the plot makes it difficult to take seriously.

Hillard is somewhat more forgiving, as she considers “Dover Beach” as an “always already reread intertext” that interrupts the narrative “with an urgent reminder of influence.” After demonstrating that McEwan draws attention to the multiple ways in which characters misinterpret the poem, Hillard argues that McEwan uses the scene to inspire “reflection upon past literatures and current events.” She then maintains that the “yearning for and fear of connections” described in McEwan’s novel actually echo the rhetorical strategies of “Dover Beach” (183). Yet Hillard is unsure as the relationship between “Dover Beach” and Mrs. Dalloway, Saturday’s other primary intertext. Initially she suggests that the imposition of the “Dover Beach” episode seems to “establish male authority in order to disavow feminine influence.” She argues that McEwan “with one stroke created a scene of richly layered chauvinism, in which the nation—rendered concomitantly as the female body shielded by male literary heritage—deflects an attack by forces rendered simultaneously as philistine, anarchist, and terrorist” (188). Yet Hillard immediately reconsiders this reading and suggests that the “entire third-person narration” might instead be “re-read ironically” (189). In the final analysis, she considers Saturday: “a novel by a man in which a woman recites a poem by a man that reflects a novel by a woman in which a woman recites a poem by a man” (199-201). For her, the tension between these intertexts serves as both a reminder of literary influence, and of the endless potential for misinterpretation.

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7 Hillard, “”When Desert Armies Stand Ready to Fight”” 183.
The closing lines of *Saturday* lend some credence to this reading. As Henry lies in his bed, he imagines that his body is “the size of a continent, stretching away from him down the bed—he’s a king, he’s vast, accommodating, immune, he’ll say yes to any plan that has kindness and warmth at its heart” (*S*, 279). Henry tries to quell the vertigo that his position affords him by clinging to his wife’s silk nightgown (i.e., by trusting the material). His fall seems immensely pleasurable, and as such, presents a sharp contrast to that of Woolf’s Septimus: “There’s always this, is one of his remaining thoughts. And then: there’s only this. And at last, faintly, falling; this day’s over” (*S*, 279). Yet these final lines are particularly unsettling. First, most of McEwan’s readers are unlikely to accept that Henry is a king of any territory, even the territory of his mind. Second, Henry’s fantasy that his English body ( politic) extends beyond the nation state to cover distant continents represents a form of nostalgia for a period of imperial rule that is likely to make many of McEwan’s readers uncomfortable. Although Henry believes himself to be “accommodating” and “kind,” his benevolence is related to his own feelings of being “immune” to the suffering of others. Furthermore, Henry is no “Gabriel” (the name of Joyce’s character in “The Dead,” the story to which these lines allude). He has neither the power of prophecy nor the power to signal the end of time (or the birth of new worlds). Instead, he is a man of decidedly limited vision.
Conclusion:

“A last glimpse of the land now being lost for ever”

Virginia Woolf, W. G. Sebald, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Ian McEwan have each used experiments with novelistic form to create innovative narrative topographies—textual spaces that provoke readers to reconsider how we interact with the physical and cultural landscapes in a world beyond the page. For these writers, reflecting on the landscape provides a means of considering a range of issues: the destruction of rural ways of life, whether by development or war; the dangers of pastoral sentiment, particularly when mobilized to promote militant nationalism; the violence of economic exploitation of individuals, whether they live within England or abroad; the erasure of historical, cultural, or private memory; and the potential of aesthetic representation to obscure the real, even as it aims to expose it. The vision of each of these writers is more pessimistic than optimistic. Yet these writers are not entirely without hope.

As mentioned at the start of this dissertation, it may seem anachronistic to investigate novelistic representations of the landscape of a single nation—particularly one that was, for centuries, the center of a vast empire and served as the focal point of stories that justified its existence. In its introduction, this dissertation asked why literary treatments of an English landscape might be of interest to global readers in an era when literary scholarship has been increasingly concerned with the study of “world literature” and how literary works “circulate beyond their country of origin.”¹ The answer to this question has to do, at least partially, with the relationship between imperialism and

geography. In certain ways, the diffusion of ideas related to how to design physical space is quite similar to that of narrative form. Throughout the period of empire, cities, towns, and plantations were built around the world on what we might think of as the “English” model. As such, elements of English geography were exported globally. The history and appearance of such settlements varies in diverse contexts. However, the tensions between city and country described in English fiction might still register with inhabitants of once colonial territories—particularly as these regions shift from agrarian to industrial economies. These tensions might also resonate with readers living in regions that have never been colonized by Britain, since English ideas of space were also exported via the nineteenth- and twentieth-century planning movement. The Englishman Ebenezer Howard’s concept of the “garden city” had a strong influence on French, German, and American planners as they designed twentieth-century suburbs. Similarly, the Scotsman Patrick Geddes’ concept of regional planning had a powerful effect on the American Lewis Mumford, as well as planners around the world struggling to relieve the congestion of modern cities.² This is not to suggest that other theories of urban design were not conceived independently of an exclusively “British” planning movement. Instead it is to echo Peter Hall’s assertion that the ideas of certain planners made a pronounced, and sometimes disproportionate, contribution to such conversations about place and space during the last century.

² Raymond Unwin, Barry Parker, and Frederic Osborn carried out elements of Howard’s vision in Britain. This vision was explored in France by Henri Sellier, in Germany by Ernst May and Martin Wagner, and in the United States by Clarence Stein and Henry Wright. Peter Hall, Cities of Tomorrow 8-9.
The ways that certain writers have responded to a changing English landscape has also had a disproportionate impact on international conversations related to literary fantasies of space. In *The World Republic of Letters* (1994), Pascale Casanova exposes the ways in which texts produced at the center of the world’s economic, political, and cultural system tend to be legitimized by universities, publishers, and prize committees at a greater rate than texts produced in cultures that are on the periphery of such a system.³ Romantic ideas about the rural past have been spread through the English-speaking world (and, via translation, beyond) in the form of poetic works like William Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads*, popular fiction like Thomas Hughes’ *Tom Brown’s Schoodays*, or even children’s books such as Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* or Rudyard Kipling’s *Puck of Pook’s Hill*.⁴ If Ishiguro’s Kathy H. presents a reliable case in point, some readers may associate nostalgia for a time of undisturbed reading with sentiment for the landscapes described within cherished texts. Although nostalgia holds the promise of the timeless and the familiar, it can also restrict freedom to question, or argue against, the political circumstances (and social and economic inequalities) that allowed such cherished landscapes to come into existence. Each of the writers analyzed in this dissertation adopts a distant perspective on the English landscape and (McEwan, perhaps providing the exception) regards England as a citizen of the “world” republic rather than

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of an exclusively English one. These writers make their readers aware of the relationship between literature and the cultural context in which it has been produced.

Casanova argues that “[b]y drawing up a map of the literary world and highlighting the gap between great and small literary nations, one may hope to be delivered at last from the prejudices inculcated by literary critics at the center” (354). In *Atlas of the European Novel* (1998), Franco Moretti does great work to this end. Here, he plots the geography that appears in nineteenth-century novels so as to understand the representation of “space in literature.” He then charts “literature in space,” or how the books that he studies actually circulated around the world. In *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (2005), Moretti develops his idea of “distant reading” further. Here he plots the migration of distinct genres into different cultural contexts. Moretti’s work, like that of Casanova, draws on the writing of Immanuel Wallerstein, who investigated why some regions became centers of global capitalism while others assumed a peripheral or semi-peripheral role. Moretti focuses on the structure of world-systems, rather than assuming that a text and its descriptions of place and space exist in a vacuum. The field of “literary geography” that Moretti envisions is therefore fluid and relational.5

It has not, however, been the aim of this project to draw precisely these kinds of literary maps. This paper does not plot each reference to a specific geographic locale that appears in a text (“space in literature”), nor does it track the physical circulation of texts (“literature in space”).6 Instead, it describes the ways in which several prominent

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twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers construct narrative topographies of their own and use formal experimentation to the perspective of a reading public that they increasingly recognize will live far from England.

These writers are united by their decision to take real or imagined English landscapes as their subject. For better or worse, such landscapes still figure largely in the imagination of a broad readership that includes individuals who have never set foot on English shores. As these writers construct “narrative topographies,” they do so with a particular audience in mind: the educated reader of literary fiction who (no matter where he may live or what language he may speak) is familiar with European literary culture. Borrowing a term from Ishiguro, this reader represents a particular kind of “carer”—that is to say, an individual who turns to works of fiction to understand the subtleties of the human condition and (perhaps even) to reflect on his own position in a rapidly changing geopolitical context. The ethical imperatives that these particular books present—whether they involve protecting bucolic landscapes from development, becoming more critical of how the past is represented, expanding the range of one’s compassion to include disempowered human beings and other forms of life, or negotiating how to respond to the terrorist acts of disenfranchised others—clearly will resonate the most strongly with those who feel that they occupy a privileged position in a “globalized” society. This privileged position is privileged because it holds the promise of action—to affect change or, at the very least, to change one’s own mind. Again, this raises a critical question: What might each of the authors discussed in this dissertation expect their readers to do with the insights that their books offer?
This section explores this question by commenting on an intriguing phenomenon. Each of the writers under discussion situates his or her vision of the English landscape relative to Dover—a setting that has long functioned as the symbolic edge of England and, as such, represents a place of departure from certain ideas of nationhood. (Even *Britain and the Beast*, the 1937 collection of essays decrying the destruction of rural England, opens with an image of the cliffs of Dover and closes with one of suburban rooftops.) Since the image of the cliffs of Dover is so iconic, it may not seem remarkable that each of these writers mentions it in his or her work. Yet what is notable is how often these descriptions appear in a kind of quotation mark—that is to say, as blatant or indirect allusions to Matthew Arnold’s poem, “Dover Beach.” With the exception of Sebald, who handles the idea of Dover somewhat differently, each of these writers reworks the imagery of Arnold’s poem in the context of a modern or post-modern landscape. As if testing Arnold’s argument in “The Study of Poetry,” “Dover Beach” becomes the “touchstone” against which they reconsider the quality and the purpose of their own literary efforts. Each of these writers is uneasy about (and reveals an “anxiety of influence” towards) relying on Arnold’s poem to understand his context. This anxiety becomes manifested through an increasingly ironic form of detachment.

In a recent essay on the relationship between Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, and Matthew Arnold, critic Donald L. Childs maintains that Woolf experienced a profound

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anxiety about Arnold’s influence on her writing.⁹ Childs points out that in “How It Strikes a Contemporary” (1925), Woolf rearticulates Arnold’s notion that contemporary writers should turn to “masterpieces” of the past. Woolf couches this perspective in the thoughts of Clarissa Dalloway in the short story, “Mrs. Dalloway on Bond Street.” As Childs reminds us, after recalling lines from Cymbeline, Clarissa muses that Shakespeare has passed “the test of great poetry,” while “the moderns had never written anything one wanted to read about death” (67). Yet Childs also asserts that Woolf was skeptical about turning to a male-dominated literary tradition. He maintains that this skepticism explains why Woolf deleted Clarissa’s musings about “the test of great poetry” from the novel, Mrs. Dalloway. He goes on to argue that, although Woolf may have excluded the voice of the critic Matthew Arnold from her novel, she does not exile the voice of the poet Matthew Arnold. Quoting the passage in which Clarissa repairs her torn dress, Childs writes:

“The waves draw back, and fling” of “Dover Beach” becomes “waves collect, overbalance, and fall”; “eternal note of sadness” becomes a “sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows”; “begin, and cease, and then again begin” becomes “renews, begins, collects, lets fall.” Even Arnold’s metaphor by which the sea is compared to “the folds of a bright girdle furl’d” is reflected in Woolf’s comparison of the sea to Clarissa’s sewing of her dress’s girdle. And so the short story’s “fear no more” touchstone, once embedded in an allusion to Arnold’s touchstone method of judging...

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poetry, is now embedded in an allusion to his poem. (70)

Childs reads this passage as revealing “Woolf’s difficulty in getting rid of Arnold’s voice” (70). We might therefore think of this scene as representing a return to the physical landscape of Dover, as seen from a triple remove. The first stage of this remove is that of Arnold as he couches his own retrospective thoughts on the scene in the present-tense voice of the poem’s narrator. The second stage is that of Clarissa’s memory as she recalls Arnold’s poem. The third stage is that of Woolf, who includes this memory at a certain moment of her text. We might think of Woolf’s emphasis of Clarissa’s detachment from the “rural” as offering insight into her character’s extraordinary powers of repression. As Chapter 1 has demonstrated, Clarissa constantly fantasizes about returning to country landscapes associated with her youth, particularly the gardens of Bourton. However, Clarissa was also traumatized by an encounter that took place in the country: the “horrible affair” of watching her sister Sylvia become “killed by a falling tree” before her “very eyes” (MD, 78). Clarissa, with her “atheist’s religion,” suspects that the natural world is indifferent to the suffering of individuals (MD, 78). Yet Clarissa is also a great unifier—a character who feels that she “must assemble” people together and who strives to assemble her disparate impressions of a London day into her vision (MD, 186). When Woolf describes Clarissa as reciting lines of poetry in her mind, she does not suggest that Clarissa wants to discover the rather abstract concept of truth. Instead, she portrays Clarissa as seeking an idea of reality as presented by the totalizing artistic vision of a past era. It is Clarissa’s aim to find something that “one wanted to read about death.” Woolf’s allusion to “Dover Beach” in Mrs. Dalloway exposes her concern about how literary works from past eras provide unevenly reliable instruments for
navigating the modern day.

W. G. Sebald alludes to Arnold’s poem far less directly in *The Rings of Saturn*. Rather than having a character quote lines of poetry, Sebald simply figures Dover Beach in many of the same ways as Arnold—as a site of powerlessness, loss, and despair. Unlike Arnold, who intimates that this landscape might provide a space of quiet reflection about the past, Sebald presents Dover as the locus of an insipid form of deflection. Here, faceless bureaucrats context systematically remove emblems of the past from sight. Sebald’s narrator recounts a friend’s journey from Germany to Dover as follows:

Michael was nine and a half when, in November 1933, with his siblings, his mother, and her parents, he came to England [……] Michael later wrote in his memoirs about he fears and anxieties of the family as they travelled toward the unknown, fears which came to a head in the customs hall in Dover as they looked on with horror as Grandfather’s pair of budgerigars, which had so far survived the journey unharmed, were impounded. It was the loss of the two pet birds, Michael writes, and having to stand by powerless and see them vanish forever behind some sort of screen, that brought us up against the whole monstrosity of changing countries under such inauspicious circumstances. The disappearance of those budgerigars at Dover customs marked the beginning of the disappearance of his Berlin childhood behind the new identity that he assumed little by little over the next decade. How little there has remained in me of my native country, the chronicler observes as he scans the few memories he still possesses, barely
enough for an obituary of a lost boyhood. *(RS 176-7)*

Much as “some sort of screen” divides Michael family from his grandfather’s pet birds, the Dover customs house separates his Berlin childhood from his adult identity. It is also a place of death, which occasions the writing of “an obituary.” It is not only Michael who loses something of himself at Dover. As the narrator retells Michael’s story, his voice merges with that of his friend. In this passage (as throughout the *The Rings of Saturn*) Sebald emphasizes this blurring of voices by refraining to use quotation marks to differentiate his narrator’s conjectures from the oral testimony of others (or lines from written texts). Sebald presents the “landscape” of the past as the product accretion—a layering of voices and texts that can “screen” the present moment from what has been. As Chapter Two has argued, *The Rings of Saturn* is a work in which Sebald encourages readers to parse personal memory from the layers of storytelling that may occlude it from view. This parsing involves falling into the proverbial “sinkhole” and confronting the violence of the past.

In *Never Let Me Go*, Kazuo Ishiguro also associates Dover with memory and forgetting. The first reference to Dover in this novel is an allusion to Arnold’s “Dover Beach.” Just after the clones Tommy and Kathy learn that it had never been possible for clones to “defer” donating their organs, Tommy runs into a dark, windswept pasture and screams. Kathy runs after him and they embrace:

Then I realised that he too had his arms around me. And so we stood together like that, at the top of that field, for what seemed like ages, not saying anything, just holding each other, while the wind kept blowing and blowing at us, tugging our clothes, and for a moment, it seemed like we
were holding onto each other because that was the only way to stop us
being swept away into the night. (N, 251)

Here is Arnold’s moonlit “darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and
flight”—a world that, despite seeming “To lie before us like a land of dreams,” actually
lacks “joy,” “love,” “light,” “certitude,” and “peace.” In this setting, Kathy and Tommy
understand that they can embrace only “for a moment” before they will be “swept away
into the night” (N, 251). For Tommy, being “swept away into the night” will involve
returning to his “recovery center” in Kingsfield—a place in which he and his friends
speculate:

How maybe, after the fourth donation, even if you’ve technically
completed, you’re still conscious in some sort of way; how then you find
there are more donations, plenty of them, on the other side of that line;
how there are no more recovery centres, no carers, no friends; how there’s
nothing to do except watch your remaining donations until they switch
you off. It’s horror movie stuff, and most of the time people don’t want to
think about it. (N, 256)

This particular “land of dreams” is terrifying in its isolation. Kathy describes this
“recovery centre” as not being “somewhere I’d look forward to visiting. It’s out of the
way and awkward to get to, and yet when you’re there, there’s no real sense of peace and
quiet. You can always hear traffic on the big roads beyond the fencing, and there’s a
general feeling they never properly finished converting the place” (N, 199). Kathy even
uses the word “wasteland” to describe its grounds: “The Square’s the obvious
congregating point and the few bits behind the buildings look more like wasteland. The
largest chunk, which the donors call ‘the field’, is a rectangle of overgrown weeds and thistles held in by wire-mesh fences” (N, 256). In this “wasteland” of cement and uninhabitable green space, neither love, nor language, nor the sympathy of others has the potential to console.

What is ironic (and seems to be Ishiguro’s joke in this novel) is that Kathy convinces herself that she will experience a more consoling “recovery” in a “recovery centre” that is located in Dover. Kathy endorses the Dover center because it is “well-designed and comfortable” and because its interior is covered in “gleaming white tiles” kept so clean that entering the space is “almost like entering a hall of mirrors.” Here, Dover becomes the post-modern space, *par excellence*—a setting in which, as Kathy boasts, “you don’t exactly see yourself reflected back loads of times, but you almost think you do. When you lift an arm, or when someone sits up in bed, you can feel this pale, shadowy movement all around you in the tiles” (N, 16). If Kathy ever resented being “kept in the shadows” at Hailsham, she now seeks a landscape in which such shadows constitute reality. She describes the sky above Dover as being a place of repetition, a setting in which “aerials and satellite dishes” broadcast simulacra of human behavior to a population eager to receive such a product. Kathy thinks of this setting as ideal for completing her life story, and for producing the narrative medicine that might help her “patrol” and “marshal” her pain. Using situational irony Ishiguro makes it plain that the return to “Dover” provides a dangerous, and even fatal, form of medicine.

It is a bit less clear how Ian McEwan intends his readers to understand the return to Dover in *Saturday*. As Chapter Four has already explored, McEwan creates an unlikely scene in which a recitation of Arnold’s poem stops an urban figure from rape and murder.
Critic Molly Clark Hillard has argued that the difficulty of understanding McEwan’s point, combined with the “unlikeability” of the novel, may actually be “McEwan’s entire point.” If the conflict over how to approach *Saturday* is in fact his metafictional strategy, then McEwan’s presentation of a copy of “Dover Beach” as a coda to *Saturday* (in both the original UK cloth edition of *Saturday* and in subsequent paperback editions) may provide some indication of how he hopes that his readers will move through the physical landscape of the pages of his text. For one thing, the presence of the poem seems to force it upon the reader. In an age of instant communication, almost any reader who wanted to access the poem could easily find it online. Reprinting the poem in the book seems gratuitous, unless its presence is designed to contrast the slow pace and contemplative tone of a Victorian poem with the fast-pace frenzy of McEwan’s own narrative. This juxtaposition may lead the reader to consider the speed of consumption that characterizes our era, not just of mass-produced consumer products, but also of literary texts. McEwan is quite interested in how the time of reading “maps” onto narrative space—a concern explored by Gérard Genette who famously distinguished “narrative time,” the time that passes within a story, from “discourse time,” the time required to read about it in a novel. Echoing Genette, McEwan compares the amount of time that it would take an average reader to complete *Saturday* with the amount of time that passes within the time-frame of the narrative:

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10 Hillard, “‘When Desert Armies Stand Ready to Fight’” 188.

Assuming that it takes seven or eight hours to read a medium-length novel, you are getting a sort of mapping, a ratio of one to four or five of real time, real reading time against fictional time, which is an interesting beginning of an approximation. So you could argue that that’s another form of realism, if you like, or an approach to it.¹²

In *Saturday*, McEwan describes a twenty-four-hour timeframe in 289 pages. Using McEwan’s “ratio,” twenty-four hours of fictional time compress into five hours of reading time. Furthermore, the fast-pace of *Saturday* creates the effect that it impossible to process, believe, and (perhaps even to take seriously) the incidents and insights contained therein. McEwan’s engages in a narrative strategy that is the opposite of the modernists, Joyce and Woolf. In *Ulysses*, Joyce describes a 24-hour time span in over 600 pages, thus creating the effect that he is blowing linear time outward. Woolf creates a similar sensation using different means. Although *Mrs. Dalloway* is only 194-pages long, the twelve hours described therein unfold slowly. As Woolf presents an instantaneous event, like a car backfiring, from the perspective of multiple characters, she encourages the reader to ponder the same instant again and again—thus creating the impression that each moment might contain an eternity. If Joyce and Woolf use narrative to decompress linear time, McEwan uses it to create the effect that make it seem to go faster. Much as the hours of private introspection evoked by “Dover Beach” do not fit comfortably into McEwan’s *Saturday*, the “hours” of *Mrs. Dalloway* (and of *Ulysses*) do not fit into this post-modern novel.

This brings us to a reprise of the question: What might these authors expect their readers to do after recognizing their own displacement from geographic and literary landscapes associated with the past? By way of conclusion, this chapter will briefly consider how each writer in question orchestrates the reader’s departure from his or her text. In the final pages of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa’s former suitor, Peter Walsh, finds himself transfixed by the “terror,” “ecstasy,” and “extraordinary excitement” of seeing a middle-aged Clarissa stand atop the flight of stairs (*MD*, 194). Peter’s vision of Clarissa (like Clarissa’s vision of England) is tinged with nostalgia for youth and possibility—and for the English countryside. Yet the final piece of spoken dialogue in this novel, Peter Walsh’s “I will come,” evokes quite a different reality, as it asserts Peter’s decision to visit Sally Seton in her suburban home outside Manchester. While Clarissa may continue to be comforted by visions of “white dawn in the country” she will do so with an ailing heart. Peter, by contrast, will move forward into an expansive but unpredictable, future. Such, it would seem, is the path that Woolf imagines, albeit uncomfortably, for her readers.

In *Between the Acts*, Woolf creates characters who project anxieties about development and the coming war onto bungalows near a country estate. Woolf sets the final scene of her final novel in a house that has “lost its shelter.” Far from representing the English pastoral, this setting represents a post-apocalyptic wilderness in which all signs of civilization have been destroyed—except, of course, the modern couple struggling to find meaning within it. Although Woolf leaves these characters on the brink of speaking, she refrains from intimating what they will discuss or what form this speech will take. Instead, she places the burden of “what we must remember; what we would
forget” onto her readers—and onto a new generation of writers—individuals who are left to struggle to determine how landscapes associated with England’s rural past (and, by extension, other fantasies of rural space) might prevent them from engaging in a clearer form of vision.

In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald takes up this charge. Here he creates a narrator who imagines that walking through Norfolk and Suffolk offers the promise of rest and might provide a way “of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work” (*RS*, 3). What this narrator discovers in the “thiny populated countryside” is not fulfillment, but rather the “paralyzing horror” of being “confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place” (*RS*, 3). As Sebald closes his work with an image of a soul taking his leave from landscapes associated with the past, he leaves his reader in an uncertain purgatory—a position that he suggests might only be escaped by relinquishing one’s hold first on the landscape and then on the text itself.

Kazuo Ishiguro takes an approach in which he creates a narrator who is “always on the lookout” for versions of the landscape that she knows are “impossible” and uses stories about a rural past to distract human clones from their grisly fate. Rather than being a place where a narrator might encounter the Real, in this novel the English landscape becomes a symbol of artifice and deflection. That said, Kathy’s reading of the symbolic function of the English landscape does evolve (somewhat) over the course of her narrative. Where once she believed that Norfolk might be a “lost corner,” or the site of perpetual return, she comes to think of it as representing the “guilty secret” that she once had hope. The fact that Ishiguro concludes his novel with Kathy indulging in one last
fantasy about space is telling. As Kathy describes a daydream in which her Tommy returns to life in a Norfolk field, she boasts that her fantasy “never got beyond that—I didn’t let it.” However, this fantasy already has had its effect. Whether Kathy realizes it or not, her dream of English space sedates her just enough to get back in her car and “drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be” (N, 263). Kathy hopes that this ideal “wherever” will be the “recovery centre” in Dover—a setting that she associates with artifice and deflection and in which she plans to spend her time fine-tuning the story she has told herself, and her “caring” audience about the past.

Ian McEwan is also interested in expanding his reader’s perspective on the symbolic function of the English landscape. In Saturday, his narrator presents rural England as an unreal space—one that his protagonist considers as being a mere “emblem” of the natural world. While McEwan’s narrator uses pastoral tropes to describe millennial London, the city, not the country, becomes the principal object of nostalgia. Like Woolf, Sebald, and Ishiguro, McEwan closes his novel with an image of giving in to physical and mental exhaustion and departure—the loss of coordinates and a final descent into the oblivion of sleep.

As pessimistic as each of these writers may seem to be, each holds out the hope that works of literature—through their power to describe the workings of human consciousness and to contextualize individual thoughts—cannot just alter the habits of mind of their readers, but also affect their actions. If, as Schama writes, landscape must be experienced as “the work of the mind” before it can “be a repose for the senses,” these writers hold out hope that, through literature, they might alter not only the understanding of space, but also the contours of place itself. “Narrative Topography” has argued that the
symbolic function of the English landscape has shifted in literary fiction of the past century from figuring as a site of repose to one of stasis. The novels under discussion demonstrate that each writer, while resorting to the perhaps flawed recourse of describing the English landscape, presents a compelling narrative that raises questions and compels thought, while still failing to providing the reader with a sense of security or lasting “shelter.”
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