Forms of Phenomenology in 20th-Century Prose: A Dialectical Examination

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation begins as an attempt to conceive of a throughline for 20th-century prose without reference to modernism and postmodernism. This is taken to be especially necessary given the ways in which the modernism/postmodernism framework has failed to account for various trends, but, for the purposes of this dissertation, most especially autofiction. The dissertation does not commence at the beginning of the 20th century, but at its end, also extending into the 21st. In my attempt to understand how Handke and Knausgaard come to write as they do in genealogical terms, the dissertation goes back to the beginning of the 20th century and offers a narrative of how, throughout 20th-century prose, phenomenology has been present in a variety of forms –or has at the very least been a tenable mode of critical analysis for that literature, as many critics assent.

What is perhaps of special note in this dissertation is the way in which I allow the typological paradigm of each chapter to deconstruct itself. It begins with a comparative study of Peter Handke and Karl Ove Knausgaard and their autofiction in the first chapter. In the context of the analysis of Handke's bibliography in the first chapter, I show how the properly Heideggerian phenomenological quality of his middle period of work soon gives way to the prolix and the self-referential in his late novels. In the second chapter, a substantial engagement with scholars' attempts to frame Marcel Proust and Louis-Ferdinand Céline as Merleau-Pontian phenomenologists instead becomes an analysis of the ways in which they fail to fall in line with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body. In the third chapter, I attempt to account for how

the depiction of an excess of worldly phenomena in “chaotic” novels by Joseph McElroy, Alexander Goldshtein, Thomas Pynchon, and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz malfunctions the text of these novels. This analysis proceeding with reference most especially to Martin Heidegger and Fredric Jameson. The final chapter of the dissertation shows what happens when the ostensibly phenomenological writers I am treating attempt to order the phenomena of the world as it is (rather than as it ought to be) into a Hegelian Geist. Even before this chapter, the ways in which Hegel’s dialectical phenomenology interrupts and interferes with phenomenology as such, are a leitmotif of the dissertation. In the fourth chapter, I find that Hegelian idealism becomes a radically negative doctrine when its method is applied to the horrors of the 20th century. Writers like Vladimir Sorokin, Andrei Platonov, J.G. Ballard, Samuel Delany, and Michael Lentz are brought to bear in this portion of the text.

Finally, the attempt to erect phenomena up into a new Geist that ends up being so Abject (in the sense of Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*) is shown to necessitate the return to autofiction performed by Handke and Knausgaard in the first chapter. Proust and Céline’s retreat from the grand narratives of the 19th century giving way to an even more reduced retreat at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st.. This dissertation does not finally insist on phenomenology as a vital form of criticism.

“That is Mr. Osmond’s pleasantry; I decide nothing,” said Madame Merle, smiling still. “I believe you have a very good school, but Miss Osmond’s friends must remember that she is meant for the world.”

“That is what I have told monsieur,” sister Catherine answered. “It is precisely to fit her for the world,” she murmured, glancing at Pansy, who stood at a little distance looking at Madame Merle’s elegant apparel.

“Do you hear that, Pansy? You are meant for the world,” said Pansy’s father.

Henry James,
The Portrait of a Lady

“Will it end? Will it end?”

Michael Gira (Swans), “Birthing”

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Thanks and apologies (more the latter than the former) are due to my beloved wife Ecem, who, between 2018 and 2022, had to listen to me talk about Hegel and Heidegger far more than any woman should ever have to listen to a man prattle on about such matters…

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…

INTRODUCTION

"Knowing is contingent insofar as it is something other than the object."

G.W.F. Hegel, from Phenomenology of Spirit

It is more or less obvious that aesthetically cutting-edge 20th-century novels are rather less plot-driven than their 19th-century forebears. They were also produced in the century of the image—of photography, motion pictures, and television. Perhaps, visuality and the perceived object play a commensurately larger role within 20th-century novel as a result of the preeminence of cinema, television, and photography. Here, I think of the Hungarian novelist Péter Nádas's claim to an interviewer that "Hollywood screenwriters had [an enormous impact] on the expectations of New York publishers in the '30s, and … these expectations shaped the American novel."[1] However, Nádas understates the impact cinema may have also had on his native European novel, just as increased sexual freedoms and the omnipresence of pornography, a form of image parallel to and distinct from cinema, changed the way the body and its myriad functions are depicted in all of 20th-century prose.

Theories of modernism and postmodernism *do* offer certain explanations of these aesthetic trends, but no narrative that would weave them all into a single typology. In thinking of criticism treating the vast field of 20th-century literature, theories of modernism and postmodernism take up more than what is perhaps their fair share of the scholarly space. It often seems as if defining a work as exemplary of one of the two movements is an end unto itself, even as those terms have been increasingly denatured and stripped of meaning. As the slicing and

[1] Davis Kovacs, "Péter Nádas," *Bomb*, July 1, 2007.

dicing of defining proceeds apace, the works contained under the umbrellas of each term become fewer and fewer until the scholar is left with only a dog-eared copy of *Gravity's Rainbow* or *Blue Lard* and an over-xeroxed print-out of "The Hollow Men". Many questions about the nature of 20th-century prose in general—from one end of the century to the other—are made invisible by the endless repetition of a single binary (or even the deconstruction thereof).

The questions I ask about image, object, body, spatiality, and the preeminence of description over *fabula* (to follow Viktor Shklovsky's dichotomy between *syuzhet* and *fabula*) bring together a variety of novels: texts typically seen as modernist or postmodern and exemplary of 20th-century literary development, as well as other texts one might term their "black-sheep brethren," which scholars are often unsure of how exactly to theorize. For example, autofiction is rarely ever linked up with the defining currents of 20th-century fiction and is instead just bracketed as a parallel set of texts. It is my intention to outline a tradition present throughout the entire history of 20th-century prose that can be usefully explored and elucidated by way of a contemporaneous philosophical movement: phenomenology. Whereas the fundamental contention of critics who focus on modernism and postmodernism is that the two movements offer opposed responses to the crisis of modernity, one in the wake of WWI and the other in the wake of WWII and the Holocaust, phenomenology is a singular reactionary move back to what is perceived to be a originary and elemental way of theorizing existence. The literature that reflects this theoretical move can be tracked in a single dialectical or typological procession without any sort of twinned rupture.

In the first half of the 20th century, phenomenologists, urged forth by the incomprehensibility of the world they found themselves living in and its seeming incommensurability with logocentric philosophy coming out of the Enlightenment, made the

reactionary move of attempting to theorize the simplest and more elementary elements of human experience. No more would all that is real have to be seen as rational, as idealists posited before; now, phenomenologists claimed, everything simply *was*—and it had always been so. Here, we might think of Husserl's central maxim about phenomenology: that it is a field of study that allows philosophers to go "back to the things themselves."[2] This should not be taken to mean a "focus on things themselves" as it might be developed in a book of material dialectics by Lenin or a neurobiological explanation of consciousness by a New Atheist. Instead, phenomenology is a discipline that deals with "things" as they *appear* to humans within a totality of meaning made up of other "things." Husserl's slogan is a willful polemic with Kant, contradicting the earlier philosopher's fundamental claim that "Dinge an sich" or "things in themselves" are entirely inaccessible to human consciousness, that they are *mere* phenomenal representations of noumena—the latter concept naming something like Platonic forms. Husserl's claim and the driving idea behind all of phenomenology is that phenomena *are* the things themselves. Phenomenology posits that there is nothing lacking in the way they appear to us and philosophers should not act as if there were a secret realm hidden away behind how things appear, as if mere appearance were intentionally deceptive.[3] In the context of this broader intellectual movement, Husserl focuses on intentionality within a "life-world" and Heidegger claims that humans (or "Dasein" as he defined us) cannot be definitionally unstuck from the world—that we have an inherent understanding of the field of existence and are able to interact with it with intuitive prowess.

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[2] Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations* (Routledge, 2015), 168.

[3] A bad philosophical habit of mind they see as coming all the way back from, not just Plato, but from Descartes' "demon deceiver."

A phenomenological account of literature, then, would have to show books also "returning to the things themselves," would have to show authors dealing with the world of objects as it appears to us in all of its head-spinning variety without any sort of appeal to a noumenal "superstructure" lying behind it. From that perspective, then, would the 20th-century movement away from plot and narrative not appear as a rejection of the noumena that order the phenomena of existence? And would not the primary mover of such a text have to be the image? This will have to be proven or disproven over the course of my study. A Hegelian phenomenological subtext suggesting that noumena and phenomena are brought together by the "middle term" of human consciousness and society will also be legible in one chapter in particular. Though philosophically imprecise, Terry Eagleton's definition of phenomenology—that it was "a new philosophical method which would lend absolute certainty to a disintegrating civilization"[4] in the wake of World War I—should also not be ignored, as it sets the stage for my own treatment of the political implications of phenomenology's application to 20th-century literature.

This is far from the first phenomenological engagement with literature. Closer to the middle of the 20th century and in the decades that followed, such studies were rather fashionable. What did these scholars mean when they used the term phenomenology? Robert Magliola's enticingly titled 1977 work *Phenomenology and Literature: An Introduction* is exemplary of the essential structure often used by scholars during this era. The first half of the book is purely philosophical, a comparative study of Heidegger, Husserl, Ingarden, and Drufrenne, whereas the second treats older literary examples by way of a framework Magliola calls "phenomenological criticism." The questions he asks through this paradigm in the second

[4] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1996), 47.

half of the book are: "What is meaning? When a text can present several senses, which is the valid sense? What does one do in the face of multiple meanings? What if a word projects contradictory senses?"[5] This is immediately reminiscent of Husserl's theorization of intentive acts and Magliola's questions seem almost indistinguishable from a kind of "reader-response" criticism. In fact, Husserl's theorization of the act of reading is a lot like reader-response criticism, theorizing it as an attentive, or directional, act that engages with the "phenomenon" of the text.

Such an approach will be alien to my method. I am instead concerned with how phenomena are rendered *within* the text. Furthermore, the criticisms levelled at Magliola's book (i.e. that he treated no contemporary literary examples) can also be ascribed to many other books of cutting-edge philosophy that treat rather conservative works of literature that are not contemporaneous with said philosophy's emergence and development, works by authors like Mann, Melville, James, and Gogol. Roman Ingarden's phenomenological treatises *The Literary Work of Art* and *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* are also philosophical treatments of the notion of intentive or directional acts of reading in which the content of the books being read is of almost no interest. Beyond that, books like Richard Zaner's *The Way of Phenomenology: Criticism as a Philosophical Discipline* follow the same method of "phenomenological literary criticism" as telegraphing attentive acts and engagements with text. This is what

[5] Robert Magliola, *Phenomenology and Literature: An Introduction* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1977), ix.

"phenomenology" as such has tended to mean when it has been made use of in literary studies, though the method is vanishingly rare today.

Another school of criticism often viewed as relevant with regard to phenomenology is the Geneva School, a group of critics associated with the University of Geneva active mostly in the 1940s and 50s and sometimes called the "Critics of Consciousness," as Sarah Lawall does in her book *Critics of Consciousness: The Existential Structures of Literature*. Lawall explicitly links the practices engaged in by this school with phenomenology, as does J. Hillis Miller. In Miller's intellectual-history article of them, he writes that they viewed literature as:

> neither an objective structure of meanings residing in the words of a poem or novel, nor the tissue of self-references of a 'message' turned in on itself, nor the unwitting expression of the hidden complexes of a writer's unconscious, nor a revelation of the latent structures of exchange or symbolization which integrate a society. Literature, for them, is the embodiment of a state of mind.[6]

Broadly speaking, these critics are anti-formalists focusing not on the reader's state of mind, but on the writer's, even as they endeavor to avoid engaging in biographical criticism. However, the work of Georges Poulet, one of the critics belonging to this school, doesn't seem to fit neatly into this definition. His book *Proustian Space* is a deeply important predecessor to this project, as it telegraphs the way Proust designs his reader's experience of space in *A la recherche du temps perdu* [*In Search of Lost Time*] (1913-1927). Drawing on phenomenology, Poulet treats Proust as a designer of aristocratically elegant, stunningly slow textual "video games"—this latter medium being my own spatial metaphor for how phenomenological prose might operate. One of the ironic contentions of Poulet's book is that, even though Proust's cycle is most renowned for its

[6] J. Hillis Miller, "The Geneva School: The Criticism of Marcel Raymond, Albert Béguin, Georges Poulet, Jean Rousset, Jean-Pierre Richard, and Jean Starobinski," *The Critical Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (Winter 1966): 302–21.

engagement with time and memory, one of his most remarkable aesthetic innovations is the way he depicts space—an innovation that might be better understood by way of phenomenology.

Eagleton's definition of phenomenological criticism is based almost entirely on the work done by the Geneva School, as he writes that "phenomenological criticism aims instead at a wholly 'immanent' reading of the text, totally unaffected by anything outside it. The text itself is reduced to a pure embodiment of the author's consciousness: all of its stylistic and semantic aspects are grasped as organic parts of a complex totality."[7] However, Eagleton is then somewhat overbroad in his application of phenomenology to the Russian Formalists in addition to the Geneva School, claiming that phenomenology's treatment of objects as well as our perception of and engagement with them influenced the Formalists' "bracketing off" of the text, as the New Critics would also later do. This reveals a common trend within "phenomenological" criticism: it tends to either take the text as an object within the world, a phenomenon that the reader engages with, and map out the directional act of the reader's reading, or it looks at the writer's psychological state while they were engaged in the process of the inventive act of writing. As such, when critics refer to their work as "phenomenological" criticism, they have historically been working within the furrows dug out by Husserl and Ingarden after him.

One exception to this rule is phenomenologist Maurice Natanson's book about literature, *The Erotic Bird*, a work of "phenomenological criticism" proper that engages with the ways literature is able to shed light onto often ignored regions of daily life. Natanson asks "is there any way of avoiding an exposition of phenomenology [in prose], or repeating what has been said dozens of times?", then answers his own question, writing "a way of proceeding recommends itself in the example of everyday experience. Instead of expounding a phenomenology *of* the

[7] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1996), 51.

mundane, I will examine the phenomenology to be found *in* the mundane."[8] He holds up Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" as a striking example of an author showing *what is to be found* in the mundane. For Natanson, literature can light up what is "hidden from consciousness" but also right before our very eyes. Natanson's book is an important forerunner to this project, especially insomuch as the notion that literature can treat phenomena often hidden from consciousness lines up neatly with what will be defined as the "state of exception" here. However, the line between banal and uncanny phenomena Natanson draws—and seems to wish to blur—is poorly defined and the works he treats by Tolstoy, Kafka, Beckett, and Mann are rather more aesthetically conservative than his philosophical ideas. I intend to do the opposite: to map aesthetically radical literature by way of phenomenology.

Moving beyond phenomenological criticism as such, when scholars make use of the philosophies of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, both phenomenologists even more eminent than Husserl, their studies do not tend to be about "phenomenology and literature" as such, but about literature and the specific philosopher in question. Literary studies dealing with Heidegger tend to depart from notions of phenomenology proper with special flair. The reason for this is the "Kehre," or "turn," that occurred halfway through his career. In *Being and Time*, his most important work, but written when he was relatively young, Heidegger maps out the basic structures of everyday "Being," attempting to destroy the entire history of western metaphysics that had, according to him, so clouded the vision of all philosophers. After the "Kehre", however, he began to write almost Romantic and arguably fascistic treatments of nationhood, exegeses of

[8] Maurice Natanson, *The Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 14.

artistic practice, and luddite screeds.[9] Heidegger's text that has had the widest impact in literary criticism is "The Origin of the Work of Art." In that piece, he theorizes the artist as a sort of folk hero who illuminates the "clearing of Being" for the "Volk."

Indeed, literary criticism dealing with Heidegger falls almost entirely into two camps: the "artist illuminating the clearing of Being" camp and the "Destruktion" camp. Critics often treat poetry through the former paradigm and are most interested in proselytizing their own critical method with the latter—not necessarily even with reference to phenomenology. For instance, in *Heidegger and Criticism: Retrieving the Cultural Politics of Destruction*, William Spanos details the revelations of Heidegger's Nazi past before analyzing why his work is still valuable for critics and pitting him against New Critics and Structuralists. For Spanos, a German, the ultimate metaphor for phenomenology in literature was his own experience digging for corpses in the rubble of Dresden—perhaps not the most widely applicable model. Like Spanos's work, Paul Bové's *Destructive Poetics* falls into the "Destruktion" camp, showing how every poet worth being read "destroys" the aesthetic models of all their forebears. There is little difference between Bové's ideas and Bloom's in *The Anxiety of Influence*. In a final accounting, the former has very little to do with Heidegger. Both David Halliburton's *Poetic Thinking: An Approach to Heidegger* and Gerald Bruns's *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language* deal with Heidegger's ideas on poetry set forth after the "Kehre." They show how the language of poetry illuminates the world and, in the latter book, Bruns places Heidegger into an "Orphic" tradition, one that is entirely focused on how language engages with the world, whereas the "Hermetic" tradition he also follows *denies* its connection to the world. The literature treated in studies belonging to both

[9] Some phenomenologists even claim that nothing Heidegger wrote about the first half of *Being and Time* should be considered phenomenology, as it all merely mines a richly irrational Nietzschean vein of thought.

camps tends to be a conservative selection. However, an element of the "destructive" camp will be at play in this project, as I attempt to construct an alternate theory of 20th-century prose that ignores distinctions between modernism and postmodernism.

Literary criticism that makes use of Merleau-Ponty's work is more properly phenomenological than Heideggerian criticism. Merleau-Ponty is essentially a *reformer* of Heidegger's philosophy; he adds the human body into the detailed phenomenological exegesis of existence laid out in the first half of *Being and Time*. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy clarifies that "for most of his career, Merleau-Ponty focused on the problems of perception and embodiment as a starting point for clarifying the relation between the mind and the body, the objective world and the experienced world, expression in language and art, history, politics, and nature."[10] In books like *Merleau-Ponty's Poetic of the World: Philosophy and Literature*, a compilation of essays by several scholars, Merleau-Ponty's legacy with regard to 20th-century prose is worked out in a way that proceeds directly out of the phenomenologist's own work. Indeed, as is affirmed in the volume's abstract, "the poetic of Merleau-Ponty is, inseparably, a poetic of the *flesh* (poetic of the body and desire), a poetic of *mystery* (which is not predominantly what is hidden, but what expresses itself inexhaustibly), and a poetic of the *visible* in its relation to the invisible."[11] The way the body itself acts as a phenomenon, as well as the site upon which external phenomena act, is legible in the works of 20th-century writers like Genet, Nádas, and especially Proust, who is of foundational significance for Merleau-Ponty. In his study of Merleau-Ponty, Lovisa Andén writes that, in his own philosophy, "through a reading

[10] Ted Toadvine, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2019 edition, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/merleau-ponty/.

[11] Galen Johnson et al., eds., *Merleau-Ponty's Poetic of the World: Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 8.

of Proust's work, [Merleau-Ponty] discusses how the literary writer makes his experience expressive by means of a stylization of what is experienced. Hence, literature expresses perception through an enhancement of the expressiveness that it already contains."[12] In this project, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological treatment of the body will be expanded out to encompass Céline, Sorokin, Nádas, and others. To wit, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy allows for the body to be treated as a source of both lengthy sensual exquisiteness and profane excrescence.

This has been a brief rendering of the preexisting pool of literary criticism dealing with phenomenology into which this project dives. While I have laid out quite a few methods and approaches I will *not* be engaging with, there is a collage of methods to be assembled from this hodge-podge that approximates my own. At times, the selection of books at hand will be a tug-of-war between Heideggerian and Merleau-Pontian phenomenologies, a battle between a non-teleological notion of the body—a sort of long-take tracking shot of existence—and a runic vision of Existenz that is certainly Romantic and arguably fascistic; this would be the binary that comes the closest to structuring the selection of texts, but focusing only on that would be a distortion of the vast field of 20th-century prose and not too different from the sins I ascribe to critics who write about modernism and postmodernism.[13] Like the phenomenal realm itself, my typology will occasionally be jarring. This is no accident. While I do not engage with notions of readerly intention or authorial psychological state in a Husserlian mode, I will be engaged in an

[12] Lovisa Andén, "Literature and the Expressions of Being in Merleau-Ponty's Unpublished Course Notes," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 50, no. 3 (2019): 208–19.

[13] This non-teleological/phenomenological vision of existence precludes the inclusion of a great many existentialist texts, which operate on the principle of Sartre's misinterpretation of Heidegger: for phenomenology, existence doesn't precede essence—existence IS essence. Interestingly, *Nausea* is a slow tracking shot of bodily existence, as it preceded much of Sartre's philosophical work and his *existentially trite* trilogy about the French Resistance.

act of Heideggerian "Destruktion" by painting over the prevailing binary that structures criticism on 20th-century prose. Furthermore, I aim to challenge works of philosophical literary criticism that treat *old-hat* 19th-century literature through a cutting-edge 20th-century phenomenological lens. Indeed, an exegesis of phenomenology in 19th-century literature is possible, it merely yields different results, as, in the texts I treat, the balance between narrative and description laid out by Lukács in his 1933 essay "Narrate or Describe?" shifts in dramatic favor of description during the 20th century. Most importantly, the novels themselves will lead the charge in these analyses and the philosophy and theory will follow. All of the chapters are most informed and directed by deep readings of long (sometimes very long!) passages from the books. My reading of Handke's bibliography is most significant in that regard; I advocate for thorough engagements with broad swaths of texts before the "superstructural allure" of philosophy is allowed to have its day in the sun. From that perspective, the critical bodies of work on each author are also of enormous importance and are made abundant reference to.

In the broadest of terms, just as humans encounter phenomena *within* the world, so too would the reader of phenomenological prose have to encounter phenomena *within* the text. I hope to hew out a vision of phenomenological prose capacious enough to contain 1. a textual experience in which reader is plunged into text as if into video game and encounters various objects, images, and phenomena *therein*, 2. texts that act as catalogues of sensuous, lengthy, banal, and obscene phenomena that have historically been excluded from literature—especially as regards the body,[14] and 3. a pinch of Hegelian phenomenological salt, which suggests that the integral of *all* phenomena taken together approximates something like the noumenal realm (or

[14] Here, I think of Vladimir Sorokin cheekily asking an interviewer why Tolstoy doesn't describe how Natasha Rostova "pisses" (Cf. «Россия, это снег, водка и кровь», *Аргументы и факты*, 5 Dec. 2001).

Geist). However, the Geist the phenomena of 20th-century texts tend to bricolage together is an obscene, contingent, and desacralized "spirit" that would make Hegel blush or vomit. The only iterations of phenomenology mentioned in this introduction that are entirely alien to the project are the "reader-response" mode and "what was the writer thinking?" conjectures. Otherwise, my conception of phenomenology and the method by which I theorize the texts will be diverse and open-ended enough to prevent me from shooting myself in the philosophical foot before I've even set out.

The **first chapter**, entitled "A Naive Reading of Peter Handke's Phenomenological Affect and Karl Ove Knausgaard's Failure to Imitate It", begins with a description of a late 20th-century and early 21st-century prose aesthetic: autofiction written in incredibly spare prose. It also describes how critics and scholars have had trouble coming to terms with it. In Peter Handke's later novels and Karl Ove Knausgaard's epic *My Struggle* (2009-2011), descriptions of everyday life, of writerly routine, of sex, and of the narrator's perceptive process are laid out in simple, unadorned prose. The texts are often repetitive and, in that respect, differ from forms of minimalism that are not merely concerned with paring down the complexity of the clause and the sentence, but also the paragraph and the word count. Knausgaard's books in particular are marked by the extreme contrast between the modesty of the sentences and the megalomaniacal sweep of the 4,000 pages they make up, which allow the reader to live out vast swathes of Knausgaard's life from the first-person perspective, as it were. Handke's prose is more abstract, often getting lost in the images and objects that surround his narrators. The *New York Times* review of *My Year in No-Man's Bay* describes the book as "one carefully observed image after another expanding into a cinematically eternal present tense […] in a sense, then, Handke's

novel is an argument for the superiority of film to the novel."[15] Though this introduction suggests that it is cinema that will provide the template for an analysis of Handke's use of images, it is actually Ezra Pound's Imagism that ends up doing so—especially given that "the immediate technical characteristics of Imagist theory [are] metaphor, objectivism (simple, concrete statement), and visuality."[16] A complete analysis of the development of Handke's work in three stages (the sort of analysis that no critic or scholar has ever done before) allows the reader to understand what strain of Handke's project Knausgaard was taking forward in his own work. Handke only comes to the incredibly bare iteration of his idiom that is so inspiring to Knausgaard after some rather baroque experimentation (and sometimes with an antique aftertaste…).

This chapter is somewhat critical of Knausgaard's agonistic misprision of Handke's method and privileges Handke's engagement with the phenomenology of the worlds of his texts over Knausgaard's attempts to do the same. Both Knausgaard and Handke will be seen to be engaged in a process of Heideggerian literary Dekonstruktion that strips away much of the ornamentation from literary depictions of the world and zeroes in on the spatiality and routines of everyday life. In their bare and sometimes plain-spoken prose styles, these authors return to something like an elemental iteration of Being, forcing the reader to experience all the banal details of the world through text. One might humorously imagine these writers as designers of the world's most *ordinary* textual video games because the spatiality of the everyday is so important to them. At the same time, this chapter suggests, Knausgaard adds the body into

[15] Lee Siegel, "The Plot Never Thickens," *The New York Times*, October 25, 1998.

[16] William Skaff, "Pound's Imagism and the Surreal," *Journal of Modern Literature* 12, no. 2 (1985): 187.

Handke's work much as Merleau-Ponty added the body into Heidegger's philosophy, but I eventually come to the conclusion that there are fundamental differences between the two authors' bodies of work that make Knausgaard phenomenologically inert and Handke phenomenologically fertile. Finally, the chapter asks what the literary precedents that laid the groundwork for these writers throughout the 20th century might have been, which is what sends the dissertation back all the way to the beginning of the previous century.

After the in medias res opening of the first chapter and the ensuing conceptual exegesis, the **second chapter**, entitled "That Which is Mediated and That Which is Not," returns to the first half of the 20th century with a comparison of the autofictions of Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Marcel Proust in terms of their visions of sensuousness and the body, but also their descriptions of how the body passes through the time of the everyday and history, the latter of which is hidden away behind the banality of daily life. I focus on the translation of phenomenological sensory experience into mediated Hegelianism in *In Search of Lost Time* and the alternately self-aggrandizing and hateful biases that fill the self-flagellating memoir of Céline's final trilogy detailing his time as a *collaborateur* at the end of World War II. Though both authors bear analysis through a phenomenology of the body as theorized by Merleau-Ponty, I end up theorizing Proust's aesthetic vision as a phenomenology of bodily *longueurs* that is hidden away by his mania for comparison and reference, thus eventually making his work more Hegelian than phenomenological. Spatiality also plays an important role in Proust's descriptions of various locales, Lukács's scale having tipped well over to the side of description to the detriment of narration—but, again, his sense of spatiality is eventually hidden away by referentiality, by mediation. I come to contend that Proust is more like the void-denizens of Henry James's relentlessly abstract *The Sacred Fount* (1901) than he is a true phenomenologist. Céline is

certainly more phenomenological given his obsession with the bodily state of exception, those areas of human biology that have historically been excluded from literature (also keeping in mind that Céline actually was a doctor), but his phenomenology is also more teleological than a true philosopher might wish, which is problematized, especially given that his telos is always hate, rage, and disgust.

Differences aside, it is undeniable that Proust and Céline do both lay the groundwork for Handke and Knausgaard in their aesthetic projects, which seem to operate on the notion that, in the context of a modern era that is both enormous and incomprehensible, the author must return to their own self and write *only what they know*. This is also the principle at play in phenomenology as a whole, which aims to erase the complex theorizing of Western philosophy and focus on the most basic and ineffable areas of existence. Despite the reactionary turn of only focusing on their own lives, both Proust and Céline end up commenting on the grand narratives of European history through the prism of their own experiences. The question of how Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body might intersect with history is the further focus of the final portion of the second chapter, which deals with *Párhuzamos történetek* [*Parallel Stories*] (2005) by Péter Nádas. This novel is massively long and collapses the opposition between Céline and Proust, as it engages in a bodily phenomenology of lengthy exception: Nádas depicts many famous moments in Hungarian history, but doesn't describe the historical events unfolding at all, focusing instead on phenomena like marathon sex acts (one of which takes up about 200 pages) and unpleasant and lengthy bowel movements. The body completely blots out grand narratives in both long-winded and obscene fashion. Also of interest in this chapter is Lydia Ginzburg's *Записки блокадного человека* [*Blockade Diary*] (1984). Though the main character is a man, Ginzburg's novel is a phenomenological work of semi-autofiction describing a body living

through the Siege of Leningrad. An appeal to Winfried Menninghaus's *Disgust* in this chapter will help to clarify how my abject treatment of the body has a different focus than Merleau-Ponty's.

Moving outwards from the self and the body, the two primary realms of interest in the second chapter, the **third chapter**, entitled "An Excessive Phenomenological Affect: Symphonies of Worldhood and Unreality," asks what happens when the "semi-autonomous sense data" of the text takes on enormous weight and presents the illusion of chaos and incomprehensibility. The first half of the chapter is devoted to Joseph McElroy's *Lookout Cartridge* (1974) and Alexander Goldshtein's *Помни о Фамагусте* [*Remember Famagusta*] (2004). In the former, a cinema-verité-style experimental film[17] made by a man named Cartwright is destroyed for unknown reasons. The only legible plot of the book is Cartwright attempting to figure out who wanted to destroy the film. In a sense, the book is a reductio ad absurdum of a systems novel[18] as it might be written by Don DeLillo; the text is a tangled jungle of the names of unintroduced characters, unique objects, and descriptions of various locales. At the end of the novel, it becomes clear that Cartwright himself might be either a camera or a god. The term McElroy himself uses to describe this aesthetic vision is the "Colloidal Unconscious", which is to say an "[imaginative unification of] separate and different people by means of a 'mind compounded chemically but far truer than the sum of its particles.'"[19] Something like the

[17] The importance of the camera and the image in this text provide another occasion for examining the relation of the image and the object in the context of phenomenology.

[18] Cf. *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* by Tom LeClair. In this book, LeClair shows how the operating principle of DeLillo's prose is "systems theory" and how he transforms it into an account of how his characters are mere pawns spun through the mill of global capitalism, the military industrial complex, and various international cabals and conspiracies.

[19] Tom LeClair, *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 166.

Colloidal Unconscious is also at play in Goldshtein's *Remember Famagusta*, a work of exploded, hypertrophic autofiction that combines real memories, psychogeographic descriptions of a variety of countries, sexual exploits real or imagined, and critical asides about literature itself. The Oxford *History of Russian Literature* describes Goldshtein as belonging to the "new sincerity" movement in Russian letters, but "expressing both the desire for an unmediated expression of individual experience and the postmodernist understanding of sincerity as a complex of rhetorical devices and discursive principles."[20] Both *Lookout Cartridge* and *Remember Famagusta* seem to be chaotic and do not operate according to a neat *fabula*, as they are more about the agglomeration of detail than anything else: an excess of semi-autonomous sense data or a phenomenology of seeming chaos. However, this chaos is always an illusion, as even the refusal to structure a text according to some kind of order is the negative of the notion of order. An actual chaos novel would be an act of pure Nietzschean *ressentiment* directed against typically ordered narratives.

The second half of the chapter asks what happens when this excess of semi-autonomous sense data or the illusion of phenomenological chaos is applied to texts that treat willfully unreal worlds or, as they might be called, alternate histories. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's *Nienasycenie* [*Insatiability*] (1930) and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) all present markedly unreal renderings of 20th-century events. In the realms of Witkiewicz's Poland and Pynchon's Zone, the reader is also presented with chaotic descriptions of semi-autonomous sense data—a total excess of objects, images, and sensations—that refuse to cohere into an explanation that would make sense of this alternate realm or provide a pithy reason for its difference from

[20] Andrew Kahn, Mark Lipovetsky, Irina Reyfman, and Stephanie Sandler, *A History of Russian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 707.

our own. I ask how the illusion of phenomenological chaos alters the reader's encounter with the alternate realm they are thrust into. What does semi-autonomous sense data represent in the context of an emphatically unreal setting? Questions of worldhood and worldbuilding—the latter of which will be at play as it might in a fantasy novel—will be the focus of this part of the chapter.

In the wake of the chaos and unreality presented in the third chapter, the **fourth chapter**, entitled "Abject Geist: When Phenomenology Meets Metaphysics in the Context of 20th-Century Literature," shows the same attempt to return to Hegel so ardently proselytized by Slavoj Žižek, but this time made by writers. Even if Hegel's philosophy is a tough pill to swallow in the 20th century, the ever-present human desire for the illusion of a superstructure and the allure of essentialist modes of thought mean that Hegel's method of looking for God (or Substance) in the phenomena presented by history and the world is still at play in many works of 20th-century fiction. In Andrei Platonov's *Котлован* [*The Foundation Pit*] (1930) and Vladimir Sorokin's *Сердца четырех* [*Their Four Hearts*] (1991), these authors attempt to integrate the phenomena they have been presented with by history and the everyday into a kind of coherent ontological superstructure—something like Geist or the illusion of Geist. The results of the process of universalization, or "spiritual integration," conducted by the authors are often profane, as the 20th century was a period filled to the brim with jarring and awful violence. The discussion of Soviet authors also deals with the analysis of generational trauma vis-à-vis artistic realism in Alexander Etkind's study *Warped Mourning*, building on Etkind's analysis so as to ask how temporal distance from atrocity changes the way it is depicted.

For Platonov, though some scholars claim that he was actually trying to write honest Socialist Realist fiction—something that the Union of Soviet Writers might endorse—and depict

the utopia the Soviet Union was attempting to create, the phenomena he insists on including in his narratives about the growing pains of the "shining future" create a rather horrifying image of the young socialist empire, one that has often been compared to Bataille's work.[21] In then analyzing Sorokin's *Their Four Hearts*, we see a move away from escapist aestheticism and a return to the growing pains of Platonov's shining future, but, this time, the titular band of four characters—like cardboard cut-outs from mediocre Soviet prose—embark upon a *truly* incomprehensible sequence of atrocities with no reference made to the future they are attempting to bring about. This novel might even bear more comparison to Bataille than it does to Platonov. At the end of the text, the four characters kill themselves and have their hearts compressed into dice that are rolled out onto a field of frozen "liquid mother," which the four characters made by killing and "juicing" one of their mothers. The last line of the book is the numbers rolled by the dice. This, Sorokin suggests, is a phenomenological rendering of the Geist of his era: four grotesque flesh-dice rolling out random numbers on a field of a liquefied family member.

Given the ambiguity of Platonov and the horror of Sorokin, a return to a benevolent ontological superstructure is no longer possible in the 20th century. An initial intention to integrate real phenomena into Geist in Platonov gives way to Sorokin's entirely aberrant terminal Geist, an ontological superstructure of random chaos and violence. Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* will cast a long shadow across this final chapter. Appealing to Lacan, Kristeva's fundamental claim is that literature is a space in which the abject and the sublime are given special attention as the eruption of the Real into the world, a process that, as Bataille writes about eroticism, destroys an atomized conception of the individual. She writes that "on close

[21] This has been done most convincingly by Thomas Seifrid, as in "Smradnye radosti marksizma: Zametki o Platonove i Batae," *NLO*, 1998, No. 32.

inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted […] on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject."[22] One might even term the ontological superstructure discovered in the fourth chapter "Abject Geist," as it displays the uncanny combination of awful and sublime described by Kristeva. It's become something of a cliché to describe the 20th century as apocalyptic, but perhaps not to say that both Platonov and Sorokin describe a Krishnevian apocalypse in *The Foundation Pit* and *Their Four Hearts*. This analysis of "Abject Geist" is finally expanded out to other authors from America, England, and Germany.

Thinking, then, of the in medias res opening of the first chapter, the movement of the dissertation becomes a perfect ouroboros that retreats to the "books of bare being." In this looping back, we catch sight of a coherent phenomenological narrative. Moving chronologically, Proust and Céline are threatened by the ontological instability of modernity and the challenges to Enlightenment conceptions of the human the 20th century presents, so retreat to their own sense experience, embroidering it in different ways. With the very conceit of autofiction, they ask if it is actually possible to write about anything other than one's own life. As is most aptly represented by the way their projects are taken forth by Nádas and Ginzburg, they also end up asking if the body isn't more important than history—if the body isn't history itself in some profound way. Of course, in Hegel's dialectic in *Phänomenologie des Geistes* [*Phenomenology of Spirit*] (1807), "sense certainty"—something like seeing through the eye rather than with it, as

[22] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 207.

Blake enjoins[23]—is the lowest Gestalt of consciousness and must be moved past. Moving past it, then, the writers in the first half of the third chapter, McElroy and Goldshtein, attempt to include an enormous number of phenomena (as objects and images) from the outside world in the "semi-autonomous sense data" of their texts, but they are only ever included under the guise of the illusion of chaos—they are not immediately intelligible and require significant legwork to put together. In the second half of the chapter, Witkiewicz and Pynchon present the illusion of more phenomenological chaos, but this time it is unbridled and semi-autonomous sense data in the context of a willfully unreal alternate reality. By representing "unreality," they test the reality of the world it is they actually inhabit. However, neither the phenomena of McElroy's "Colloidal Unconscious" nor Pynchon's Zone add up to any sort of intelligible statement about the world or what might lie beyond it.

In the fourth chapter, I then show that Platonov, Sorokin, Sharov, Ballard, Lentz, and Delany might be seen as attempting a return to Geist in the context of 20th-century depravity, but, in following this phenomenologically Idealist method, discover that the structure lying behind existence in their texts is profane and irrational. The most obviously synecdochic[24] phenomena they attempt to integrate are the mass-grave foundation pit in Platonov's work and the dice in Sorokin's. Therefore, the Geist that they discover once all of these discrete objects and instances have been integrated is very far from Hegel's vision of a post-Enlightenment God; if he were writing his *Phenomenology* in the 20th century, perhaps his last chapter would be

[23] "This life's dim windows of the soul / Distorts the heavens from pole to pole / And leads you to believe a lie / When you see with, not through, the eye" from "The Everlasting Gospel", *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Anchor, 1988) 520.

[24] Indeed, synecdoche is the engine of any phenomenology of some greater ontology (i.e. Geist); individual parts taken together stand for a whole.

titled “Absolute Horror” rather than “Absolute Knowledge.” Finally, the first writers treated in the dissertation—Handke and Knausgaard—are shown to be making a conscious return to “sense certainty” and away from any kind of intelligible integral of the phenomena of our world. This is a desperate gesture that comes out of the failure to integrate the phenomena of the world into something rational or ideal in the fourth chapter. What is perhaps remarkable is that Handke and Knausgaard’s aesthetic visions are even more bare and unembroidered than Proust’s and Céline’s, even as they are all practitioners of the genre of autofiction. Like Heidegger with his Destruktion, these later writers strip away everything from their depictions of reality, everything but a baseline of what might be called Being or “sense certainty,” then utterly immerse themselves in that *dialectically unadvanced* medium. They have retreated from any attempt to make sense of what lies beyond the boundaries of the self and its experience, which ends up making them easy prey for heinous political perversions (most especially in Handke’s case).

With the roving narrative of these four chapters completed, the typology of 20th-century phenomenological prose is shown to be an attempt to grasp for ontological certainty—whether this be through a reduction or a hypertrophic increase of terms treated in the work. Pushing off from Proust and Céline’s initial return to the self in the second chapter, the 20th-century novel’s attempts to leave the self behind and include as many worldly phenomena as possible creates an unintelligible “chaos novel” in the third chapter, while the attempt to then integrate the phenomena of the third chapter into something like Geist leads to a frightening and depraved vision of existence in the fourth. The failures[25] of the third and fourth chapter convince the

[25] Of course, the term “failure” is only meant dialectically, as the novels treated are all worthy of deep reading and intense study. Their failure is their inevitable inability to encompass the world and the need for new aesthetic methodologies these “failures” necessitate.

writers I open the dissertation with to retreat—as if the self and its sense experience were all that remained to them to write about.

Beyond its broader framework, my dissertation aims to interrogate a variety of questions about the meaning of *worldhood* within a text, how *spatiality* might be unlocked through close reading, what the relation between *object* and *image* might be in the context of language, why the *body* and the *everyday* are such important themes in 20th-century prose, and, most broadly, what the reductive and essentialist attempt to return to some primal mode of Being made by many writers and philosophers in the 20th century might mean. The narrative of the four chapters present four different responses to the problem of how to depict an incomprehensible world. Finally, I ask, why do all four of these responses seem to fail and necessitate an aesthetically-minded dialectical advance? Is this what is often meant by critics discussing the "death of the novel"—the increasing impotence of the word in the face of endlessly multiplying and endlessly awful phenomena?

My critical narrative will begin with an in medias res treatment of Peter Handke and Karl Ove Knausgaard, asking what in 20th-century prose paved the way for their bare depiction of being. Chapter Two will deal with the phenomenological role of the body in Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Marcel Proust, Péter Nádas, and Lydia Ginzburg. Chapter Three will show how Thomas Pynchon, Joseph McElroy, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, and Alexander Goldshtein fill their texts with unreal and excessive phenomena—novels that present the illusion of chaos—sometimes in the context of alternate visions of our reality. Finally, Chapter Four will playfully "return" to Hegel, showing how Andrei Platonov, Vladimir Sorokin, Vladimir Sharov, J.G. Ballard, Samuel Delany, and Michael Lentz attempt to depict the Geist of their eras. Throughout this dissertation, I will not move chronologically, but conceptually. The chapters pose questions

both distinct and interlocking that I hope will cohere by the end of the project into a set of legible theses about the tradition I have hewed out from within 20th-century prose.

CHAPTER ONE

IN MEDIAS RES:

A NAIVE READING OF PETER HANDKE'S PHENOMENOLOGICAL AFFECT AND KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD'S FAILURE TO IMITATE IT

Knausgaard — Fruit of a Long Blossoming

When Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle* became a "literary sensation" in 2014, it was greeted with strikingly little reflection as to what the origin of its particular idiom might be. This was equally true in criticism and scholarship. Writers treating the books were more eager to herald Karl Ove Knausgaard's work as a *sui generis* novelty than they were to understand it. In the *New York Times* article titled "Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle* is a Movement," Liesl Schillinger writes that:

> Direct and unguarded in tone, the books combine a micro-focus on the granular detail of daily life (child care, groceries, quarrels with friends) with earnest meditations on art, death, music and ambition. The novelist Jeffrey Eugenides, calling these two elements "auto-fiction" and "rumination," said that blending them in the way Mr. Knausgaard does is something "nobody's done before."[26]

Schillinger ends the article by asking, "So will a legion of writers now start trying to pull a Knausgaard and write their own multipart oeuvres on the infinite particulars of their personal

[26] Liesl Schillinger, "His Peers' Views Are in the Details," *The New York Times*, May 21, 2014.

journeys?"[27] The closest thing to a literary genealogy in the *The New Yorker* article about *My Struggle* by Joshua Rothman is this relatively trite paragraph:

> Writers have portrayed consciousness in all sorts of ways: as what William James called "an alternation of flights and perchings" ("Mrs. Dalloway"), as a river-like flow, carrying thoughts and perceptions in its current ("Ulysses"), as the creation of an unseen, inner artwork ("In Search of Lost Time"). Knausgaard has found his own way of understanding it: as a struggle.[28]

As with many other critics, Rothman takes Knausgaard's project at face value, dealing only with the content of his work in a naive way—as if he had been employed as Knausgaard's therapist or life coach. In a statement echoed in practically every single piece of published Knausgaard criticism, Rothman writes that "It's hard to overstate the strangeness of the book's success."[29] In his piece from 2012—before the book had truly taken off in the Anglosphere, as it did in 2014—James Wood is somewhat more theoretical than his colleagues, kicking his text off with a reference to Walter Benjamin's theory about the deathlessness of contemporary society, but still fixates on Knausgaard's content rather than the precise nature of his form or his place within literary history:

> A fair amount of contemporary prose seems to have been written by people who, like Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich, refuse to accept that they will die; there is a puerile or evasive quality in many new novels (not to mention movies), especially in America, where infinite information promises to outlive us, and dazzle down the terminality of existence. Are there serious contemporary writers who remind us of our mortality? The forty-three-year-old Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard is certainly one. His long, intense, and vital book "My Struggle" (Archipelago; translated

[27] Ibid.

[28] Joshua Rothman, "What Is the Struggle in "My Struggle"?," *The New Yorker*, May 28, 2014.

[29] Ibid.

> by Don Bartlett) is so powerfully alive to death that it sometimes seems a kind of huge, ramshackle annex to Benjamin's brief thesis.[30]

Wood concludes his article with the constatation that "These are the concluding sentences of the book—placid, plain, achieved. They have what Walter Benjamin called 'the epic side of truth, wisdom.'"[31] At this point, one might say that there is an obvious issue when critics don't seem to go beyond that which writers might easily say about themselves in a moment of unguarded egotism.

Scholars didn't initially do much better—and nor have they since. In *Agni*, William Pierce claims that Knausgaard's project is turning "his own experience" into "the substance of a quixotic attempt that, as we know from the adult Karl Ove's ruminations elsewhere in the novel, aims at sharing the possibility of awe."[32] At the conclusion of his article about Knausgaard in *The Hudson Review*, Bruce Bawer writes that:

> [Knausgaard has] stated explicitly, both in *My Struggle* and elsewhere, that, as he sees it, that's the only really important thing that a worthwhile novelist does: he comes up with his own way of rendering reality, to which any given reader may or may not respond. In the present reader's view, he has succeeded at this task quite remarkably indeed.[33]

Even less perceptively, Pamela Erens concludes her article in *The Virginia Quarterly Review* with this "analysis":

> Is Karl Ove Knausgaard—the man, the brother and father, the writer—a narcissist? I don't know him and can't say. In the novel, KOK is guilty of some selfish and off-putting behavior. I have been guilty of my own

[30] James Wood, "Total Recall," *The New Yorker*, August 6, 2012.

[31] Ibid.

[32] William Pierce, "Crucibles: Is Knausgaard for Real?," *Agni*, no. 81 (2015): 219–23, 223.

[33] Bawer, Bruce. "Life Itself." *The Hudson Review* 67, no. 4 (2015): 587–97, 597.

> versions of such behavior and believe that everyone I know has been, too. Again, this is a man one of whose dearest wishes is that his children will never fear him as he feared his father. But even if he is, or is at times, an egotist, that is a matter for those close to him and not for the literary-critical community to deal with. The narcissism is not in the work. *My Struggle* is art, and it is a gift.[34]

Autofiction seems to leave the door open to critics taking the thoughts, feelings, and strivings of the narratorial stand-in for the author at face value in a way they wouldn't dream of with *pure* characters. On the other hand, even scholars were far too quick to echo critical claims as to the novelty of Knausgaard's project. Toril Moi rather infamously claimed that Knausgaard's cycle necessitates "'new criteria' for the reading of fiction"; Timothy Bewes describes an MLA panel during which Moi went through a laundry list of all the theorists whose work was incapable of treating Knausgaard.[35] Bewes is initially critical of Moi's claims, then, after spending several pages wondering whether Knausgaard's self-narration might be compared with Trump's, he comes to a bizarrely mystical claim about the cycle: "There is a non-identity to every claim of presence in Knausgaard's work, a non-identity that persists irrespective of—which is to say, at the very heart of—the many diegetic conversations in which Karl Ove says exactly the opposite," he writes.[36] This almost seems to echo Emerson's "Circles" in the notion that each human is also *not* himself, but everyone else—a philosophical idea that really isn't at play in Knausgaard's exploration of his own identity. But it is Moi's insistence about the novelty of Knausgaard's project that is most significant for our purposes, as not even Knausgaard himself—a great theorist of his own excellence—would assent therewith.

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[34] Pamela Erens, "Knausgaard's Triumph," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 91, no. 4 (2015): 202–7, 207.

[35] Timothy Bewes, "What Does It Mean to Write Fiction? What Does Fiction Refer To?," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 64, no. 4 (2019): 533–48.

[36] Ibid, 547.

Without yet speaking of the broader framework of how it might have been possible to understand Knausgaard, even during that hectic week in 2014 when, it seems, he had really and truly exploded and everyone wanted a piece of him (or a piece *on* him), we shall begin with the fact that the immediate predecessor Knausgaard himself speaks of as the man who made his work possible is the Austrian novelist, dramatist, and Nobel Prize winner, Peter Handke. Immediately following Handke's receipt of the Nobel, during the dogpile of controversy stemming from Handke's support for Slobodan Milošević and the Serbian right during the Serbo-Croat War, Knausgaard was one of the first to come to his defense, telling the *New York Times* that, "I can't think of a more obvious Nobel laureate than him."[37] In a *The New Yorker* interview following the publication of the final volume of *My Struggle*, Knausgaard reflects on the level of "mercilessness" of his own writing compared to Handke's writing, also wondering if his whole cycle wasn't inspired by Handke's *Wunschloses Unglück* [*A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*] (1972), an autobiographical, telegraphically composed account of Handke's mother's suicide:

> That's a good question. Handke's book is about the death of his mother, who committed suicide. My book is about the death of my father, at the end of a destructive period that I think of as a slow suicide. But Handke never represents his mother in the text, while I describe my father, his movements; I re-create his speech. Which text is more truthful? Obviously, Handke's. I think I could have been braver, gone further in that direction. The question is whether, like Handke, you can represent the world more truthfully when you don't use the conventional tricks of the novel. When I was writing, I felt very strongly that I had made my father into something like a character in a novel, and that I had manipulated people so that they could feel what I felt, or what I wanted them to feel, in relation to him. I felt that I was cheating.[38]

[37] Alex Marshall, "Genius, Genocide Denier or Both?," *The New York Times*, December 10, 2019.

[38] Joshua Rothman, "Karl Ove Knausgaard Looks Back on 'My Struggle,'" *The New Yorker*, November 11, 2018.

Near the end of that sixth volume of *My Struggle*, in what is another sort of homage to Handke after the long treatment *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* is given during the non-fiction section of the book dealing with Nazism, Knausgaard portrays himself reading (and asking the famous Norwegian writer Dag Solstad what he thinks about) Handke. But it isn't just any Handke book Knausgaard is reading; he is reading the incredibly long *Mein Jahr in der Niemandsbucht* [*My Year in the No-Man's-Bay*] (1994), a work of autofiction written with deliberate banality: "I'm in the middle of reading a fantastic book," he tells Solstad, "*My Year in the No-Man's Bay* it's called. Have you read it?"[39] It is worth wondering whether Knuasgaard was actually reading this book when he met Solstad or if he simply inserted this detail back into the reality of his lived life, a sort of totem representing his devotion to Handke's project and, indeed, Handke's paternal role in relation to his own. Ironically, in a recent interview during which Handke himself was asked about Knausgaard, he responded with an unfavorable comparison of Knausgaard's work with Solstad's:

> A: I've tried to read Karl Ove Knausgaard [...] But it is impossible… *My Struggle* lacks air. Literature needs a little air.
> Q: You might want to be polite. He is your publisher, after all," the interviewer reminds Handke.
> A: Yes, polite, yes… well, my wife likes him, write that. But Dag Solstad I like. That scene in *Shyness and Dignity*—a wonderful title—where the teacher struggles to open his umbrella and bursts into a rant, calling a female student a cunt and a porkface, oh, that's magnificent. Solstad is a writer of depth… he has air.[40]

[39] Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle: Book 6*, trans. Don Bartlett and Martin Aitken (New York: Archipelago, 2018), 880.

[40] Ane Farsethas, "Norway's Greatest Living Writer is Actually Dag Solstad," *Literary Hub*, May 18, 2015, https://lithub.com/norways-greatest-writer-is-actually-dag-solstad/.

At the risk of idle supposition, one can easily imagine Knausgaard responding to this critique with heartbreaking equanimity: "Yes," he would say, "I suppose Peter is correct. I have failed to do what he did." But what, if we are to take the conceit of this imaginary dialogue (or better: dramatic aside—Karl Ove talking to the audience by way of merely pretending to talk to himself) seriously, did he fail in doing?

There is a striking lack of serious academic work that has taken this genealogical comparison seriously or, indeed, that has dealt with it at all. Part of this lack must have to do with the fact that Knausgaard's debut novel *Ute av verden* [*Out of the World*] (1998) only appeared in German in 2020 and will appear in English in 2027. This book, a maximalist bit of Handke worship in three parts and clocking in at almost 1000 pages, was given attention almost exclusively due to the sexual relationship between a teacher and his student on a remote island portrayed in its first section, especially given that this is an autobiographical tale, as Knausgaard himself admits in volume three of *My Struggle*, even if he is ever eager to blur the actual contours of what actually might have happened. Kaye Mitchell's book *Writing Shame: Gender, Contemporary Literature and Negative Affect* makes ample use of this section of the novel to show that "men's writing of and on shame seeks to disavow that shame, to project it onto female bodies and/or make of its confession a kind of heroism."[41] While it would be foolish to disagree with this claim, which is unequivocally true, it is also a notion that deals too much in the content of Knausgaard's project and not enough in the form. The ultimate danger of autofiction, especially when its surface is so unembroidered as to almost have an element of punk

[41] **Kaye Mitchell, *Writing Shame: Gender, Contemporary Literature and Negative Affect* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 199.**

nonchalance to it, is that it becomes a kind of exploded gossip-rag compilation of tawdry transgression.

What is actually shown in a combined reading of Handke and Knausgaard's oeuvres is that, in *My Struggle*, Knausgaard reenacts Merleau-Ponty's agonistic misprision of Heidegger; Knausgaard adds the body and the banal long take to Handke's quick-cut ideogrammatic phenomenology just as Merleau-Ponty does to Heidegger's philosophy. Even more significantly, it is Handke's "ideogrammatic phenomenology," borrowing in equal measure from Ezra Pound and, most particularly, Heidegger's 1950 essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" that provides this dissertation's somewhat programmatic definition of phenomenology in 20th-century literature. It is a *definition in action*, not one that can simply be pulled from a theory compilation. To wit, much of this dissertation's notion of phenomenology in 20th-century prose shall be defined by way of an in-depth chronological analysis of Handke's fiction. This, followed by a brief analysis of Heidegger's essay shall provide a limpid gaze to be cast onto all the diverse, even disparate, notions of phenomenology in literature brought to bear in the following chapters.[42]

Stage One: Early Extremity

[42] It is worth noting that this "definition in action" is, by its very nature, somewhat polemical, but, as described in the introduction, this polemical tone is in keeping with the way phenomenological philosophy has been used in literary criticism and is also an "homage in action." This tone should be taken less as a reflection of the dissertation-author's proclivities than as an attempt to inhabit the very male gestalt of the discourse being analyzed.

It was not as a novelist, but as a dramatist that Handke first gained renown, most especially for his play *Publikumsbeschimpfung* [*Offending the Audience*], which was first performed in 1966, the same year his first novel *Die Hornissen* [*The Hornets*] was published by Suhrkamp. Whereas the former work is still well known today, the latter has never been translated into English and is hardly read at all. *Offending the Audience* is considered to be an "anti-play," as it tells no story whatsoever. The players merely jeer at the audience and constantly draw attention to the artificiality of the spectacle they are engaged in. As Handke described his own intentions with the play:

> The idea was to have the spectators in the orchestra thrown back upon themselves. What mattered to me was making them feel like going to the theatre more, making them see all plays more consciously and with a different consciousness. My theatrical plan is to have the audience always look upon my play as a means of testing other plays. I first intended to write an essay, a pamphlet, against the theatre, but then I realized that a paperback isn't an effective way to publish an anti-theatre statement. And so the outcome was, paradoxically, doing something onstage against the stage, using the theatre to protest against the theatre of the moment—I don't mean theatre as such, the Absolute, I mean theatre as a historical phenomenon, as it is to this day.[43]

This intended methodology would remain in full force in Handke's subsequent novels: to question—to interrogate—the entire notion of writing novels and the philosophy of prose—plus what that even means—but in the context of elaborately written, beautiful novels. To deconstruct the edifice of literature by building it up into something new. The director of the first production of *Offending the Audience*, Claus Peymann writes that:

> Suddenly, the spectators found themselves thrust into the focus of discussion—found themselves in a starring role.

[43]Artur Joseph, Peter Handke, and E. B. Ashton, "Nauseated by Language: From an Interview with Peter Handke," *The Drama Review: TDR* 15, no. 1 (Autumn 1970): 57–61.

> "You don't have to look over the fence any more," the actors told them, "you are the theme. You are the focus."
> Then, just as suddenly, the audience found itself criticized: "You are a dramaturgial misfit; you are not real to life."
> Then, praised:
> "You are all cast in one role. You've had a good day today."
> Finally, the audience was bombarded with 150 insulting words, the promise of the play's title.
> The commotion in the theatre was considerable at the end. There was a half- hour battle between those who rejected the work and those offering enthusiastic approval.
> The future performances of *Offending the Audience* were even more charged. Large groups of spectators tried to take part in the action on stage. Again and again, the audience understood its role to literally join the play and turn the performance into a discussion. Unfortunately, neither I nor the actors were prepared for this situation. We could not detach from the fiction of the performance in order to open a conversation with the audience. Thus, each performance always remained a new adventure.[44]

Peymann also gives us quite a generous description of Handke's following play, *Kaspar*, based on the mythical story of Kaspar Hauser, said to have grown up away from any and all human company in a pitch-black cell. He first quotes Handke's own prologue to the play: "The play *Kaspar* does not show how it REALLY IS or REALLY WAS concerning Kaspar Hauser. It demonstrates what can be possible in connection with someone. It shows how someone can be made to speak through speaking."[45] The play, of which Peymann also directed the debut, depicts the speechless Kaspar being socialized, taught to speak, by a nameless and unidentified collective of voices—a sort of purely aural *das Man*:[46]

[44] Claus Peymann and Claus Brucher-Herpel, "Directing Handke," *The Drama Review: TDR* 16, no. 2 (1972): 48–54, 49–50.

[45] Ibid, 51.

[46] Heidegger's notion of a nameless, faceless social collective made up of the worst, most gossipy, prying elements of human society. Immersion in "das Man" makes "authentic" existence impossible. Often rendered in English as "the they."

> Kaspar is taught to speak. He strives to memorize the sentence. But the sentence is gradually driven from him by the narrators who want to teach him other sentences. He becomes confused. After a silence, the hero Kaspar starts to speak, babbles and finally loses himself completely. The language, which was meant to free Kaspar, frees him only of his individuality. It is a play of manipulations. The change in Kaspar, which is due to the speaking and whispering of the narrators, implies manipulation by opinion-makers. But Handke does not identify the narrators/opinion-makers, nor does he give them motives or particular causes.[47]

Peymann believes that the play became a focal point of great controversy because its production overlapped with a period when West Germany was embroiled in controversy regarding the "Emergency Law," an attempt to suspend certain political freedoms due to leftist political unrest in 1968. Handke became a punching bag for leftists who claimed that he was detached from reality and concerned about non-essential political issues. One can easily imagine how, even though *Kaspar* could easily be seen to spring forth from Germany's recent totalitarian past, it might also be viewed as a critique of didactic leftists who demand intellectual obedience. Handke himself was relatively direct in his response to this controversy:"The leftists always want to be shown the causes they know anyway. My vision is to see that situations are presented with sensitivity and within a structure. [...] in literature, the Marxist method confirms only and always things one has experienced."[48] As enigmatic as this thesis statement regarding his own vision is—to present "with sensitivity and within a structure"—it could easily be viewed as a modus operandi for Handke's prose works. Jonathan Neufeld characterizes *Offending the Audience* as "an act of aesthetic disobedience [...] characterized as a public communicative act that breaks an artworld norm in order to draw attention to and to reform perceived conflicts

[47] Ibid, 51.

[48] Ibid, 52.

between an entrenched norm of the artworld and other, broadly speaking, aesthetic commitments."[49] For Neufeld, this anti-theater act of "aesthetic disobedience" can be likened to an act of actual civil disobedience, so destabilizing does Neufeld view it to be for the powers that be of the world of cultural production. Beyond that, for Neufeld, aesthetic disobedience can often shade into acts of possible revolution, a seemingly naive thesis that certainly has nothing to do with the quiet gravitas of Handke's work. However, the "aesthetic disobedience" at play in *Offending the Public* would certainly continue to be one of the primary attributes of Handke's prose work as well.

As for *The Hornets*, a book many parts of which are written entirely in the German subjunctive tense, it was not to be the book that brought Handke's method to a wide audience. Indeed, it doesn't engage in any of the telegraphic ideograms (again: thinking of Ezra Pound's idiom of Imagism as very succinctly rendered condensations of objects and sights to behold, a poetic idiom in which images are "the objective darting into the subjective,"[50] another succinct description of a kind of perception-based phenomenology)[51] that shall so obviously define Handke's prose, most especially in its middle period. Nor does it have the simmering rage, violence, and world-rejection that characterize Handke's break-out novels, *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter* [*The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*] (1972), *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied* [*Short Letter, Long Farewell*] (1972), *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* (already

[49] Jonathan A. Neufeld, "Aesthetic Disobedience," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73, no. 2 (2015): 116.

[50] Robert Lumsden, "Ezra Pound's Imagism," *Paideuma* 15, no. 2/3 (1986): 263.

[51] And, just as, "the imagist image," Frank Kermode is surely right in saying, "is merely a subspecies of the Romantic Image," so too is the imagism of Handke's prose a subspecies of the Romantic. Cf. P. E. Firchow, "Ezra Pound's Imagism and the Tradition," *Comparative Literature Studies* 18, no. 3 (1981): 379–85, 384.

mentioned in the context of Knausgaard), and *Die Stunde der wahren Empfindung* [*A Moment of True Feeling*] (1975). It is tempting to define these as the first stage of Handke's bibliography with no reference whatsoever to *The Hornets*. On the other hand, as almost all scholarly work takes it to be a footnote in Handke's otherwise wildly successful career, some researchers might view the book's obscurity as an invitation to resurrect its reputation and make it the centerpiece of an exegesis of his style. Alas! The critics and scholars have been correct in their assessment of *The Hornets*, published when Handke was only 24. Its language games, simultaneously baroque and obscure, do nothing but obscure the limpidly clear images of his style, beginning with his true debut, *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*. Thomas Barry's assessment of the novel, which he presents in the context of an analysis of what I have termed Handke's true prose debut, is apt:

> His first novel, *Die Hornissen* (*The Hornets*) of 1966, a confusing and almost unreadable experimental work in the tradition of Robbe-Grillet and the nouveau roman, is a highly self-reflexive text—a novel about the writing of a novel that seeks to demonstrate the conventions and traditions dominating the writing of fiction.[52]

It would be difficult to read this description and wish to immediately leap up so as to go pick up the book. However, its aggressive genre-testing does recall the "aesthetic disobedience" of his plays. But the fact of plays happening in real time, with actors before the audience speaking—and, in Handke's case, speaking aggressive words directed at the audience—might help to explain the gulf that separates the power of *Offending the Audience* from the headache that is *The Hornets*.

[52] Thomas F. Barry, "Language, Self, and the Other in Peter Handke's 'The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick,'" *South Atlantic Review* 51, no. 2 (1986): 94.

As such, a mere six years after that unsuccessful debut saw the light of day, Handke's reader was confronted with a very different-–a very direct—sort of opening: "When Joseph Bloch, a construction worker who had once been a well-known soccer goalie, reported for work that morning, he was told that he was fired."[53] The reference to Kafka's Josef K. and the Kafkaesque rhythm of the first line come through immediately, but it isn't Kafka who looms large over this book: it is Camus's Meursault, as the book tells the story of Joseph Bloch's pointless murder of a woman he is having a romantic encounter with, then his aimless waiting for the police to arrest him. It is in the course of this waiting that Joseph Bloch simply allows the *phenomena* of the world to wash over him—and it is this engagement with the phenomena of the world by a strangely cold and detached protagonist that most characterizes Handke's entire body of work, even though imagined murders (without one actually being committed) are also a trope that crops up quite often. The prose in this book is characterized by sentences that are very simple and direct, allowing for the unmediated (thinking, yes, of Hegel's dialectics) contemplation of the things within them. Here is a representative example:

> The waitress came in from the yard. As if she were answering his sitting there, she said the landlady had gone to the castle to have the lease renewed. The waitress had been followed by a young man dragging two crates of beer bottles, one in each hand; even so, his mouth was not closed; Bloch spoke to him, but the waitress said he shouldn't, the guy couldn't talk when he was pulling such heavy loads. The young man, who, it seemed, was slightly feeble-minded, had stacked the crates beyond the bar. The waitress said to him: "Is he pouring the ashes on the bed again instead of in the brook? Has he stopped jumping the goats? Has she started cutting open pumpkins again and smearing the stuff all over his face?" She stood next to the door, holding a beer bottle, but he did not answer. When she showed him the bottle, he came toward her. She gave him the bottle and let him out. A cat dashed in, leaped at a fly in the air, and gulped down the fly at once. The waitress had closed the

[53] Peter Handke, *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*, trans. Michael Roloff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 3.

> door. While the door had been open, Bloch had heard the phone ringing in the customs shed next door.[54]

The simple sentences allow for the affect that the reader is simply observing what's happening in the text through the clear, cold waters of a mountain stream.[55] Beyond that, it is possible the "castle" the landlady has gone to is another little nod to Kafka and the seemingly random dialogue in the middle, alarming non-sequiters right out of a David Lynch film, prefigure the monologues that shall later interrupt the serene phenomenal contemplation of Handke's middle- and late-period novels.[56] Human speech in Handke's novels communicates nothing, is mere rhythm and intonation that stands as a sort of interference into/against the phenomenal world. Then there is the precise rendering of spatiality, which becomes more clear across broader drifts of text. This obsession with movement through space is the main intrigue—the only plot—of Handke's later work. As a starting point, the contemplation of objects through a pellucid text and a focus on topography and the navigation of space—as in a video game—are a fine starting point for the iteration of phenomenology in literature that Handke's work suggests. In this context, it is significant that there are no causal links between clauses here or anywhere else in the book. Each clause and sentence exists alongside every other, just as inanimate objects exist next to one another in a phenomenal field, most often with no causal relationship to one another whatsoever.

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[54] Ibid, 72-73.

[55] Again, the reader will note that the author of the dissertation is, indeed, buying the ideology of Handke's work… if not wholesale, then at the very least halfsale… but this is an intentional attempt to bring to life the archaic mode of phenomenological criticism in the context of a modern master whose work ought to be analyzed in this practically extinct discourse…

[56] The most striking example of which we shall see in the monologues in *Die Abwesenheit. Ein Märchen* [*Absence. A Fairy Tale*] (1987).

But *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* does have an actual plot beyond, as in most of his later work, a ragtag gang of disparate individuals going on some interminably long walk—for which reason he will, later in the chapter, merit comparison with Iain Sinclair and his psychogeographic explorations of London in the form of hyper-digested (and hyper-opaque) prose narratives. *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* is actually the propulsive prose narration of a wanted criminal fleeing the authorities (albeit in dilatory fashion). At one point in the book, Bloch talks to a tax official who tells him that:

> Whenever he saw an item, say a washing machine, he always asked the price immediately, and then when he saw the item again, say a washing machine of the same make, he would recognize it not by its external features, that is, a washing machine by the knobs which regulated the wash cycle, but by what the item, say a washing machine, had cost when he first saw it, that is, by its price. The price, of course, he remembered precisely, and that way he could recognize almost any item. And what if the item was worthless, asked Bloch. He had nothing to do with items that had no market value, the tax official replied, at least not in his work.[57]

After this, Bloch begins to ask the price of every object he encounters. Given Bloch's troubling naivety, which comes across to the reader as a form of mental illness, might we not view the tax collector as a single representative of "das Man" and Bloch's ensuing obsession with prices as him getting caught up in an inauthentic mode of being? Similarly, Bloch buys a map later in the book and continually compares "the map with the territory." Thomas Barry writes that "Handke's understanding of language—as a mode of alienation and as a source of liberation—is central to his task as a writer."[58] In this novel, we see both liberation and alienation: the

[57] Ibid, 59-60.

[58] Thomas F. Barry, "Language, Self, and the Other in Peter Handke's 'The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick,'" *South Atlantic Review* 51, no. 2 (1986): 94.

liberation lies in the calm clarity of the objects and space described, whereas the alienation lies in the diremption between the real and the represented. If Handke's theatrical work and the turgid *The Hornets* represent the alienation of language and his middle- and late-period work represent the sheer liberatory nature of description, then his initial burst of successful novels are suspended—hamstrung even—between the two poles. So hamstrung that Bloch's calm contemplation threatens to become the incessant schizoid analysis of the world around him in a paranoid mode:

> All his perceptions of the external world are transformed into language-metaphors to be exact—that he tends to interpret in a paranoid fashion. The following example is typical of the ex-goalie's perception throughout the novel: "And why were the cookies on the wooden plate fish-shaped? What did they suggest? Should he be 'mute as a fish'? Was he not permitted to talk?"[59]

But the truth is that this paranoid mode is no different from the sheerly contemplative one of Handke's later work. Only the frame narrative of the murder, in making the text more palatable to the general reader, distorts the sheerly phenomenological nature of his project. Barry even goes so far as to identify Bloch as schizophrenic, which I am not certain is borne out by Handke's text. For Barry, the clarity of the descriptions are an insane man's means of locating himself in the real world, simple syntax becoming a sort of antipsychotic, a way out of "the void of internality," and a means of dispelling his own titular anxiety.[60] In this novel, Barry's theory is tenable, but, outside of it, problems arise when one considers that these are the hallmarks of Handke's style across most of his books. Barry writes that "[Handke's] desire to create a 'system of relationship' for his estranged consciousness suggests that his approach to language is

[59] Ibid, 97.

[60] Ibid, 101.

primarily existential as well as aesthetic. This has been *the* consistent theme of Handke's work since the beginning of his career."[61] However, proceeding chronologically through Handke's work shows how the anti-establishment qualities of his more confrontational early plays and novels over-determine this notion of alienation as being the primary mover of his project. No reader, having read all of his novels, should be able to assent with this. And, indeed, the novel ends unexpectedly, not with Bloch's arrest or execution as one would expect from the Kafkaesque echoes or the references to *The Stranger*, but with him watching a soccer game, complaining that the players are too loud—"A good game goes very quietly,"[62] he says—then seeing the goalkeeper perfectly block a penalty kick: "The kicker suddenly started his run. The goalkeeper, who was wearing a bright yellow jersey, stood absolutely still, and the penalty kicker shot the ball into his hands."[63] The ending is a riddle rather than a statement—and Handke's first successful novel, his true debut, is something of a red herring in relation to the rest of his bibliography. As Andreas Huyssen writes, "Preserving elements of the avant-gardist tradition is not at all incompatible with the recuperation and reconstitution of history and of story which we have witnessed in the 1970s."[64] Which is to say: Handke would spend his career making the thorny violence of his avant-garde beginnings more consummate, more whole.

Published in the same year, *Short Letter, Long Farewell* is an immediate departure in terms of complexity and subject matter. It tells the fragmented story of an Austrian writer

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[61] Ibid, 102.

[62] Handke, Peter. *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*, trans. Michael Roloff. FSG, 1972, 131.

[63] Ibid, 133.

[64] Andreas Huyssen, "The Search for Tradition: Avant-Garde and Postmodernism in the 1970s," *New German Critique*, no. 22 (1981): 23–40, 37.

(perhaps an autofictional stand-in for the author) being pursued across America by his wife, from whom he has split up. In the "short letter" alluded to by the title, his wife says that she is going to find him and kill him. As in *A Moment of True Feeling*, the real murder of *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* has been transmuted into an imagined murder or the notion of murder. Kurt Fickert views a certain hard-boiled narrativity as the glue that draws the books into affinity with crime fiction and film noir as genres: "The influence of the detective story, particularly in its American 'hard-boiled,' i.e., naturalistic, version, persisted in Handke's writing, as the underpinning of *Der kurze Brief*."[65] The book is filled with cinematic references and constantly fetishizes America. In Handke's middle- and late-period work, references to cinema and other, more teleological genres, like thrillers or old-fashioned adventure novels, serve as an almost ironic counterpoint to aimless narration focused almost entirely on the physical navigation of topography. *Short Letter, Long Farewell* is not yet as prolix as that later work, so the irony is less pronounced and the cinematic quality of the work itself zooms—telegraphically, imagistically—across the surface of a mythic America. As Fickert also writes:

> The literary aspect of Handke's autobiographical account comes further to the fore by way of the narrator's repeated references to works of literature he is reading and films and other performances he has seen and considers significant. By these means, *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied* provides insight into the typicalness of both European introversion, centered in the individual, and American extroversion, secured by membership in a community.[66]

More unexpectedly, Fickert demonstrates that Handke riffs on Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*, the phrase itself a euphemism for death, in the second half of the book, entitled "Long

[65] Kurt Fickert, "The Myth of America in Peter Handke's 'Der Kurze Brief Zum Langen Abschied,'" *German Studies Review* 21, no. 1 (1998): 27–40, 29.

[66] Ibid, 27.

Farewell."[67] The book is divided into two halves: "Short Letter" and "Long Farewell." No particular thematic separates the two halves, except, perhaps, a rather reactionary binary between the protagonist's wife, Judith, an evil harpy,[68] and his lover, the beneficent Claire. It is the protagonist's penetration of the sleeping Claire—all-forgiving, all-accepting, doe-like in her compliance—that ends the first part of the novel and shoots us into the second: "I awoke from my nightmares with an erection, penetrated the sleeping Claire, went limp, and fell asleep again."[69] The child of Judith and the protagonist is traveling with him and Claire at this point, referred to as only "the child," as is always so in Handke's novels in a way that almost dehumanizes children, but, more than that, thematizes his characters' inability to identify with their own children or their own fatherhood.[70] For Fickert, Judith and Claire represent Handke's commentary on Chandler's text (or perhaps its meta-version thereof):

> Although Handke makes no other mention in his story of Chandler's tale of murder and debauchery among the obscenely rich who inhabit the mansions in the hills above Los Angeles, he puts to his own good use Chandler's preoccupation with the feminine mystique. *The Long Goodbye*, in which the detective Philip Marlowe—a private investigator––becomes involved with two attractive women, one of whom is murderous and the other who gives him solace, *Der kurze Brief* also confronts the protagonist with the vengeful Judith but also with the beneficent Claire (the name itself connotes brightness).[71]

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[67] Indeed, though Manheim's translation of the novel is brilliant as always, it really should have been called *Short Letter, Long Goodbye*.

[68] A phrase that ought to be more associated with Handke than with the author of the dissertation. And, again, this is a resurrection of a mode of criticism as much as it is an analysis of Handke…

[69] Peter Handke, *Short Letter, Long Farewell*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: NYRB Classics, 2009), 87.

[70] Also a significant thematic element of Knausgaard's cycle.

[71] Kurt Fickert, "The Myth of America in Peter Handke's 'Der Kurze Brief Zum Langen Abschied,'" *German Studies Review* 21, no. 1 (1998): 27–40, 28.

Politically problematic moments in Handke's texts are not limited to his naive paeans to Serbian identity, as one sees here.

Beyond Chandler, the reference to whom creates something of a conceptual framework for the text, the allusions to other films, plays, and novels are overwhelming and not necessarily constitutive of the text's subject matter: *The Great Gatsby*, Gottfried Keller's *Der grüne Heinrich*, John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*, Schiller's *Don Carlos*, Johnny Weissmuller's "*Tarzan* pictures," the "*Canned Heat* Show"... Even here, there is the constant critical drive to relate everything in Handke's work to alienation:

> As the American dream provided Jay Gatsby with a grammar by which he could relate his ideals to objectively existing things and thereby create himself, as does the contemporary American reality—based as it is on self-apparent signs—allow Handke's narrator to construct a system of relationships by which he can realize his own identity, which has heretofore been lost amid anxious uncertainties.[72]

But why should these references be any different from Handke's descriptions of nature, of the McDonald's golden arches omnipresent on the highway, of the constant signs on those same roads? The reference to John Ford does, however, end up forming the novel's fairy-tale ending: the protagonist and Judith go to visit the great director, which somehow allows them to forgive each other, to reconcile with the threat of death no longer hanging over the protagonist's head, and, simultaneously, to perhaps bid farewell to his European past—as Fickert writes: "As in Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*, the theme of a farewell to the past, which becomes in Handke's case his renunciation of his European past, underlies the fiction."[73] The Ford scene is worth

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[72] Jerome Klinkowitz and James Knowlton, *Peter Handke and the Postmodern Transformation* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983), 47.

[73] Kurt Fickert, "The Myth of America in Peter Handke's 'Der Kurze Brief Zum Langen Abschied,'" *German Studies Review* 21, no. 1 (1998): 27–40, 29.

quoting in full, as it displays Handke's phenomenological description of topography, the defining feature of his later work, alongside the resolution to the hard-boiled narrative and the strange coming-to-life of an American idol:

> Lightning fell on the hills across the valley. Now and then a gust of wind cut light and dark shadows in the tall grass around us. The leaves on the tree fluttered as though dead. For a time there was no wind at all. Then a bush behind us rustled, though all the other bushes were still. The rustling stopped. A moment later a treetop down by the house was lit up for a moment. For a long while all was quiet, motionless. Then suddenly a murmur ran through the grass at our feet. I blinked, and when I opened my eyes the world around me had darkened and everything in it was close to the ground. The air was oppressive. A big yellow spider that had just been sitting on a leaf popped and fell at our feet. John Ford wiped his fingers in the grass, and turned his signet ring as though to conjure up something. I felt a tickling on the back of my arm. I looked and saw a butterfly that was just folding its wings; at the same time, Judith lowered her eyelashes. To see all this, I had only to take one less breath. We heard the rain falling on the orange trees in the valley. "One night last week," said John Ford, "we were driving through the desert down in Arizona. There was so much dew we had to use the windshield wiper."
> *Down in Arizona*: at those words I began to remember. John Ford was sitting stooped over, his eye almost closed. Expecting a story, we leaned forward a little: I realized I was imitating the gesture of a character in one of his pictures who without shifting his position cranes his long neck over a dying man to see if he's still alive.
> "Now tell me your story," John Ford said.
> And Judith told him how we had come to America, how she had followed me, how she had robbed me and wanted to kill me, and how at last we were ready to part in peace.
> When she had done telling our story, a silent laugh spread over John Ford's face.
> "*Ach Gott*!" he said.[74]
> He grew grave and turned to Judith.
> "Is that all true?" he asked in English. "None of it's made up?"
> "No," said Judith. "It all happened."[75]

[74] The strangeness of John Ford speaking German comes not from the translation, but the original text.

[75] Peter Handke, *Short Letter, Long Farewell*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: NYRB Classics, 2009), 166–167.

This page is a perfect illustration of the book's poetic: phenomenological descriptions, clear as one's gaze through the water of a mountain stream, exist alongside hard-boiled plot and incarnated engagement with American myth. It is my contention that, in this novel, the hard-boiled and the American mythical are simply mythical noumena brought down to the level of phenomena incarnate. In this text, Handke has mired his reader in a world of phenomena, high and low—originating from both on high and deep within the soil.

The third book published in this same *annus mirabilis* of Handke's prose, *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, is a highly fragmented agglomeration of the worldly phenomena that led to his mother's suicide; as Fickert writes, it is a "personal memoir, written so that he could reconcile himself to his mother's suicide[, which] had signified for him her failure to overcome the depression which resulted from the hopelessness that prevailed in the rural quagmire in which she and, for a time, her oldest child lived."[76] At least superficially, *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* is an obvious Handke book for Knausgaard to gravitate toward: it deals with the death of the mother in precisely the same way as *My Struggle* deals with the death of the father. Discussing *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* in Volume 6 of *My Struggle*, Knausgaard writes, "When I started writing, I'd been trying to achieve a similar style [to Handke's], if not dry, then raw, in the sense of unrefined, direct, without metaphors or other linguistic decoration."[77] However, Knausgaard also adds that "In contrast to my own prose, which constantly leaned toward the emotional and the evocative, Handke's prose was dry and unsentimental [...] the book I had written was the

[76] Kurt Fickert, "The Myth of America in Peter Handke's 'Der Kurze Brief Zum Langen Abschied,'" *German Studies Review* 21, no. 1 (1998): 27–40, 31.

[77] Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle: Book 6*, trans. Don Bartlett and Martin Aitken (New York: Archipelago, 2018), 174.

direct antithesis of Handke's, its antipode."[78] But emotion isn't necessarily the aesthetic element that separates their two bodies of work. As we shall see in the brief comparative analysis of their styles at the end of the chapter, Knausgaard attempts to narrativize and adds the physical human body into Handke's project (just as Merleau-Ponty does the body into Heidegger's), making it incredibly banal and prolix in the process. The book from Handke's oeuvre that actually bears some resemblance to Knausgaard's project is *My Year in the No-Man's Bay*, mentioned, as we have seen, in this same volume of *My Struggle*. And Knausgaard seems to recognize the tension between both his own project and Handke's and the two polarities of Handke's bibliography.

In fact, *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* is incredibly terse, bereft of detail, unadorned. As Knausgaard describes the book, "Handke steered away from all affect, all feelings, anything anecdotal, anything that might inject life into the text, always insisting that he was writing a text, that the life he was describing exists, or existed, elsewhere."[79] The book insists on merely listing the phenomena of Handke's mother's life without filling them in. As Tony Wells wrote in the *Oxford Review* around the time of the book's publication, "The fact of his mother's suicide renders Handke speechless, and as a fact it cracks language apart and does not allow itself to be tidied up in any clauses that would fit it into a scheme of things."[80] As with his early theatrical work, Handke violently questions the representative abilities of language. But the solution to this realization is different: not language games, but objects and events rendered with language and *without* authorial intervention. This runs precisely counter to Michael Shapiro's thesis about Handke, when he writes that:

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[78] Ibid, 174, 176.

[79] Ibid, 176.

[80] Tony Wells, "A Sorrow Beyond Dreams," *Oxford Literary Review* 2, no. 2 (1977): 35–36, 36.

> In various ways, then, Handke shows us that all meaning, at least that which human subjects can make intelligible, depends on the identities of the speaking subject and the interpreter [...] Handke's major issue—who are we such that we can mean anything intelligible, and who are we such that we can decipher meanings—is a fundamental epistemological question.[81]

In fact, *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* provides the blueprint for Handke's later non-epistemological circumvention of these issues. Handke proceeds on the assumption that his language is able to bring things distinctly into the "clearing of Being" by way of language, as Heidegger would put it. But *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* is only the beginning of this affect—the "clarity of a clear mountain stream" affect, as it might be termed. Shadows still haunt *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*. Ghosts even. The ghost of Handke's mother.

The book begins: "The Sunday edition of the Kärntner Volkszeitung carried the following item under 'Local News': 'In the village of A. (G. township), a housewife, aged 51, committed suicide on Friday night by taking an overdose of sleeping pills."[82] Later, he will explain that "This story, however, is really about the nameless, about speechless moments of terror. It is about moments when the mind boggles with horror, states of fear so brief that speech comes too late."[83] Though the book is not written in the subjunctive like *The Hornets*, there is the feeling that it might be. Much of it is speculation, but never speculation that is filled out to the level of a fiction:

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[81] Michael J. Shapiro, "Toward a Politicized Subject: Peter Handke and Language," *Boundary 2* 13, no. 2/3 (1985): 393–418, 414.

[82] Peter Handke, *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 3.

[83] Ibid, 30.

> [My mother and her husband] seldom looked at each other except in these moments of open hatred; then they looked deep and unflinchingly into each other's eyes, he from below, she from above. The children under the blanket heard only the shoving and breathing, and occasionally the rattling of dishes in the cupboard. Next morning they made their own breakfast while husband and wife lay in bed, he dead to the world, she with her eyes closed, pretending to be asleep. (Undoubtedly, this kind of account seems copied, borrowed from accounts of other incidents; an old story interchangeable with other old stories; unrelated to the time when it took place; in short, it smacks of the nineteenth century. But just that seems necessary, for, at least in that part of the world and under the given economic conditions, such anachronistic, interchangeable nineteenth-century happenings were still the rule. And even today the Town Hall bulletin board is taken up almost entirely by notices to the effect that So-and-so and So-and-so are forbidden to enter the taverns.)[84]

The reader is put into the same position as Handke: seeing glimpses of situations, imagined details, blobs of dark against the dim light of memory. But the notion of immersion? Of the creation of (to reference Husserl) an entire fictional life-world that the reader feels themselves to be at home in? No. As Knausgaard suggests, this would somehow be a betrayal. Perhaps most evocatively, Handke's mother's relation to Nazism is described as a kind of vague phenomenological apprehension of change:

> Demonstrations, torchlight parades, mass meetings. Buildings decorated with the new national emblem SALUTED; forests and mountain peaks DECKED THEMSELVES OUT; the historic events were represented to the rural population as a drama of nature.
> "We were kind of excited," my mother told me. For the first time, people did things together. Even the daily grind took on a festive mood, "until late into the night." For once, everything that was strange and incomprehensible in the world took on meaning and became part of a larger context; even disagreeable, mechanical work was festive and meaningful. Your automatic movements took on an athletic quality, because you saw innumerable others making the same movements. A new life, in which you felt protected, yet free.
> The rhythm became an existential ritual. "Public need before private greed, the community comes first." You were at home wherever you went; no more homesickness. Addresses on the back of photographs; you bought your first date book (or was it a present?)—all at once you had so many friends and there was so much going on that it became possible to

[84] Ibid, 37-38.

> FORGET something. She had always wanted to be proud of something, and now, because what she was doing was somehow important, she actually was proud, not of anything in particular, but in general—a state of mind, a newly attained awareness of being alive—and she was determined never to give up that vague pride.
> She still had no interest in politics: what was happening before her eyes was something entirely different from politics—a masquerade, a newsreel festival, a secular church fair. "Politics" was something colorless and abstract, not a carnival, not a dance, not a band in local costume, in short, nothing VISIBLE. Pomp and ceremony on all sides. And what was "politics"? A meaningless word, because, from your schoolbooks on, everything connected with politics had been dished out in catchwords unrelated to any tangible reality and even such images as were used were devoid of human content: oppression as chains or boot heel, freedom as mountaintop, the economic system as a reassuringly smoking fac-tory chimney or as a pipe enjoyed after the day's work, the social system as a descending ladder: "Emperor-King-Nobleman-Burgher--Peasant-Weaver/Carpenter-Beggar-Gravedigger";[85] a game, in-cidentally, that could be played properly only in the prolific families of peasants, carpenters, and weavers.[86]

No text can bring home the feeling of having been a young person in Nazi Germany, disinterested in politics and blissfully unaware, as well as this one. Because, in its abstraction, it deals with phenomena rather than noumena—with how it felt to live through this rather than what it meant. Unlike Handke's criticism of Knausgaard as having "no air," this passage is *all air*. It contains no editorial remarks. Handke's conception of the book is described in equally evocative terms:

> The people left the grave quickly. Standing beside it, I looked up at the motionless trees: for the first time it seemed to me that nature really was merciless. So these were the facts! The forest spoke for itself. Apart from these countless treetops nothing counted; in the foreground, an episodic jumble of shapes, which gradually receded from the picture. I felt

[85] This tarot-like way of identifying people by the rune-like designations of their profession will become more and more prevalent in Handke's work.

[86] Ibid, 13-15.

> mocked and helpless. All at once, in my impotent rage, I felt the need of writing something about my mother.[87]

In fact, as the book continues, it begins more and more to resemble an "episodic jumble" of images, with less and less of these imagined narratives "in the subjunctive," but, counterintuitively, this increasing fragmentation is not a mark of inarticulateness, no, it is a sign of *total precision*. And the book's ultimate victory is when, at its very end, Handke writes "A thought is taking shape, then suddenly notices that there is nothing more to think. Whereupon it crashes to the ground like a figure in a comic strip who suddenly realizes that he has been walking on air. Someday I shall write about all this in greater detail."[88] It is specifically the thought that is unneeded, for the image, the event, the name is enough—and the thought crashes to the ground, the book ending as a victory over the very notion of authorial intervention. Jakob Norberg assents as to the victory at the heart of this failure to represent, though he aligns it with an equivalency posited between writing and the mother's household chores: "*Wunschloses Ungluck* may not be able to endow the mother with a voice she never had, but through attention to the pressures under which she suffered, and through the figuration of the writing process in terms of analogous pressures, it tries to make her silence legible by putting its own failure on display."[89] Or, as G.M. Stoffel writes about the book, "Im sorgfältig ausbalancierten Spannungsfeld antithetischer Strukturelemente, das 'das schmerzlose Verschwinden einer Person

[87] Peter Handke, *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 65.

[88] Ibid, 70.

[89] Jakob Norberg, "'Haushalten': The Economy of the Phrase in Peter Handke's 'Wunschloses Unglück,'" *The German Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (2008): 471–88, 485.

in poetischen Sätzen' verhindert, ergibt sich ein hohes Maß an Authentizität."[90] [91] Absence, sheer image, a lack of commentary, the eventual cessation of the writing process—all of this is a sign of success and not alienation from language as a representative medium, it is the movement toward a higher form of representative language, one that Handke shall spend the rest of his life and career exploring.

Even in his following novel, however, *A Moment of True Feeling*, not published until 1975, Handke begins to move toward the phenomenological affect that shall define his middle-period work. The novel opens as a sideways commentary on *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*: one Gregor Keuschnig (one of the many Gregors in Handke's work and, indeed, not the only time this particular Gregor shall appear in Handke's work, a repetition that is, in part, a reference to Kafka's Gregor Samsa) who works at the Austrian embassy in Paris dreams that he has committed a murder and, after that, finds himself wandering through his daily life without purpose, in search of something "true," something as genuine as the feeling of the murder in the dream. In some strange way, the book seems like a video game that consists of nothing but two days spent walking around Paris. The first sentences sums up Gregor's predicament with radiant succinctness: "Who has ever dreamed that he has become a murderer and from then on has only been carrying on with his usual life for the sake of appearances?"[92] As Francis Sharp writes:

> Keuschnig wakes up one morning from a dream with the conviction that he has become a murderer. His past has overnight ceased to define his existence. The roles which he had played on the various levels of his

[90] "A high degree of authenticity emerges from the carefully balanced field of tension between antithetical structural elements that prevent "the painless disappearance of a person into poetic sentences."

[91] G. M. Stoffel, "Antithesen in Peter Handkes Erzählung 'Wunschloses Unglück,'" *Colloquia Germanica* 18, no. 1 (1985): 40–54, 52.

[92] Peter Handke, *A Moment of True Feeling*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 3.

> life—husband, father, journalist, lover—suddenly become null and void for him in the face of the dream's power. Arrival at a new existential position, a new identity, seems equally as impossible as a return for Gregor. He becomes disconnected from the person he had been before his dream without direction or momentum toward a newly defined self.[93]

Less convincingly—and as other critics do with Joseph Bloch—Sharp ascribes Gregor's existential condition to schizophrenia and suggests that "Schizophrenia is only the most radical change of consciousness which Handke envisions. He maintains both as a reader and as an author that literature too should have the capacity to alter experience."[94] The issue here is that Handke's characters do not see what is *not* there in a schizophrenic mode, but only what "exists in the world" with total clarity. Indeed, what Gregor finds instead of the contours of a self are the objects around him, described in minute detail, as he wanders around Paris:

> Suddenly he had a vision of things happening simultaneously all over Paris: in Saint-Germain-des-Pres (TOURIST QUARTER) pizzas were being gouged and tugged about and hungry tourists were going from restaurant to restaurant reading menus, unable to make up their minds; in Menilmontant (WORKING-CLASS QUARTER) workers were drinking their after-work beer at the Rendez-vous des Chauffeurs, an authentic workers' bistro, where today as usual quite a few intellectuals had dropped in; in Belleville (AFRICAN QUARTER) groups of blacks,[95] some in dashikis, all holding beer cans, were standing silent on the sidewalk; in Auteuil (POSH QUARTER) waiters in leather-upholstered pubs were asking sons and daughters of the upper bourgeoisie whether they wished french or foreign beer; and all over town idle pinball machines gleamed, while those in use rattled and clicked, the plane trees and chestnut trees on the boulevards murmured, the black coupling pipes between Metro cars wriggled when the train was in motion, lovers looked into each other's eyes, hamburgers rested on soggy slices of onion in those wimpy snack bars that were still left—and all that, thought Keuschnig—as he stared with burning eyes into the same forever unchanging light—year in year out with the same inexorability, predictability, mortal tedium, and deadly exclusivity with which this

[93] Francis Michael Sharp, "Literature as Self-Reflection: Thomas Bernhard and Peter Handke," *World Literature Today* 55, no. 4 (1981): 603–7, 605.

[94] Ibid, 607.

[95] Worth noting that the descriptions of Black people in this book are uncomfortably Houellebecqian.

> possibly perfectly nice woman, for instance, would no prepare an avocado vinaigrette for dinner.[96]

Yes, OK, the attentive critic of my work may respond, but he is *imagining* things here, therefore, Sharp's notion of schizophrenia may not be so misplaced, never mind how precise all of Gregor's imaginings are—exact renderings of what it is to BE in the world of Paris. Well, I respond, most of the time, Gregor does *not* imagine Paris is in superposition and Gregor simply observes what happens around him in simple, pellucid sentences—again, with no causation posited between them, as in *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*—with none of the baroque flair that sometimes characterizes other German-language stylists:

> A thin bony man overtook Keuschnig; of all the people on the street, he was the only one who seemed to be in a hurry; his prominent shoulder blades jiggled under his tight-fitting summer jacket. Here and there North African workers, apparently grown accustomed to the lack of space, were sitting on doorsteps, waiting for the end of the lunch hour. A pale counter girl, with a name tag on the collar of her apron, stepped out of a pastry shop, closed her eyes, sighed and bent back her head so as to get the sun in her face. Another girl, carrying a cup of coffee, crossed the street very very slowly, step by step, for fear of spilling the coffee. Keuschnig stopped still and without a word from him Agnes stopped too—because it was so hot, just plain hot. The street trembled as the Metro passed inaudibly underneath. Keuschnig felt the tremor. This is it! he thought. Yes, this is it!—an experience that he had given up expecting.[97]

Of course, this imagined revelation is no revelation at all; it is immediately forgotten as Gregor moves on to other almost identical chains of observations. Handke observes the life of Paris in precisely the same mode that he will observe the life of nature in his later novels. The one element of this book that isn't remotely transitional, but utterly unique in Handke's bibliography

[96] Peter Handke, *A Moment of True Feeling*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 62–63.

[97] Ibid, 110.

are the nasty, depersonalized sex scenes, far more graphic than the erotic encounters in *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*. In this scene, Gregor has sex with his mistress, who has children and whose husband died in a motorcycle accident:

> He didn't let her undress him. If she were to touch him, he would crush her with his fist. The actions of laying- his-trousers-over-the-back-of-a-chair, of lying-down-in-bed- together, of inserting-the-penis-in-the-vagina. When she stroked his member with her fingernail, he felt she was infecting him with some loathsome skin disease. Intermittently, under the light pressure of her vagina, he felt protected, but at the orgasm, in place of something hot, a cold shiver came out of him and instantly spread over his whole body. He wished he were washed and dressed that minute, sitting opposite her, at some distance [...] He thought of a dead pig, but only to avoid feeling inferior to her. The longer they looked at each other, the more concerned she became and the more he lost interest. Merely because he hadn't a thought in his head, he grimaced—no, his face turned into a grimace without his stirring a muscle. He simulated a yawn, so as to be able to close his eyes again. Then he took hold of Beatrice's hair and forced her head down to his belly; she took his member into her mouth and pushed it out with her tongue; if her face had been on a level with his, he might have thought she was sticking out her tongue at him. Filled with warmth, he had a feeling that he and Beatrice briefly belonged together, and that if he could only start talking, he would come to understand her completely.[98]

This psychopathic attitude toward sex helps to understand another one of Gregor's ersatz revelations at another point in the text: "Keuschnig thought himself capable of anything, even a sex murder. At last he owned to himself that killing the old woman in his dream had been a sex murder."[99] Richard Critchfield identifies Handke entirely with the Austrian writer with whom Gregor has some dealings in his work at the embassy and who is constantly following Gregor and writing down what he does. When that writer abandons Gregor near the end of the novel, Critchfield views this as a parodic turn:

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[98] Ibid, 20-21.

[99] Ibid, 33.

> We know that Handke is finished with Gregor Keuschnig, who has become
> in the course of the novel a droll caricature of Sartre's Antoine Roquentin [...] He has assumed this role perhaps in an attempt to counter on the one hand the current argument that his oeuvre contains a great deal of "flat and unreconstructed existentialist orthodoxy" and on the other to further distance himself from the image of the author whose writing is irreparably flawed by the seductive but anachronistic notion that it is still possible to write original stories.[100]

It is only possible to make such a claim by ignoring the later development of Handke's work. For there is no question that the descriptions of Paris are earnest and accurate and, beyond that, the constant references to cinema and literature are simply means of better describing the fabric of the city, overlaid as it is by the detritus and allusions that culture is made up of. I do not envy Critchfield the task of attempting to prove what is humorous about Gregor's chilly reflection that he envies Humphrey Bogart, but, fortunately, he does not take it on. Critchfield merely identifies the book as parody and satire, but shows not a single "moment of true humor." Far more convincing is Cornelia Blasberg's article in *Poetica*, "'Niemandes Sohn'? Literarische Spuren in Peter Handkes Erzählung *Die Stunde der wahren Empfindung*," which traces all of the literary references in the book at a micro-level. At the same time, Blasberg comes to no grand conclusion about what they might mean. It seems to me that these references are used simply because they are a part of Handke's world. Just as there is no special meaning in the cup of the coffee that is on the verge of spilling, so too do the Rilke lines occasionally cropping up simply make up the phenomenal texture of the literary text. Banal objects in the world and lines of poetry represent different plains of phenomena for the author. One thing is certain about the Austrian writer's abandonment of Gregor: after this book, Handke would never write such a character again and

[100] Richard Critchfield, "Parody, Satire, and Transparencies in Peter Handke's 'Die Stunde Der Wahren Empfindung,'" *Modern Austrian Literature* 14, no. 1/2 (1981): 45–61, 58.

his work would take on a placidity entirely alien to the violence of Joseph and Gregor, of his mother's suicide, and of Claire's murderous letter.

Stage Two: The Zen of Dasein

The book that represents the beginning of Handke's middle period, *Die linkshändige Frau* [*The Left-Handed Woman*] (1976), might initially seem to better belong to his brief and violent early texts. In the book, a woman realizes that her husband will someday leave her and, as such, immediately kicks him out of the house, despite their apparent lack of marital strife (though the husband is something of a brute with an apparent tendency toward infidelity). In the press materials for the film's release (*The Left-Handed Woman* was also made into a film), Handke describes the genesis of the novel in a single image:

> The story of *The Left-Handed Woman* began with an image in the winter about five years ago; I was living in one of those new apartment building colonies in the Taunus mountains to the north of Frankfurt, and one evening I was on the outskirts of the housing development. The houses . . . were set out like terraces one on top of another, behind them the woods started, crowned by the three thousand foot peak of a mountain. A few lights were on in the boxes, and one or two women were visible in the windows .... The not yet completely dark sky with its large bright clouds- underneath- it the brown and grey forest beneath the forest the box houses with the occasional women. It was a kind of separate togetherness, and at that moment I knew that I had a story to tell, a story expressed in this image.[101]

It is significant that the initial genesis of this "story" is not an event, but a worldly "phenomenon" that Handke feels the need to describe in detail. This demonstrates what should

[101] Susan Linville and Kent Casper, "Reclaiming the Self: Handke's 'The Left-Handed Woman,'" *Literature/Film Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1984): 13–21, 15.

be clear to any reader: the book is not about marriage, it is, as Susan Linville and Kent Casper write, "a [reflection of] Handke's personal situation at the time: that of the 'foreigner' living in a strange country [Germany], isolated in unfamiliar surroundings, groping for identity among the welter of signs and signals."[102] Ah yes! The old refrain that Handke's immersion in worldly phenomena is an attempt to cure alienation, or something similar. But what if there is no alienation at issue? The titular woman's decision to part ways with her husband is a very cool, a very matter-of-fact one. Linville and Casper conclude by claiming that:

> *The Left-Handed Woman* suggests the possibility (though it remains a highly ambiguous implication) for freedom from that captivity of consciousness produced by the alienating verbal and cultural patterns which filter daily existence. In rejecting and subverting conventional narrative techniques and replacing their framework with a para tactical series of familiar (and therefore generally unseen, unrecorded) occurrences of daily experience, Handke develops a style that necessitates- even as it reveals- a process of recognition. By focusing on and exposing relational constructs that exist in particular moments of experience, he also exposes consensual reality, with its politically motivated biases and myths and its resistance to self-realization.[103]

The notion that Handke, whose work becomes more and more depersonalized and that here ends with the woman's totally ambiguous non-position as regards both the world and her husband, is primarily interested in the telos of self-realization is not a serious one. *The Left-Handed Woman* takes the framing device of an Updike[104]-style divorce narrative, then zooms in on those German terraces as set against the mountain—and all the other worldly, natural, and unnatural phenomena surrounding it. Fascinatingly, more criticism is devoted to the film of *The Left-*

[102] Ibid, 13.

[103] Ibid, 21.

[104] Updike, who, incidentally, wrote a very positive review of *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* in *The New Yorker* upon its release.

Handed Woman than the book itself—perhaps as Handke himself directed it and it preceded the book. In this context, the notion of the gaze of cinema becomes the basis for Alice Kuzniar's claim that "Far then from accusing Handke of mindless narcissism, as in much prevailing criticism, one may chart how he splits and sutures the subject in its field of vision. But Handke does not solely delineate the destabilization of the postmodern subject: he also witnesses the grace that the other's look bestows."[105] This is on the right track, but we can take it one step further: Handke's prose is a gaze through words and into the world, the gaze that allows the reader to see the "grace" of existing among phenomena and in a world. And this is that same "grace" at play when Heidegger writes that "Thus Dasein's understanding of Being pertains with equal primordiality both to an understanding of something like a 'world', and to the understanding of the Being of those entities which become accessible within the world,"[106] for is not "primordial" something like Heidegger's conception of "grace"—to see within or illuminate the "clearing of Being"?

That's surely a bit over-egged. But to ignore the fact that the point—the telos—of *The Left-Handed Woman* seems to be the ability to exist, alienated, amongst the phenomena of the world, haloed by the zen or "grace" that belongs to Dasein, would be an enormous error. It is that telos—the goal of living alienated within the world, unbothered by the scaffolding of the plot—that Handke's middle-period novels takes as mission statement. Here, the protagonist, a translator of French literature, is unbothered by the possible love triangle that seeks to unfold around her and in which she refuses to be implicated. The precise details of the romantic

[105] Alice Kuzniar, "Desiring Eyes," *Modern Fiction Studies* 36, no. 3 (1990): 355–67, 366.

[106] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1962), 33.

entanglements in the novel never really even come into focus, even as the book ends with her publisher (who seems to be a possible love interest in that he is constantly bringing over champagne), a famous actor (representing not only himself, but the primacy of cinema in Handke's oeuvre, as well as another love interest), and her husband all over at her house, getting drunk. The publisher leaves first, then her husband and the actor: "They stopped and pissed side by side, with their backs to her. When they proceeded on their way, they kept changing sides, because neither wanted to be on the right."[107] Their arrangement in space is more important than the emotional resonance of the scene; it is never explained why being on the left is somewhere better, except for with abstract reference to the title. Once everyone has left, the protagonist sits alone and sketches:

> She sat in the living room, propping her legs on a second chair, and looked at the sketch the chauffeur had left. She poured herself a glass of whiskey and pushed up the sleeves of her sweater. She smiled to herself and shook the dice cup, leaned back and wiggled her toes. For a long time she sat perfectly still; her pupils pulsated evenly and grew gradually larger. Suddenly she jumped up, took a pencil and a sheet of paper, and began to sketch: first her feet on the chair, then the room behind them, the window, the starry sky, changing as the night wore on—each object in every detail. Her strokes were awkward and uncertain, lacking in vigor, but occasionally she managed to draw a line with a single, almost sweeping movement. Hours passed before she laid the paper down. She looked at it for some time, then went on sketching.
> In the daylight she sat in the rocking chair on the terrace. The moving crowns of the pine trees were reflected on the window behind her. She began to rock; she raised her arms. She was lightly dressed, with no blanket on her knees.[108]

This, then, is true victory, the true victory of alienation that Handke's books do not lament or satirize, but proselytize. It is this victory that Handke's books move toward—the ability to live

[107] Peter Handke, *The Left-Handed Woman*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 86–87.

[108] Ibid, 87-88.

among objects and perhaps occasionally sketch them. And, in Handke's two most placid, most "alienated" late-period works, *Die Obstdiebin oder Einfache Fahrt ins Landesinnere* [*The Fruit Thief, or A One-Way Journey into the Interior*] (2017) and *Der Bildverlust oder Durch die Sierra de Gredos* [*The Loss of Image or Through the Sierra de Gredos*] (2002), it is no coincidence that the protagonists are, like the left-handed woman herself, women. These books are prolix expansions of this compressed early text. When this book then ends with a quote from Goether's *Elective Affinities*,[109] "And so they all, each in his own way; reflectingly or unreflectingly, go on with their daily lives; everything seems to take its accustomed course, for indeed, even in desperate situations where everything hangs in the balance, one goes on living as though nothing were wrong,"[110] the reader sees that, for Handke, this idyllic "daily life" is one liberated from plot, just as he increasingly seeks to liberate his own characters from the plots that are meant to contain them, thereby freeing them to be "alienated"—a state of being that is actually just a clearer way of seeing the things in the world.

Significant in this regard is the fact that Handke also published one of his journals in 1977, calling it *Das Gewicht der Welt* [*The Weight of the World*]. Not only would this book be an important predecessor to *My Year in the No-Man's Bay*, it is an early iteration of the same banal, unadorned method Knausgaard would eventually take and run with. Of the fragmentary quality of this journal, Ulrich Wesche writes that "Ihre Endgültigkeit ist nicht die einer geschliffenen, immer wieder überarbeiteten Form, sondern eine unmittelbare Treffsicherheit, der die

[109] As all of Handke's novels from this point on end with a quote from a classical (or semi-classical) source, presented on its own single page.

[110] Ibid, 89.

Genauigkeit zur zweiten Natur geworden ist,"[111] adding that "Handkes Fragmente lassen sich immer wieder lesen [...] Die Fragmente bleiben frisch, auch weil sie nachvollziehbar sind."[112] [113] Wesche describes the almost meditative quality of this fragmented diary, subjecting it to comparisons with eastern texts about zen and meditation, also indicating that this book was an influence on the American author Joyce Carol Oates: "Diese absolute Empirie der Handkeschen Fragmente ist bei einigen amerikanischen Schriftstellern unmittelbar auf Resonanz gestoßen. Joyce Carol Oates ist von Handkes Weight of the World 'begeistert' und 'spürt eine starke Identifikation.'"[114] [115] As Francis Sharp writes, "The focus in Handke's journal remains fixed on present time as the author reports the experiential content of private moments."[116] However, the lack of framing means that *The Weight of the World* exists as a source of raw material—of method—for Handke's later projects, but is not itself significant in his reception or, really, within his own development.

Handke's next three novels exist in a state of ontological uncertainty, as they were first published as three very short texts, then collated into the three parts of a single book later on. These are *Langsame Heimkehr* [*Slow Homecoming*] (1979), *Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire* [*The*

[111] "Its finality is not that of a polished form that is continually revised, but rather an immediate accuracy for which accuracy has become second nature."

[112] "Handke's fragments can be read again and again [...] The fragments remain fresh, also because they are comprehensible."

[113] Ulrich Wesche, "Fragment Und Totalität Bei Peter Handke," *The German Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (1989): 329–34, 331.

[114] "The absolute empiricism of Handke's fragments immediately resonated with some American writers. Joyce Carol Oates was 'thrilled' by Handke's *Weight of the World* and 'feels a strong identification.'"

[115] Ibid, 331.

[116] Francis Michael Sharp, "Literature as Self-Reflection: Thomas Bernhard and Peter Handke," *World Literature Today* 55, no. 4 (1981): 603–7, 603.

Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire] (1980), and *Kindergeschichte* [*Child Story*] (1981), later to form *Langsame Heimkehr* [*Slow Homecoming*] as a single volume. Taken together, these three books form a high-wire act: that of Handke's observations sublated to the level of tenuously plotted fiction, then that of the three individual parts of the book, essentially unrelated, brought into highly abstract conversation by way of their compilation. As W.G. Sebald, a noted devotee of this era of Handke's work, which he claimed was an enormous influence on his own fiction, writes:

> Already with the appearance of the three books of *Slow Homecoming*, however, the engagement [of critics and readers] with Handke became more hesitant. Far more hermetic, far more difficult to describe, these works, which observe the world in a different manner, almost seem to me to be conceived in order to put a stop to this critical and scholarly game. The author clearly paid a dear price for this insolence—whether unintentional or strategic—through which the author secured for his writings a claim to a certain discretion after publication. What unsettled critics more than anything else was Handke's new and, one could say, programmatic design for the visualization of a more beautiful world by virtue of language alone.[117]

Sebald, of course, sees what the critics do not: that there is no question here of alienation or attempts to "self-affirm" a new identity, but that Handke's language's ability to capture the phenomena of the world, as through the cold water of a mountain stream, is the singular focus of the text. And not just in this text, but in all of Handke's middle-period texts from the three books that make up *Slow Homecoming* until *My Year in the No-Man's Bay*, which represents the transition to the totally prolix excess of his later novels. These middle-period novels do not just represent the apex of what I consider to be the phenomenological affect in Handke's work, they represent its apex in 20th-century prose as such.

[117] W.G. Sebald, "Across the Border," trans. Nathaniel Davis, in *The Last Books* (New York: New Directions, 2013), 1.

Slow Homecoming, as trilogy, is the first text by the mature Handke, bearing with it many of the hallmarks of his later work: constant references to antiquity, random expressions or phrases in quotation marks, and almost total non-attention paid to the plot (*A Moment of True Feeling* comes to seem almost like a Tom Clancy novel in comparison). Yet a great deal of what critics write about is the strange identity-based transformations in the book: the geologist working in Alaska becomes the writer chasing after the origins of paintings in France becomes the everyman-father of *Child Story*. As Francis Sharpe writes, "Through the transmutation of the central character, *Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire* is in a sense a continuation of *Langsame Heimkehr*. The first-person narrator, a writer who has just returned to Europe, asserts his identity with the 'geologist' through a kind of literary metempsychosis on the return flight."[118] Perhaps what unites these first two parts of the book is the notion of a European returning from America, then, perhaps, the meeting with the child in the third as that of an ultimate homecoming. As Hugo Caviola writes, "While *Der kurze Brief* describes an emancipatory, 'avant-gardist' westward movement across the American continent, *Langsame Heimkehr* presents a European's emotional and intellectual preparations for returning home."[119] Caviola adds that "Orientation in physical space, narration, and writing [here] emerge as Handke's dominant themes, themes that indicate the self-reflective, allegorical dimension of the book."[120] The "orientation in physical space" is certainly key, but the self-reflective or allegorical focus is misidentified. Francis Sharp is closer to the marrow of things when he writes that "At times the boundaries between self and

[118] Francis Michael Sharp, "Literature as Self-Reflection: Thomas Bernhard and Peter Handke," *World Literature Today* 55, no. 4 (1981): 603–7, 606.

[119] Hugo Caviola, "'Ding-Bild-Schrift': Peter Handke's Slow Homecoming to a 'Chinese' Austria," *Modern Fiction Studies* 36, no. 3 (1990): 381–94, 384.

[120] Ibid, 384.

world appear close to dissolution in [the geologist] Sorger's mind, his absorption into an undifferentiated mass of self and world near at hand."[121] And, as expected, Sharp describes the trilogy as war waged against that dissolution of the self—as if melting away into the world were not Sorger's goal, just as it is the writer's goal, just as it is the father's goal, just as it is the left-handed woman's victory. The key to this book, as well as all later books Handke would write, is, as Caviola puts it, "a direct analogy between printed texts and the forms of physical reality [that] points to a static, simultaneous existence of writing and the physical world."[122] Beyond any and all plot scaffolding, it is at this point that the entirety of Handke's bibliography comes to resemble a prose version of Virgil's *Georgics*, which, as one scholar comically writes, "the director of a well-known botanical garden maintains [...] are the best thing for starting boys on botany."[123] The same, broadly speaking, might be said of Handke's prose: that it is "the best thing" for awakening the reader to the world around and all the phenomena in it… or just to hikes.

Yes, what the reader experiences in *Slow Homecoming* is not the plot—that's only when looking at the back cover or reading critical articles. What the reader experiences is: "a groove in the rock, a change of color in the mud, a windblown pile of sand at the foot of a plant"[124]; "a rifle shot fired across the water, as though from ambush, grazed but barely ruffled the smooth

[121] Francis Michael Sharp, "Literature as Self-Reflection: Thomas Bernhard and Peter Handke," *World Literature Today* 55, no. 4 (1981): 603–7, 606.

[122] Hugo Caviola, "'Ding-Bild-Schrift': Peter Handke's Slow Homecoming to a 'Chinese' Austria," *Modern Fiction Studies* 36, no. 3 (1990): 381–94, 390.

[123] L. P. Wilkinson, "The Intention of Virgil's 'Georgics,'" *Greece & Rome* 19, no. 55 (1950): 19–28, 28.

[124] Peter Handke, *Slow Homecoming*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: NYRB Classics, 2009), 7.

surface”[125]; “the ground under the raised huts, where the miniature geological formations, sheltered from the effects of precipitation, differed from the originally related but subsequently ruined forms of the outside world”[126]; “a beam of light flashed over the two companions and all those who were still abroad, including a group some distance away, waiting in the darkness for a bus—and then continued down the street like the beam of a searchlight, though no cars were passing just then”[127]; pallid formlessness (always when walking downhill)”[128]; “Fragments of painted high-rise buildings drove down the desolate streets in the form of bright-colored cars, and in those cars headrests had taken the place of people”[129]; “The river, with its seemingly frozen meanders glinting through the jumble of buildings, lies like a sleeping giant.”[130] And finally, a kind of thesis for Handke’s new method, beginning with this book: “This is how I see Cézanne's *réalisations* (except that I stand before him instead of kneeling): a transformation and sheltering of things endangered—not in a religious ceremony, but in a form of faith that was the painter’s secret.”[131] The forthgoing “transformation and sheltering” of Handke’s work takes on the form of a steady drift, a 20th-century *Georgics*.

Handke’s following novel *Der Chinese des Schmerzes* [*The Chinaman of Pain*, rather unimaginatively rendered as *Across* in English] enacts the same de-plotting of violence as *A*

[125] Ibid, 15.

[126] Ibid, 39.

[127] Ibid, 125.

[128] Ibid, 170.

[129] Ibid, 185.

[130] Ibid, 266.

[131] Ibid, 181.

Moment of True Feeling, but in much more radical fashion, for, in reading a summary of the book, it sounds like a violent, gritty confrontation with Austria's Nazi past (and Handke's novelistic return to Austria after several books away). It tells the story of Andreas Loser, a teacher of the classics,[132] who one day sees a tree defaced by a swastika in the woods, then tracks down and murders the perpetrator: "Back in the gully, I picked up my projectile, which was still lying there, and with it scraped the unfinished rune off the rock. The stone grew hot in my hand from the friction and smelled like a flint just before the sparks fly."[133] The murder scene is so overwhelmed by the description of the forest in which it comes to pass that an even mildly inattentive reader could easily miss it. Loser is also obsessed with and writes about thresholds in antiquity, another leitmotif in Handke's later work:

> For a threshold, he says, is not a boundary—boundaries are on the increase both in inner and in outer life—but a precinct. The word 'threshold' embraces transformation, floor, river crossing, mountain pass, enclosure (place of refuge). According to an almost forgotten proverb: 'The threshold is a fountainhead.' And this teacher says literally: 'It was from thresholds that lovers and friends absorbed strength. But,' he goes on, 'where nowadays are we to find the destroyed thresholds, if not in ourselves? By our own wounds shall we be healed. If snow stops falling from the clouds, let it continue to fall inside me.' Every step, every glance, every gesture, says the teacher, should be aware of itself as a possible threshold and thus recreate what has been lost. This new threshold consciousness might then transfer attention from object to object, and so on until the peace relay reappears on earth, at least on that one day—and on the day after and the day after that, rather as in the child's game where stone sharpens scissors, scissors cut paper, and paper wraps stone.[134]

[132] Lest it seem I have compared Handke's work to the *Georgics* for nothing, that which is Greek and Roman does indeed become an almost permanent motif in his texts from this point forward. Handke even references the *Georgics* six times in *Der Chinese*, writing, among other things that "Virgil, it is said, created his verses in the manner of a she-bear bringing forth her cubs, by hard labor during birth and even greater labor in 'licking them clean," an aspirational reference to an earlier method. Cf. Peter Handke, *Across*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 22.

[133] Peter Handke, *Across*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 56.

[134] Ibid, 67.

Increasingly in Handke's work, there are moments that serve as theses for the whole. For *Der Chinese*, the notion of the threshold certainly serves as a kind of sigil for the work, just as a pure articulation of Handke's notion of phenomenology would read that "This new threshold consciousness might then transfer attention from object to object, and so on until the peace relay reappears on earth," a rather Heideggerian formulation. From that perspective, the transference of attention from object to object would be the bringing of these objects into the clearing of Being in which Dasein (humankind) both is and *which* it is: "In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing [...] Only this clearing grants and guarantees to us humans a passage to those beings that we ourselves are not, and access to the being that we ourselves are,"[135] as Heidegger writes. And, as Handke would insist "to those OBJECTS that we ourselves are not."

Der Chinese could not be less concerned with the human drama of its plot. As Hugo Caviola writes:

> "*Der Chinese* is located in the "dwelling place" between its letters and the phenomena signified by them [...] Handke's writing of *Der Chinese* parallels its hero's actions in Austria. Loser "edits" the "text" Austria: he crosses out a slogan on a church wall, removes trail marks from the willow trees, and disposes of signboards covered with posters of political parties. He tears down a birdhouse, destroys a theater showcase, destroys a poster advertising a hairdressing establishment, and sets fire to a sign saying "Land suitable to development."[136]

[135] Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 178.

[136] Hugo Caviola, "'Ding-Bild-Schrift': Peter Handke's Slow Homecoming to a 'Chinese' Austria," *Modern Fiction Studies* 36, no. 3 (1990): 381–94, 392.

The book proceeds on the somewhat magical assumption that the writer is a producer of scriptural runes that illuminate (or "edit") the clearing of Being. As will be discussed at the end of the chapter, this is a directly Heideggerian notion that comes out of "The Origin of the Work of Art"—the positing of a direct passageway between text and world, and a two-way passageway of editing and illumination, not merely one of description. Caviola offers a clear explanation as to why the swastika-execution is so secondary in the book: "Even Handke himself has commented about [the swastika-execution] negatively as a regrettable remnant of narrative plot."[137] Caviola also does a brilliant job of explaining the enigmatic title:

> Located on the threshold between the letters on the page and the physical phenomena, the Austria evoked in *Der Chinese* can be aligned with a perception of space through slanted eyes. The scene that introduces the book's title permits a phenomenological explanation of its enigmatic Chinese element. Loser's woman-friend compares Loser to a man who, although very ill, went to visit a good friend. In leaving, he stopped at length in the doorway and tried to smile; his tense eyes became slits, framed in the sockets as by sharply ground lenses: "Auf Wiedersehen, mein Chinese des Schmerzes!" said his friend.[138]

Perhaps it's not such a mystery why the American publisher ditched the title… Caviola adds that the slanting of eyes, apart from the racist image it represents, "narrows the 'doors of perception,' [accentuating] the difference between inner and outer world," but also "merges object and its representation, 'die Schrift,' toward a 'blurred' middle between signifier and signified."[139] Then, with implacable inevitability, Caviola adds that this "Chineseness" represents Handke's own alienation from that which is Austrian, a thesis not really borne out by a book in which the

[137] Ibid, 392.

[138] Ibid, 393.

[139] Ibid, 393.

protagonist is utterly grounded in his native forests and, not only that, acts as their custodian, killing a Nazi defacer. Most significant in the book is not the murder, but a later scene in which a group of people identified only by their professions or roles in the world, like tarot cards—a painter, a politician, a priest, and the master of the house—each tell a "threshold story." This tarot-like form of identifying characters becomes increasingly prevalent in Handke's work. Then, after the story-game, Loser himself tells his son that this book, his story, is a "threshold story": "I sat down on the stool beside my son's desk chair and said: 'I have a story to tell you. It's called Threshold Story.'"[140] The book ends with an epilogue that is nothing more than the description of a medieval bridge, itself a threshold: "Now from the medieval canal—as from the medieval figures over the doors of the Old City churches—flow peace, mischief, quietness, gravity, slowness, and patience."[141] There is even less question of Loser's arrest than there is of Joseph's in *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*. Also of note are the occasionally archaic flourishes in the narration, perhaps another appeal to the classical tradition that is obviously so significant to Handke—"Shine for me, hard hazelbush. Glide hither, lithe linden tree. Rounded elderbush, prosper under the protection of the willows. Here is my other word for repetition: 'rediscovery'"[142]—and, as in *Slow Homecoming*, the random phrases in quotation marks, phrases that might seem to be clichés from the mouth of das Man, but often are not—"Held fanwise on the four sides of the card table, they represent in my eyes the 'heartland.'"[143] In his introduction to *Slow Homecoming*, Benjamin Kunkel describes this as "an insistence on placing overfamiliar

[140] Peter Handke, *Across*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 129.

[141] Ibid, 138.

[142] Ibid, 36.

[143] Ibid, 43.

expressions inside quotes,"[144] but the attentive reader will also find many unfamiliar expressions in quotes.

It is at this point in Handke's bibliography, after the novel *Wiederholung* [*Repetition*] (1986), that the amount of criticism at hand declines precipitously, as noted by Sebald. It is also when the Serbian theme comes to the fore, not yet problematically, but as a *premonition of great idiocy*. Sebald's essay on the book, "Across the Border," makes it clear how much this book specifically influenced his own work, but also presents a cogent analysis of the novel unto itself. *Repetition* is the story of a young man, Filip Kobal, searching for his brother Gregor in Slovenia during the course of one summer. The novel is presented as a recollection by Filip Kobal 25 years after the events in question. Sebald writes that, "As much as we learn from him about the young Filip Kobal, the currently middle-aged narrator is unwilling to give us much information regarding his present identity. It's almost as if he, who we can recognize only by his words, is the missing brother himself, whose trail the young Filip Kobal is following."[145] Note the "repetition" of the name Gregor from other works, an homage to Kafka and, as some critics note, "an autobiographical reference to the author's beloved maternal grandfather, Gregor Siutz. There was also a maternal uncle named Gregor who died during the war and whose letters from the front Handke had often read."[146] In the context of *A Moment of True Feeling*, the lost uncle seems not to be significant in the name of Gregor. But, here, that resonance is very à propos. In his book, *Die Idee der Wiederholung in Peter Handkes Schriften*, while arguing that repetition is,

[144] Peter Handke, *Slow Homecoming*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: NYRB Classics, 2009), viii.

[145] W.G. Sebald, "Across the Border," trans. Nathaniel Davis, in *The Last Books* (New York: New Directions, 2013), 2.

[146] Thomas F. Barry. *Modern Austrian Literature* 29, no. 2 (1996): 163.

in Handke's work, something akin to Heidegger's notion of "Selbstentwurf" [Self-design/Self-drafting], Klaus Bon persuasively shows that *Repetition* is an attempt to rewrite *The Hornets*. Bon argues is that:

> [What] Handke's fantasies of repetition [represent] is a shifting modality of the past (both as memory and as text), the present, and an almost utopian thrust into an imagined "other world" in which primal anxieties are overcome: a narrated self-reflexion up "blank slate" of paper through which an "other" self, a connection to the world is re-established. Repetition is a remembering of the estranged consciousness.[147]

The notion of self-actualization is, yet again, not necessarily so cogent in an oeuvre that posits total dissolution into the world of things—as at the end of *The Left-Handed Woman*—as goal, not *Selbstentwurf*. But repetition as that which thrusts the reader into another "utopian" world is a precise description of the myriad self-quotations of Handke's work. And is this utopian other world not the phenomenological world of things on which I somewhat polemically focus?

That is mostly the case, but in *Repetition*, as in other middle- and late-period works, this utopian other world also begins to get uncomfortably close to the political doctrine Handke would grow obsessed with: the Serbian nationalism of Milošević. Handke would even speak at Milošević's funeral and write a travelogue about Serbia, *Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien* [*A Winter Journey to the Rivers Danube, Sava, Morava and Drina, or Justice for Serbia*] (1996), in which he would defend the Serbian nationalist cause and deny the genocide quite rabidly. All because his mother was Slovenian and he, like Filip Kobal, came to feel a similar connection to the Serbian land as Kobal does in the book. This is so unsubtle that, as soon as Filip crosses the border, he has a

[147] Barry, Thomas F. *The German Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (1996): 460–61, 460-61.

quick look-around, then thinks, "this [is] a great country."[148] For *Repetition* resembles nothing quite so much as a memoir written by a Serbophile geologist that has been submitted to the Burroughs cut-up method:

> Comparable to sedimentary rock, the buildings before my eyes pointed to strata of the architectural past, from the foundations of Imperial Austria to the bay windows of the kingdom of the south Slavs and the smooth, unornamented upper stories of the present People's Republic of Slovenia, not omitting holes for flagpoles just below the attic windows.[149]
>
> Beyond the Seven Mountains there was nothing but a brook, so clear that its bed could be mistaken at first sight for a road—fish could be seen swimming over its dark elongated paving stones until at last the water, rushing over a round protruding rock, gave forth an endless sound.[150]
>
> But now everything was the primordial world—the rain gushing out of the dark sky as it had been falling since the world began, the smoke rising from the black earth as though from clefts in lava, the gray-on-gray of the wet, cold rock, the creepers catching at my feet, the absent wind.[151]

The book is exceedingly confusing and difficult, beyond which it is the first of Handke's books that is properly long—not simply telegraphic images stitched together into a pamphlet after the fashion of Pound's Imagism. Again, we recall that "the immediate technical characteristics of Imagist theory [are] metaphor, objectivism (simple, concrete statement), and visuality."[152] This is also a succinct enumeration of the characteristics of Handke's middle period of work. Indeed, as Sebald writes about *Repetition*, "Art, wherever and whenever it may take place, bears the closest

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[148] Peter Handke, *Repetition*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 5.

[149] Ibid, 92.

[150] Ibid, 148.

[151] Ibid, 175.

[152] William Skaff, "Pound's Imagism and the Surreal," *Journal of Modern Literature* 12, no. 2 (1985): 187.

ties to the realm of metaphysics. In order to explore this proximity, the writer requires a courage which should not be underestimated [...] in the higher realms, the air is thin and the danger of falling great."[153] Sebald's essay on the book is incredibly detailed: among other things, he shows how the fictional Kobal family represents transposed aspects of Handke's real family—and, therefore, his wish for another, more noble one. He also shows how the "repetition" of the title is the older narrator wishing to repeat the young Filip's journey out of Austria and to his "true homeland" (a journey that is best represented by the process of writing the text). Sebald also finds a resonance with Kafka's *The Castle* in Filip Kobal being offered a room in the "Black Earth Hotel" that has "four beds."[154] Sebald describes the process by which all this heavy family history and longing becomes a transcendentally powerful text:

> Looking back, it becomes clear to the forty-five-year-old that, at the time, he would not have been able to tell the story of homeland to anyone. It is a lengthy process of gestation by which indifferent scraps of one's own life transform into thought-provoking images; and even when the ancient fragments seem to be gathered into a sensible pattern, the storyteller is plagued by doubts, never to be fully assuaged, as to whether what he holds in his hands are only a matter of 'the last remnants, leftovers, shards of something irretrievably lost, which no artifice could put together again'. The fact that, despite this difficulty, and despite such scruples, *Repetition* presents us over and over with passages [...] which almost communicate a sense of levitation, seems to me a mark of the exceptional quality of this story, whose secret ideal, so it seems to me, is one of lightness.[155]

And the lightness lies in the fact that the text is almost entirely dissolved into its own fragmentary images. The meanings Sebald persuasively finds in it are the fruit of his own long,

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[153] W.G. Sebald, "Across the Border," trans. Nathaniel Davis, in *The Last Books* (New York: New Directions, 2013), 1.

[154] Ibid, 6.

[155] Ibid, 7.

hard work putting a few small fragments together. Which suggests that the "meaning" of the text is secondary to the feeling of "homeland," communicated by way of fragments placed alongside one another, but never properly reassembled. Sebald ends his essay with an analysis of how Filip comes to view a roadmender turned sign-painter as his role model. In the most Heideggerian passage in the book, Filip watches him "adding a shadowy line to a finished letter with a strikingly slow brushstroke [...] then conjuring up the next letter from the blank surface, as though it had been there all along and he was only retracing it, I saw in this nascent script the emblem of a hidden, nameless, all the more magnificent and above all unbounded kingdom."[156] This passage will be important for the discussion of "The Origin of the Work of Art" at the end of the chapter. In his own analysis, Sebald writes that "I don't know if the forced relation between hard drudgery and airy magic, particularly significant for the literary art, has ever been more beautifully documented than in the pages of *Repetition* describing the roadmender and sign painter."[157] Beyond which Sebald proposes that "The extraordinary openness of the text of *Repetition* arises from its presentation of the external as something much more important than the internal."[158] And is this not a keen way of describing Handke's telos of having his characters disintegrate into the world of objects, of phenomena, around them? A Handke plot, then, is centered around learning to view the external as more important than the internal.

Any and all problematic geographic markers disappear from Handke's following novel, *Die Abwesenheit: Ein Märchen* [*Absence: A Fairy Tale*] (1987), in which he strains against the limits of brevity, just as he does in the two that follow *Nachmittag eines Schriftstellers* [*The*

[156] Ibid, 8.

[157] Ibid, 8.

[158] Ibid, 8.

Afternoon of a Writer] (1987) and *Noch einmal für Thukydides* [*Once Again for Thucydides*] (1990). In *Absence*, four individuals identified by only their profession or some elemental quality of their being, in tarot-like fashion—the "old man," the "woman," the "soldier," and the "gambler"—randomly converge to take a long, but apparently significant journey by foot outside of a European city, into the wasteland of modernity that surrounds it. As in an Iain Sinclair novel or in any of Handke's late-period works, the walk is the only thing that structures the text; as the narrator states, "Actually, we did nothing, we just walked."[159] The old man constantly writes ideograms in a notebook and seems to be a stand-in for Handke himself:

> The pages are covered with columns of signs that vaguely suggest hieroglyphics. Beside them, written in a clear, official-looking, yet childlike hand, are words that seem to be attempts (some followed by question marks) to decipher the signs, such as "to bear in mind"; "to master"; "to break camp"; "to set out"; "to sit down?"; "the tunnel?"; "the cliff on the border?"; "the watershed?" In the space under the spine of the notebook: a black hexagonal pencil.[160]

Handke's method of putting certain phrases in quotation marks seems to be explained here: it is a form of ideogram. It is by way of these Poundian ideograms that the old man conducts their journey. As he writes, the old man "has kept on writing, but now he does it while walking, no longer in his book but in the air, drawing big letters."[161] Or is it a poster on the wall of a bus shelter that guides them, announcing: "PILGRIMAGE TO THE HOLY LAND"?[162] As they walk, the four trade monologues filled with classical references, none of which are direct in the

[159] Peter Handke, *Absence*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 75.

[160] Ibid, 5.

[161] Ibid, 91.

[162] Ibid, 17.

slightest. The "absence" of the title is the old man's disappearance right before the end of the book: "So then the old man went into the phase of evil absence. And it persisted. He lurked in the darkest corners of the room and attacked us in our instant-long insomniac dreams; and in the morning sun he was still there, ready to pounce."[163] In a certain sense, then, the book could be said to be a metaphor for the passing of older generations. In the book's final pages, Handke offers two resounding theses that guide it, as he often does: "Our perception was never purely external; it was always an assimilation, which engraved colors, forms, and relationships indelibly on our minds and strengthened us; we never so much as thought of appropriating, but saw things as values in themselves; their mere presence made us feel that we had recovered from something"[164] and, speaking of the book as a whole: "So this was what came of trying to get rid of history, individual as well as universal, and escaping into so-called geography?"[165]

As these theses suggest, *Absence* is the most succinct and direct declaration of purpose in Handke's bibliography. In 100 pages of taut, evocative prose, he shows us a group of human tarot cards vanishing into a world of degraded modern objects, spouting classical references in bizarre monologues as they disintegrate. Just as the old man composes runes in the air that guide the journey, then the book ends after his disappearance, so too does Handke illuminate the "clearing of Being" by way of the rune *that is the book* in a mode that seems to come directly out of Heidegger's essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art." Christoph Parry's book *Peter Handke's Landscapes of Discourse: An Exploration of Narrative and Cultural Space* uses *Absence*, as well as other texts, to show how Handke uses topography as a form of plot rather than event-oriented

[163] Ibid, 109.

[164] Ibid, 97.

[165] Ibid, 111.

narrative: "landscape also contributes to Handke's strategy of narrative unhinging."[166] Little else has been written on this book or the two following texts, *The Afternoon of a Writer* and *Once Again for Thucydides*, both of which, in a sense, read like epilogues or retreads of the highly compressed, Poundian technique in *Absence*. The air in these texts, as Sebald would say, is very thin. *The Afternoon of a Writer* is a phenomenological account of a writer's day, which "might serve as an illustration of the stringent and uncompromising stand taken by this author and of its consequences."[167] Gunther Pakendorf claims that "what is depicted in this text, then, is the external manifestation of the inner world of the author; to be sure, the title, with its use of the indefinite article, already indicates the exemplary nature of the afternoon and the paradigmatic value of the writer."[168] This is undeniably true, but only in the sense that the author represents a military avant-garde who charges forward and shows his reading public (his *Volk*) how to *be in the world*. As the Goethe quote at the end of the book reads: "'tis all there, but I am nothing."[169]

And the "I" is *truly* nothing in his following book, *Once Again for Thucydides*, which does not even have a shred of plot to disregard. It is simply a series of fragments culled from Handke's international wandering, fragments of nothing at all with no characters whatsoever. Here, one might recall Ulrich Wesche's notion of the fragment in Handke—that "its finality is not that of a polished form that is continually revised, but rather an immediate accuracy for which accuracy has become second nature." The title engages in the ancient polemic between

[166] Jerome Carroll. *Austrian Studies* 13 (2005): 284–85, 284.

[167] Gunther Pakendorf, "Writing about Writing: Peter Handke, 'Nachmittag Eines Schriftstellers,'" *Modern Austrian Literature* 23, no. 3/4 (1990): 77–86, 77.

[168] Ibid, 77.

[169] Peter Handke, *The Afternoon of a Writer*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Picador, 2020), 87.

Thucydides and Herodotus: that Thucydides wrote what he saw and found and Herodotus wrote what he heard. Handke's phenomenological method obviously falls on one side of this. Fascinatingly, in his article "It Was. But It Ain't," Charles Olson claims that Thucydides' phenomenological method—one that only examines the surface of things—ends up supporting the interests of the powers that be. In precisely this vein, *Once Again for Thucydides*, which might even be considered as non-fiction rather than a novel, prefigures the later tendency Handke has to praise the surface of the globalized world instead of lamenting it: an ode to those same *Foams* that Peter Sloterdijk beweeps. Jacob Haubenreich views the book not as some Poundian experiment in imagistic fragment, but as the consumerist self-packaging of Handke's writing process: he sells his process and sells his notes, just as he did with *The Weight of the World*. But Haubenreich also believes that Handke has a positive goal: "encouraging readers to create their own 'journal volumes,' to pick up their own pens or pencils and join Handke in slowing down, attuning, seeing the world anew, and taking note"[170] Or, as Susan Reynolds wrote in the *L.A. Times*, "Imagine that you are a writer from Austria who has taken on, in his fiction and nonfiction, all the angst of his generation. You're so twisted by guilt and blame and high culture and literary sensibility that you long to simply observe and record…Here he focuses on life's dazzling particulars."[171] Again with the alienation… But even if the diagnosis of "guilt and blame" is exaggerated, the description of the project is phenomenologically correct.

In the final act, then, of Handke's middle period, *My Year in the No-Man's Bay*, Handke "observes and records," "slows down, sees the world anew, attunes, takes note," but at enormous

[170] Jacob Haubenreich, "Packaging Process: Peter Handke's Writing for Sale," *Consumerism and Prestige: The Materiality of Literature in the Modern Age*, ed. Anthony Enns and Bernhard Metz (London: Anthem Press, 2022), 60.

[171] "Front Matter," *The Hudson Review* 51, no. 4 (1999): 641–719.

length: the Suhrkamp edition of this novel is more than a thousand pages. Like Knausgaard's *Out of the World*, this is a maximalist iteration of Handke's own project—a formulation that should be an oxymoron. For an unabridged translation, the English version of the book looks to be suspiciously shorter than the German: 468 to Suhrkamp's original 1066. But this is due to over-ample formatting on the German publisher's part, just as the Farrar, Straus, and Giroux first edition has much-too-tall pages. Even so, without knowing the precise page count of the Norwegian translation, one can imagine the young Knausgaard—the one who converses with Solstad about the book in volume six of *My Struggle*—drawing the wrong lesson from this enormity. The novel is nominally the account of a "metamorphosis": "There was one time in my life when I experienced metamorphosis. Up to that point it had been only a word to me, and when it began, not gradually, but abruptly, I thought at first it meant the end of me,"[172] it begins. The Kafka reference here need not be rehearsed. But it is not an insect into which the protagonist transforms: he instead becomes a writer who observes instead of creating. Like the Handke of *Once Again for Thucydides* and *The Weight of the World*, but with an ostensible plot to disregard, one that involves a whole armada of beautiful international women from the writer's past. A mild-mannered Casanova, near the beginning of the novel, he reflects that "Alone with a friend, unlike with a woman, I often felt out of place, even if I had been full of pleasure when I set out to join him."[173] Divorced and alone, the narrator now devotes himself to observation and, as in an Iain Sinclair book, walking through neglected urban areas. His house, strangely enough, is in the Parisian banlieues. About the writer, Robert Boyers observes that "As often in Handke,

[172] Peter Handke, *My Year in the No-Man's Bay*, trans. Krishna Winston (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 14.

[173] Ibid, 11.

the problem of the protagonist has much to do with exacerbated self-awareness, a problem at least as old as Dostoevski's underground man and the procession of existentialist anti-heroes he spawned."[174] The relation to the Underground Man is keenly identified—it is also at play in *A Moment of True Feeling* and *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*—but, here, one must imagine an Underground Man who, despite his disdain for his fellow man and his children, is somehow utterly at peace with himself, surrounded as he is by the phenomena of the natural and unnatural worlds. As Boyers also writes, "*No-Man's-Bay* never reads like a case study or psychological memoir. What would pass for a symptom in another work is here but a fraction of a leisurely, expansive movement of consciousness. Handke has no interest in diagnosis. Neither is he interested in epistemology as such."[175] In other words, by applying these notions to the book after the fact, the reader or critic betrays its essence. (As a side note, Boyers also aptly identifies Handke's obsession with antiquity: "The word 'antiquity' has for Handke's narrator as powerful a charge as the word 'metamorphosis.' [...] Now and again, a warmth rises from the gloom, a bright antique clang as of struck bronze sounds amidst the silence and dim isolation."[176]) The remaining critical literature on *My Year in the No-Man's Bay* is thin. Erich Skwara makes the poetic observation that this book might be the long-gestating fruition of "Flaubert's ambition to create a masterpiece out of nothing."[177] One critic, Lothar Hönnighausen

[174] Robert Boyers, "Review of *Peter Handke: Crossing Thresholds, Counting Losses*, by Peter Handke and Krishna Winston," *Salmagundi*, no. 128/129 (2000): 331–42, 336.

[175] Ibid, 336.

[176] Ibid, 341.

[177] Skwara, Erich Wolfgang. *World Literature Today* 69, no. 3 (1995): 572–73, 573.

theorizes the resonance of a painter in the book making a film of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*.[178] But Ulrich Wesche has the final word in writing that:

> Hand in hand mit der Wiedereinführung der Metapher geht bei Handke die "Wieder-holung" der Wirklichkeit und die neuerliche Verbindung von Wort und Welt. Was Handke in seinem letzten Roman, *Mein Jahr in der Niemandsbucht*, seine "Verwandlung" nennt und als größtes und einmaliges Ereignis seines Werdeganges feiert, ist eben diese Überwindung der Sprachimmanenz und der Entfremdung der Moderne, die sein Frühwerk so unerbittlich dargestellt hatte.[179] [180]

For if alienation is, in some sense, at play in the early novels (even if this "alienation" really is a kind of proselytized melting-away into the world of objects), there is no question that something has here been overcome.

Nevertheless, with the loss of that tension, there exists the danger that Handke is constantly on the verge of slipping into a banal version of Virgil's *Georgics* and losing the aesthetic consummateness that characterizes his phenomenological gaze in taut, vicious texts like *A Moment of True Feeling*; as, for example, in this passage from *My Year in the No-Man's Bay*:

> Each of these animals had its more or less brief heyday during the summer, so that I have a clear impression, for instance, of the week of the water strider, of the day of the hornets, of the dusk of that giant hedgehog, tapping its way, mammoth-sized, through last year's leaf layers, the hour of the seagull that fluttered into the bayou by mistake, the long, long moment of the giant dragonfly, hovering in the air directly before my eyes, face to face with me, its four-wing rotor transparent, nothing of the insect clearly outlined except the seemingly eyeless face,

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[178] Lothar Hönnighausen, "Conclusion: Faulkner's Achievement," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 42, no. 4 (1997): 685–92.

[179] With Handke, the "repetition" of reality and the renewed connection between word and world go hand in hand with the reintroduction of metaphor. What Handke calls his "metamorphosis" in his last novel *My Year in No-Man's Bay* and celebrates as the greatest and unique event of his career is precisely this overcoming of the immanence of language and the alienation of modernity, which his early work so mercilessly portrayed.

[180] Ulrich Wesche, "Metaphorik Bei Peter Handke," *Monatshefte* 89, no. 1 (1997): 59–67, 66.

> of an uncanny yellow, or the entire face a single universe-sized yellow eye, in whose omnipresence, after a moment's pause, I continued my sentence.
> That was already in early fall, and then the dragonflies continued to come, even on warm November days, though also never again so close. The only creatures besides the little birds in the bush that kept me company the entire time were the ordinary pond ducks and the coots. The latter, light in weight, could skim across the leaves that had fallen into the water, or, when they swam, they glided along in a straight line, their tail feathers sticking straight up in the air, beyond the densest thicket of the nameless lake, like Indian canoes, from which sometimes a warning cry sounded.[181]

If Seneca once humorously commented on the inaccuracy of the *Georgics* by writing that Virgil was "concerned more with what made the best poetry than with complete accuracy, since his object was to delight his readers rather than to instruct farmers,"[182] Handke here begins to read less like a writer seeking to "delight" his audience than the pamphleteer of a regional Austrian nature preserve, writing prolix descriptions of natural phenomena that families are to skim as they search out their trailhead. Passages like this are the blueprint for Handke's prolix late period, like Iain Sinclair's psychogeographic accounts of London with none of the latter's gritty flair for detail. Handke becomes a prose-bound tour guide through odd areas of post-industrial Europe (some beautiful forests, but more places like the city-outskirts of *Absence*). If the middle period of Handke's career is an attempt to dissolve the violence of his early work sheerly into the world of objects and if, in books like *Once Again for Thucydides* and *My Year in the No-Man's Bay*, he ends up like the female protagonist at the end of *The Left-Handed Woman*, this relaxed contemplation of the world's phenomena makes the length of this last work of his middle period

[181] Peter Handke, *My Year in the No-Man's Bay*, trans. Krishna Winston (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 370.

[182] M. S. Spurr, "Agriculture and the 'Georgics,'" *Greece & Rome* 33, no. 2 (1986): 164–87, 164.

the forthgoing rule rather than the exception. From here on out, walking through Europe alongside "the writer," we exist in the realm of the prolix.

Stage Three: "Prolix, prolix, nothing a pair of scissors can't fix!"

Various elements of Handke's late-period work have attracted the ire of critics, but most significant is the mushy-brained banality on display in the passage I quote from *My Year in the No-Man's Bay* combined with his enduring political affiliation with Milošević and his Serbian genocide denial. A very recent article in *The Nation* about Handke's late work (specifically *The Fruit Thief*) takes on this strange combination of failure quite brilliantly:

> Here and there, Handke hints at resisting the attention drain of the ever-accelerating information culture of Western Europe that he so despises: "You have control over the meanwhiles. Don't let them be taken from you! It's in the meanwhiles, the in-between stretches, that things happen, take shape, develop, come into being." But by luxuriating in the meanwhiles, Handke lays claim to a solipsism that finds originality in self-indulgence. Unlike his earlier works, which remain grounded in the brutal truths of the everyday, the hermeticism of *The Fruit Thief* is less accessible and far more mercurial. Lost in the flow of the narrator's thoughts, Handke's novel makes it difficult to know where one idea begins and another ends, and one starts to wonder if that is the point: The novel is, for good and for ill, a study in the act of isolated creativity, the bounty of an artist who has left the world behind for good.[183]

Moving back to the eternal theme of isolation in an elliptical way, the article suggests that Handke is simply too cut off from the world—that this is the problem with his politics and his novels. In a 2016 documentary about Handke living, gardening, and gathering mushrooms at his house on the outskirts of Paris, "we still glimpse a Handke who remains stubbornly at a distance

[183] David Schnurman Wallace, "Without a Map," *The Nation*, July 26, 2023.

from the world around him. Having won everything, why surrender now?"[184] And, to be sure, there is an infuriatingly large amount of mushroom picking in *The Fruit Thief* and *Die morawische Nacht* [*The Moravian Night*], but especially in *In einer dunklen Nacht ging ich aus meinem stillen Haus* [*On a Dark Night I Left My Silent House*] (1996), which is structured around a pharmacist in the suburbs of Salzburg, an avid collector of mushrooms, who receives a blow to the head, loses his memory, becomes, in tarot-like fashion, "the driver," then travels around Europe with a group of people identified by only proper nouns (like "the Olympic skier"). This novel is relatively brief and, along with *Don Juan (erzählt von ihm selbst)* [*Don Juan: His Own Version*] (2004), is one of two *harkening-backs* toward the brevity of his early work. *Don Juan* is actually not plotted after a walk at all, but tells the story of a modern Don Juan who stumbles into a French inn and tells the innkeeper tales that don't really mesh with the mythical image of a "Don Juan." The story seems to be a declaration of Handke's elliptical storytelling method—as if to say, "here is how I don't tell stories, even when I seem to be delving into the world of myth." Even the opening suggests the elliptical nature of what is to come: "Don Juan had always been looking for someone to listen to him. Then one fine day he found me. He told me his story, but in the third person rather than in the first. At least that is how I recall it now."[185] As with much of Handke's late work, these two books have been mostly ignored by critics and scholars.

Only *The Loss of Image* (which I refer to in the proper translation of its German title rather than the English *Crossing the Sierra de Gredos*) was afforded enough attention to be given

[184] Ibid.

[185] Peter Handke, *Don Juan: His Own Version*, trans. Krishna Winston (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 3.

what one might dub a *drubbing*. Even in the *New York Times*, there is a small digest of Handke's apparent failure published at the beginning of the review (after the reviewer first compares Handke to David Byrne in the '70s):

> At a certain point—in my view, with "Slow Homecoming," published in German in 1979 and in English a few years later—his exacting gaze, with its strange combination of compassion and accusation, turned on and began to consume itself. In the decades since then, Handke has continued to enjoy the status of *enfant terrible* in Continental letters, but in the English-speaking world he has been steadily demoted to something more like a whipping boy. Indeed, the first few inches of a Nexis search on Handke reads something like a literary Friar's Club roast. "An exasperating, even neurotic book," is one critic's reaction to his memoir, "A Sorrow Beyond Dreams." In a British newspaper, he is described as "that arch bore of German experimentalism." And a *New York Times* reviewer, discussing the novel "On a Dark Night I Left My Silent House," observed, "It is as though he is offering us something for its medicinal effect, like a low-sodium diet."[186]

The Germans were, if anything, less kind. Troublingly (for what it suggests about her own sympathies and not because there is much truth in it), Erich Wolfgang Skwara claims that it was the intellectual freedom Handke demanded for himself as regards Serbia that led to this negative reception, that it "may well have suffered a similar fate in the hands of a great many critics. Who can say whether genuine dislike of the novel or merely a settling of old scores has dictated the numerous negative or outright derisive reviews in German-language media."[187] How much more perceptive it is, as in the article in *The Nation*, to point to a parallel problem—that Handke's political foolishness is also a symptom of what the *New York Times* calls his *self-consumption*. In this simple, but very long—perhaps longer than *My Year in the No-Man's Bay*, depending on the page formatting—book, Handke presents the story of a female Spanish banker who wishes to

[186] Neil Jordan, "Over the Hills and Far Away," *The New York Times*, August 19, 2007.

[187] Erich Wolfgang Skwara, *World Literature Today* 77, no. 1 (2003): 77-78, 77.

cross the Sierra de Gredos, a remote mountain range. And that's it. The female protagonist of this book and *The Fruit Thief* (which has a feminine ending in German: "ObstdiebIN.") are deliberate callbacks to *The Left-Handed Woman*: women who dissolve into the world of natural and unnatural phenomena. Gabriele Eckart claims that the book is a deliberate retelling of *Don Quixote*: "The theme in *Der Bildverlust* is our contemporary cultural crisis caused by a flood of media images, which, according to the narrator, make false assumptions taken for facts. But, truth and veracity, the narrator claims, must also take into account the personal and emotive."[188] Handke never seems to bemoan this cultural state of affairs however, no matter how much this may seem to be an apt description of his problems with Serbia (and how much he might seem to be a genocide-denying Don Quixote); as previously stated, these novels seem like the positive siblings of Sloterdijk's dirge for the sphere in *Foams*. Even the constant references to Muslims and mosques are orientalizing in a positive sense rather than Houellebecqian (only the references to quite old conflicts with the Turks are properly negative—that obsession with the ancient once again). Alexander Honold's reading of *The Loss of Image* in *Der Erd-Erzähler. Peter Handkes Prosa der Orte, Räume* [*The Earth Narrator. Peter Handke's Prose of Places, Spaces*], his book about landscape in Handke's work, is utterly predictable: Handke uses "die Reliefgestalt des Erdbodens in ihrer Widerständigkeit als eine Gegenkraft des Erzählens ein"[189] [190] This might not

[188] Gabriele Eckart, "Peter Handke's Reception of Miguel de Cervantes's Don Quixote of La Mancha (1605) in Der Bildverlust: Oder Durch Die Sierra de Gredos (The Loss of Image or Through the Sierra de Gredos) (2002)," *The Comparatist* 37 (2013): 262–75, 262.

[189] "uses the relief of the ground in its resilience as a counteracting force to the narrative"

[190] Alexander Honold, *Der Erd-Erzähler: Peter Handkes Prosa der Orte, Räume* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler Verlag, 2017), 495.

add much to our discussion, but the notion of phenomena offering "resistance" against "narrativity" is a poetic way of describing Handke's work from beginning to end.

It is a single phrase in the *New York Times* review that gets it right: "self-consumption." These later works, like German slow-cinema Marvel posse-movies, are self-compilation, self-quotation, and self-cannibalization. Characters reappear constantly; the most *Avengers*-style book from this period, *Die morawische Nacht* [*The Moravian Night*] (2008), which tells the story of a writer who has quit writing[191] and gathers his friends together to recount his recent walks around Europe, boasts the reappearance of Filip Kobal from *Repetition*, Gregor Keuschnig from *A Moment of True Feeling*, constant reference to the No-Man's Bay, as well as a plotline of a man being chased by a female lover who apparently wishes to do physical violence unto him, as in *Short Letter, Long Farewell*. But not only that: the female banker in *The Loss of Image* ends up being the mother of the girl with the compulsion to steal fruit in *The Fruit Thief* and this girl who steals fruit is practically an explicit stand-in for Handke, as, in *The Moravian Night*, he recounts how he has never had any issue stealing fruit:

> From early on and to this day he had disliked thieves, except fruit or orchard thieves. All his life he had been a fruit thief, and freely admitted it. Stealing fruit was part of his self-image, far more so than wandering or writing. As a child he had already known when the first fruit on every tree in the area would ripen, and… he had called his first book *The Pear Thieves*. And to this day he could not pass someone else's orchard without at least making an attempt, even if only in his thoughts, to nab some fruit. The fence or wall around the fruit trees, whose crowns beckoned invitingly to him, had to be scaled, called out to be scaled, admitting him to the forbidden realm, to the heart of the real. And no matter how much of a hurry he was in, nothing, however urgent, would deter him from making this crucial detour.[192]

[191] The statements the "former writer" makes about no longer writing are reminiscent of Knausgaard's statement at the end of volume six of *My Struggle*—that he is no longer a writer.

[192] Peter Handke, *The Moravian Night*, trans. Krishna Winston (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 265.

A whole article could be devoted to what the precise meaning of Handke's female alter-egos might be, in both these two books and *The Left-Handed Woman*. Unexpectedly, the fruit thief of the title ends up being drawn into a whirlwind romance with a kebab delivery boy who rides his moto around Europe with her on its back. Could this be a highly repressed desire that belongs to Handke himself? Unlikely. But it does show the extent to which he is willing to be entranced by Sloterdijkian foams of globalism rather than lament them. On the other hand, in *The Moravian Night*, his obsession with Serbian nationalism becomes the crown jewel—the dénoument—of the fragments that make up the rest of this rather long, non-linear book. As Joshua Cohen writes in the *New York Times*:

> To admit error or express regret would be too bourgeois. Handke's "former writer" didn't abandon his profession to pursue a political truth, but a political emotion; an entire odyssey of enchantment and disabuse. His Yugoslavia was never so much a country as it was a symbol of himself, which is to say a symbol of literature, or of the European Novel — the last proud polyglot redoubt of a noble dream, which reacted so volatilely to the threats of technology and Islamization that the pious gods of NATO intervened, divided it parochially and bombed it into rubble.[193]

It is no coincidence that *A Winter Journey to the Rivers Danube, Sava, Morava and Drina, or Justice for Serbia* kicks off this prolix period of late work.[194] Thinking of the image from the documentary quoted in the *The Nation* review of *The Fruit Thief*, the problem is that, in addition

[193] Joshua Cohen, "Peter Handke's Time-Traveling Tale of a Europe in Flux," *The New York Times*, December 30, 2016.

[194] And, here, we might also think of the Russian writer Eduard Limonov who fought on Milošević's side of the war (a video exists of him incompetently firing a sniper rifle at Sarajevo). He also has an enormous catalog of highly insular autofiction that, after two brilliant first books about his time as an immigrant in New York City, becomes another version of Handke's failure to escape from his own garden and afternoon mushroom hunts: the failure to escape from his politically driven male ego.

to dissolving to the world of "real phenomena," Handke has his work, his characters, and, perhaps, himself dissolve into the world of his own work in equal measure. Because the books quote his own work instead of just the images that make up the world, they lose their universal, incendiary quality. To understand these novels, it isn't that one ought to simply have spent time in the world, as is the case in his middle period, but that one ought to have read all of Handke's books. This is an oxymoron, aesthetically speaking, and it greatly diminishes the phenomenological clarity of the work, even if there are brilliantly lucid sections (for, with so many pages to experiment with, how could there not be?!). In a gender-reversing final image justified by Handke's own drag performance in *The Fruit Thief*, one might say that the protagonist of *The Left-Handed Woman* ceases to sketch the world around her, but simply returns to her own previous sketches, no longer looking at anything other than her own notebook. To put it another way: what if the hieroglyphs in the old man's notebook in *Absence* refer to nothing outside of it, to nothing out in the world? Or what if the paintings in *The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire* were not based on nature, but on other paintings? The icon of John Ford appearing at the end of *Short Letter, Long Farewell* becomes the esoteric reappearance of characters from Handke's own bibliography. The clearing of Being becomes a gathering of Handke's own artistic creations and nothing is illuminated.

The Artist in the Clearing of Being

However, during that middle period, from *The Left-Handed Woman* to *My Year in the No-Man's Bay*, there is something at play in Handke's work that is highly Heideggerian, originating, more specifically, in his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art." In this essay,

Heidegger is famously concerned with Van Gogh's painting of a pair of peasant's shoes. Just as Van Gogh "reveals" these peasant's shoes to whomever observes the painting, so too does any work of art make "public something other than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory. In the work of art, something other is brought together with the thing that is made [...] The work is a symbol."[195] It is the artist who takes upon himself the project of making something "thingly" in order to depict "something other," like Van Gogh who takes upon himself the creation of a "thingly" painting of an "other" pair of shoes:

> What happens here? What is at work in the work? Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, is in truth. This being emerges into the unconcealment of its Being. The Greeks called the unconcealment of beings aletheia. We say "truth" and think little enough in using this word. If there occurs in the work a disclosure of a particular being, disclosing what and how it is, then there is here an occurring, a happening of truth at work.[196]

Here, we have the lighting-up of the clearing of Being that has been a leitmotif throughout my discussion of Handke. And Heidegger has a precise response to the question that might be asked in response to both his own discussion of Van Gogh's painting ("did Van Gogh even paint a real pair of shoes or did he just imagine one?") and my exegesis of Handke's work ("what *things* are his characters surrounded by? What world? What objects? What phenomena are they meant to 'dissolve' into?"):

> The work, therefore, is not the reproduction of some particular entity that happens to be at hand at any given time; it is, on the contrary, the reproduction of things' general essence. But then where and how is this general essence, so that artworks are able to agree with it? With what essence of what thing should a Greek temple agree? Who could maintain

[195] Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 145–46.

[196] Ibid, 161-162.

> the impossible view that the Idea of Temple is represented in the building? And yet, truth is set to work in such a work.[197]

It is this "essence" that Handke attempts to depict, this essence that the protagonist of *The Left-Handed Woman* loses herself in sketching at the novel's end, this essence that the old man in *Absence* records in his notebook by way of hieroglyphs, and this essence that his early, violent protagonists are submerged into after being unmoored from the ordinary "inauthentic" nature of the world by their own murderous acts or imaginings thereof. Indeed, there is a fundamental "truth" at play in Handke's non-polemical depiction of uniquely degraded modern landscapes—like the wasteland at the edge of the city in *Absence*, the constant references to car noise and airplanes in the sky across all three periods of his work, his characters' wanderings through "psychogeographic" areas of urban city centers, etc. And that "truth" is the unconcealment of the world in which Handke lives and in which we live with him: "Art lets truth originate. Art, founding preserving, is the spring that leaps to the truth of beings in the work. To originate something by a leap, to bring something into being from out of its essential source in a founding leap—this is what the word 'origin' [Ursprung, literally, primal leap] means,"[198] Heidegger writes.

In books like *Repetition*, however, and in Handke's obsession with Serbian nationalism and the phenomenology of the Yugoslavian as a kind of forbidden cosmopolitan iteration of Europe (as is aptly described in the quote from Joshua Cohen's review of *The Moravian Night*), another aspect of this essay by Heidegger *comes to light*: its fascism. For Heidegger, the artist illuminates the clearing of Being for other beings within it so as to illuminate *one* truth:

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[197] Ibid, 162-163.

[198] Ibid, 202.

> Truth happens in the temple's standing where it is. This does not mean that something is correctly represented and rendered here, but that beings as a whole are brought into unconcealment and held therein [...] Truth happens in Van Gogh's painting. This does not mean that something at hand is correctly portrayed, but rather that in the revelation of the equipmental being of the shoes beings as a whole—world and earth in their counterplay—attain to unconcealment.[199]

The creation of art, in other words, is the activity of the sign-painter in *Repetition*, but done in such a way that it causes a single vision—a single iteration-–of the world to *become true*. As "this open region [the clearing of Being] occurs in the midst of beings,"[200] the artist's activity is fundamentally communal. It is impossible to ignore a dogmatically prescriptive note in all of this—so very far from the postmodernism of *The Hornets* or *Offending the Audience*. One feels Handke's intense desire for his illumination of the clearing of Being—a degraded, post-industrial Europe—to orgasm into the central meaning of Serbian nationalism in the final chapter of *The Moravian Night*. One can also better understand his frustration that the proverbial audience did not eventually come around to his vision of the Serbian conflict, articulated directly in the documentary referenced in the *The Nation* article. After all, the "thingly" quality of his work has succeeded in illuminating the "truth" of the clearing of Being—how is it, then, his readers have failed to see it?

This "problematic" aspect of Heidegger's essay has been amply commented on. Dominick LaCapra writes about how, in it, Heidegger makes ordinary language uncanny to show "how the ordinary is itself extraordinary."[201] However, he also critiques Heidegger for essentially

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[199] Ibid, 181.

[200] Ibid, 180.

[201] Dominick LaCapra, *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

being a conservative revolutionary longing for an earlier golden age. LaCapra believes that the essay collapses based on Heidegger's own total divorce from the real circumstances of life in Germany under National Socialism, even after a brief period when he was the Nazi rector of the University of Freiburg. As Stefanos Geroulanos adds:

> Heidegger provides the foundations for a thinking that moves outside and beyond the degradation and limits of modern homogeneous reality, presumably identified here as those of inauthentic existence (das Man). Yet like fascism, he does not allow the real discrepancy between an individual's existence and his world to manifest so as to allow for genuine freedom amid servility. Heidegger thinks up an escape from the oppression of inauthenticity of modern life, but also because of his destructive illusion of authenticity and heterogeneity, he renders real escape impossible.[202]

Does this not sound fundamentally similar to Handke? Both in the divorce from reality and the longing for a move *outside* (not to mention the obsession with the ancient classics)? The "genuine freedom" in Handke's work ends up being endless pacing within a circuit—like Iain Sinclair's laps around the M25 in *London Orbital*. The freedom allowed for by the imagined murder in *A Moment of True Feeling* begins to curdle in *Repetition* until it becomes that final chapter of *The Moravian Night*—an ode to all things Milošević, not concretely, but *metaphysically*. Indeed, Jürgen Habermas's brilliant and brutal analysis of Heidegger's political idiocy as relates to the hermetic, detached quality of his philosophy is just as applicable to Handke:

> A self-critical attitude, an open and scrupulous comportment to his own past, would have demanded from Heidegger something that would surely have been difficult for him: the revision of his self-understanding as a thinker with a privileged access to truth. After 1929, Heidegger veered farther and farther away from the circle of academic philosophy; after the

[202] Stefanos Geroulanos, "The Anthropology of Exit: Bataille on Heidegger and Fascism," *October* 117 (2006): 3–24, 21.

> war he actually strayed into the regions of a thinking beyond philosophy, beyond argumentation itself. This was no longer the elitist self-understanding of an academic corporate guild. It was the consciousness of a mission cut to the form of one's own person, with which the admission of a few mistakes, to say nothing of guilt, was incompatible.[203]

Beyond plot, beyond the normal rules of literature, Handke also conceives of a phenomenological mission "cut to the form of [his] own person." It is not only in terms of the notion of "lighting up the clearing of Being" and showing the precise forms of "being in the world" that Handke and Heidegger are comparable; their missions, their isolation, their detachment, and their political failures form direct parallels with one another.

A good deal has been written about this affinity between Handke and Heidegger. At a symposium at the New School in 1997, even Slavoj Žižek critiqued Handke through the lens of "authenticity":

> An example of this, and someone in fact who is the worst interpassive subject that I know of, is Peter Handke, the Austrian novelist. As some of you may know, he is someone who has interpassively lived his "authentic" life, a believer in the corruption of Western consumerist capitalism, by the grace of his Slovene identification. Handke's mother was Slovene, and for him, Slovenia, was always a country in which "words directly relate to objects." He says that if you go to Austria, instead of simply getting milk, you have some alienated name of the big company set between you and the milk. You go to Slovenia, and my god, milk is simply called milk.
>
> Now, the Slovenian independence has unleashed in him a violent aggression. In his recent writings, he dismisses Slovenes as slaves of Austrian-German capital, selling their legacy to the West and is of course now desperately looking for another interpassive partner to be authentic for him. In his recent book on the Yugoslav war, he finds it in the Serbs, comparing the Bosnian Serb siege of Sarajevo with the Native American sieges of white colonizer camps.[204]

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[203] Jürgen Habermas and John McCumber, "Work and Weltanschauung: The Heidegger Controversy from a German Perspective," *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 2 (1989): 431–56, 454.

[204] "'The Consciousness Industry': A Symposium," *Salmagundi*, no. 118/119 (1998): 106–90, 123–24.

Žižek is a subtle enough commentator to let these Heideggerian references play out in the background of his directly political commentary: first of all, in the notion of authenticity, then in the Handke's direct identification of words with things in Slovenia, then in the notion of an "interpassive partner" that would allow him to be authentic. I don't imagine Žižek is a particularly exhaustive reader of Handke, but, if he were, he would know that the fantasyland in which words "directly relate to objects" is also the majority of Handke's bibliography, as he trafficks not in alienation, but in a kind of idealized Heidegerrian phenomenology. The notion that this obsession with words applying directly to objects is what led to his genocide-denying identification with Serbs, however, is a subtly brilliant one. And one that seems to emerge directly out of Heidegger's own errors. Just as Heidegger, alienated from the real material conditions of National Socialism, idealized an abstract element thereof and ended up committing awful crimes against the truth, so too did Handke come to believe in the phenomenological truthfulness of Serbia in a lofty way, while also becoming complicit in truly monstrous lies about demonstrably true events in the world. In both cases, the practical is sacrificed in favor of the sublime in a way that ends up curdling the sublime into its opposite.

More directly, Alfred Kolleritsch writes about how the "Kehre" [turn] in Handke's philosophy—from the Husserlian descriptions of how various objects in the world are and can be used or perceived, to the mysticism of being in his later work—might also be seen to be at play in the movement from alienation to a kind of perpetual and exalted walking tour of modern Europe in his later work. According to Kolleritsch, there is not a "Kehre" in Handke's work, but a "Wende" [a wending/a curve]: "a shift from language that dominates perception to a language

that liberates Being."[205] Kolleritsch also describes how Heidegger took the same journey to the mountain where Cézanne painted that Handke did and wrote about in *The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire*, which, circumstantial evidence though it may be, is compelling. In my analysis, "The Origin of the Work of Art," a piece from after the "Kehre," is more significant than the first half of *Being and Time*, the most significant pre-"Kehre" text; indeed, the most consequential affinities between Handke and Heidegger's bodies of work begin after the "Kehre" / "Wende." In that same volume of criticism, Gerhard Melzer shows that Handke's aesthetic vision belongs to the Platonic golden age Heidegger longs for—where perception and object perceived are merged.[206] John Pizer also believes that Handke's work fits into Heidegger's definition of that lost golden age, adding that:

> Handke's recent works, on the other hand (especially the *Langsame Heimkehr* tetralogy) are resonant with Heidegger's influence. Handke assumes a solicitous yet passive stance towards the objects of Cézanne's world as he tracks them in *Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire*, a Heideggerian "Gelassenheit zu den Dingen" [composure/calmness toward things] which seeks to renew the cohesion between man and the external world [...] The narrator of *Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire* [succeeds] in experiencing this synchronic resonance of the primal past, as Heidegger and Cézanne apparently did, in the natural or semi-natural world.[207]

Pizer, however, does not believe that Handke's characters are able to enter this same authentic phenomenological state of apprehension near Paris, as it is too "commodified." It is strange to imagine Pizer reading *A Moment of True Feeling* and Gregor's video-game navigations of a

[205] Thomas F. Barry, "Postmodern Longings for the Static Moment: On Recent Peter Handke Criticism," *The German Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (1987): 88–98, 97.

[206] Ibid, 97.

[207] John Pizer, "Phenomenological Redemption and Repressed Historical Memory: Benjamin and Handke in Paris," *Monatshefte* 81, no. 1 (1989): 79–89, 87.

documentary-real Paris, then exclaiming, "not enough phenomenology!" To be fair, though, Pizer correctly concludes with the notion that "Handke welcomed Benjamin's notion of the idea as the basis of a redemptive language which liberates objects from their commodified character and evokes their authentic nature by clustering them in a timeless constellation," even while not "investing the phenomena of Paris with their repressed historical memory."[208]

This, then, is the fundamental irony of Handke's artistic development. In his successful quest to liberate objects from everything except perception, in his desire to make himself, his characters, and his readers see the objects of the world as if upon a topographical plain utterly devoid of logocentric connections, history happened TO him. He believed Yugoslavia to be a place where "words corresponded to things," a Heideggerian or even Husserlian fairy tale, not a place where history happened. When history then happened, Handke had no immune system against its nastier pathogens and became a foot soldier for its worst actors. In order to write about phenomenology in literature, then, and perhaps in order to write about phenomenology at all, we too must willfully blind ourselves to history (as I have sought to do in this chapter), knowing that it is there in the background, but still focusing on the objects of the text, the perpetual planes taking off or beginning to land, the car noise off in the distance… It is only then that we see the ways in which, in books like *Repetition* and *Absence*, Handke's work is the ultimate yardstick of phenomenology in 20th-century prose. We see it because we are blind.

The Failure of Knausgaard's Out of the World *and his Abandonment of the Fragment*

[208] Ibid, 88-89.

A master of the conceptual, is this not Knausgaard's message in titling his phenomenological epic *My Struggle*? That his whole enterprise, even if the reader or critic blinds themselves to it while they are immersed in the text, is informed by the legacy of fascism? Well… perhaps not intentionally so. In fact, the best way of understanding how Knausgaard reacted to his own failure to reproduce Handke's mode in *Out of the World* is to understand the innovation Merleau-Ponty's work represents within phenomenology itself. If Handke's project is to make the reader see images[209]—rocks, trees, mountains, light behind tower blocks, planes landing, freeways—but without any connective tissue binding them together, then Knausgaard's is to make his reader present in a world through which they are able to navigate as if in a video game—not in *Out of the World*, which is still a collection of Handkeian images within a prolix mode that is anathema to them, but in *My Struggle*. In order to do this, Knausgaard had to add the body into Handke's work, just as Merleau-Ponty had to add a phenomenology of the body into phenomenology itself. As Taylor Carman writes:

> Unlike Husserl, but like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty looks beyond the subject-object divide to try to gain insight into the concrete structures of worldly experience. But whereas Heidegger does little more than mention the problem of embodiment in passing, Merleau-Ponty bases his entire phenomenological project on an account of bodily intentionality and the challenge it poses to any adequate concept of mind. Embodiment thus has a philosophical significance for Merleau-Ponty that it could not have for Husserl. Indeed, taking the problem of embodiment seriously, as Merleau-Ponty does, entails a radical reassessment of the very conceptual distinctions on which Husserl's enterprise rests.[210]

[209] And the attentive reader will have noticed that the model of image as cinematic or photographic that is suggested in my introduction as given way to a notion of the "image" that is more indebted to Ezra Pound's Imagism, itself a form of "runic seeing" that is itself somewhat Heideggerian.

[210] Taylor Carman, "The Body in Husserl and Merleau-Ponty," *Philosophical Topics* 27, no. 2 (1999): 205–26, 206.

In other words, Heidegger has his subject dissolve into the world of objects just as Handke has his characters and readers do, but it is Merleau-Ponty who examines the body in the world and what its presence might mean:

> For Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, the body is a primitive constituent of perceptual awareness as such, which in turn forms the permanent background of intentionality at large. The intentional constitution of the body is not the product of a cognitive process whose steps we might trace back to the founding acts of a pure I. Rather, the body in its perceptual capacity just *is* the I in its most primordial aspect. For Merleau-Ponty, then, strictly speaking, we do not *have* bodies, rather "we are our body," which is to say, "we are in the world through our body, and insofar as we perceive the world with our body." In effect, "the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception."[211]

The body is added to the Dasein that, or so it sometimes seems, is only there so as to be dissolved into phenomena: Dasein as a polemical object-lesson in the none-difference between subject and object, as the left-handed woman being teleologically forced into the duty of endlessly sketching that which surrounds her.

How is it, then, that one could claim Knausgaard's cycle is a comparable innovation in relation to Handke's work? Here, for example, the whole of Knausgaard's cycle begins with a description of what happens when the body dies, explicitly foregrounding the body:

> For the heart, life is simple: it beats for as long as it can. Then it stops. Sooner or later, one day, this pounding action will cease of its own accord, and the blood will begin to run toward the body's lowest point, where it will collect in a small pool, visible from outside as a dark, soft patch on ever whitening skin, as the temperature sinks, the limbs stiffen and the intestines drain. These changes in the first hours occur so slowly and take place with such inexorability that there is something almost ritualistic about them, as though life capitulates according to specific rules, a kind of gentleman's agreement to which the representatives of death also adhere, inasmuch as they always wait until life has retreated before they launch their invasion of the new landscape. By which point, however, the invasion is irrevocable. The enormous hordes of bacteria

[211] Ibid, 224.

> that begin to infiltrate the body's innards cannot be halted. Had they but tried a few hours earlier, they would have met with immediate resistance; however everything around them is quiet now, as they delve deeper and deeper into the moist darkness.[212]

This description continues for three pages until, with a sentiment that seems almost to reference Handke, Knausgaard concludes his description: "The moment life departs the body, it belongs to death. At one with lamps, suitcases, carpets, door handles, windows. Fields, marshes, streams, mountains, clouds, the sky. None of these is alien to us. We are constantly surrounded by objects and phenomena from the realm of death."[213] This could be interpreted as an agonistic rereading of Handke's project; those objects that make up the essence of the world and the clearing of Being across the Austrian writer's bibliography here become death itself. What, then, is life? Life is the body: smoking, drinking coffee, getting drunk, being ashamed… In a sense, the death of Knausgaard's father at the beginning of *My Struggle* is also the metaphorical death of his literary father-figure, of Handke's influence on his work, which is so overwhelmingly at play in *Out of the World*. To wit, there are bodies in *Out of the World*—more than there are in Handke's work at least—but they are out of focus. In *My Struggle*, on the other hand, as this epic-poem invocation suggests, the affect of the body is ALL. For example, in this famously long description of a young Knausgaard sneaking a bunch of beers to his friend's house, the description of what the body does and feels is incredibly minute—as minute as the directions guiding the movements of a video-game avatar:

> I put the bags down on the road for a second, opened my jacket and pulled out the scarf, and wound it around my face, grabbed the bags again, and kept on walking. The wind whistled round my ears, whisked

[212] Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle: Book One*, trans. Don Bartlett (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

[213] Ibid, 4.

> up the snow on all sides, swept it into the air and swirled it around. It was four kilometers to Jan Vidar's place so I needed to hurry. I broke into a jog. The bags hung from my arms like lead weights. Farther along the road, on the far side of the bend, two headlights came into view. The beams sliced through the forest. The trees there seemed to flare up, one by one. I stopped, put one foot on the edge of the ditch and carefully rested the bags in the ditch below me. Then I walked on. I turned my head as the car passed. An old man I didn't recognize was in the driver's seat. I walked back the twenty meters and retrieved the bags from the ditch, carried on walking, rounded the bend, passed the house where the old man lived alone, emerged from the forest to see the factory lights, hazy in the snow-flurried darkness, walked past the small, dilapidated farm, in darkness tonight, and had almost reached the last house before the intersection with the main road when another car came along. I did the same as before, quickly hid the bottles in the ditch and carried on walking, empty-handed. It wasn't Gunnar this time either. After the car had passed I ran back, picked up the bags and set off even faster; it was already half past seven. I hurried along and was not far from the main road when three more cars appeared. I put down the bags again. Let it be Gunnar, I thought, because as soon as he had gone by I wouldn't need to keep stopping to hide the beer. Two of the cars drove across the bridge, the third turned off and passed me, but that wasn't Gunnar either. I collected the bags and made for the main road, followed it past the bus stop, the old-fashioned shop, the garage, the old houses, all of them bathed in light, all of them windblown, all deserted. Approaching the top of the long, gentle gradient I saw the headlights of another car coming over the brow. There was no ditch here, so I had to put the bottles in the banked up snow, and as they were visible, hurriedly put a few meters between them and me.[214]

Here, one can perhaps better begin to understand why Handke calls Knausgaard's work "airless" in a recent interview. Whereas, in Handke's work, all images are given ample space around them, in *My Struggle*, they are overwhelmed by and crowded out by the activity of the body. And this is far from the end of the description; it continues on for pages and pages. While reading such descriptions, the reader is at first nonplussed, then finds themselves more and more compulsively drawn into the world of the text. To abruptly stop reading such a scene feels like coming up through the surface of a body of water for air, Knausgaard's world having become

[214] Ibid, 114-115.

more real than the world which the reader normally inhabits. From that perspective, the true Faustian pact of Knausgaard's prose is not that he wrote all sorts of less-than-pleasant things about his friends and relatives in exchange for fame and fortune, but that he traded good prose for a whole world in which he could immerse his readers.

Fundamentally, then, it is the two-pronged affect of Handke's quick-cut ideogrammatic phenomenology and the long takes of Knausgaard's video-game depictions of his past self moving through space that define phenomenology in 20th-century prose. Indeed, it is the definition these two styles produce when shot back through the 20th century—when the dialectical process that led to their blossoming is examined—that characterizes the iteration of phenomenology in prose examined in this dissertation. And yes, it is an *affect* that is at play in both writers' work. Neither Knausgaard nor Handke are actually giving their readers unmediated access to the world—the world as seen through the limpid waters of a mountain stream. And it is not only *despite* the political resonances and problems that dog the two authors that their work is our ideal paradigm, it is also *because* the political affiliations and interests of their work are at play throughout the entire dialectical development of phenomenology in 20th-century prose (which comes to pass mostly by way of failure, the top-heaviness of certain styles and aesthetic paradigms that then collapse). In this context, Handke truly is an affiliate—bound up with bad political actors in ways he isn't even fully cognizant of—but Knausgaard comments on the enterprise's failures, stirs up controversy, uses his work as an arch conceptual vessel that makes use of phenomenology as such, but also of its political baggage. Here, we might think of the long description from Volume 6: of when he goes to a nighttime march for the victims of Anders Breivik, then thinks to himself that the march must be what Nazism felt like. The

phenomenology of the occurrence, of what it feels like to be a body among other bodies surrounded by flames at night, becomes a political remark designed to be brutal and explosive.

Handke is no stranger to this brand of provocation: "he first gained notoriety when he stood up at a 1966 Princeton literary conference and delivered a stinging rebuke to [...] the so-called Gruppe 47 (which included future Nobel laureates Günter Grass and Heinrich Böll), whom Handke denounced as dull peddlers of 'descriptive impotence.'"[215] How funny to imagine Handke's project—then Knausgaard's—as one of *descriptive potency*… To describe (with an erection!), but to do so in a way that somehow enlivens, enlightens, awakens the reader to the clearing of Being. A deadening description—or an impotent one—would not be Heidegger's "happening of truth at work," but mere enumeration. Even given *descriptive failures* like Knausgaard's *Seasons Quartet* and some of Handke's late-period work, it would be impossible to ever call them "deadening" or "impotent"; they enliven and enrage (reveal!) in their prolix passages and over-egged bits just as in their best work. Their iteration of phenomenology in prose is perfect, static, and eternal (provided we blind ourselves to its political undertones, sticking wooden stakes into our eyes like Oedipus). But no eternity comes to be without death. And, for that reason, the *failed eternities* that make up the history of phenomenology in 20th-century prose must be examined in order to see how their dialectical development paved the way for this banal eternity: the left-handed woman's sketching, the old man's notebook in *Absence*, Gregor's wandering through Paris in *A Moment of True Feeling*, the one-man writer's workshop of *My Year in the No-Man's Bay*, and Karl Ove's long, snowy beer-walk in *My Struggle*. Our first stop lies all the way back at the beginning of the 20th-century, with two innovators of

[215] David Schnurman Wallace, "Without a Map," *The Nation*, July 26, 2023.

autofiction who were comparably self-obsessed and one of whom also almost destroyed his legacy by way of affiliations with bad political actors…

CHAPTER TWO:

THAT WHICH IS MEDIATED AND THAT WHICH IS NOT

It would be tempting, in the context of the narrative I suggest in the introduction, to simply posit Proust and Céline as occupying roughly equivalent roles within this phenomenological narrative of 20th-century prose-–to outline them both as escaping from the enormous and totalizing tapestries composed by their French predecessors, Zola and Balzac, in an act of radical aesthetic pessimism. "How," they might exclaim in this narrative, "are we meant to write about anything but our own selves!" This plays directly into the simplistic theory of modernism discussed at the beginning of the introduction: that it was a historical phenomenon, a direct response to horrors and complexities of modernity, as well as modern war. In the context of modernity, various critics suggest, Proust and Céline show the extent to which writers no longer felt they had a grasp on subject matter that didn't originate in their own lives.[216]

The suggestion that they fulfill roughly equivalent roles is hardly a ridiculous one. Though Herbert V. Fackler initially notes the dissimilarity of Céline and Proust's projects in *Voyage au bout de la nuit* [*Journey to the End of the Night*] (1932)and *À la recherche du temps perdu* [*In Search of Lost Time*] (1913–1927), he also briefly surveys scholars who have found the works to be similar, writing that, "David Hayman claims that Celine 'stands next to Proust as the painter of a moribund society,' and as early as 1935 Havelock Ellis noted in Proust's works a 'growing disposition to pessimism' and a 'schizoid tendency to . . . lose contact with reality,'

[216] Does Proust and Céline's combined work suggest that the self was one of the few concepts not called into question by modernity? See Finn Fordham's *I Do, I Undo, I Redo: The Textual Genesis of Modernist Selves* (Oxford University Press, 2010) and Dennis Brown's *The Modernist Self in Twentieth-Century English Literature: A Study in Self-Fragmentation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1989).

both characteristics usually commented upon as typical of Céline."[217] It is then that Fackler comes to his own main idea:

> A close comparison of the two major works of these authors reveals even more similarities, for Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* and Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night* both deal with the movement of the human consciousness toward order and understanding, the process of becoming, the soul-crippling tyranny of romantic idealism, the creative advantages and disadvantages of illness, the psychic truth of hallucination and dreams, the decadence of society, and the importance of violence and death in a realistic view of existence.[218]

Fackler is far from the only critic to attempt such comparative frameworks, not of difference in the Deleuzian sense, but of sheer similarity in dealing with Proust and Céline taken together.

Most famously and pithily among these *comparers* stands Philip Roth, who once famously exclaimed, "Céline is my Proust! [...] Even if his anti-Semitism made him an abject, intolerable person."[219] Succinct, but perhaps not precisely what we're looking for. Elsewhere, Hervé G. Picherit's book *Le livre des échorchés* unimaginatively posits World War I as the axis around which both of their oeuvres revolve, the only difference being that Céline's life is destroyed by war at its beginning, whereas the scourge of modernity seems to come for Proust more toward his own life's end; there is also an entire book by Pascal Alain Ifri tracking "Proustian correspondences" in Céline's oeuvre, a project that would have driven Céline quite mad, as he always insisted that his own autofiction bore no resemblance whatsoever to Proust's––he didn't wish to be seen as coming out of Proust. Céline even went so far as to refer to him as

[217] Herbert V. Fackler, "Proust's 'Remembrance of Things Past' and Céline's 'Journey to the End of the Night:' A Study in Approaches to Creativity and Fear." *The South Central Bulletin* 32, no. 4 (1972): 202–8, 202.

[218] Ibid, 202.

[219] Adelaide Docx , "A Gentler Céline," *The New Yorker*, May 27, 2013.

"Prout-Proust"[220] in his anti-Semitic pamphlet *Bagatelles pour un massacre* [*Trifles for a Massacre*] a bad joke which becomes even less funny when one remembers that Proust was also Jewish. His description of Proust in *Voyage* merits closer examination than this childishly antagonistic word game. He writes that "Proust, who was half ghost, immersed himself with extraordinary tenacity in the infinitely watery futility of the rites and procedures that entwine the members of high society, those denizens of the void, those phantoms of desire, those irresolute daisy-chainers still waiting for their Watteau, those listless seekers after implausible Cythereas."[221] Céline is, of course, referring to the French painter Antoine Watteau, one of whose most famous paintings is *The Embarkation for Cythera*, which depicts a group of wealthy travelers leaving the island of Cythera (Venus' birthplace). Their departure is intended to have allegorical resonances: these travelers are leaving the island of love because love is transient. More important than the presence of Watteau's painting in this passage, however, is the use of the words "void" and "phantom," as well as the adjective "implausible" appended to Cythera. Céline rightly sees Proust as operating in a world of ungrounded forms.

Even so, much of the reception of Proust in the 20th century has sought to ellide the sheer weightlessness of his vision and weigh it down with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body. A brief comparison of Céline's abject poetics of the body with Proust's method in his cycle shall reveal the error inherent to using Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body to understand Proust. The use of the term "abject" throughout the dissertation is informed by Kristeva's notion of abjection in *Powers of Horror*:

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[220] "Prout" being an onomatopoeia for a fart in French.

[221] Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Directions, 1960): 61.

> What is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. A certain "ego" that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. Without a sign (for him), it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out.[222]

In other words, the abject is that which, by way of a variety of affective powers, forms the state of exception that the subject cannot countenance. More simply, Kristeva refers to the abject as being an indelible indication to the human of their own corporeality, which is horrifying: "an intrinsically corporeal and already signifying brand, symptom, and sign: repugnance, disgust, abjection."[223] Of course, this also bears some comparison to Merleau-Ponty's notion of how fundamental the body is to human existence. Kristeva further defines the abject as an interposition of the "Real" into the "symbolic order," the destruction of which Céline is so concerned with as the ultimate skeptic of all that which is not "Real"—of all that which is symbolic. For Kristeva, the abject shows "the objective frailty of symbolic order."[224] And it would be difficult to find a reader who, when engaging with Céline's prose, does not sense a similar frailty in the fabric of things, for which reason Céline has often been classified as an existentialist.

In any case, before the comparison between Proust's airiness and Céline's abjectness is to begin, a brief detour to the work of Henry James may prove to be just as instructive in theorizing Proust's method as Céline's work will be in showing what it is *not*. And, strangely enough, that

[222] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

[223] Ibid, 11.

[224] Ibid, 70.

detour into James is to begin with Ezra Pound, whose imagistic method also informed our analysis of Handke…

The Sacred Fount*: A Book of "Void Denizens"*

In Pound's bizarro-world schoolbook primer, *ABC of Reading* (1934), he lavishes praise upon James—especially his prefaces. In discussing what seems to be his favorite work by James, *The Sacred Fount* (1901), he remarks somewhat cryptically that "There for perhaps the first time since about 1300 a writer has been able to deal with a sort of content wherewith Cavalcanti had been 'concerned.'"[225] This is a typical example of Pound's highly insular critical method: explaining his own taste by way of a rather specific example that is important in his own personal canon, but that few others read. The strangest part of the comparison is that Pound neglects to say precisely what Cavalcanti was concerned with—a clarification that should perhaps have been made, given that Cavalcanti is a seldom-read 14th-century poet, known primarily for his influence on Dante. Fortunately, Pound is elsewhere more transparent about why he finds *The Sacred Fount* so worthy of note: "In *The Sacred Fount* [James] attains form, perfect form, his form. It is about the only novel about which he says not a word in his prefaces. Whether or not this was intentional, it seems to be one work that he could afford to sit back, look at, and find completed."[226] This is a rather more cogent bit of praise, but it's in his 1933 essay "Past History" that Pound fully articulates what he finds so remarkable about *The Sacred Fount*

[225] Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 2010), 90.

[226] Robert Gregory, "On Not Going Home: Pound's Reading of James." *Boundary 2* 10, no. 3 (1982): 93–108, 100.

by way of a comparison with Joyce: "In many ways Joyce has not gone further than Henry James, at any rate H. J. was the first man to extend the art of the novel beyond the territory already occupied by the French. The serious student can find much of this matter analyzed and presented in James's prefaces, and in one novel, *The Sacred Fount*…"[227]

As is further elucidated in that essay, Pound's theory is essentially that, because he came directly out of Flaubert and Ibsen, not precisely ignoring James, but also not writing *in his wake*, Joyce missed out on some of the more radical innovations made by "H.J." in his own language, and was therefore not able to move beyond them. Pound was an enormous fan of *Ulysses*, for precisely the same reasons that Wyndham Lewis savaged it—its specificity, the work it does with the detritus of history, with all the objects from that day in Dublin washed up onto the book's shore—but hated *Finnegans Wake* for its ungroundedness, writing that "'Nothing so far as I can make out, nothing short of divine vision or a new cure for the clap, can possibly be worth all the circumambient peripherization."[228] He called the book *Joyce in Regress*, a play-on-words with the book's initial title, *Work in Progress*. One might therefore take up Pound's point and run with it, theorizing that Joyce might not have "regressed" quite so much had he paid more attention to the radical innovations made in *The Sacred Fount*. And what were those innovations?

Proceeding chronologically through James's work and moving toward *The Sacred Fount* and other similarly difficult late novels, the attentive reader sees the neat sonatas of James's early realist texts increasingly stripped of content; as time went on, James included fewer and fewer

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[227] Ezra Pound, "1933: Past History." *College English* 22, no. 2 (1960): 81–86, 82-83.

[228] Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and Forrest Read, *Pound/Joyce: The Letters of Ezra Pound to James Joyce: With Pound's Critical Essays and Articles about Joyce* (New York, NY: New Directions, 1970), 228.

descriptions of setting or characters in his work. By the time he wrote *The Sacred Fount*, his most radical book, though not his last, the spectacle of his novel had come to resemble a small group of individual consciousnesses dueling by way of language—not all of which immediately appears to mean anything—in the void. Thinking back to the beginning of the chapter, Céline's description of Proust's "void-dwellers" would almost certainly be even more applicable to *The Sacred Fount* than to the *Recherche*. The novel tells the story of a group of friends who go to a country house for a weekend. The nameless narrator observes those around him and constantly theorizes about their appearances and possible interpersonal relationships. The nature of his observations is so minute that they bedevil the reader's ability to entirely keep track of or understand them. The title originates in a strangeness of one of the couples' relationships; the female partner therein appears to have grown much younger and the man much older, though the woman is in fact ten years older than the man. When the narrator first makes this narrative observation, it seems the book is to become a supernatural text about vampires, as possible supernatural practices, infidelity, and the "sacred fount" of the title (one partner sucking the other's blood, whether metaphorically or not, so as to have become enormously rejuvenated) are all at play. Ross Posnock writes that "The darker aspects of manipulative violence are [...] evident in *The Sacred Fount* [...], in which vampirism, paranoia, voyeurism, and monomanias come to the fore."[229] In a much older study, Dorothea Krook-Gilead's *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James*, Krook-Gilead connects *The Sacred Fount* with James's much more famous horror story, *The Turn of the Screw*, writing that "*The Sacred Fount* is [...] chiefly though not exclusively, a writing large of one of the subsidiary themes—what I call the

[229] Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 325.

'epistemological' theme, which turns upon the final incapacity of the enquiring mind to know with certainty whether what it 'sees' is fact or delusion."[230] The main difference between the two works is, of course, that the horror elements of *The Turn of the Screw* are brought to the fore enough to make silly cinematic adaptations of that work in a B-movie mode possible; it is quite amusing to imagine such an adaptation of *The Sacred Fount*.

Indeed, in *The Sacred Fount*, none of the narrator's fears end up being proven true and he drowns in his increasingly baroque and incomprehensible theories dealing with the relationships around him; no vampires stalk the halls of this country manor. At the end of the novel, the narrator confronts one of the women involved in his theories with his thoughts about the various characters' relationships and infidelities, to which she laughs in his face and calls him crazy: "My poor dear, you are crazy, and I bid you good-night!"[231] The narrator then hurries off, attempting to theorize the reasons for this rejection in just the same overwrought mode he'd been theorizing this woman's possible romantic entanglements:

> When once I had started to my room indeed—and to preparation for a livelier start as soon as the house should stir again—I almost breathlessly hurried. Such a last word—the word that put me altogether nowhere—was too unacceptable not to prescribe afresh that prompt test of escape to other air for which I had earlier in the evening seen so much reason. I should certainly never again, on the spot, quite hang together, even though it wasn't really that I hadn't three times her method. What I too fatally lacked was her tone.[232]

[230] Dorothea Krook, *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James* (Cambridge University Press, 1967), 167.

[231] Henry James, *The Sacred Fount* (New Directions, 1995), 218.

[232] Ibid, 122.

More so than at any other point in the text, the satirical "tone" of the book as a whole comes through in its final sentences.

At a certain level, then, it seems as if James might be engaged in self-parody in *The Sacred Fount*—imagining this text as a sort of aggregate of all of his other books with him as the narrator, over-observing his subjects/characters. Robert Gregory writes that:

> Pound's applause for the *Sacred Fount* as having perfect form was actually a response, I suggest, to this final scene, in which Mrs. Brissenden apparently destroys the narrator's theory. If form depends on closure, then this novel can have form in Pound's eyes because it depicts the smashing of inferior and solipsistic form. Some critics have seen the novel as James' self-critique, a critique of the fine-spun nothings produced by interpretation; I think Pound saw the novel roughly in this way and was delighted.[233]

Other critics are more stern and psychological in their interpretations. Leo B. Levy claims that "James is writing a fictionalized essay in epistemology in which he ventures upon an experimental relativism that calls the whole enterprise of fiction into question."[234] Also in this more serious mode, Robert J. Andreanch views the book as a dissection of an "existential predicament" no less remarkable than those performed in Kafka or Hamsun, writing that:

> It is obvious from an examination of *The Sacred Fount* that the view of James as an artist who was not conscious of the levels of meaning in his works and the view of James as a recluse who shrank from contact with the larger issues of his day will have to be discarded. It is impossible that James did not know that he was creating a narrator whose logical apprehension of the world inter- feres with his real experiencing of it. The narrator's language and thought processes are too complex, his isolation too acute, to be the work of an artist unconscious of the

[233] Robert Gregory, "On Not Going Home: Pound's Reading of James." *Boundary 2* 10, no. 3 (1982): 93–108, 101.

[234] Leo B. Levy, "What Does the Sacred Fount Mean?" *College English* 23, no. 5 (1962): 381–84, 381.

> predicament of modern man, so designated as "the existential predicament."[235]

The book, then, as Andreanch writes it, is about the ways that our consciousness mediates any experience of the real in a way that can be quite destructive. *The Sacred Fount* posits the human being as utterly trapped within mediations and incapable of moving outside of them.

The novel's dialogue, as well, dense, elusive, and almost incomprehensible, seems to parody James's style of dialogue in other texts, while simultaneously posing the question of whether anything true or actual can actually be communicated by way of human speech, like in this scene early on in the novel, in which the narrator excitedly discusses various observations he's made:

> I did on the morrow several things, but the first was not to redeem that vow. It was to address myself straight to Grace Brissenden. "I must let you know that, in spite of your guarantee, it doesn't go at all—oh, but not at all! I've tried Lady John, as you enjoined, and I can't but feel that she leaves us very much where we were." Then, as my listener seemed not quite to remember where we had been, I came to her help. "You said yesterday at Paddington, to explain the change in Gilbert Long—don't you recall?—that that woman, plying him with her genius and giving him of her best, is clever enough for two. She's not clever enough then, it strikes me, for three—or at any rate for four. I confess I don't see it. Does she really dazzle *you*?"
> My friend had caught up. "Oh, you've a standard of wit!"
> "No, I've only a sense of reality—a sense not at all satisfied by the theory of such an influence as Lady John's."
> She wondered. "Such a one as whose else then?"
> "Ah, that's for us still to find out! Of course this can't be easy; for as the appearance is inevitably a kind of betrayal, it's in somebody's interest to conceal it."
> This Mrs. Brissenden grasped. "Oh, you mean in the lady's?"
> "In the lady's most. But also in Long's own, if he's really tender of the lady—which is precisely what our theory posits."[236]

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[235] Robert J. Andreach, "Henry James's The Sacred Fount: The Existential Predicament." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 17, no. 3 (1962): 197–216, 216.

[236] Henry James, *The Sacred Fount* (New Directions, 1995), 36.

For the sheer number of words spoken, stunningly little is conveyed. Just as the narrator thinks to himself in the last line of the novel, James seems most concerned with *not lacking* tone—in capturing certain rhythms and intonations—and not necessarily in the precise quiddity of the scenes rendered by the dialogue. Robert's description of this style as James's "fine-spun nothings" is apt, but they aren't just finely spun, they're also "over-spun." The characters speak in a shared idiom that bears more relation to Hegel than it does to how actual humans converse.

Here, Sharon Cameron's book about Henry James, *Thinking in Henry James*, is an important point of reference dealing with the notion of "consciousnesses dueling in the void," as well as the narrator's strangely overwrought and zoomed-in observation of those around him. Cameron identifies James as operating under the idea that consciousness exists "outside" and "between" people, but not necessarily within them. If that's taken to be true, then the void these consciousnesses operate within in *The Sacred Fount* is *consciousness itself*. Cameron claims that "thought is all idealized [...] in *The Sacred Fount* [...] thought in *The Sacred Fount* is incomprehensible because it has no relation[237] to things."[238] From this perspective, James's novel would seem to be the anti-phenomenological text *par excellence*—a novel about mediation that never "returns to the things themselves," as Husserl wished to do. Cameron further writes that:

> In *The Sacred Fount*, there is an ultimately vertiginous example of thinking as attempting to annihilate the distinction between subjective and objective reality [...] the subject [of the novel] is the narrator's collusion with the thinking of *other* characters about still other

[237] In her book *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Harvard University Press, 2020), Sianne Ngai associates the diremption between thought and reality with "labor and secrecy," connecting the overwrought thought of James's narrator with the reification of labor in a capitalist political economy (266), as well as James's later turn to dictating his novels—a somewhat silly analysis that doesn't have much to do with what's going on in the books themselves.

[238] Sharon Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), 168.

> characters—his attempt to make those to whom he confides his thoughts think as he does.[239]

Inasmuch as the progression from James's early works—like *Washington Square* (1880) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881)-–to his later moves increasingly away from descriptions of things and depicts the process of consciousness becoming unmoored from the world, his career as a whole might be taken as a kind of *dephenomenologization machine*. In that vein, his later work might also be taken as a potent example of the financially focused,[240] anti-physical worldview phenomenology as such was reacting against.

À la recherche of endless mediations: Proust as anti-phenomenologist

It is therefore my contention that James's *The Sacred Fount* is the best model for understanding precisely what it is that Proust is up to in his seven-volume opus—especially as also taken alongside Céline's pithy description of Proust as being defined by "half-ghosts," "infinitely watery futility," "denizens of the void," "phantoms of desire," and "irresolute daisy-chainers," as well as an aestheticized reading of Hegel's dialectical method, decisive in forming my model for understanding the *Recherche*. I am not alone in viewing Proust's work as more or less determined by James's. In a 1931 column from *The New Republic*, James Joyce tells his interviewer about the very few works of contemporary fiction he'd read: "James Joyce, because

[239] Ibid, 159-160.

[240] The Victorian novel, of which James is a late and imperfect representative, deals primarily in narratives depicting humans as monads moving through the world engaged in only financial transactions (which include romantic encounters). For more on this, see Tamara S. Wagner's *Financial Speculation in Victorian fiction: plotting money and the novel genre, 1815-1901* (Ohio State University, 2010). Despite its conservatism, James seems to say, this is also an almost psychedelic way of looking at the world.

of the state of his eyes, reads very little nowadays, and so it is a surprise to find that the conversation has turned to literature. He speaks of Henry James, who he thinks has influenced Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*."[241] This nugget of observation by Joyce will end up being more valuable than the reams and reams of paper upon which scholars have spilled their ink attempting to make a Merleau-Pontian out of him.

For, as discussed in the introduction, a great many scholars have seen fit to analyze Proust's work by way of Merleau-Ponty and in terms of phenomenology as such, as in Georges Poulet's *Proustian Space*. Mauro Carbone, for example, is insistent that Merleau-Ponty's project comes in large measure out of the philosopher's reading of Proust. As the abstract[242] to one of his more influential readings of Proust states, "Mauro Carbone finds Merleau-Ponty's gradual break with Husserl's analysis of temporality and the ontology undergirding it to be inspired by motifs borrowed from [...] Proust's descriptions of corporeal experience, e.g., those of memory in the state of half-sleep."[243] This, according to Carbone, leads directly to Merleau-Ponty "[eschewing] the traditional interpretation of time as a series of now-points in favor of a description of its originary experience."[244]

For Merleau-Ponty, originary experience in the body is a necessary precondition for the human subject's ensuing interiority: first comes bodily experience, then comes reflection. It is for this reason that, in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, the body isn't exactly subject or object, but

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[241] Padraic Coolem, "This Is What It Was Like to Go to James Joyce's Birthday Party," *The New Republic*, May 12, 1931.

[242] A necessary point of reference for us given his jumbled logic in the essay itself.

[243] Mauro Carbone, "The Time of Half-Sleep: Merleau-Ponty Between Husserl and Proust," in *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), xxiii.

[244] Ibid, xxiii.

both and neither. *Phenomenology of Perception* can be read partially as a polemic with Heidegger regarding the empirical way the latter describes Dasein's actions in the world. As Merleau-Ponty considers time's passing and those "originary experiences" to be of the highest importance for the real functioning of perception, this means that to treat perception as merely empirical and immediate would be a fundamental error. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, then, exists between two poles: the notion of the body as such in a way that doesn't precisely contradict Heidegger and the notion of the body's perception, which might well be read as a polemic with the notion of Dasein's merely "being here." So, on the one hand:

> All thought of something is at the same time self-consciousness [...] At the root of all our experiences and all our reflections, we find [...] a being which immediately recognises itself, [...] and which knows its own existence, not by observation and as a given fact, nor by inference from any idea of itself, but through direct contact with that existence. Self-consciousness is the very being of mind in action.[245]

This passage shows that, unlike in Heidegger, it would be impossible to say that this individual self-consciousness is identical with the world that it exists inside of and that this impossibility stems in large measure from the protracted influence of originary experiences—from duration and that which it leaves behind. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty makes a variety of statements that don't contradict Heidegger in the slightest and read as if they might well have been snipped out of *Being and Time*:

> True reflection presents me to myself not as idle and inaccessible subjectivity, but as identical with my presence in the world and to others, as I am now realizing it: I am all that I see, I am an intersubjective field,

[245] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception: An Introduction*, trans. Donald Landes (London: Routledge, 2011), 432.

> not despite my body and historical situation, but, on the contrary, by being this body and this situation, and though them, all the rest.[246]

If we are to attempt to create a unified theory of all of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical concepts, what separates these two statements must end up being the duration that allows "originary experiences" to, given time, become the entirety of a self-consciousness. The basis of Carbone's[247] own theorization of Proust as a phenomenologist of the body begins with Merleau-Ponty's idea that "memory is, not the constituting consciousness of the past, but an effort to reopen time on the basis of the implications contained in the present [and that] the body, as our permanent means of 'taking up attitudes' and thus constructing pseudo-presents, is the medium of our communication with time as well as with space."[248] Carbone also refers to Merleau-Ponty's affirmations that "subjectivity, at the level of perception, is nothing but temporality,"[249]; that "My body takes possession of time; it brings into existence a past and a future for a present; it is not a thing, but creates time instead of submitting to it,"[250]; and that one's body "secretes"[251] time. For our purposes, the most significant of Merleau-Ponty's theses that Carbone draws on is the somewhat Jamesian formulation that "subjectivity, at the level of perception, is nothing but

[246] Ibid, 525.

[247] Carbone is such an important point of reference in this chapter because so many other literary scholars have entirely abandoned notions of phenomenology, as well as what was once the cottage industry of comparing Proust with Merleau-Ponty.

[248] Mauro Carbone, "The Time of Half-Sleep: Merleau-Ponty Between Husserl and Proust," in *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 150.

[249] Ibid, 151.

[250] Ibid, 151.

[251] Ibid, 151.

temporality."[252] Merleau-Ponty himself never uses the terms "originary experience" or "duration" and, more generally, time itself takes a backseat to the body in his work. However, it is fair to say that the way Carbone formulates this analysis is credible if we limit it to only Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.

And if we apply this analysis to Proust in preliminary fashion, it doesn't seem immediately incorrect; Proust's work is rather long-winded (is partially defined by its duration) and the sediment of those originary experiences lived by Marcel do, given the thousands and thousands of the book's pages, mutate into self-consciousness as such. In fact, Merleau-Ponty's notion of time as the "ultimate subjectivity" could well have come directly out of Proust; the passing of time in Proust's "phenomenology of longueurs"[253] is entirely inextricable from the narrator's subjectivity. It's in the development of these ideas and the attempt to work out less obvious ways they might apply to Proust that cracks begin to appear. As, for instance, when Carbone writes that:

> The figure of "embodied time" and Proust's work in its entirety, in fact, describe a life without consciousness, an experience emerging precisely as in sleep or in one of those states of half-sleep of which the *Recherche* is full [...] In short, the object of Proust's search [recherche] is this "life without *Erlebnisse*, without interiority" that Merleau-Ponty also intends "to restore." In this manner, both of them profoundly show the disintegration of the very notion of the subject and, thereby, the consequent "mutation of the relationship between humanity and Being" within which we are living.[254]

[252] Ibid, 151.

[253] My own term.

[254] Mauro Carbone, "The Time of Half-Sleep: Merleau-Ponty Between Husserl and Proust," in *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 171-172.

Even if we accept the whole progression of the argument up until this point, the notion that Proust is attempting to participate in the Heideggerian project of "destroying western metaphysics" and to somehow "restore" to humanity a life without interiority should give any reader pause. While there's no arguing with Carbone's earlier affirmation of the common ground between Proust and Merleau-Ponty's projects-–that "by virtue of the original movement of intentionality that projects it into the world, one's own body inhabits a spatio-temporal totality, animates space and time with its presence, and literally incorporates them into its experience, where later it can find the trace again"[255]—it will be my contention that, as in James's *The Sacred Fount*, Proust's vision is one of total interiority, an incredibly mutated iteration of "Being" that almost never comes down to earth.

In fact, Carbone has an entire book on Proust and Merleau-Ponty that advances, if not precisely the thesis that Proust is somehow invested in restoring a mode of originary Being to humanity, then a similar one. In *An Unprecedented Deformation*, Carbone continues to develop his obsession with "involuntary memory," at play in the narrator's half-sleep and olfactory flash-backs throughout Proust's cycle. For Carbone, "involuntary memory" contains the seed for an entirely new possible model for human subjectivity:

> Here we are dealing with the work of involuntary memory which is anticipated in the passage of the *Recherche* quoted at the outset: a passive operation—and therefore inseparable from the action of memory's oblivion—but at the same time an operation which the Proustian Narrator defined, while correcting himself significantly: "Seek? More than that: create."
> Hence, the anti-Platonic characterization of the ideas, which Merleau-Ponty finds in Proust, combines with the anti-Platonic conception of recollection that Deleuze sees in the author of *Recherche*, and in doing

[255] Mauro Carbone, "The Time of Half-Sleep: Merleau-Ponty Between Husserl and Proust," in *Merleau-Ponty's Reading of Husserl* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 150

> so, it offers to the thought and art of the twentieth century a mirror in which to *reflect* itself.[256]

It's immediately apparent that, here too, Carbone takes on a Heideggerian tone in attempting to polemicize with Plato, the arguable fount of Western thought and metaphysics. Though his logic is somewhat convoluted, he should be seen as taking up Heidegger's project in attempting to return to a more elemental form of Being by way of Proust. More specifically, his reversal of Plato lies in locating the nucleus of the "eidos" ["form" or "idea"] in objects and the body, rather than up in a nebulous and unreachable beyond. It is Carbone's contention that the body doesn't pass through the beyond in dealing with memory and perception; it creates and is created upon by that which is corporeally involuntary. The problem here, as we shall see, is how much of Proust's cycle deals with moving through a kind of beyond that is neurotic, unreal, and bears no relation to any sort of elemental Being. To formulate such an argument—to "Heideggerize" Proust-–Carbone must willfully ignore an enormous number of contradictory bits of evidence.

More measured receptions of Proust and Merleau-Ponty without this totalizing Germanic impulse are usually less imprecise than Carbone's. Patricia Locke is cautious in her interpretation of a common vision of time throughout both of their works. She writes that:

> Merleau-Ponty adopts Husserl's schema that denotes time as ―not a line, but a network of intentionalities [...] This reciprocal interaction between self and world is centered in my body, which is fundamentally sexual. Merleau-Ponty stresses this point; the way in which I am a moving human being, able to take root in different settings, is my sexuality as a general power of being in relationships with others.[257]

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[256] Mauro Carbone, *An Unprecedented Deformation: Marcel Proust and the Sensible Ideas* (Alban: SUNY Press, 2011), 10-11.

[257] Patricia Locke, "Intermittences: Merleau-Ponty and Proust on Time and Grief." *Critical Studies,* Volume: 32, *Chrono-topologies* (2010): 146–158, 148.

She then claims that, in Proust, these intermittences are not merely sexual, but also centered around the shocks of grief—or of any violent, unexpected experience by which the mind is troubled. This is a relatively accurate model for Proust's work; the only issue being the extent to which Proust's narrator departs from that seed of initial experience in his reflections: how many pages he spends enumerating Albertine's possibly unreal infidelities, among many other imagined obsessions. Marcel's experience of his body—even his experience of time—is dwarfed by the mediations interposed by his mind, just as in *The Sacred Fount*.

Catherine Hansen also identifies the axis around which Proust's work revolves as time itself. She theorizes that Proust is a kind of time traveler brought back to the flesh of his earlier body as he undertakes his writing-process:

> Proust's extra-temporal being is not only the writer who entered the space of imagination, but one who is fully immersed in the universal Being of the Flesh. But to become this being requires a kind of self-separation, whether by means of temporal distance, Merleau-Ponty's *écart*, or through the metamorphosis necessary to enter the space of imagination. Finally, it seems that Proust questions the necessity of this separation.[258]

This might be a better modality for analyzing Knausgaard's *My Struggle*—or, as shall be done later in this chapter, Céline. In Proust's epic, both author and narrator are less concerned with the experience of flesh than they are with the reflections that preoccupied them both at the time being written about and after the fact. Certainly, Proust questions the fundamental difference between the thoughts he may have had in the past as narrator and the thoughts he is having as he writes as author, but this is a question of time and consciousness, not one of time and sense-perception. In Proust's cycle, mediations don't just enshroud the body, they also hide away space

[258] Catherine Hansen. "The Anonymous Flesh of Time: Merleau-Ponty and Blanchot on Proust." *L'Esprit Créateur* 46, no. 4 (2006): 33–43, 42.

in a way that seems to fundamentally call into question Poulet's thesis in *Proustian Space*; the Dasein of Proust's narrator may occasionally elucidate the arrangement of things in a compulsive way, as Poulet suggests is one of the main axes of Proust's work, but the narrator always ends up quickly burying that initial description in comparisons and compulsive thought-loops. Poulet claims that the fundamental question posed at the beginning of Proust's book when the narrator wakes up (one that also concerns Carbone quite intensely) is not just *when* the narrator is upon waking up, but *where*.[259] Proceeding from a Jamesian model of consciousness, it isn't difficult to see that, occasional neurotic luxurious descriptions of surroundings aside, the reader and narrator both only ever occupy one space in Proust's cycle: the void of the narrator's consciousness, as mediated and inescapable as it is in *The Sacred Fount*. In that sense, Jean-Yves Tadié's *Proust et le roman: Essai sur les formes et techniques du roman dans "À la recherche du temps perdu"* is a more credible rendering of Proust's vision. Tadié's thesis is that the form of Proust's novel is dependent only on the "je" of Proust's narrator and "time." Indeed, it is this part of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy that is at play in the cycle: the ego as a sedimentary formation deposited by originary experience and duration. Otherwise, however, *Dinge an sich* are not returned to, as Carbone would have us believe; they are definitively erased by the ceaseless cogitations of the narrator's mind.

Unmediated dealings with a mediated text

[259] Georges Poulet, *Proustian Space*, trans. Elliott Coleman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 7.

While Proust certainly deals with a kind of "originary experience" that begins in the body, the mediations that pile up on top of that experience are so plentiful that they almost entirely enshroud the experience of the body—or flesh—that lies behind or underneath it. These mediations are constantly at play in the text. In terms of its construction, Proust's madeleine, used by Carbone as an example of his "inverted eidos" isn't remarkable for what it is *in and of itself* (as it would have to be from a phenomenological perspective), but because of the other images, thoughts, and memories it calls forth; even Proust's madeleine is mediated. Marc A. Weiner compares the madeleine to a Wagnerian leitmotif, writing that:

> Wagner's leitmotif technique-it is at this point in the third act that a motif invokes for the first time a specific memory in the audience-aids the listener as Proust's "leitmotivic" use of familiar psychic experience aids the reader. The listener is forced to juxtapose Tristan's scene with Isolde's Act I narration in much the same way as Proust's reader must juxtapose various passages dealing with recollection. Structurally the process of remembrance in Proust is similar to that in Wagner. In order to re-find the world temporarily lost to the conscious mind, Proust initiates contact with the past through a two-fold process: the "memoire involontaire" or immediate, automatic recollection, is followed by introspection and analysis. One thus touches the past by happenstance and then actively comes to terms with it.[260]

As Carbone also suggests, the process of remembrance for both reader, narrator, and listener is involuntary; they are not to seek anything out—are not to wade through a diaphanous beyond so as to come to a lofty "eidos".

But what of the madeleine itself? Is the task of phenomenology not to *return to the cookie*? In his article "Proust Précurseur: La madeleine entre psychanalyse et neurosciences," Edward Bizub outlines the ways in which Proust's conception of "involuntary memory" might

[260] Marc A. Weiner, "Zwieback and Madeleine: Creative Recall in Wagner and Proust," *MLN* 95, no. 3 (1980): 682.

align with Freud's (at the time) incipient theory of the unconscious—might even stand as a sort of sigil for that theory's coming-into-being. In that case, the madeleine would also be a catalyst offering access to a hidden psychological world rather than something to be taken on its own terms. Even in Proust's book, the madeleine is barely described:

> Mais au moment où, me remettant d'aplomb, je posai mon pied sur un pavé qui était un peu moins élevé que le précédent, tout mon découragement s'évanouit devant la même félicité qu'à diverses époques de ma vie m'avaient donnée la vue d'arbres que j'avais cru reconnaître dans une promenade en voiture autour de Balbec, la vue des clochers de Martinville, la saveur d'une madeleine trempée dans une infusion, tant d'autres sensations dont j'ai parlé et que les dernières œuvres de Vinteuil m'avaient paru synthétiser. Comme au moment où je goûtais la madeleine, toute inquiétude sur l'avenir, tout doute intellectuel étaient dissipés. Ceux qui m'assaillaient tout à l'heure au sujet de la réalité de mes dons littéraires et même de la réalité de la littérature se trouvaient levés comme par enchantement.[261]

> And at the moment when, recovering my balance, I put my foot on a stone which was slightly lower than its neighbor, all my discouragement vanished and in its place was that same happiness which at various epochs of my life had been given to me by the sight of trees which I had thought I recognised in the course of a drive near Balbec, by the sight of the twin steeples of Martinville, by the flavour of a madeleine dipped in tea, and by all those last works of Vinteuil had seemed to me to combine the quintessential character. Just as, at the moment when I tasted the madeleine, all anxiety about the future, all intellectual doubts had disappeared, so now those that a few seconds ago had assailed me on the subject of the reality of my literary gifts, the reality even of literature, were removed as if by magic.[262]

The only real description of the cookie/pastry is that it's been dipped in tea. Otherwise, it's simply a springboard for thinking about various places that the narrator will also not describe in any detail; he'll merely think of other things these places remind him of while also not describing

[261] Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Gallimard, 1957), 1593

[262] Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*, ed. D. J. Enwright, trans. Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin (Modern Library, 1999), 255.

those other things. One word from the passage—referencing the famous Vinteuil sonata, itself a perpetual "objet a" throughout the whole cycle, standing in as a leitmotif for everything but itself—is of particular note: "synthesize." Not only does it seem to refer to a vulgar, not entirely accurate conception of Hegel's metaphysics, it is a fundamentally anti-phenomenological word––the inversion of Heidegger's "uncovering."

Instead of viewing things as they are, Proust's narrator constantly stacks them up on top of each other. To wit, after reading this passage, the reader has no notion of how the madeleine tastes, its texture, the temperature of the tea… As an account of bodily experience—thinking back to Catherine Hansen's conception of Proust's narrator voyaging through time to occupy his earlier flesh or of the half of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy that doesn't deal with time—it leaves much to be desired. The fact that Proust the novelist articulates pure remembering as his purpose should not blind the reader to the fact that the memories as presented are murky and mediated. As Vincent Descombes writes in *Proust: Philosophy of the Novel*, Proust the novelist is allowed and expected to be more radical than Proust the theorist of his own work; Descombes recommends entirely disregarding the portions of the text in which Proust enumerates his own rather banal philosophy of memory. And it's true that the ceaseless mediations that make up the actual novelistic descriptions do not enact the philosophy Proust enumerates in any respect.

Taking the description of the madeleine as a starting point, the reader sees that Proust's description of place does not offer any firmer ground than the description of the dessert they were (rather tautologically) meant to be somehow equivalent to. For instance, at the beginning of *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* [*In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*] (1918), the narrator describes a visit to the Swanns' apartment:

[...] j'écartai à tout jamais de moi, comme un dévot la *Vie de Jésus* de Renan, la pensée dissolvante que leur appartement était un appartement quelconque que nous aurions pu habiter.
Cependant ces jours de goûter, m'élevant dans l'escalier marche à marche, déjà dépouillé de ma pensée et de ma mémoire, n'étant plus que le jouet des plus vils réflexes, j'arrivais à la zone où le parfum de Mme Swann se faisait sentir. Je croyais déjà voir la majesté du gâteau au chocolat, entouré d'un cercle d'assiettes à petits fours et de petites serviettes damassées grises à dessins, exigées par l'étiquette et particulières aux Swann. Mais cet ensemble inchangeable et réglé semblait, comme l'univers nécessaire de Kant, suspendu à un acte suprême de liberté. Car quand nous étions tous dans le petit salon de Gilberte, tout d'un coup regardant l'heure, elle disait :
— Dites donc, mon déjeuner commence à être loin, je ne dîne qu'à huit heures, j'ai bien envie de manger quelque chose. Qu'en diriez-vous ?
Et elle nous faisait entrer dans la salle à manger, sombre comme l'intérieur d'un Temple asiatique peint par Rembrandt, et où un gâteau architectural aussi débonnaire et familier qu'il était imposant, semblait trôner là à tout hasard comme un jour quelconque, pour le cas où il aurait pris fantaisie à Gilberte de le découronner de ses créneaux en chocolat et d'abattre ses remparts aux pentes fauves et raides, cuites au four comme les bastions du palais de Darius.[263]

I banished for ever from my memory, as a good Catholic banishes Renan's Vie de Jésus, the destroying thought that their house was just an ordinary flat in which we ourselves might have been living.
Meanwhile on those tea-party days, pulling myself up the staircase step by step, reason and memory already cast off like outer garments, and myself no more now than the sport of the basest reflexes, I would arrive in the zone in which the scent of Mme. Swann greeted my nostrils. I felt that I could already behold the majesty of the chocolate cake, encircled by plates heaped with little cakes, and by tiny napkins of grey damask with figures on them, as required by convention but peculiar to the Swanns. But this unalterable and governed whole seemed, like Kant's necessary universe, to depend on a supreme act of free will. For when we were all together in Gilberte's little sitting-room, suddenly she would look at the clock and exclaim:
'I say! It's getting a long time since luncheon, and we aren't having dinner till eight. I feel as if I could eat something. What do you say?'
And she would make us go into the dining-room, as sombre as the interior of an Asiatic Temple painted by Rembrandt, in which an architectural cake, as gracious and sociable as it was imposing, seemed to be enthroned there in any event, in case the fancy seized Gilberte to discrown it of its chocolate battlements and to hew down the steep brown

[263] Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Gallimard, 1957), 256.

> slopes of its ramparts, baked in the oven like the bastions of the palace of Darius.[264]

There could be no better passage to demonstrate the ceaseless and methodical process of mediation that Proust subjects his recollections to. At no point does the reader see or taste anything *real*. After a reference to Renan's famous work of naturalistic atheism as a lens through which to understand the young narrator's feelings about the apartment, there is a brief description of mounting a staircase, a non-description of a perfume that is merely referenced (but its odor not dissected), the expectation of a dessert that isn't ever eaten, then a reference to Kant. After that—Gilberte first getting in a polite interjection—the dining room is compared to a Rembrandt painting, one the reader can now Google, but, at the time Proust was writing, this reference might have meant absolutely nothing to a reader who hadn't seen the painting itself or its reproduction. Then, finally, the cake, the flavors of which aren't described at all, is compared to the bastions of Darius's palace. So much for phenomenology or bodily experience… In a certain way, Barthes's reading of Proust might be of value here, as it also pushes back against the banal over-seriousness of books of popular neuroscience or psychology often written about Proust:[265]

> [...] Proust's entire undertaking is in a sense an exercise in idling, [Barthes claims] in one of the interviews collected posthumously as *Le Grain de la voix* (1981), and it would not be in keeping with the book's delicious associative textures to read it in an other than idly pleasure-seeking frame of mind [...] Only scholars and specialists would want to turn the reading of Proust prematurely towards long labour and goal-directed linearity. "Je ne suis pas 'proustien'" (I am not a "Proustian"), he repeats elsewhere in *Le Grain de la voix*.

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[264] Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*, ed. D. J. Enwright, trans. Terence Kilmartin and C. K. Scott Montcrieff (Modern Library, 1999), 107.

[265] For example: *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*, *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*, or Alain de Botton's heinous *How Proust Can Change Your Life*.

> [...] Barthes's *A la recherche du temps perdu* is a cabinet of curiosities inside which the reader's attention is endlessly dispersed, and an inexhaustible dossier of singular moments from which supporting evidence could be plucked for any general claim whatsoever.[266]

While it is certainly true that there is no "goal-directed linearity" in Proust's cycle, there might also be a profound seriousness at work within that lack—one that entirely lines up with Barthes's analysis.

Beyond that, as can already be seen in the description of the Swanns' apartment quoted above, Proust is most fixated with mediating his descriptions of reality through references to great works of art. Céline must have been thinking of this perpetual tic in Proust's prose when he also included a reference to Watteau's painting in his brief lampoon from *Voyage au bout de la nuit*. Proust himself is cognizant of this tic and articulates a half-justification for it at the end of *Du côté de chez Swann*:

> Mais rien ne ressemblait moins non plus à ce Balbec réel que celui dont j'avais souvent rêvé, les jours de tempête, quand le vent était si fort que Françoise en me menant aux Champs-Élysées me recommandait de ne pas marcher trop près des murs pour ne pas recevoir de tuiles sur la tête et parlait en gémissant des grands sinistres et naufrages annoncés par les journaux. Je n'avais pas de plus grand désir que de voir une tempête sur la mer, moins comme un beau spectacle que comme un moment dévoilé de la vie réelle de la nature; ou plutôt il n'y avait pour moi de beaux spectacles que ceux que je savais qui n'étaient pas artificiellement combinés pour mon plaisir, mais étaient nécessaires, inchangeables, – les beautés des paysages ou du grand art. Je n'étais curieux, je n'étais avide de connaître que ce que je croyais plus vrai que moi-même, ce qui avait pour moi le prix de me montrer un peu de la pensée d'un grand génie, ou de la force ou de la grâce de la nature telle qu'elle se manifeste livrée à elle-même, sans l'intervention des hommes.[267]
>
> And yet nothing could have differed more utterly, either, from the real Balbec than that other Balbec of which I had often dreamed, on stormy

[266] Malcolm Bowie, "Barthes on Proust." *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 14 no. 2 (2001): 513-518, 513.

[267] Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Gallimard, 1957), 220.

> days, when the wind was so strong that Françoise, as she took me to the Champs-Elysées, would advise me not to walk too close to the walls or I might have my head knocked off by a falling slate, and would recount to me, with many a groan, the terrible disasters and shipwrecks that were reported in the newspaper. I longed for nothing more than to behold a stormy sea, less as a mighty spectacle than as a momentary revelation of the true life of nature; or rather there were for me no mighty spectacles save those which I knew to be not artificially composed for my entertainment, but necessary and unalterable—the beauty of landscapes or of great works of art. I was curious and eager to know only what I believed to be more real than myself, what had for me the supreme merit of showing me a fragment of the mind of a great genius, or of the force or the grace of nature as it appeared when left entirely to itself, without human interference.[268]

The desire for immediacy is constantly foiled and seems to be in direct contradiction with the equivalency Proust articulates as existing between great works of art and nature. Unlike in moments at which Proust is more didactic in outlining his philosophy (those moments that Descombes advises the reader to ignore), the unresolved contradiction of the man-made and the natural being somehow equivalent seems to lie behind many of the mediations the narrator subjects the surrounding world to. His ironic desire for something *truer than he is* contains the same fundamental paradox that the narrator's constant theorizing about the people around him does in *The Sacred Fount*; one's theories about authenticity are bound to bear traces of the inauthentic self that foments those theories—to be forever warped by their lens. In *Proust entre littérature et philosophie*, Pierre Macheray attempts to explain away Proust's referentiality, while still presenting him as a philosopher; he writes about the power of "l'art de restituer les méandres de la vie de l'esprit et de mieux comprendre ce qui s'y passe en réalité, qui est extraordinairement compliqué. Ceci admis, l'art participe à part entière à l'entreprise de la

[268] Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, ed. D. J. Enwright, trans. Terence Kilmartin and C. K. Scott Montcrieff (Modern Library, 1999), 545-546.

philosophie: il a valeur de philosophie."[269] [270] Ah—to make such bold Gallic pronouncements! The art Proust's narrator constantly refers to is only "philosophical" according to certain limited definitions of philosophy; paintings and architecture are certainly not philosophy as such. Beyond that, in the context of the philosophy that is phenomenology, constant appeals to works of art outside of the world of the text are actually anti-philosophical. Macheray's statement is so general as to mean nothing.

The issue of mediation vs. reality reaches its neurotic climax in the young narrator's pilgrimage to go see a famous actress, La Berma, perform in Racine's famous *La Phèdre*. Having heard about La Berma and been obsessed with her for a long time, the young narrator has erected an enormous edifice of ideas outlining how her performance will be. Remembering how terribly the rupture between expectation and reality affected the neurotic boy when he traveled to Balbec with his grandmother to see the church, his parents and doctor are hesitant to let him go to the play:

> Le médecin qui me soignait—celui qui m'avait défendu tout voyage—déconseilla à mes parents de me laisser aller au théâtre; j'en reviendrais malade, pour longtemps peut-être, et j'aurais en fin de compte plus de souffrance que de plaisir. Cette crainte eût pu m'arrêter, si ce que j'avais attendu d'une telle représentation eut été seulement un plaisir qu'en somme une souffrance ultérieure peut annuler, par compensation. Mais – de même qu'au voyage à Balbec, au voyage à Venise que j'avais tant désirés – ce que je demandais à cette matinée, c'était tout autre chose qu'un plaisir: des vérités appartenant à un monde plus réel que celui où je vivais, et desquelles l'acquisition une fois faite ne pourrait pas m'être enlevée par des incidents insignifiants, fussent-ils douloureux à mon corps, de mon oiseuse existence. Tout au plus, le plaisir que j'aurais pendant le spectacle, m'apparaissait-il comme la forme peut-être nécessaire de la perception de ces vérités ; et c'était assez pour que je

[269] "the art of reconstructing the intricacies of the life of the mind and better understanding what's actually happening in there, which is extraordinarily complicated. Proceeding from this, art unto itself participates in the enterprise of philosophy: it has the value [valence] of philosophy." [My translation]

[270] Pierre Macherey, *Proust entre littérature et philosophie* (Éditions Amsterdam, 2013), 299.

> souhaitasse que les malaises prédits ne commençassent qu'une fois la représentation finie, afin qu'il ne fût pas par eux compromis et faussé. J'implorais mes parents, qui, depuis la visite du médecin, ne voulaient plus me permettre d'aller à Phèdre.[271]
>
> The doctor who was attending me—the same who had forbidden me to travel—advised my parents not to let me go to the theatre; I should only be ill again afterwards, perhaps for weeks, and should in the long run derive more pain than pleasure from the experience. The fear of this might have availed to stop me, if what I had anticipated from such a spectacle had been only a pleasure for which a subsequent pain could so compensate as to cancel it. But what I demanded from this performance—just as from the visit to Balbec, the visit to Venice for which I had so intensely longed—was something quite different from pleasure; a series of verities pertaining to a world more real than that in which I lived, which, once acquired, could never be taken from me again by any of the trivial incidents—even though it were the cause of bodily suffering—of my otiose existence. At best, the pleasure which I was to feel during the performance appeared to me as the perhaps inevitable form of the perception of these truths; and I hoped only that the illness which had been forecast for me would not begin until the play was finished, so that my pleasure should not be in any way compromised or spoiled. I implored my parents, who, after the doctor's visit, were no longer inclined to let me go to Phèdre.[272]

As in the description of Balbec (or, rather, in the description of the Balbec that the young narrator expects and hopes to encounter, then the one that he actually finds), the young narrator also describes his hopes of encountering something "more real" than that which makes up his own life. As it turns out, his parents and doctor are right to be concerned:

> Je ne pouvais même pas, comme pour ses camarades, distinguer dans sa diction et dans son jeu des intonations intelligentes, de beaux gestes. Je l'écoutais comme j'aurais lu *Phèdre*, ou comme si *Phèdre*, elle-même avait dit en ce moment les choses que j'entendais, sans que le talent de la Berma semblât leur avoir rien ajouté. J'aurais voulu—pour pouvoir l'approfondir, pour tâcher d'y découvrir ce qu'elle avait de beau—arrêter, immobiliser longtemps devant moi chaque intonation de l'artiste, chaque expression de sa physionomie; du moins, je tâchais, à force d'agilité morale, en ayant avant un vers mon attention tout installée et

[271] Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Gallimard, 1957), 251.

[272] Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*, ed. D. J. Enwright, trans. Terence Kilmartin and C. K. Scott Montcrieff (Modern Library, 1999), 17.

> mise au point, de ne pas distraire en préparatifs une parcelle de la durée de chaque mot, de chaque geste, et, grâce à l'intensité de mon attention, d'arriver à descendre en eux aussi profondément que j'aurais fait si j'avais eu de longues heures à moi. Mais que cette durée était brève! A peine un son était-il reçu dans mon oreille qu'il était remplacé par un autre.[273]

> I could not even, as I could with her companions, distinguish in her diction and in her playing intelligent intonations, beautiful gestures. I listened to her as though I were reading Phèdre, or as though Phaedra herself had at that moment uttered the words that I was hearing, without its appearing that Berma's talent had added anything at all to them. I could have wished, so as to be able to explore them fully, so as to attempt to discover what it was in them that was beautiful, to arrest, to immobilise for a time before my senses every intonation of the artist's voice, every expression of her features; at least I did attempt, by dint of my mental agility in having, before a line came, my attention ready and tuned to catch it, not to waste upon preparations any morsel of the precious time that each word, each gesture occupied, and, thanks to the intensity of my observation, to manage to penetrate as far into them as if I had had whole hours to spend upon them, by myself. But how short their duration was! Scarcely had a sound been received by my ear than it was displaced there by another.[274]

Just like in the description of the apartment, the young narrator cannot see the performance in and of itself, but only its failure to align with his expectations for it; he recites the play he expected to hear alongside the play he actually hears. Ironically, it is only the next day when the Marquis de Norpois describes to the narrator why the performance was brilliant that he begins to appreciate it.

However, the narrator also goes to see a performance of the same play with La Berma two books later in *Le côté de Guermantes* [*The Guermantes Way*] (1920). This time, he claims, he actually appreciates the performance for what it is, not mediating it with his mind at all:

> Autrefois, pour tâcher d'isoler ce talent, je défalquais en quelque sorte de ce que j'entendais le rôle lui-même, le rôle, partie commune à toutes les

[273] Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Gallimard, 1957), 253.

[274] Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*, ed. D. J. Enwright, trans. Terence Kilmartin and C. K. Scott Montcrieff (Modern Library, 1999), 26-27.

> actrices qui jouaient Phèdre et que j'avais étudié d'avance pour que je fusse capable de le soustraire, de ne recueillir comme résidu que le talent de Mme Berma. Mais ce talent que je cherchais à apercevoir en dehors du rôle, il ne faisait qu'un avec lui.[275]
>
> Formerly, in my attempts to isolate the talent, I deducted, so to speak, from what I heard the part itself, a part common to all the actresses who appeared as Phèdre, which I had myself studied beforehand so that I might be capable of subtracting it, of receiving in the strained residue only the talent of Mme. Berma. But this talent which I sought to discover outside the part itself was indissolubly one with it.[276]

The dialectical irony of this revelation is overpowering. Over the course of a massively long interior monologue littered with references to other genres of art and containing almost no descriptions of La Berma herself, the narrator comes to the conclusion that her talent simply *was* Racine's text. He even asks himself, "Ce génie dont l'interprétation de la Berma n'était seulement que la révélation, était-ce bien seulement le génie de Racine?"[277] [278] and finds himself unable to really answer except by means of a paradox. At the end of this interior monologue, so as to put his mind to rest, he affirms to himself (as he might once have to his classmates) that "'C'est vraiment la Berma que je mets en premier,'"[279] [280] but he isn't quite satisfied as he feels "confusément que le génie de la Berma n'était peut-être pas traduit très exactement par cette

[275] Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Gallimard, 1957), 553.

[276] Marcel Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, ed. D. J. Enwright, trans. Terence Kilmartin and C. K. Scott Montcrieff (Modern Library, 1999), 53.

[277] "This genius of which Berma's rendering of the part was only the revelation, was it indeed the genius of Racine and nothing more?"

[278] Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Gallimard, 1957), 554.

[279] "Certainly, I put Berma first!"

[280] Ibid, 555.

affirmation de ma préférence et de cette place de 'première' décernée, quelque calme d'ailleurs qu'elles m'apportassent."[281] [282]

Bryan Reddick sees this as a positive and firm resolution, writing that:

> The absolute reality, because of la Berma's genius, is at the very heart of the particular sense impression which she produces on the stage. It is fused with it, inseparable from it, and perceivable only through it. But what is equally important in this passage is Marcel's discovery of the falseness of preconceived ideas, which result from the imagination's working before it has real and personal experience to work up.[283]

I fail to see the firm basis for any kind of permanent impression of La Berma's work; given Proust's total non-description of the performance itself, to claim that her genius lies in the "particular sense impression" she produces is yet another example of the phenomenological fallacy that often takes hold of scholars of Proust's work. What I see instead is an ongoing dialectical process—precisely what is described in Hegel. As is the case with every other description reproduced in this chapter, the description of La Berma is dialectical and mediated rather than phenomenological and immediate; the same can also be said of the narrator's thought processes, as is exemplified in his ongoing reception of La Berma's performance, which never quite lands on solid ground—just like Hegel's dialectical model for philosophy.

[281] "confusedly that Berma's genius was not, perhaps, very accurately represented by this affirmation of my preference, or this award to her of a 'first' place, whatever the peace of mind that it might incidentally restore to me."

[282] Ibid, 555-556.

[283] Bryan Reddick, "Proust: The 'La Berma' Passages." *The French Review*, vol. 42, no. 5 (1969): 683–92, 688.

Proust as Hegelian: no body and no space

As was acknowledged at the beginning of the previous section, Merleau-Ponty seems to marry two fundamental insights: one regarding the body in space and one regarding time. Also like Heidegger, the second half of whose *Being and Time* barely follows from the first, Merleau-Ponty's theory of time doesn't really have anything to do with his theory of the body in the world. Therefore, it would seem that Proust's work doesn't abide by the notion that "The body is our general medium for having a world."[284] Merleau-Ponty's theory of originary experiences creating self-consciousness by way of perception, however, does apply to Proust. Statements like "The photograph keeps open the instants which the onrush of time closes up forthwith; it destroys the overtaking, the overlapping, the 'metamorphosis' [Rodin] of time"[285] are, in fact, Proustian. But again, as with Heidegger, the theory of time that Proustians take from Merleau-Ponty to apply to the *Recherche* is the periphery of the latter's philosophy; the nucleus of his work might be encapsulated by the statement that:

> Insofar as, when I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity [= consciousness] is merely one with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world.[286]

[284] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception: An Introduction*, trans. Donald Landes (London: Routledge, 2011), 169.

[285] Ibid, 186

[286] Ibid, 475.

Judging from this statement, college philosophy professors are not wrong to require students to memorize the adage that Merleau-Ponty simply added the body into Heidegger's paradigm without changing it too much (and, indeed, without forcing the students having to actually read anything by Merleau-Ponty). Carbone's use of Merleau-Ponty, however, can only be seen as specific and opportunistic; no college student should have to memorize the adage that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy deals with the sediment of originary experience eventually giving forth the sprouts of self-recognizing self-consciousness.

Furthermore, although there is no denying the fact that the paradigm of originary experience becoming self-consciousness by way of duration might be brought to bear in the analysis of Proust's work, given the sheer weight of mediations that pile up on top of those "originary experiences" and the fact that the body seems to have almost no position or worth in Proust's work—especially not in any "phenomenological space"—it is my claim that, in certain respects, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) maps onto Proust's cycle more neatly than Merleau-Ponty's philosophy does. While neither theory is perfect, in his fiction Proust comes across as a poor phenomenologist who falls into a Hegelian paradigm and schema as he attempts to migrate through time back into an earlier body, as Catherine Hansen describes it. Thinking, however, of the dialectical method rather than the phenomenological, Kojève's elucidation of dialectics might be of some initial value:

> "To overcome dialectically" means to overcome while preserving what is overcome; it is sublimated in and by that overcoming which preserves or that preservation which overcomes. The dialectically overcome-entity is annulled in its contingent (stripped of sense, "senseless") aspect of natural, given ("immediate") entity, but it is preserved in its essential (and meaningful, significant) aspect; thus mediated by negation, it is sublimated or raised up to a more "comprehensive" and comprehensible mode of being than that of its immediate reality of pure and simple,

> positive and static given, which is not the result of creative action (i.e. of action that negates the given).[287]

This description of simultaneous overcoming and preservation works as a reframing of the symbiotic relationship between duration and originary experience elucidated in Carbone's analyses of Merleau-Ponty. One might also see the Proustian narrator's method of description in the cycle's narrative prose as dialectical in precisely Kojève's sense; as with the cake in the Swanns' apartment, certain contingencies are discarded—the cake's taste, colors, actual shape—in favor of a more "comprehensive" and "comprehensible" vision of the cake as the ramparts of Darius' palace. This seems immediately[288] correct at the level of Proust's descriptions—a dialectical impulse is certainly at work in Proust's narration—but what of Proust's cycle's structure as compared to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*?

On the face of it, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* would seem to be impossibly different from Proust's cycle. It describes a possible historical development of Spirit ("Geist") all the way from the banal naivete of "sense certainty" (as discussed in the previous chapter) to a religious vision of "absolute knowing." In moving through an enormous series of historical "Gestalten" or "shapes of consciousness," Hegel offers highly abstract accounts of different moments in history (and the states of mind that characterize them), some of the most famous of which are the "master and slave" dialectic, the "beautiful soul," "the law of the heart and the frenzy of self-conceit," "absolute freedom and terror," "self-alienated spirit," "reason as lawgiver," "reason as testing laws," and "revealed religion." Most instructively for Proust's purposes, Jean Hyppolite

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[287] Alexandre Kojève et al., *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 15.

[288] Or perhaps *mediately*?

formulated the text as a *Bildungsroman*, in which Spirit moves through the whole history of consciousness.[289] Hegel's descriptive goal is to have each Gestalt move from a lower to a higher shape of consciousness, still preserving some of the previous shape, but with its contingencies discarded—just as Kojève writes. The work has often been criticized for the somewhat arbitrary way it moves through these shapes of consciousness.[290] Still, it remains highly influential and, as Jon Stewart writes, "we need not find Hegel's structure here philosophically compelling in order to use it to understand the individual analyses which he gives."[291] Kenley R. Dove assents with this in somewhat polemical fashion when he writes that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is not dialectical at all; he writes that "Insofar as it can be characterized in a word, it is *descriptive*. The study of a science, in Hegel's sense, requires that the student, through a tremendous effort of restraint, give himself completely over to the structural development of that science."[292] Stewart, however, contradicts his earlier statement and makes another, which is more apt, disagreeing also with Dove: "on the other hand, the risk that we run by ignoring his systematic pretensions entirely is not understanding him at all," he writes.[293]

It is this broader, "unignorable" structure that is also the basis by which, beyond their similarity at a micro level, I claim Proust and Hegel's works to be comparable. And there are

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[289] See Hyppolite's *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Northwestern University Press, 1979).

[290] The way in which Henry James lampoons his narrator's distance from the actual world could easily be a parody of the arbitrary nature of Hegelian dialectics.

[291] Jon Stewart. "The Architectonic of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55, no. 4 (1995): 747–76, 776.

[292] Kenley R. Dove, "Hegel's Phenomenological Method." *The Review of Metaphysics* 23, no. 4 (1970): 615–41, 615.

[293] Jon Stewart. "The Architectonic of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55, no. 4 (1995): 747–76, 776.

three fundamental elements of that similarity that make the works broadly comparable at a structural level: the dialectical repetition of the madeleine at the beginning and end of the cycle, Hegel's "inverted world" as compared to Proust's obsession with "inversion," and the revelatory quality of each work's finale. Most obviously, Proust's initial description of the madeleine as compared to the final is a fine showcase of the Hegelian process of shedding contingency, becoming more comprehensive and comprehensible. At the beginning of the cycle, the young narrator is simply enjoying a tasty dessert with tea, but at the end of the cycle, the madeleine becomes the catalyst of "involuntary memory" that spurs him on to write the whole series, even as his own death seems inevitable. The madeleine has been sublimated, universalized, and it contains within it the whole of Proust's epic; this is precisely a Hegelian process.

The issues of "inversion" and the "inverted world" require slightly more explanation. Renowned as one of the most difficult sections of the work, "this section occupies a most crucial position in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*: it serves to carry us forward from the phenomenological examination of appearing consciousness as pure consciousness, i.e., as pure intentional consciousness over against a pure intended world, into the examination of appearing consciousness as self-consciousness."[294] In this section of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel describes Spirit as having arrived at a Gestalt by which everything appears precisely as its opposite. The meaning of this section is obscure, but Joseph Flay describes it as an intentionally misleading section meant to be understood as an error by the reader so that they might see "that consciousness is not merely finite intentionality, but as such is infinite. Consciousness is self-

[294] Flay, Joseph C. "Hegel's 'Inverted World.'" *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1970, pp. 662–78. 662.

consciousness, consciousness limited by nothing but itself."[295] Flay's position is that the section is essentially a thought experiment:

> Thus, the inverted, absurd world remains inverted and absurd from the point of view of a pure attitude of consciousness where the knower stands over against and transcendent to the objective appearance and the supersensible which grounds this appearance. But when the limits of consciousness are explicitly brought before us, when there is awareness of an inversion of this duality and a collapse of the knowing and the knowable into experience as such, then the absurdity evaporates.[296]

Proust is comparably preoccupied with "inversion" (his pet term for homosexuality) in his cycle––especially in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* [*Sodom and Gomorrah*] (1921). Despite the author's own homosexuality, Proust's narrator is highly critical of his gay and lesbian characters, describing their "inversion" as an intense moral failing. Just as Proust's narrator presents himself as a lothario and occasional predator, so too do many of the characters who seem to be the most successful (and callous) with members of the opposite sex end up being "inverted"—like Saint-Loup, a Casanova and military man who ends up being, if not gay, then at least bisexual. Melvin Seiden makes a claim about this rhetorical game that is very reminiscent of Joseph Flay's ideas about the inverted world:

> If Marcel's heterosexuality is a lie, then Saint-Loup is the sacrifice Marcel offers to the truth. When Saint-Loup is made to descend into Sodom, when Marcel's ingenious theories about the tactics of homosexual concealment are proven correct, that descent by its own logic, which is Marcel's logic, necessarily implicates Marcel, forces him into the same pattern, blots and invalidates Marcel's heterosexual credentials.[297]

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[295] Ibid, 663.

[296] Ibid, 677.

[297] Melvin Seiden. "Proust's Marcel and Saint-Loup: Inversion Reconsidered." *Contemporary Literature* 10, no. 2 (1969): 220–40, 239.

A similar process of "inversion" is at play in Proust's highly anti-Semitic language and descriptions, despite the fact that Proust himself was of Jewish extraction. Far from being an attempt to re-access the reality of an actual situation or "find time"—again, it is important the reader ignore Proust's own philosophy in favor of what he writes when he isn't elucidating that philosophy—Proust's play with inversion also seems to be a thought experiment that the reader necessarily becomes complicit in. The ramifications of that mind game, as in the case of Hegel's inverted world, are not immediately apparent—especially if the reader follows the New Critical dogma of ignoring Proust's biography and doesn't make use of the fact that he was a gay Jew in their analyses of the book…

Finally, there is the revelatory and rather fantastic quality of both works' dénouements. In Proust's novel this revelation is a gallery of all the characters he's already written about at the Princesse de Guermantes's salon. First, coming into the party from the street, the cobblestones act on him by way of involuntary memory as the madeleine did earlier in the book; he feels as if no time at all has passed. Later, however, he is shocked by the changes time has inflicted upon "his characters" once he's made it inside. Many of the characters seem to have become inverted versions of themselves, their most elemental characteristics shifting into their polar opposites. But, like the "involuntary memory" brought on by the madeleine at the beginning of this final volume, the changes wrought upon these characters convince the narrator to become a writer:

> Il me fallait rendre aux moindres signes qui m'entouraient (Guermantes, Albertine, Gilberte, Saint-Loup, Balbec, etc.) leur sens que l'habitude leur avait fait perdre pour moi. Et quand nous aurons atteint la réalité, pour l'exprimer, pour la conserver nous écarterons ce qui est different d'elle et que ne cesse de nous apporter la vitesse acquise de l'habitude.[298]

[298] Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Gallimard, 1957), 1609.

> I was surrounded by symbols (Guermantes, Albertine, Gilberte, Saint-Loup, Balbec, etc.) and to the least of these I had to restore the meaning which habit had caused them to lose for me. Nor was that all. When we have arrived at reality, we must, to express it and preserve it, prevent the intrusion of all those extraneous elements which at every moment the gathered speed of habit lays at our feet.[299]

And, about a hundred pages later, at the very end of the book—the end of the cycle—his revelation becomes even more vividly articulated; he decides he must write the massive series the reader has just read, despite the fact that time is having its way with him and he may not have the strength to finish it; he must defeat time and preserve his characters (also his presumptive acquaintances) against it:

> Que celui qui pourrait écrire un tel livre serait heureux, pensais-je, quel labeur devant lui! Pour en donner une idée, c'est aux arts les plus élevés et les plus différents qu'il faudrait emprunter des comparaisons; car cet écrivain, qui d'ailleurs pour chaque caractère en ferait apparaître les faces opposées, pour montrer son volume, devrait préparer son livre, minutieusement, avec de perpétuels regroupements de forces, comme une offensive, le supporter comme une fatigue, l'accepter comme une règle, le construire comme une église, le suivre comme un régime, le vaincre comme un obstacle, le conquérir comme une amitié, le suralimenter comme un enfant, le créer comme un monde sans laisser de côté ces mystères qui n'ont probablement leur explication que dans d'autres mondes et dont le pressentiment est ce qui nous émeut le plus dans la vie et dans l'art. Et dans ces grands livres-là, il y a des parties qui n'ont eu le temps que d'être esquissées, et qui ne seront sans doute jamais finies, à cause de l'ampleur même du plan de l'architecte. Combien de grandes cathédrales restent inachevées![300]
>
> How happy would he be, I thought, the man who had the power to write such a book! What a task awaited him! To give some idea of this task one would have to borrow comparisons from the loftiest and the most varied arts; for this writer- who, moreover, to indicate the mass, the solidity of each one of his characters must find means to display that character's most opposite facets- would have to prepare his book with meticulous care, perpetually regrouping his forces like a general conducting an offensive, and he would have also to endure his book like

[299] Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*, ed. D. J. Enwright, trans. Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin (Modern Library, 1999), 302.

[300] Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Gallimard, 1957), 1682

> a form of fatigue, to accept it like a discipline, build it up like a church, follow it like a medical regime, vanquish it like an obstacle, win it like a friendship, cosset it like a little child, create it like a new world without neglecting those mysteries whose explanation is to be found probably only within worlds other than our own and the presentiment of which is the thing that moves us most deeply in life and in art. In long books of this kind there are parts which there has been time only to sketch, parts which, because of the very amplitude of the architect's plan, will no doubt never be completed. How many great cathedrals remain unfinished![301]

It is thus that the work appears to be a perfect circle—a revelation that justifies itself.[302] The narrator's whole goal—Proust's whole goal, his self-sacrifice and kenosis—has been to save these people from time. The goal of the book that justifies its writing (though not necessarily what ends being written) is therefore precisely what Catherine Hansen describes. As Jeremy Worthen further claims in a theological mode, the narrator's words outlining his initial goal "proclaim the triumphant good news that through the involuntary memory of sensory experience the self can be re-created and humanity 'freed from the order of time,' so that even death need not be a source of fear, as it loses its meaning of destruction."[303] Worthen complicates this vision of the narrator's vision, by claiming that, a few pages later, "the fear of death returns, for its threat overshadows the work of art that Marcel wants to create in order to reflect and hold the light shed in such moments of liberation from time."[304] But the issues with the narrator's revelation go far beyond his fear and foreknowledge of death. The near-constant dialectical

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[301] Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*, ed. D. J. Enwright, trans. Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin (Modern Library, 1999), 507-508.

[302] And yet the attentive reader will note that, even here, at the nucleus of insight that justifies his entire project, the narrator still mediates his revelation by way of reference to other artforms.

[303] Jeremy Worthen. "The Theology of Time Regained: Eucharist, Eschatology and Resurrection." *New Blackfriars* 80, no. 945 (1999): 512–24, 523.

[304] Ibid, 523.

slippages in the book's narration—the total lack of straightforward description, as well as the murky inversions of various characters' sexualities—mean that this *raison d'être* must be problematized; the narrator's revelation doesn't necessarily come down from a truthful god. Like the narrator of *The Sacred Fount*, Proust's protagonist has attempted to access a transcendental reality and found himself trapped in the dialectics of his own perception. And thus is it true that, as Descombes insists, the reader must ignore Proust's ideas about his own work.

The revelation of Hegel's endpoint—where Spirit is meant to end up after the whole of its development through history—might be similarly problematized, as its arbitrariness is a distortion of all that which precedes it. Furthermore, the very nature of the dialectical method, the constant shedding of contingency and elevation into greater necessity, should presuppose that it can have no endpoint. The entire work preceding the final section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* seems to disprove that final section. And what is the shape of consciousness elucidated in that final section? It is "absolute knowing," when "Spirit knows itself as Spirit," leading to the "recollection of the Spirits as they are in themselves and as they accomplish the organization of their realm."[305] Furthermore, "it is the Science of Knowing in the sphere of appearance: the two together, comprehended History, form alike the inwardizing and the Cavalry of absolute Spirit, the actuality, truth, and certainty of his throne, without which he would be lifeless and alone."[306] On the one hand, the contradiction between the "Science of Knowing" and how it might be worked out through the "sphere of appearance" seems to be an opposition that contains within it the whole of the dialectical method. On the other, Hegel is concerned with the Christian

[305] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford University Press, 1977), 493.

[306] Ibid, 493.

dialectical development of Spirit recognizing itself to be God—of mankind recognizing itself to contain God within itself, to *be* God itself, which is to say: mankind is God is Spirit playing with itself. Once mankind knows itself to be God, Hegel seems to presume, they will also know everything else. As in Proust's text, the ceaseless shards of mediation that precede this endpoint must make the reader very suspicious of such a presumptuous plagal cadence. Non-Christian Hegelians attempt to absolve Hegel of his metaphysical determinacy with statements like "Therefore, when Hegel teaches that thought is conterminous with the real, he is simply stating the doctrine that experience and reality are one,"[307] but such sophisms are willful course-corrections of Hegel's theological designs. As Descombes suggests about Proust, perhaps the reader must ignore Hegel's philosophy in favor of his philosophical method.[308]

Alternative Grist for Merleau-Ponty's Mill

Given the phenomenological history posited at the beginning of the dissertation (which, given Proust's strangely hybridized Hegelian iteration of phenomenology, doesn't need to be discarded), it might be possible to reapply the readings of Merleau-Ponty often used to analyze Proust to his contemporary, competitor, and dark double, Céline—himself a doctor eminently concerned with the body both in his non-writerly profession and in his autofiction. Only a few comparisons between Céline and Merleau-Ponty have been made. For example, Paul Keller

[307] G. W. Cunningham, "The Significance of the Hegelian Conception of Absolute Knowledge." *The Philosophical Review* 17, no. 6 (1908): 619–42, 642.

[308] In fact, this is mostly how Hegel has been taken up in 20th-century philosophy, as his notions of the end of history and Spirit knowing itself to be God as so easily "disprovable."

writes a study of Céline and Jean-Paul Sartre that makes some reference to Merleau-Ponty, claiming that:

> As for *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, let us say that its originality is derived from that property of mythical space which, following Merleau-Ponty, can be described as the original source of human experience. Or, as Céline himself aptly puts it: "C'est bien agréable de toucher ce moment où la matière devient la vie. On monte jusqu'à la plaine infinie qui s'ouvre devant les hommes."[309]

Kelley takes after Carbone in hemming Merleau-Ponty into a mode that is slightly alien to him, though one that is, again, a peripheral part of his philosophy. Beyond that, in a none-too-scholarly piece, Andrew Irving problematizes the seeming revelations Céline often presents, writing that "Bardamu [Céline's protagonist and stand-in] is aware that this all-too-brief moment does not reveal an eternal truth, but one that is subject to revision by successive modes of being. Merleau-Ponty similarly cautions us by insisting that the process of disillusion is always ongoing."[310] I make reference to this none-too-serious thesis simply because of how little Céline and Merleau-Ponty have been brought into conversation. However, a recent and groundbreaking piece of work in this respect is Luke Warde's DPhil dissertation, "Of (un)Sound Mind: Louis-Ferdinand Céline and the Phenomenology of Reading and Perception." In his dissertation, Warde rightfully claims that the sensual/perceptive harm and traces that World War I left behind in Céline by way of constant tinnitus, auditory hallucinations, and insomnia are a clear way to put Céline's work into conversation with Merleau-Ponty's. The publication of this dissertation will be an epochal event in the world of Céline studies.

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[309] Paul B. Kelley, "'Nausea and Space in Sartre's *La Nausée* and Celine's Voyage *Au Bout De La Nuit*,'" *LittéRealité* (1997): 53–64, 62.

[310] Andrew Irving, "Journey to the End of the Night: Disillusion and Derangement among the Senses," *Journeys* 9, no. 2 (pages 138–60), 156.

As suggested by Warde, the notion of "originary experiences" acting on the body, then forming a self-consciousness by way of duration is articulated more cogently in Céline's work than in Proust's. Take, for example, the beginning of Céline's recently discovered novel *Guerre*. At the text's opening, the narrator describes the incident by which he acquired his tinnitus and auditory hallucinations:

> C'est la première fois dans cette mélasse pleine d'obus qui passaient en sifflant que j'ai dormi, dans tout le bruit qu'on a voulu, sans tout à fait perdre conscience, c'est-à-dire dans l'horreur en somme. Sauf pendant les heures où on m'a opéré, j'ai plus jamais perdu tout à fait conscience. J'ai toujours dormi ainsi dans le bruit atroce depuis décembre 14. J'ai attrapé la guerre dans ma tête. Elle est enfermée dans ma tête.[311]
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> It was the first time that I'd slept in this treacle filled with shells whistling by—in all the noise that one could want—still without entirely losing consciousness, which was, to put it briefly: in horror. Except for the hours when they operated on me, I've never entirely lost consciousness since. Thus have I slept in atrocious noise since December '14. I caught war in my head. It's shut up in there.[312]

Is this articulation of having "caught war in his head" not a perfect and succinct description of the entire theory Carbone wishes to outline in his book *An Unprecedented Deformation*? Following his logic, the insomnia and tinnitus that would plague Céline for his whole life are a "corporealized eidos" of the forms that represent modernism as such. Céline's autofictional oeuvre—not precisely a cycle like Proust's—is littered with such references to his condition, these other examples usually rendered in Céline's typically musical style.[313] At the beginning of

[311] Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Guerre* (Gallimard, 2022): 25-26.

[312] My translation.

[313] Upon its release, *Guerre* disappointed many critics with its lack of polish, rhythm, and revision, so marked in his other works. Though the notion of Céline's "petite musique" uses a term that comes from the author's own work, it is best articulated in Vitoux's *La vie de Céline: Nouvelle édition revue et augmentée* (Gallimard, 2005).

Mort à crédit [*Death on Credit*] (1936),[314] Céline implies how the experience of war has led directly to his abject writing while recounting a conversation with a fellow doctor:

> Mon tourment à moi c'est le sommeil. Si j'avais bien dormi toujours j'aurais jamais écrit une ligne.
> « Tu pourrais, c'était l'opinion à Gustin, raconter des choses agréables de temps en temps. C'est pas toujours sale dans la vie. » Dans un sens c'est assez exact. Y a de la manie dans mon cas, de la partialité. La preuve c'est qu'à l'époque où je bourdonnais des deux oreilles et encore bien plus qu'à présent, que j'avais des fièvres toutes les heures, j'étais bien moins mélancolique… Je trafiquais de très beaux rêves… Madame Vitruve, ma secrétaire, elle m'en faisait aussi la remarque. Elle connaissait bien mes tourments.[315]
>
> My trouble is insomnia. If I had always slept properly, I'd never have written a line.
> "You could talk about something pleasant now and then." That was Gustin's opinion. "Life isn't always disgusting." In a way he's right. With me it's kind of a mania, a bias. The fact is that in the days when I had that buzzing in both ears, even worse than now, and attacks of fever all day long, I wasn't half so gloomy… I had lovely dreams… Madame Vitruve, my secretary, was talking about it only the other day. She knew how I tormented myself.[316]

Fascinatingly, the narrator claims that the fevers (also apparently a trauma—perhaps psychosomatic—inflicted by the war) elevate his mood, worsened tinnitus notwithstanding, and that this, in turn, has positively influenced his writing. In this self-description, Céline's narrator is utterly in thrall to his body in terms of how he experiences the world. And all of this because, to repeat the maxim by Merleau-Ponty I take to be most characteristic of his work, "[he is] an

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[314] The whole conception implied by the title of *Death on Credit* or, as it has sometimes been rendered, *Death on the Installment Plan*—that the bodies of the lower-middle-class merchants described in the text decay by way of the ways in which their bodies also (tautologically) experience the capitalist system they have been forced to participate in—is a perfect illustration of Merleau-Ponty's maxim that "I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical situation, but, on the contrary, by being this body and this situation, and though them, all the rest."

[315] Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Mort à crédit* (Gallimard, 1952): 15.

[316] Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Death on the Installment Plan* (New Directions, 2014): 19.

intersubjective field, not despite [his] body and historical situation, but, on the contrary, by being this body and this situation, and though them, all the rest."[317] Given also the phenomenological narrative propounded in this dissertation, the fact that Céline places the entire impetus for his having become a writer in his insomnia, the result of injuries sustained in that passage from *War*, supports the notion that, just as phenomenology is "a new philosophical method which would lend absolute certainty to a disintegrating civilization,"[318] so too is modernism in literature a reaction to World War I and modernity as such. In this passage, Céline directly identifies the war and his injuries as being the reason he has narrowed his subject matter down to a heinously grim view of himself and his own experiences. As José Luis Romanillos writes:

> As noted in the introduction, the geographies of literary modernisms often conceive of new narrative styles as the cultural expression of shifts in spatial experience, as textual manifestations or responses to Lefebvre's sense 'that around 1910 a certain space was shattered' [...] What Celine's *Journey*, and broader literary corpus, reveals is that this impossibility does not just refer to the nihilistic loss or abandonment of an overarching and universalist logic of representation, but also, and more profoundly, signifies the opening of a multiplicity of modes of representation and expression. To recall Ansell-Pearson's conceptualisation of nihilism, it corresponds to a creative disjuncture whereby our experience of the world cannot be accommodated by inherited interpretations, and instead provokes or demands another writing. It is for the reader to decide if this interpretation in turn amounts to a betrayal.[319]

For Céline, the narrator's body is what this fundamental shattering had acted upon; it is therefore time and duration that have turned the originary experience of shattering into his writing practice—presumably by way of the "involuntary memory" of his tinnitus, auditory

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[317] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception: An Introduction*, trans. Donald Landes (London: Routledge, 2011), 525.

[318] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 1996), 47.

[319] Romanillos, José Luis. "Nihilism and Modernity: Louis-Ferdinand Céline's 'Journey to the End of the Night.'" *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2015, pp. 128–39. 138.

hallucinations, and various other strange psychosomatic symptoms, as well as by way of the insomnia that won't let him sleep, thereby turning his art into something "other" than those authors who wrote before him. This, at least, is the "creation narrative" Céline suggests in his own books. He doesn't, however, disprove it by way of his method as Proust does.

It isn't just his own body that's the prism through which Céline's narrator sees the world; he also views the people around him as primarily existing within and through their own bodies, but never outside of them. At many points in all of Céline's books, he works as a doctor. *Mort à crédit*, for example, begins with a description of an old woman's death, which serves as a catalyst for reflections about his profession:

> Nous voici encore seuls. Tout cela est si lent, si lourd, si triste… Bientôt je serai vieux. Et ce sera enfin fini. Il est venu tant de monde dans ma chambre. Ils ont dit des choses. Ils ne m'ont pas dit grand-chose. Ils sont partis. Ils sont devenus vieux, misérables et lents chacun dans un coin du monde.
> Hier à huit heures Madame Bérenge, la concierge, est morte. Une grande tempête s'élève de la nuit. Tout en haut, où nous sommes, la maison tremble. C'était une douce et gentille fidèle amie. Demain on l'enterre rue des Saules. Elle était vraiment vieille, tout au bout de la vieillesse. Je lui ai dit dès le premier jour quand elle a toussé «Ne vous allongez pas surtout Restez assise dans votre lit! » Je me méfiais. Et puis voilà. Et puis tant pis.
> Je n'ai pas toujours pratiqué la médecine, cette merde. Je vais leur écrire qu'elle est morte Madame Bérenge à ceux qui m'ont connu, qui l'ont connue. Où sont-ils?[320]
>
> Here we are, alone again. It's all so slow, so heavy, so sad. . . I'll be old soon. Then at last it will be over. So many people have come into my room. They've talked. They haven't said much. They've gone away. They've grown old, wretched, sluggish, each in some corner of the world.
> Yesterday, at eight o'clock, Madame Bérenge, the concierge, died. A great storm blew up during the night. Way up here where we are, the whole house is shaking. Tomorrow they're going to bury her in the cemetery on the rue des Saules. She was really old, at the very end of old age. The first day she coughed I said to her: "Whatever you do, don't

[320] Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Mort à crédit* (Gallimard, 1952): 11.

> stretch out. Sit up in bed." I was worried. Well, now it's happened… anyway, it couldn't be helped…
> I haven't always been a doctor… crummy trade. I'll write the people who've known her, who've known me, and tell them that Madame Bérenge is dead. Where are they?[321]

Unlike the presumptuous Proust at the end of his cycle, Céline's narrator does not locate the purpose of his writing in death's encroachment. If anything, Céline's writing exists parallel to and outside of death's grasp; it is a record of death, but doesn't ever rage against it. For all of his spleen vented against other areas of life, Céline is remarkably sanguine about death, disease, and aging. He is comfortable in the abject quality of what Kristeva describes as the "objective frailty of the symbolic order."[322] For Céline, there is a kind of comfort in the fact that he can reduce the many illusions of life down to the abject. He is used to it, in other words. Scott M. Powers offers a cogent theory of the way in which Céline's books are all "diagnostic narratives." He writes that "In *Voyage* the antagonistic relationship established between body and disease provides a foundation for a critique of industrialization and urbanization, and begins to account for the ubiquity of criminality among the lower classes [...] The novel's vision [is] of the human body as the primary victim of modernization."[323] In my own article, I discuss how Céline shows the body to be the mechanism by which the city debauches and criminalizes his young protagonist.[324] Two examples I identify are of particular note: when Céline's protagonist is perpetually sexually

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[321] Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Death on the Installment Plan* (New Directions, 2014): 15.

[322] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 70.

[323] Scott M. Powers, "Evil and Medicine: Interpreting Céline's Diagnostic Narratives." *Dalhousie French Studies* 67 (2004): 63–74, 72-73.

[324] Max Lawton, "Forms of Realism in Dostoevsky and Céline," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, April 20, 2022.

abused as he and his father go out to visit clients who might buy their wares and when Céline's protagonist goes out to buy groceries for his family, but gets drunk instead, has a hallucination of a giant-phallused Rabelaisian monster, then comes home, is reprimanded, tries to kill his father with a typewriter, and defecates everywhere after this attempted murder. At every juncture, Céline demonstrates that the body is the catalyst for both mood and action. Tragically, this focus on biological determinism would also play a large role in his anti-Semitism before and during World War II. As Powers writes, "Céline at once resurrects the Jewish devil of medieval Christian thought and falls back on outdated theories of biological determinism. The description of the victimized and racially undetermined body of *Voyage* thus cedes to one that confuses evil with the 'Semitic' body."[325] In his later trilogy[326] about World War II and his own collaboration, Céline makes every effort to paint the Nazis and collaborators (along with almost everyone else) as incompetent nincompoops. As Michael André Bernstein writes, "As a result of Céline's sarcasm, most of the veterans of the Collaboration were incensed by the [trilogy], since it seemed to mock their 'martyrs' as a gang of venal, hysterical, and squabbling politicians. Writing in the June 20, 1957 number of *Rivarol*, for example, Pierre-Antoine Cousteau blasted Céline for his cruelty in laughing at the defeated and disgraced men of Sigmaringen."[327]

These "sarcastic" efforts arguably culminate in a scene from *D'un château l'autre* in which he gives a prostate exam to a Nazi colleague (also a doctor):

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[325] Scott M. Powers, "Evil and Medicine: Interpreting Céline's Diagnostic Narratives." *Dalhousie French Studies* 67 (2004): 63–74, 73.

[326] The trilogy includes *D'un château l'autre* [*Castle to Castle*] (1957), *Nord* [*North*] (1960), and *Rigadon* [*Rigadoon*] (1969), the last of which Céline completed a draft of the day before he died, but which he wasn't able to properly edit.

[327] Michael André Bernstein, *Bitter Carnival* (Princeton University Press, 1992): 128

Mais que lui Traub, là, se trouvait pas opérable du tout !... pas d'avis du tout !... qu'il avait même une sacrée trouille d'être opéré !... et qu'il me l'avouait ! qu'il me le hurlait !... positivement peur !... surtout dans les circonstances ! alors moi ? moi ?... qu'est-ce que j'en pensais ?
« La prostate, n'est-ce pas cher confrère, vous le savez aussi bien que moi est facilement congestionnée... on peut attendre... tout rentre dans l'ordre... les chirurgiens, évidemment, ont toujours envie d'opérer... quatre-vingts pour cent des hommes au-dessus de cinquante ans sont prostatiques... vous ne les opérez pas tous ! oh là ! de loin !... ils se pissent un peu dans les talons... alors ?... alors ?... quelle importance ! ils meurent parfaitement de leur belle mort !... ils sentent seulement un peu l'urine... la belle histoire ! vous Traub vous ferez attention, c'est tout ! vous vous surveillerez... pas d'alcool… pas de bière... pas d'épices... pas de coïts... et dans dix ans vous retournerez le voir votre spécialiste !... ce qu'il en pensera ? s'il a été opéré, lui ? »
Oh ! mes paroles réconfortantes lui faisaient un bien immédiat !... lui la figure à la serpe, bien boche, dure, me regardait comme affectueusement... positif !... le nectar de mes mots !...
« Vous voulez m'examiner, cher Collègue ?
— Mais certainement !... »
Je passe mon doigtier... la vaseline... il se déculotte... son beau pantalon gris à pli... il s'agenouille sur mon grabat... il n'enlève pas sa tunique, ni son ceinturon, ni sa dague... je lui fais son toucher... oui !... exact !... sa prostate est très élargie... même, il me semble un peu dure...
« Oh ! tout ça peut très bien attendre !... avec un régime très sévère!... votre prostate rentrera dans l'ordre !
— Très bien !... très bien mon cher collègue !... mais pour l'alimentation ?
— Des nouilles !... seulement des nouilles !... c'est tout ! »[328]

He, Traub, didn't consider himself operable at all! . . . not at all! . . . in fact he was scared shitless of being operated . . . and admitted it . . . yelled it in fact! . . . really afraid! . . . especially under the circumstances! so what about me? what did I think?
"The prostate, my dear colleague, you know as well as I, is subject to inflammation . . . we can wait . . . it will calm down . . . naturally surgeons always want to operate . . . eighty percent of men over fifty are prostatic . . . we don't operate them all! certainly not! . . . they piss on their heels now and then . . . what of it? what difference? they'll die a natural death! . . . they only smell of urine a little . . . is that anything to worry about? you'll be careful, Traub, that's all! you'll watch yourself . . . no liquor . . . no beer . . . no spices . . . no sexual intercourse . . . and in ten years you'll go back to see your specialist again . . . you'll come and tell me what he thinks . . . and whether he's been operated . . ."
My comforting words did him a world of good . . . with his hard, hatchet Boche face, he looked at me almost affectionately . . . absolutely! . . . the nectar of my words! . . .
"Would you examine me, my dear colleague?"

[328] Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *D'un château l'autre* (Folio, 1976): 270-271.

> "Why, certainly!"
> I slip on my rubber finger . . . smear it with vaseline . . . he takes his pants off . . . his gray pants with the fine crease . . . he kneels down on my cot . . . he doesn't remove his tunic or his sword belt or his dagger . . . I palpate . . . yes . . . it's a fact! . . . his prostate is considerably enlarged . . . in fact it seems rather hard . . .
> "Oh, all that can wait . . . with a very strict diet . . . your prostate will take care of itself . . ."
> "Excellent! . . . excellent, my dear colleague! . . . but my diet?"
> "Noodles! . . . just noodles! . . . nothing else!"[329]

As far as *mea culpas* go, this is fairly thin gruel, but it is an interesting way of conceptualizing Céline's political engagement; whomever is being medically diagnosed in his texts—whoever's body is up on the examination table—is on his proverbial *shit list*, even if Céline's merely putting them there for reasons of political expediency. In his early work, the body being examined is "victimized and racially undetermined," an *every-body*, but, later, the body becomes Jewish, Black, "Boche"[330]... The body is therefore the prism through which to understand, not only Céline's existentialism, but also his political commitments. In this context, the capaciousness of Céline's *disgusting* bodily affect might be analyzed by way of Winfried Menninghaus's *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*. He writes that:

> The "no" of disgust, therefore, leaves room for various dimensions—rang- ing from secret to overt—of affirmation. Not only does disgust, from Kant to Sartre, serve in numerous ways as a positive operator and signature of immediate cognition—cognition of the harmful (Kant), of the "eternal essence of things" (Nietzsche), of our existence in its pure facticity (Sartre). The disgusting in and of itself is also brought forward for a second-order acknowledgment in that it comes to represent the diverted "truth" of the human bestial nature and of the Dionysian (Nietzsche), or else of the polymorphous-perverse libido (Freud). Not a simple rejection, but the rejection of rejection, the overcoming of disgust

[329] Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Castle to Castle* (Dalkey Archive Press, 1997): 304.

[330] Meaning "Kraut", the French slur for Germans.

> and its integration into an economy of pleasure and knowledge form the core of thinking about disgust since Nietzsche.[331]

In Céline's case, the "no" of abject disgust gives way to the "yes" of an ethnocentric and fascistic iteration of "medicine." Indeed, "the overcoming of disgust and its integration into an economy of pleasure and knowledge," an integral part of Céline's fascistic *bodily* gaze onto the world, might also be analyzed by way of the bodily affect at work in Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*, but this is a subject for another project entirely. Menninghaus's book, along with her interpretation of Kristeva's category of the "abject" will be essential in this dissertation's final chapter—on the subject of "abject Geist."

As Céline's non-phenomenological political bias suggests, there are a great many issues with conceiving of Céline as a strict Merleau-Pontian. The most significant of these issues is the musicality of the prose, which never allows the reader to feel themselves anchored in the space of the text. In his book on Céline, Vitoux identifies two transpositions in Céline's fiction: the transposition of Louis Destouches's life into that of Louis-Ferdinand Céline and the transposition of ordinary popular French into balletic prose that is always moving, shifting, and dancing.[332] Vitoux describes this "petite musique" created by Céline as "la perfection d'une écriture ajourée comme de la dentelle—et un souffle visionnaire—c'est-à-dire la perfection d'une construction patiemment élaborée comme tous les grands délires ou les grands désordres."[333] Céline himself was obsessed with ballet and a significant portion of his anti-Semitic pamphlet *Bagatelles pour*

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[331] Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, trans. Howard Eiland and Joel Golb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 10.

[332] Frédéric Vitoux. *La vie de Céline: Nouvelle édition revue et augmentée* (Gallimard, 2005), 188.

[333] Ibid, 188. Translation: "that's to say the perfection of a piece of writing treated like a piece of lace—and a visionary breath—that's to say the perfection of a piece of work patiently worked on like all the biggest disorders and deliriums."

un massacre is devoted to his fury that, he suspects, Jews prevented his ballets from being staged.

As such, while certain elements of Céline's worldview might well be analyzed by way of Merleau-Ponty—especially notions of the body being the total interface for our perception of the world, if not our entire world—the evilly diagnostic and balletic "little music" that uproots the reader so thoroughly from any real space and into the slangy, non-normative flow of the narrator's speech can hardly be said to be that much better of a vessel for conceptions of a phenomenology of the body than Proust's cycle. In his brilliant book *Bitter Carnival*, Michael André Bernstein identifies Céline's narrator as entirely motivated by Nietzschean *ressentiment*—comparable in that respect to certain of Dostoevsky's character and Rameau's titular *Nephew*. Bernstein refers to Céline's narrator as an "Abject Hero" and claims that, in the context of Céline's narration, " Only the negative, the critical judgment has a chance to be true."[334] Again, the reader finds themself just as trapped in Céline's narrator's mind and diagnoses as they were in the mind of the narrator in *The Sacred Fount*; just because the contours of that imprisonment have shifted doesn't mean that any higher degree of freedom exists. The monomania of Céline's style and worldview was the justification for my terming his poetic a "monophony" in comparison to Bakhtin's theory of Dostoevsky's "polyphony." And just as Proust reads like a lapsed Merleau-Pontian who slips into a Hegelian mode, so too does Céline read like a hateful polemicist who makes use of a somewhat Merleau-Pontian vision of the body in order to make his diagnostic narratives seem more credible.

[334] Michael André Bernstein, *Bitter Carnival* (Princeton University Press, 1992): 129.

Much later: the true heirs to Merleau-Ponty

In fact, in order to discover writers who are more or less engaged in what critics claim Merleau-Ponty shows Proust to accomplish, the invested critic must travel east to Hungary and Russia and wait out a few decades of literary production before two perfect examples of this mode come into being: Lydia Ginzburg's *Записки блокадного человека* [*Notes from a Blockade Person*][335] (1984)and Péter Nádas's *Párhuzamos történetek* [*Parallel Stories*] (2005). Just as with Céline and Proust's work, Ginzburg's blockade diary is an autofictional account of her own experience during the three-year siege of Leningrad. Ginzburg's male autofictional alter-ego is "N," though in a draft of the novel, his name is "Otter," a riff on the French word for "auteur." Indeed, the book is not a straightforward record of Ginzburg's blockade experience, though she wrote it during the blockade. On the contrary, "Ginzburg performed complex transformations of personal experience within her generalized narratives (which were also based on observations of others), sometimes even reversing or idealizing it."[336] Emily Van Buskirk analyzes the way in which, unlike Proust and Céline, Ginzburg makes almost no use of the narrator's "I" both in her own diaries and in her narratives (or "povestvovaniya"):

> Ginzburg's usual mode in her notebooks, to a much greater extent than in her *povestvovaniia*, is to "write completely indirectly: about other people and things as I see them." The "I" is often the hidden observer, the analyst, still a kind of unifying presence. Meanwhile, when Ginzburg

[335] A title that seems to partially mimic or reference Dostoevsky's Underground Man (or "человек из подполья") and his *Notes from the Underground*. Dostoevsky's novella, like James's *The Sacred Fount*, occupies a totally interior world, in which, as Michael André Bernstein also writes, the mediations imposed upon the world by way of ressentiment end up entirely cutting the narrator off from it. Ginzburg's book, on the other hand, is about a body that encounters the world with no psychological mediation. Problematically, the English translation was simply published as *Blockade Diary*.

[336] Emily Van Buskirk, "Recovering the Past for the Future: Guilt, Memory, and Lidiia Ginzburg's Notes of a Blockade Person." *Slavic Review* 69, no. 2 (2010): 281–305, 302.

> writes of an autobiographical self, it is usually an observed self (or multiple selves) that is split off from the observing one and held at a distance.[337]

What Van Buskirk describes is a properly phenomenological method that doesn't get caught up in Kant's transcendental paradox of the perceiving self; Ginzburg seems relatively confident that she is able to observe (then describe) things in themselves. Perhaps she is successful precisely because she doesn't get caught up in the specific perception of a single individual, for "N." is intended to be a "fictional composite[; Ginzburg] wishes to create, not a specific individual, but a composite person whose experiences can expose the assault on individual personhood during the siege."[338]

Van Buskirk further draws on statements Ginzburg made in her notebooks as she composed (and recomposed) this text in order to understand Ginzburg's own theory of the body/individual living through history:

> Новому (пока еще преимущественно негативному) восприятию человека соответствует новый метод его рассмотрения. Психологический роман 19 века возник на великих иллюзиях индивидуализма. Сейчас рассмотрение человека как замкнутой самодовлеющей души имеет бесплодный, эпигонский характер. Современное понимание—не человек, а ситуация. Пересечение биологических и социальных координат, из которого рождается поведение данного человека, его функционирование. Человек как функция этого пересечения. Этот унылый аналитический метод не мыслится мне действительным на все времена, но лишь наиболее адекватным существующей в данный момент негативной концепции человека.
> [The new method of examination corresponds to the new (at this point still predominantly negative) concept of a person. The psychological novel of the nineteenth century arose on the great illusions of individualism. Now the examination of a person as a closed, self-sufficient soul has a sterile, imitative quality. The contemporary

[337] Ibid, 304.

[338] Andrew Kahn et al., *A History of Russian Literature* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 723.

> understanding is this: not a person, but a situation. The intersection of biological and social coordinates, from which the behavior of a given person is born, the way this person functions. A person as a function of this intersection. This dismal analytical method does not occur to me as valid for all times, but as the most adequate for the negative concept of a person that exists at the given moment.][339]

This analysis of *the human as a situation* bears immediate comparison to Heidegger's unwillingness to draw any distinction between Dasein and world, as well as Merleau-Ponty's gambit that humans can only experience their bodies through the world, a process by which the body then becomes the whole world. As Merleau Ponty-writes, "I am thrown into a nature, and that nature appears not only as outside me, in objects devoid of history, but it is also discernible at the center of subjectivity[340]."[341] Later on in that same chapter, he adds:

> Insofar as I have sensory functions, a visual, auditory and tactile field, I am already in communication with others taken as similar psycho-physical subjects. No sooner has my gaze fallen upon a living body in process of acting than the objects surrounding it immediately other selves and the human world take on a fresh layer of significance: they are no longer simply what I myself could make of them, they are what this other pattern of behavior is about to make of them.[342]

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[339] Emily Van Buskirk, "Recovering the Past for the Future: Guilt, Memory, and Lidiia Ginzburg's Notes of a Blockade Person." *Slavic Review* 69, no. 2 (2010): 281–305, 304-305. The translation in brackets is Van Buskirk's.

[340] At the risk of lingering on this point too obsessively, it is worth noting the degree to which both time and subjectivity represent intellectual tangles that phenomenologists never quite know what to do with. Once they start writing, they immediately become implicated in the same metaphysics they were determined to "destroy" (and isn't that the fundamental irony of Carbone's book: that he uses a metaphysical re-theorization of phenomenology to align himself with Heidegger's project of destroying western metaphysics so as to return to a more "authentic' mode of Being?). Part Three of *Phenomenology of Perception* essentially detonates the whole of the project that has preceded it with its metaphysical mumbo-jumbo.

[341] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception: An Introduction*, trans. Donald Landes (London: Routledge, 2011), 428.

[342] Ibid, 436-437.

This chapter ("Others and the Human World") is where the wheels begin to come off of Merleau-Ponty's strictly phenomenological vision of the body in the world and where the theory of time made such ample use of by Carbone and others first rears its head, but, on the face of it, what I quote is a simple description that seems to align well with Ginzburg's own theorization of the "situation" (and doesn't *in situ* mean the same thing, essentially, as Dasein?). Ginzburg never allows subjectivity to enter into her text and undo the neatly anti-psychological vision she lays out. Even so, Van Buskirk claims that Ginzburg's narrator has a sublimated urge to become psychologized:

> Her total isolation, her hidden identity as a writer, and the concealed nature of her drama [...] were part of what made possible the successful partitioning and fictionalization of personal experience, as well as the creation of a character who was condemned to isolation and failure. It was this person's struggle, and not right, to exist as a single connected individual.[343]

Just as Walter Benjamin wrote that "behind every fascism, there is a failed revolution," Van Buskirk seems to suggest that behind every phenomenological narrator stands a frustrated Hegelian narrator.

It would be difficult to detect that urge behind the fleshy veil of Péter Nádas's *Parallel Stories*, about which strikingly little criticism has been written.[344] The book has no plot; though the first chapter tells of a mysterious murder in the Berlin Tiergarten, this thread of the novel is never resolved. And though a single family seems to exist at the center of the "story," its members are perpetually out-of-focus and the narrative often haphazardly shifts away from them.

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[343] Emily Van Buskirk, "Recovering the Past for the Future: Guilt, Memory, and Lidiia Ginzburg's Notes of a Blockade Person." *Slavic Review* 69, no. 2 (2010): 281–305, 305.

[344] At least in any language I can access.

As Nádas himself puzzlingly said in an interview with Joshua Cohen, "During the course of writing [...] I suddenly discovered that I, with the structure of my novel, was following the same laws, the same design, so to speak, that people I didn't know, very far away from me, were using to create computers and later the Internet. It was a powerful confirmation [...] That's what people mean by the Zeitgeist."[345] Perhaps Nádas is referring to the fragmented quality of his own work, as Ivan Sanders affirms that "Each new chapter [in *Parallel Stories*] poses a challenge: we must reorient ourselves, get used to a new set of characters, new locales. Every one of the thirty-nine chapters can in fact be considered a self-contained piece of fiction."[346] In an interview with *Bomb Magazine*, Nádas explains the genesis of *Parallel Stories* as engaging with a highly scientific vision of biological determinism:

> The question is not what connects people who know each other, but rather, what is the nature of the connections between those people who don't? This is the central question for brain researchers studying neurological phenomena, and also for philosophers following these studies. If not God, then who directs neurological processes or human decisions? Who or what, and through what structure? Or in plain English: Is our will free? If in reaching for my cup of coffee I'm not motivated by my desire to drink coffee, but it is more correct to say that my brain has made a reach-out-for-cup neurological decision, then the long-established notions regarding the freedom of the will collapse together with the traditional concept of person and all the related political conceptions. Then it no longer makes sense to distinguish between virtue and vice, between reward and punishment; then all the characteristics formerly attributed to individuals fall away as mere poetic exaggerations, or empty appearances; then societies can no longer be expected to be governed by the rules of common sense.[347]

[345] Joshua Cohen, "The Man in the High Castle," *New York Magazine*, August 19, 2011.

[346] Ivan Sanders. *World Literature Today*, vol. 86, no. 4, 2012, pp. 60–62. 61.

[347] Davis Kovacs, and Péter Nádas, "Péter Nádas." *BOMB*, no. 100, 2007, 40–45. 44.

To put it briefly, then, Nádas shows the human to be that same "situation" described by Ginzburg as being at play in her work. He also reproduces the same paradigm outlined by Merleau-Ponty in the statements I make use of from the chapter entitled "Others and the Human World"—those about being "thrown into nature" and "sensory functions" being inherently related to the "sensory functions" of others.

Furthermore, thinking back to Nádas's several-hundred-page sex scene that I reference in my introduction, there is no question that duration plays a substantial role in Nádas's aesthetics. Take, for instance, this very brief (though it may not seem so) excerpt from that very scene:

> She didn't know who he was.
> She still didn't know.
> Like the mouth of her womb, the little room grew gigantic from this loud desire, as if to devour the entire apartment with all its odds and ends.
> Rhythmically, they breathed into each other's mouth.
> The man concentrated on her cautious movements, guided by the rhythms of two mouths breathing into each other and not by sensations and certainly not by her feelings. He had an inner countenance with which he saw her. He saw that the relatively long vagina's angle of inflection and that of his cock, shortened and thickened by excitement, were in virtual opposition. The vagina arced upward while the cock, as if pulled downward by the mass and weight of its blood-filled head, bowed willfully.
> They were wedged into each other sternly and stubbornly. With his every thrust forward and every retreat, they mutually increased the tension in each other.
> He was managing things economically. Such a tiny movement mustn't make a noise that could be heard through the wall. Another reason to be on the alert. As if he were controlling two worlds at once. And they were not equally elastic. He knew where he was, and what he had to do if he did not want to injure the real world. He saw how far he had penetrated, the road behind him and the stretch that was still ahead. He could not give in to the woman, who, if he did, would writhe under him in spasmodically interrupted, hysterical rhythms that would not match his. She would pretend dutifully to demonstrate how good it was for her, and with that it's impossible to get anywhere.
> Their hips collided several times, almost unpleasantly. Actually, it was the first thing he had noticed at the swimming pool, the woman's hips. How her torso became elongated when she came out of the pool and drops of water rolled down, sticking to her cold brown skin, around the

> hip bone. Now the pain claimed his attention. Although he could see with his eyes, he was seeing better with his skin and cock; his body no longer had a separate bulk, independent parts, limbs of its own; and with their parts and limbs thus shared, they could not separate and their mutual sensations could not become independent.
> White was the strongest.
> He should have pulled his cock out of her at least for a moment, to see it, to delight in it; he missed his sense of ownership. Pain is darkness. The white pillowcase illumined all his senses, its sunken wrinkles and shadows almost irritatingly bright around the expanding and contracting face. Lips opening to the sound of breathing; flaring, finely opening and closing nostrils; a barely audible, painful whistling in his ear.
> And she is still doing it.
> She's always doing it, he thought, exasperated. As if she'd been trying to convince him. Or herself. And the enlightening decision was right at hand. I won't let her. He no longer felt skin, only the heat filtering through it, and he didn't feel the flesh under the skin either. This was the only remaining task, which was somehow familiar from somewhere. He entered into darkness, into the pervasive odor of the cunt, with its sloshing sounds at every little movement. He must face the task, or at least find appropriate means to deal with it, if he had failed until now. To outwit the woman.[348]

The duration of such a scene makes it impossible to be titillated or aroused by it; it cannot be said to have a pornographic function. But, unlike Proust, whose poetic is similarly long-winded, Nádas never loses sight of the objects and bodies he *sights* in the text. And the characters' thoughts that the reader is given access to are never complex or referential; if anything, they're irritatingly banal. In her analysis of Ginzburg's text, Van Buskirk focuses on the transpositions Ginzburg applies to her own life as it becomes text and the differences between *Otter's Day* and *Notes from a Blockade Person* as the final work of art (the latter) came into being. By doing so, she loses sight of the finished product's simplicity. As more criticism of Nádas's masterpiece is written, I suspect much of it will deal with the linkages between the novels' disparate sections, attempting to make the fragments into a unified whole. This will be a fundamental error. Nádas's message in presenting all of this abject duration—a phenomenology of longueurs that deals

[348] Péter Nádas, *Parallel Stories*, trans. Imre Goldstein (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011): 258-259.

primarily in a bodily state of exception—is to show the "time" of history as being always already empty, as not having the potential to be kenotically emptied, as Spirit does to itself at the end of history in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In Nádas's novel, no originary experience is sedimented down, then woven by time into an individual subjectivity. No. Bodies simply exist alongside history. For a long time. Then they eventually stop doing anything at all and rot, as is described in Nádas's description of his own near-death experience, *Own Death*. There is no possible transcendence to be found in Náda's work—especially not by way of subjectivity. As such, while the clock's ticking-down toward death is productive in Proust from the perspective of the narrator's constantly shifting and mediated meditations—Wagnerian in the way they circle back in on themselves as leitmotifs—duration in Ginzburg and Nádas is a question of pure phenomenological realism.

Denying repetition: No Ocean for all the drops

In *Different and Repetition*, Deleuze writes that:

> Opening is an essential feature of univocity. The nomadic distributions or crowned anarchies in the univocal stand opposed to the sedentary distribution of analogy. Only there does the cry resound: 'Everything is equal!' and 'Everything returns!' However, this 'Everything is equal!' and 'Everything returns!' can be said only at the point in which the extremity of difference is reached. A single and same voice for the whole thousand-voiced multiple, a single and same Ocean for all the drops, a single clamor of Being for all beings: on the condition that each being, each drop, and each voice has reached the state of excess – in other words, the difference which displaces and disguises them and, in turning upon the mobile cusp, causes them to return.[349]

[349] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (Columbia University Press, 1994): 304.

In this romantic attempt to make difference itself—perhaps a stand-in for dialectics, as *Difference and Repetition* is something of a polemic with Hegel—climax in a Return that seems to come down from Nietzsche, but is distinctly Hegelian due its visionary, kenotic quality, Deleuze echoes Proust's own view of what the dialectics of his work were supposed to culminate in. Andrew M. Jampol-Petzinger also describes the paradigm of *Difference and Repetition* as a Nietzschean one of self-overcoming and Eternal Return that "[contains the] notion of repetition as an 'approximation' of the world of becoming to eternity through an affirmation of change."[350] The fundament of Deleuze's vision is very similar to Hegel's: he wants paradox to resolve in perfection-–in eternity. Unlike Hegel, however, Deleuze doesn't deny the paradox at the heart of his vision. But *not* denying the paradox doesn't change the fact that *Difference and Repetition* is a romantic text—not quite as Germanic as Hegel in its quest for perfection, but not too far off either. Perhaps the wary reader might come to the conclusion that this dubiously transcendental conclusion has its origin in Proust's own *eschatology of the madeleine*,[351] as Deleuze identifies Proust as a profound influence on his own composition of *Difference and Repetition*. Furthermore, Deleuze is not capable of recognizing the Hegelian tendency at play in Proust's schema, as he writes that "The Proustian formula 'a little time in its pure state' refers first to the pure past, the in-itself of the past or the erotic synthesis of time, but more profoundly to the pure and empty form of time, the ultimate synthesis, that of the death instinct which leads to the eternity of the return in time."[352] In fact, both Proust's "death instinct [leading] to the eternity of

[350] Andrew M. Jampol-Petzinger, "Faith and Repetition in Kierkegaard and Deleuze," in *Deleuze, Kierkegaard and the Ethics of Selfhood* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 64.

[351] My own phrase.

[352] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (Columbia University Press, 1994): 157.

the return in time" and Deleuze's "Ocean for all the drops"/"single clamor of Being" are synthetic visions that are built upon mediated repetitions, though they both attempt to deny this. And this denial leads to the destruction, the keeling-over, of both authors' edifices: time's form cannot be said to be emptied out in Deleuze and Proust fails to preserve the characters at that final salon *as they once were*.

What, though, is the purpose of bringing up this artificial conclusion to Deleuze's book at this point in the conclusion of my line of argumentation? It is because all of the works treated in this chapter deal with the numbing repetitions imposed on subjectivity by the routines of the body. Only Nádas and Ginzburg, however, depict that repetition in a way that is *not* romantic in the Deleuzian sense. To wit, Proust, an eschatological memoirist, believes that he can bring repetition to the orgasm of eternity, whereas Céline attempts to bring evil diagnostic repetition to the orgasm of pure hate.[353] In its own way, hatred is a response to the myriad repetitions of the human condition just as romantic as Proust's narrator's diaphanous longing for eternal stasis. Neither Céline's pamphleteering nor Proust's referential mediations can be properly termed "phenomenological." And, as those impulses are constantly at play in their greater bodies of work, they do a great deal to undermine their narrators' seeing eyes. It is also difficult to say whether Proust's self-articulated philosophy of memorializing the time lived out by all of his "characters"—a philosophy taken up by buffoons like Alain de Botton in books of popular pseudo-science—would have ended up being phenomenological if he hadn't gotten so utterly lost in mediations as he went along. How much more radical, then, are Nádas and Ginzburg's horrifically repetitive descriptions or sex, of eating and not-eating and wanting to eat, of dying and not-dying and wanting-to-die and not-wanting-to-die, than Deleuze's own theory of

[353] See Bettina Knapp's *Celine: Man of Hate* (University of Alabama Press, 1974).

repetition, itself an anachronistic anti-Hegelian Hegelianism? Nádas and Ginzburg are competent phenomenologists, their projects completely in line with Merleau-Ponty in the notion that "As a system of motor or perceptual powers, our body is not an object for an 'I think', it is a grouping of lived-through meanings which moves towards its equilibrium."[354] In that vein, the only way in which Nádas can be said to succeed more splendidly than Ginzburg is in terms of duration, those longueurs also at work in Proust's cycle: the length of Nádas's text is more effective at showing the "lived-throughness" of bodily experience than Ginzburg's.

Though the phenomenological narrative I suggest is non-chronological, the twin failures of Proust and Céline to actually see or depict their own lives, even as they reduce their subject matter down to such a narrow, *selfish* circumference, might be said to influence the next chapter's move outwards from the body and the self; perhaps, as the phenomenological authors who follow in their footsteps suggest, the perceiving subjectivity shall be more accurate in burrowing down to the things themselves if the things to be burrowed down to exist *outside* of the self—if they are those things that constitute *the whole of worldhood*.. Might these writers then be more *successfully perceptive* than James's narrator in showing the world *an sich*? Will they actually manage to write what they see without any mediations—without even the mediation that is the necessity of understanding what they are seeing—interposing themselves between perception and world? The dialectical failure of Proust and Céline to depict the phenomenology of their own lives forces the Geist of my dissertation to make a further move outwards—into THE WORLD.

[354] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception: An Introduction*, trans. Donald Landes (London: Routledge, 2011), 177.

CHAPTER THREE

AN EXCESSIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL AFFECT:

Symphonies of Worldhood and Unreality

In Jameson's discussion of Zola's affective method in his 2015 book *The Antinomies of Realism*, he aptly describes many of the wildly detailed, overlong descriptions in the French novelist's texts as "sense data" that eventually becomes "semi-autonomous" from the precise machinations of the plot. Jameson's analysis of Zola occurs in the context of this rather excessive description of a table of cheese from *The Belly of Paris*:

> All around them the cheeses were stinking. On the two shelves at the back of the stall were huge blocks of butter: Brittany butter overflowing its baskets; Normandy butter wrapped in cloth, looking like models of bellies onto which a sculptor had thrown some wet rags; ocher blocks, already cut into and looking like high rocks full of valleys and crevices. Under the display counter of red marble veined with grey, baskets of eggs shone like white chalk; while on layers of straw in boxes were *bondons* placed end to end, and *gournays* arranged like medals, forming darker patches rimed with green. But for the most part the cheeses stood in piles on the table. There, next to the one-pound packs of butter, a gigantic *cantal* was spread on leaves of white beet, as though split by blows from an axe; then came a golden Cheshire cheese, a gruyère like a wheel fallen from some barbarian chariot, some Dutch cheeses suggesting decapitated heads smeared in dried blood and as hard as skulls—which has earned them the name of "death's heads." A parmesan added its aromatic tang to the thick, dull smell of the others. Three bries, on round boards, looked like melancholy moons. Two of them, very dry, were at the full; the third, in its second quarter, was melting away in a white cream, which had spread into a pool and flowed over the thin boards that had been put there in an attempt to hold it in check. Some *port-saluts*, shaped like ancient discuses, bore the printed names of their makers. A *romantour* in silver paper suggested a bar of nougat or some sweet cheese which had strayed into this realm of bitter fermentations. The *roqueforts*, too, under their glass covers, had a princely air, their fat faces veined in blue and yellow, like the victims of some shameful disease common to rich people who have eaten too many truffles; while

> on a dish next to them stood the *fromages de chèvre*, about the size of a child's fist, hard and grey like the pebbles which the rams send rolling down stony paths as they lead their flock. Then came the strong-smelling cheeses: the *mont-d'ors*, pale yellow, with a mild sugary smell; the *troyes*, very thick and bruised at the edges, much stronger, smelling like a damp cellar; the *camemberts*, suggesting high game; the *neufchâtels*, the *limbourgs*, the *marolles*, the *pont-l'évêques*, each adding its own shrill note in a phrase that was harsh to the point of nausea; the *livarots*, tinted red, as irritating to the throat as sulphur fumes; and finally, stronger than all the others, the *olivets*, wrapped in walnut leaves, like the carcasses of animals which peasants cover with branches as they lie rotting in the hedgerow under the blazing sun. The warm afternoon had softened the cheeses; the mould on the rinds was melting and glazing over with the rich colours of red copper verdigris, like wounds that have badly healed; under the oak leaves, a breeze lifted the skin of the *olivets*, which seemed to move up and down with the slow deep breathing of a man asleep. A *livarot* was swarming with life; and behind the scales a *géromé* flavoured with aniseed gave off such a pestilential smell that all around it flies had dropped dead on the marble slab.[355]

Comparing the methodology at play here to Balzac's much more "artificial" technique, Jameson writes that "[this] is *ekphrasis*, which demands planning something like a camera movement through the object world, so that attention to each item is motivated, as in early film."[356] The first thing to note here is that the "object world" briefly referred to might, intentionally or otherwise, be a neat phenomenological alternative to the "life world" laid out in Husserl's phenomenology. Given his own firm grounding in Marxist materialism, Jameson necessarily identifies his "object world" as having its origin in the world created by the means of production.[357] But his vision of an object world might become richer and more evocative in its ramifications for the

[355] Émile Zola, *The Belly of Paris*, trans. Brian Nelson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 210–211.

[356] Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2015), 51.

[357] As when Jameson claims that the postmodern novel is fundamentally influenced by the fact that "aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to aeroplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation." See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 4–5.

contemporary psyche if we refuse to make the same explicitly political and materialistic connection. Jameson's discussion of objects hinges on his comparison of Balzac and Zola. Balzac, he claims, takes his time with the objects in his texts, writing until he is finished with them and not the other way around. Zola, on the other hand, seems to be more in thrall to the objects than he is interested in neatly juggling them. However, Jameson further claims, this is only an "affect" to be made use of up to a certain point: "that obvious phenomenological reality will have first had to be made strange, to be differentiated (autonomization means that as well), somehow separated out from the existence we take for granted, only in order then to be added back in as a specific and ideologized technique," he writes.[358] Here and elsewhere, Jameson is clear that the merely "semi-autonomous" sense data of these passages in Zola do not represent an end unto themselves. Zola gives himself over to the objects more than Balzac does because he thinks it will serve the edifice he is constructing. These descriptions are not, he writes, "some empirical common-sense datum on the order of the eyes of bodily daily life."[359]

What work, then, does this long description of cheeses accomplish if it is not an end unto itself? "This semi-autonomous 'symphony' will now begin to intervene in the toxic gossip of the old women and as it were orchestrate their machinations at the same time that it exasperates them, in a new and heightened cacophonous counterpoint," Jameson clarifies.[360] Even a description as maniacally prolix as this is necessary in Zola's eyes as a function of its role in the

[358] Ibid, 51.

[359] Ibid, 51.

[360] Ibid, 63.

plot. Unlike in, say, Huysmans's decadently endless jewelry-box texts,[361] Jameson believes that Zola has minutely considered the duration of these descriptions and laid them out due to particular narrative or ideological necessities. Again, Jameson being a materialist Marxist, it is unsurprising how enamored he also is by another such description of a new department store in *Au Bonheur des Dames*. Nor is it surprising that he finds the description not to be so much narratively as *politically* necessary. And, to be fair, Zola himself was a dedicated leftist. Even so, in both descriptions, Zola willfully puts himself in thrall to the objects he describes, not taking his time with them, as Balzac apparently would, but letting them take the lead. When Jameson finally shifts away from his typically materialist modes of analysis to attempt to account for something other than historical reality in such passages, his prose is both alluring and unclear in equal measure:

> The multiplicity comes before us not as things or visible objects but rather as names, it is the alien guts and insides of the words themselves that are overwhelmingly juxtaposed and arrayed against us in such catalogues, which are very far from expressing their original Whitmanian gusto. [...] Yet names are not enough, and now the piles and well-nigh infinite variety of commodities find their way into the other senses at the same time that they barrow their distinct temporalities, and along with smell, a sonorous dimension appears which reorganizes the trajectory of the eye into the temporality of something which is neither noise nor music, neither the deafening sound-pollution of the crowd all around us, nor the fragile path of an instrument pursuing its unfamiliar course towards an unknown note which can never be the last word.[362]

As is apparent here, Jameson doesn't seem to know what to do with the hieroglyphic opacity of these lists, but his attempt to come to terms with it does (unintentionally, to be sure) call to mind

[361] See Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. Nicholas White (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[362] Ibid, 61-62.

Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art" in, paradoxically, how completely opposite it is to Heidegger's point of view. Does this last passage from Jameson not entirely contradict Heidegger's claim that, "Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, *is* in truth. This being emerges into the unconcealment of its Being"?[363] What could be more opposed to the "unconcealment of being" than "the alien guts and insides of the words themselves" within a catalog? For Jameson, then, the clarity of the "unconcealment of being" is something akin to the structure of plot, as, later in *The Antinomies of Realism*, he writes that "the very multiplication of these sensory onslaughts raises the question of their succession in time, where the gradual autonomization of the various affects slowly begins to release them from their relationship to plot as such and suggest whole new forms of temporal organization."[364] The uncomfortable quality of their "alien guts" is intrinsically related to the way they attempt to "semi-autonomously" break free from the bonds of narrative—but only up to a certain point. Like world powers with nuclear weapons, the 19th-century realists only play with over-the-top affect when it is deemed to be *absolutely necessary*.

However, there might also be a strain of Heidegerrian thought that Jameson is operating in accordance with, rather than against. Though he can't quite put his finger on what he means to say in the overly poetic passage quoted above, Jameson seems to imply that the long lists of objects threaten to rupture not just the neat motion of these more-or-less realist narratives, but to also puncture the skin of worldhood that Zola works so hard to create and immerse the reader inside of. In the relatively straightforward first half of *Being and Time*, Heidegger's attempts to

[363] Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), 161.

[364] Ibid, 65.

trace out Dasein's interactions with the objects in its world are centered around the networks of meaning attached to objects that are either "ready-to-hand" or "present-at-hand." Objects that possess the former quality are tools, whereas objects that possess the latter are simply *there*. These objects are entirely dependent on their position within the totality of meaning that is the World:

> Being-in is not a 'property' which Dasein sometimes has and sometimes does not have, and *without* which it could *be* just as well as it could be with it. It is not the case that man 'is' and then has, by way of an extra, a relationship-of-Being towards the 'world'—a world with which he provides himself occasionally. Dasein is never 'proximally' an entity which is, so to speak, free from Being-in, but which sometimes has the inclination to take up a 'relationship' towards the world. Taking up relationships towards the world is possible only *because* Dasein, as Being-in-the-world, is as it is. This state of Being does not arise just because some entity is present-at-hand outside of Dasein and meets up with it. Such an entity can 'meet up with' Dasein only in so far as it can, of its own accord, show itself within a *world*.[365]

Dasein, in other words, is that which is *there*: in the world. And there is no hope of severing Dasein from the World, nor of understanding the objects within the World outside of the totality of meaning presented by the network that *is* the whole.

Heidegger further describes how the closest Dasein comes to understanding what an object might be outside of what its use is within the whole is when something that is "ready-to-hand" for work or some other need malfunctions:

> [The] presence-at-hand of something that cannot be used is still not devoid of all readiness-to-hand whatsoever; equipment which is present-at-hand *in this way* is still not just a Thing which occurs somewhere. The damage to the equipment is still not a mere alteration of a Thing—not a change of properties which just occurs in something present-at-hand.[366]

[365] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 84.

[366] Ibid, 103.

Heidegger paints Dasein as a creature of total habit used to moving around in a space in which it is accustomed to everything being *a certain way*. When it ceases to be *that way*, an uncanny feeling comes over Dasein. Heidegger continues that "In our concernful dealings, however, we not only come up against unusable things *within* what is ready-to-hand already: we also find things which are missing—which not only are not 'handy' ['handlich'] but are not 'to hand' ["zur Hand"] at all."[367] When Dasein's "concernful" dealings with the world are interrupted, it must face the "alien guts" (as Jameson would put it) of that which actually *is* outside of a network of use and meaning. To use a Heideggerian formulation, it must confront the *thingness* of the thing without reference to its *handiness*: "Anything which is un-ready-to-hand in this way is disturbing to us, and enables us to see the obstinacy of that with which we must concern ourselves in the first instance before we do anything else."[368] Indeed, as Herman Philipse affirms in his analysis of Heidegger, "the primordial [which, for Heidegger, means most basic and essential] way in which things manifest themselves to us is as being *Zuhanden* (ready-to-hand) and not at all as things that are *Vorhanden* (simply exist and occur)."[369] Following the logic of this statement, to make the things in the world appear to "simply exist and occur" through art must also be a way of disturbing, or unsettling, everyday human perception. This logic also suggests that the disturbing quality of broken equipment is at play in overflowing enumerations of objects to be found in the world and that this excess creates a similar conundrum for the observing Dasein. In

[367] Ibid, 103.

[368] Ibid, 103.

[369] Herman Philipse, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Being: A Critical Interpretation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 29.

dissenting with Jameson's focus on the means of production—with the notion that this excess is primarily a function of the development of consumer capitalism—would it not be *handy* to center the argument of this chapter more around the alienation caused by excess within the bounds of Heidegger's vision of Worldhood? An appeal to a Heideggerian sense of brokenness or a rupture of conditioned routine would also help to explain why Jameson claims that the lists cannot possibly be "some empirical common-sense datum on the order of the eyes of bodily daily life."

Peter Sloterdijk, himself something of an unorthodox Heideggerian, presents a thesis akin to this notion in his book *Foams*, the third volume of his *Spheres Trilogy*, on the subject of "phenomenology of community and its spatial peripheries." The trilogy traces out issues of meaning and worldhood through the whole history of human civilization, moving from the "bubbles" created around close-knit communities and families, to the "globes" of successful nations that present a totalizing conception of life in which their citizens could comfortably live, to the "foams" of contemporary societies, which are bereft of any single transcendental system of values to be shared by their inhabitants with no single "immune system" binding them together, as Sloterdijk describes it. He succinctly writes that:

> In foam worlds, the individual bubbles are not absorbed into a single, integrative hyper-orb, as in the metaphysical conception of the world, but rather drawn together to form irregular hills [...] What is currently being confusedly proclaimed in all the media as the globalization of the world is, in morphological terms, the universalized war of foams.[370]

As is hinted at by the mournful undertone that seems to sound in the wake of the phrase "metaphysical conception of the world" (something we no longer have, the trilogy suggests), Sloterdijk's project is profoundly conservative. This is none too surprising. In the past, Sloterdijk

[370] Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Semiotext(e), 2011), 71.

has gotten into hot water because of his skepticism as regards the project of welcoming refugees into Europe, as well as for his essay "Rules for the Human Zoo," which reads dangerously like a defense of state-controlled eugenics. And *Foams* does contain a kind of lamentful longing for the "globes" of the early political organizations. Even the central metaphor encapsulates a narrative of something round, perfect, and able to be made use of—the globe—giving way to something useless and uninhabitable—the foam. "One can define conservatism as the political form of melancholy [...] Fluctuating between equanimity and disgust, the conservative watches the activities of those moved by progressive feelings and waits for entropy to do its work," he writes at one point and, throughout the trilogy, some part of Sloterdijk's attention is undoubtedly devoted to capturing and criticizing those moments of entropy.[371]

But, perhaps aware of his own reputation as a reactionary and eager to dispel some portion of it, Sloterdijk also attempts to imagine what might be the "bright side" of such a foamy world:

> The lively thought-image of foam [...] helps us to enter the element of a manifold thought undeterred by the nihilistic pathos that involuntarily accompanied a reflection disappointed by the monological metaphysics during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries [...] 'God is dead' is affirmed as the good news of the present day. One could reformulate it thus: 'So the One Orb has imploded—now the foams are alive.' [...] this is precisely *not* a reason to abandon everything that was considered great, inspiring and valuable. Claiming that the harmful god of consensus has died means declaring which energies are required to resume work: it can only be those that were bound by metaphysical hyperbole. Once a great exaggeration becomes obsolete, swarms of more discrete upsurges arise.[372]

[371] Peter Sloterdijk, *Foams*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Semiotext(e), 2014), 627–28.

[372] Ibid, 25.

As such, the trilogy is finally ambivalent about what all this excess of meaning and lack of coherence might signify for the "human zoo." In any case, it is my claim that the *foaminess* of our present condition as described by Sloterdijk is given early voice to in the epic descriptions of objects to be found in Zola. And if, as I suggest, this excess is a kind of brokenness and "un-readiness-to-hand" that forces Dasein to confront something "alien" and "obstinate" in the world rather than the mere influence of the means of production on society's artistic and literary subconscious, then is the writer who engages in a phenomenology of objects and images in excess not fundamentally split between the same poles that Sloterdijk is? The "alien guts" of lists of objects that "semi-autonomously" burst the bounds of narrative, sometimes even slicing open the skin of world—are they not an implicit critique of modernity? Is it even possible such a *cheesily overripe plurality* would be anything other than fiercely reactionary?

McElroy and the Colloidal Unconscious

In examining such pluralities in the novel, it would be useful to find examples of semi-autonomous, or perhaps fully autonomous sense data in more contemporary texts. Two of the most extreme examples of writers for whom a contemporary phenomenological state of "semioblitz"[373] is key to the poetics of the novel are Joseph McElroy and Alexander Goldshtein. McElroy, the more senior of the two, is an American novelist who first gained notoriety at the

[373] A phrase originally coined by theorist Mark Fisher. See Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014).

height of the popularity of the postmodern "systems novel"[374] in the 1970s and is still writing today. Of McElroy, Tom LeClair, an expert on American postmodernism, writes that "Joseph McElroy comes closest [of all the excessive novels of the 70s] of equalling the achievement of Pynchon, for in McElroy's fiction [...] the art of excess works to create new imaginative models."[375] His work, while not a textbook example of the systems novel, does exist at the periphery of that genre, though there are important distinctions between the two; Tom LeClair, who wrote the definitive study of the systems novel, entitled *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*, focuses on McElroy in a separate work entitled *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction*. In the former book, LeClair shows how the operating principle of DeLillo's prose is "systems theory" and that his novels are an account of how his characters are mere pawns spun through the mill of global capitalism, the military industrial complex, and various international cabals and conspiracies. LeClair sees a fundamental distinction between the systems novel and what is at play in McElroy. McElroy himself claimed that he was writing about the "colloidal unconscious," which he described as the "[imaginative unification of] separate and different people by means of a 'mind compounded chemically but far truer than the sum of its particles.'"[376] For this reason, McElroy's novels often feel rather chaotic, in colloquial terms; they are not ordered by a system, but proceed into some deeper bowel of human consciousness—one still filled up with the detritus of modern life.

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[374] Novels organized somewhat paranoiacally in order to reflect the increasing interconnectedness of all of the systems that make up global capitalism (see Tom LeClair, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

[375] Thomas LeClair, "Joseph McElroy and the Art of Excess," *Contemporary Literature* 21, no. 1 (1980): 15–37, at 16.

[376] Tom LeClair, *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 166.

However, as LeClair affirms, "McElroy has registered the systems paradigm's contemporaneous scale of information [and] his attention to extraliterary information also demanded narrative and stylistic deformations that create further obstacles for the reader."[377] Unlike in DeLillo's rather paranoid texts, McElroy self-proclaimedly aims to bring the reader to the point of "ravishment and wonder" with these information-rich accounts of modern life.[378] LeClair largely focuses on *Women and Men* (1987), a book about a man and a woman who live in the same Upper West Side apartment building and never meet, yet the book circles around them elliptically as angels (referred to as "BREATHERS") tell their tale. The book is longer than *War and Peace*. As McElroy himself describes *Women and Men*:

> There are a lot of images in the book, but the main image that I keep coming back to and which carries us from New York to New Mexico, from New York to disarmament conferences, from Skylab in orbit all the way down into the depths of the Earth, is the image of a man and a woman facing each other but not on the same line, as if they were on parallel lines, as if they were looking over each other's shoulders. So they are looking toward each other but not seeing each other. And if the book were to be described in abstract or structural terms the narrative turns again and again upon variations of this image, variations which can be abstractly seen as all the variations of pivoting that are possible. If you see the man and the woman as two arrows pointing towards each other but on separate tracks, and pivot one arrow or pivot them both, pivot them in various ways, that is an abstract way of seeing all the varieties of contact, of communication, of insight that may be possible.[379]

Problematically, this book also gives voice to a sort of treacly humanism that eventually attempts to suggest ways of overcoming the "war of the sexes." Though it stands as McElroy's longest novel, it is far from his coldest or most radical. Like Sloterdijk in *Foams*, McElroy is caught

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[377] Ibid, 133.

[378] Philippe Birgy, *The Art of the City* (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2009), 253.

[379] Tom LeClair, *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 152.

between celebrating the pluralism of modernity and *befoaming* its incomprehensible multiplicity. In *Women and Men*, at least, he seems to bizarrely suggest that information overload might provide the key to a sort of Tolstoyan harmony across genders.

Plus (1977), on the other hand, is about a disembodied brain in space. And McElroy's most bizarre achievement, *Lookout Cartridge* (1974), is about a man who, in the context of a thriller that feels like it must have been submitted to the Burroughs cut-up method, discovers that he is either a camera or a god. Initially about a filmmaker named Cartwright who has made an experimental documentary about nothing with his friend Dagger DiGoro, the novel follows Cartwright's paranoid journey after the film is destroyed in Dagger's apartment, as Cartwright goes to New York to find information about the destroyer and is summarily assaulted, his assaulter perhaps even attempting to murder him, at which point the text quickly becomes incomprehensible from the perspective of the thriller genre it first seems to inhabit. The chapters alternate between accounts of the contents of the film and descriptions of Cartwright's comically frequent transatlantic trips trying to figure out who wanted the film destroyed. McElroy described *Lookout Cartridge* as "a computer in itself" and LeClair claims that "to formulate his vision of mysteriously intersecting and collaborating communications systems, human and otherwise, McElroy exceeds the conventions of the detective story, that old model of closed systems and linear solutions."[380] LeClair believes the book to be a loop, an imitation of the analog programming of early computers:

> Cartwright is metaphorically a cartridge, for he is a looping subsystem who inserts himself who inserts himself and is inserted to power systems both to record and to inform. The lookout half of the title indicates the growing sensitivity of the recording Cartwright. The lookout is between, looking both ways, looking all possible ways. Cartwright occupies

[380] Ibid, 138.

> privileged lookout settings in the book and is literally the lookout between groups—the interface between systems—on several occasions. But even the increasingly sensitized lookout Cartwright does not know enough to bring the book to a linear conclusion. In the middle of systems, still moving, growing but overloaded, Cartwright stops recording. And the reader rewinds, not to see why, but to see better what.[381]

Of course, not every reader will choose to rewind back to the beginning, too frustrated as they'll perhaps be by the text's stony impenetrability.

There is also an argument to be made that LeClair is too literal in his interpretation of the text with reference to contemporary technology. His interpretation conveniently ignores Cartwright's increasingly frequent assertions that he is a kind of god. LeClair's overly literal reading of *Lookout Cartridge* is unfortunately widespread. In his book *Topologies of Fear in Contemporary Fiction: The Anxieties of Post-Nationalism and Counter Terrorism*, Scott McClintock devotes an entire chapter to *Lookout Cartridge*. And though he does briefly analyze it "from a phenomenological perspective, as a novel of consciousness," he eventually comes to the conclusion that "McElroy's novel may … be read as a toolkit of strategies for coping with a society in which technologies of surveillance have invaded our privacy, transformed our social relations, and even subverted our consciousness of self."[382] The self, in other words, must also be a *cartridge looking out* for these strategies of oppression and recording them in a sort of mutual surveillance arrangement. This thoroughly technology-oriented reading is emetically prescriptive and can hardly be said to be present in the text; how strange it would be to suggest that McElroy is suggesting the reader adopt the same fractured point of view at play in his prose as a sort of

[381] Ibid, 141.

[382] Scott McClintock, *Topologies of Fear in Contemporary Fiction: The Anxieties of Post-Nationalism and Counter Terrorism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 178.

liberational technique in the mode of Deleuze and Guattari. John Johnston's *Information Multiplicity: America Fiction in the Age of Media Saturation* also devotes an entire chapter to *Lookout Cartridge* and, while it too is awfully literal in its treatment of how McElroy intends his books to interface with technology, Johnston does also offer a fascinating polemic with Jameson:

> Whereas Jameson believes that contemporary technology is fascinating precisely because 'it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imagination to grasp, McElroy discovers that technology can hardly be thought of as any representational shorthand' and that its relationship with any network of power and control will be necessarily excessive and incommensurate[383]

In a way, this "excess" of technology's relationship to power and control as described by Johnston brings to mind Bataille's *The Accursed Share*. Again, however, Johnston's unequivocal belief in Cartwright's singular subjectivity causes certain issues of interpretation, as he writes that, "*Lookout Cartridge* can be seen as an effort to write a prose fictional equivalent of a hyperspace and the drama of one character's attempt to trace his own cognitive map of its contours and passages."[384] By locating the axis of McElroy's aesthetic method in a precise sort of imitation of the mechanisms of contemporary technology, all of these readings lose sight of the text's excessive phenomenological totality, one that eventually threatens to become metaphysical.

An early passage in *Lookout Cartridge* gives a good idea of the excess phenomenological "affect" at play throughout most of the book. Even as certain glimmers of an "ex-pat" narrative about Cartwright living in London come through and the paragraph begins with the promise of

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[383] John Johnston, *Information Multiplicity: American Fiction in the Age of Media Saturation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 122.

[384] Ibid, 120.

describing the murder attempt on the escalator, none of the names or anecdotes referred to are ever fleshed out much at all:

> I could not know naturally that today was not the day I was going to be shoved down a dead escalator, as if some private-spirited mechanic at wit's end were trying to prime those stopped steps with living feet. I couldn't know for sure that Jim and Claire weren't linked — hell, the people you know tend to do the same things as you — in New York you see a French bloke you haven't seen in three years suddenly in the lobby at a festival of horror films contemplating popcorn through the glass counter, his hand detached below a leather sleeve; or in London at the end of a bad day you catch an Arts Council Show and in the first of its series of American interiors you sit down in a Vegas madam's 1943 parlor that's traveled from California to Germany and now here to London on the way back home and you listen to the authentic jukebox and you cross eyes with a blue-uniformed guard who looks away as you wonder if he ever heard "Don't Fence Me In" during the Blitz, but now at eyelevel from Roxy's seedy armchair where you're sitting two new knees materialize and they turn out to be knees that followed yours at the Cinderella Ball in Brooklyn Heights a year later in '44, for you move up past them to a Lincoln green wool hem and thence in a rush to Renee's russet shag that is not russet now but hot San Francisco copper: Reneé—for Christ sake Renée-opens her bright mouth, moans, and reaches at you and as you incredulously get up almost falls into your lap there in the easy chair of your traveling brothel but a moving lap is hard to find and as Renee says quite loud, Missed it in L.A., had to see it here, the russet hair you mouthed on Brooklyn Heights flies back in your face here half a mile from Buckingham Palace at this summer show (where in Days of old, Knights were bold) and the same low-pitched voice you once kissed gives you a twenty-five-year résumé and when the Crosby changes in the bright dome of this jukebox that transcends nickels and dimes, the mouth takes a breath, its breasts rise, and it asks where you're staying — and you don't know where to start, here in Merry England, where Knights were bold and ladies not particular. You shrug (as if amused): I'm making a film — and she says, Oh you're on location, and you say, No I mean I live here. She says, We're going to Stratford tomorrow, and you say be sure and go over to Warwick Castle to see the peacocks.[385]

I quote these passages in full in the interest of allowing their difference from the "symphony of cheeses" excerpt to become fully legible. Just as Jameson sees a camera moving across the cheeses in *The Belly of Paris*, so too is there a camera here, but one roving wildly across space

[385] Joseph McElroy, *Lookout Cartridge* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2003), 44–45.

and time, not bound by the walls of a single room. The "alien guts" here are not just to do with the names of things (cheeses, for example), which the reader has trouble tracking. No, here, the totality of human experience seems to have been cut up and rendered as a list with no hierarchy separating any realm of vision from any other. In the entire 531-page book, even the attentive reader will only come to recognize eight or nine names, yet they will be presented with hundreds of other names with no introduction in the context of stories barely told. Passages like this neatly encapsulate McElroy's conception of the "colloidal unconscious." Were it not for the unfulfilled promise of telling the story of the attempted murder and the shrugged "I'm making a film," this passage would be completely incomprehensible—impossible to even identify as belonging to this text. The second sentence—when McElroy describes the escalator being dead "as if some private-spirited mechanic at wit's end were trying to prime those stopped steps with living feet"––doesn't even make sense on its own terms. Much of the content in the novel is confused because of its position within a colloidal solution, but there is also no shortage of passages and sentences such as this that are confused *within themselves*. In this passage and in the novel as a whole, McElroy plays with allowing the reader to teeter on the edge of complete confusion, offering them only the smallest of breadcrumbs to facilitate their forward progress through the text. Passages like this show that, bread crumbs notwithstanding, *Lookout Cartridge* can be aptly described as a compilation of sense data that has become completely (rather than semi-) autonomous from the normative dictates of narrative or, indeed, of worldhood as such. No logic dictates the motion from locale to locale in New York, London, and LA, nor can the reader understand why the individuals described need to be in here—in this colloidal soup.

Such passages become even more opaque as the book goes on, peppered at they begin to be with incomprehensible technical jargon:

> A baker's dozen of blue harrows like they don't make any more turn the earth, hand-made, hand-held, furrowing parallel up over a hill. I put this room on the map. It is my closed-circuit scope. There is no occulting sweep hand. I monitor the empty distances between the bright blips — from the moment (reported to me by Tessa but also by Queenie who said he became like an Old Testament prophet) when Tessa's father capitulated, breathless and palsied, the water twinkling still in the corners of his eyes, and said to Dudley, My daughter tells me you are circumcised — thence a decade, a cloaked decade and more, to this well-aired room and its weighty white floral molding round the ceiling and the electric heater's parallel rows of dark coils framed by the marble fireplace itself framed by a marble mantel with a dark bust of Tessa at fifteen and photographs of Tessa and her mother, and color shots of Jane—from words about a circumcision thence to the same room years later where the blood trouble between Tessa and Dudley which threatens to spread into an indifference beyond divorce seems so far from any trouble which the blood let out of some child's penis thirty-odd years ago could have stanched, that I see a cluster of blips between; and they say, I Cartwright of London and New York lessen these distances and bind these troubles. All is still. I see it all, I seem to protect it by seeing it my way. Scots time cogs into the slower teeth of the Jewish calendar. Lorna's riddle joins the flow and instability of my blood to the name of my son and to my daughter's stanched but septic arm from Kew. My princely helicopter swashes here the groping hand of Dudley, there Lorna's pearly stretch-marks, yonder the absence of pulse in her father's wrist, arm, breast, throat, and mouth that will gnash no more, hither the contemplative lingo of Andsworth within earshot of his French vegetable slicer with which his housekeeper is doing violence to onions, aubergines, and the great baggy red peppers Lorna buys in Highgate Village from a greengrocer who does not get on with his mother-in-law, peppers like huge rich cells. I draw all together in someone else's house. Less like micro-stivers of bone that the dentist's high-speed drill sprays through some lung as like as not his own. Less like the flicker-flash of radiant particles in night space that get through the capsule and the helmet and into the eye of the astronaut's brain. More like the character of a liquid crystal. I will find a formula for (in the phrase of Boyd's father) that Brooklyn Indian Ned Noble. Someone's car radio rides by in the quiet street. But crystal scope or not, have I even a god's limited control over this field of force affirmed, like a NAND valve's zero, by nonforce? The street would be quiet even if it were not Saturday in Golders Green. I am omnipotent.[386]

The two lengthy passages quoted should entirely dispel the notion that this text bears any resemblance to the paranoid thrillers it takes some degree of inspiration from. DeLillo, for

[386] Ibid, 451-452.

example, in his own "systems" novels, hews much more closely to the genre he uses as a jumping-off point and nothing reaches this fever pitch of avant-garde impenetrability. The beginning of the passage seems to suggest that Cartwright is filming something, yet there is no indication in the narrative that this should be so. Beyond that, the references to "closed-circuit scope," "occulting sweep hand," and the word game with "hand-held" help to explain why some critics claim Cartwright to be a camera.[387] As Cartwright himself states, "All is still. I see *it all* [my emphasis], I seem to protect it by seeing it my way." It would be difficult to claim that Cartwright is exaggerating with this "it all." Who could not assent with the fact that the two passages I have quoted from *Lookout Cartridge* seem to contain "it all"—the whole of life in the contemporary world, all blended up into a single liquid medium? But, does not the fact of all of this information being presented in such impenetrable slabs not also make it somehow *broken*? It might be possible to come to the conclusion that the non-hierarchical recording of human life in this fashion somehow forces that which is captured to malfunction, thereby forcing us to engage with it in a different way than we normally do, entrapped in quotidian networks of meaning in daily life as we are. My claim is that excess is also a form of brokenness that forces the objects or subjects described to spit forth their "alien guts." Or, as Philipse affirms with regard to Heidegger, "the dominance of logic and the intellect has to be 'broken' in order that we may raise the question of being and nothingness."[388] McElroy's move away from logically

[387] See Joseph Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), Chapter 5, in which Tabbi compares Cartwright as camera to the space-brain in McElroy's *Plus*, as well as Flore Chevaillier, "Chaos and Order in Joseph McElroy's *Lookout Cartridge*," *TRANS* 6 (2008): 1–16, in which Chevaillier claims that "the narrative appears as seen by a camera, with all the traces of fragmentation and decomposition of the filmic and photographic medium.The framing of the narration by a camera is striking when writing achieves zooming effects and changes in scales and angles of vision, as we have seen in the above section" (9).

[388] Herman Philipse, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Being: A Critical Interpretation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 9.

comprehensible narratives—his "breaking" of objects—is an ambitious technique for approaching metaphysical or ontological questions. At the very least, this passage should "malfunction" the notion that this now autonomous sense data is a mere recording mechanism of a certain stage in the development of capitalism.[389] Perhaps that could be a tenable claim as regards Zola, but fully autonomous sense data breaks the narrative intended to contain it too definitively to allow for any "metanarratives," to quote Lyotard,[390] in or outside of the text—in the narrative itself or the vision of the world is constructs.

What, then, is the reader to make of the final sentences of the passage, suggesting that Cartwright doesn't only "see it all," but that he may have "a god's limited control over this field of force affirmed, like a NAND valve's zero, by nonforce" and that he is "omnipotent"? Is this a hint of metaphysical redemption that offers to organize the passage's apparent chaos? Or is it a sort of monomaniacally positive pluralistic response to the foamy "swarms of more discrete upsurges," to quote Sloterdijk's attempted celebration of malfunctioning globes? In any case, it is far from the only such declaration made by Cartwright. Initially, his statements as regards his own godhood are not entirely sure of themselves. "I did not have to have the sharpness of a god to know that he did not wholly mean to let go his next words: Who put that letter on my brother-in-law's desk,"[391] he thinks at one point. "A sequence of footsteps, phone rings, bucket clanks, lights, darks—words which reminded me that, godlike or not, my strength was in knowing what

[389] I make this statement so as to once again directly contradict Jameson's thesis in *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

[390] See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

[391] Joseph McElroy, *Lookout Cartridge* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2003), 439.

these others mistook: that all I had was my place in a multiple system,"[392] he reflects later. Of special note in this snatch of text are the non-standard use of the word "darks" to echo the word "lights" and the direct reference to the "multiple system" McElroy is so concerned with depicting aesthetically. Still, though, Cartwright's godhood is no sure thing. This doubt becomes a direct object of Cartwright's consciousness when he asks himself, "But am I Tessa's Maya god Kokulcan who was exiled yet at once relanded and never really went away? Not quite."[393] The hyper-specificity of this question—its reference to a Mayan god—suits the text's "colloidal" referentiality.[394]

Soon enough, however, Cartwright does take his own godhood as a sure thing and begins to ask highly specific questions about his nature. "I was in a helicopter level with the tops of buildings. I was nothing. A godlike thought. What had I lived through?"[395] Cartwright thinks during a scene when he may or may not be in a helicopter-–the reader can't quite tell. The image of the helicopter is strangely tied to these questions of godhood in the last third of the book, in which there are multiple allusions to an engineered helicopter crash caused by a loosened swash-plate, though the precise contours of the event are totally murky. Over the course of this third of the book, the questions Cartwright asks about his own nature become increasingly jarring and often interrupt the flow of the narrative: "But if he thinks I made probable Claire's death in this system that so many think I engineer, did he arrange to have our swash-plate loosened? We can

[392] Ibid, 439.

[393] Ibid, 499.

[394] This is not the only reference to Kokulcan in the text, though the reason for all of these references is far from clear.

[395] Ibid, 522-523.

go only down and forward, it feels, but not fast-forward any more, and can a god evolve?"[396] he thinks near the end of the book, a question made even stranger by the fact that the reader doesn't really understand the mystery of Claire's death—who she is or how she died, let alone who might have killed her. In one of the last chapters, he thinks "I felt an emptiness grin, except if I was looking through the emptiness the smile might be my own. Can a god have a religious experience? Can a god be isolated?"[397] Given the focus on systems and interconnectedness throughout the book, the answer to this last question must necessarily be "no."

Unless the final meaning of the text is that technology has become a contemporary god and, in being a camera, Cartwright is also a divine being, which, again, would be an emetically topical reading, the final reason put forth for these enigmatic statements must be less dully literal. In fact, if the narrowly technological frame of analysis for the book is discarded—if it is taken to be not about a camera recording, but about phenomena in the world as they are without reference to the possible camera or VHS tape of the title (for, to be sure, McElroy's mission is to depict the "colloidal unconscious," not the "recorded colloidal")—then the book is about *blended phenomenological totality*, which, frankly, is an unnecessary rephrasing of McElroy's own self-description. As the book progresses, Cartwright doesn't seem to simply see "it all," he becomes indistinguishable from the "it all" he describes and weaves his way in and out of. Cartwright *is* the foamy, broken totality of being that is malfunctioning and splits autonomously off from the narrative, to which it was meant to offer verisimilitude in exchange for the creation of spherical clarity of meaning. At one point, as Cartwright reflects on the book's incomprehensible central mystery, he thinks "The things way high in Chartres Cathedral meant only for God may perhaps

[396] Ibid, 514.

[397] Ibid, 500.

be reached by diagrams"[398]—the phrase a complete non-sequitur except for the fact that part of Cartwright and Dagger's film was filmed in Chartres and Cartwright's son allegedly went on a school trip to Chartres. McElroy finally seems to suggest that Cartwright is both God and the diagram, but that these "high" things are actually just everything around us in the world. And, in what is a very Heideggerian move, by breaking the networks of meaning that would usually connect these objects either in a transatlantic thriller or in the context of daily life, McElroy forces the reader to confront the insane and incomprehensible excess of that which *is*. Fundamentally, then, even though he does sometimes think that he might be (or is certainly) a camera, the purely technological reading of the novel offered by LcClair, McClintock, and Johnston is a red herring that forces something wild and strange into an overly simple topical mode. Furthermore, thinking once again of Lyotard, the god containing the entirety of a malfunctioning totality is both the fruit of a meta-narrative and an anti-meta-narrative. McElroy, in other words, wants to have his totalizing cake and eat it too…

Goldshtein Protruding Like a Phallus

No such technological misreading is possible in the context of the excessive affect of Alexander Goldshtein's *Remember Famagusta*. While initially a critic, Goldshtein (born in 1957) only began to produce novels in the last few years of his life. He died tragically in 2006, the same year his novel *Спопойные поля* [*The Fields of Calm*] was published. Stanislav

[398] Ibid, 496.

Lvovsky's description of Goldshtein's project in his preface to *The Fields of Calm* provides a neat starting point for understanding the author's project. Lvovsky writes that:

> Прозаики, работающие сегодня по-русски с большой формой, тяготеют, в основном, либо к созданию «новой беллетристики», скроенной скорее по кинематографическим лекалам, либо к реанимации «большого русского романа» (за скобками оставляем чисто инерционное письмо, делающее вид, что в последние двадцать лет с миром и языком ничего не произошло) [...] Проза Александра Гольдштейна — редкий пример литературы другого рода. Отказываясь от наработанных техник и приемов, разрушая привычные границы жанров, Гольдштейн выстраивает методологию письма, не опираясь на традицию, но используя ее в собственных целях. У его прозы нет помощников, — она одинока, — но это позволяет ей заглянуть в такие места, о существовании которых другие даже не подозревают.[399]
>
> Prose writers working with new forms today in Russian for the most part gravitate either to the creation of a "new fiction" tailored essentially according to cinematic patterns, or to the reanimation of the "big Russian novel" (we leave that purely inertial form of writing pretending that nothing has happened to the world and language in the last twenty years between parentheses) [...] Alexander Goldshtein's prose is a rare example of another kind of literature. Rejecting proven techniques and methods and destroying the usual boundaries between genres, Goldshtein builds a methodology of writing that doesn't rely on tradition, but uses it for his own purposes. His prose has no one to help it along—it is alone—but this allows it to peek into places that others do not even know exist.[400]

Alas, the loneliness of Goldshtein's prose has not yet given way to an "excess" of readers in Russia or abroad… In any case, because of its strictly analog content, it is far more likely that *Remember Famagusta* would be treated as a "maximalist novel" than as a systems novel. Alas, it has been treated as neither, partially as a function of the fact that there is not much criticism on Goldshtein's work. To be sure, *Remember Famagusta* does fulfill nine of the ten categories for

[399] Aleksandr Goldshtein, *Spokoinye polia*, introduction by Stanislav Lvov (Moscow: NLO, 2006), 8.

[400] My translation.

identifying and categorizing the maximalist novel developed in Stefano Ercolino's study *The Maximalist Novel*: 1. Length, 2. Encyclopedic mode, 3. Dissonant chorality, 4. Diegetic exuberance, 5. Completeness, 6. Narratorial omniscience, 8. Intersemiocity, 9. Ethical commitment, and 10. Hybrid realism.[401] The only category *Remember Famagusta* does not fulfill is "paranoid imagination," as the text is much more exuberantly humanistic—joyful in its foamy plurality—than it is stoned or worried about the encroachment of systems, as one might describe Pynchon's work, for example, as being. There are no "systems" as such at play in *Remember Famagusta* at all; the operating principle of the novel is the *exploded autofictional associations* of Goldshtein's own mind. It would be foolish to claim no association between Goldshtein and his two novels' narrators. He is, so to speak, his own colloidal unconscious.

Though Ercolino does not treat Goldshtein or any other works from Russia, claiming that the maximalist novel is a strictly American, Latin American, and European phenomenon—a claim that holds no water—his notion of "diegetic exuberance" is eminently applicable to *Remember Famagusta*, especially in its reception by Mark Lipovetsky, the most important critic to have written about it. Ecolino writes that:

> The maximalist novel abounds in diegetic material. Its narration is hypertrophic and ultra-dense; the stories and characters that populate it are innumerable, as are its digressions and themes. One finds oneself face to face with something similar to that "inflation of discourse" of which Charles Newman has spoken in relation to Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*: a discursive excess that causes the maximalist novel to appear to be an overflowing river, the narrative substance of which seems to proliferate almost spontaneously, rather than being the fruit of a well-planned creative operation. The key word is inclusion: not to leave anything out, to bring the entire world into the novel.[402]

[401] Cf. Stefano Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

[402] Stefano Ercolino, *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 71.

No better term than an "excessive and overflowing river" would be possible to characterize the constant and roving overabundance of the text. In lectures and seminars, Mark Lipovetsky has also used the term "hypertrophic" in relation to *Remember Famagusta*, describing Goldshtein's prose as a kind of "hypertrophic in-between prose," in which the connections that propel the story are not based in narrative, but "association." According to Lipovetsky, Goldshtein follows a long tradition of books that are neither fiction nor non-fiction, but somewhere "in between." The term "in-between prose" was initially coined by Lydia Ginzburg and, in *The Oxford History of Russian Literature*, Lipovetsky and his colleagues claim that Goldshtein was "perceived as an updating of the novel through a free-floating combination of fiction, autobiography, impressionistic travelogues, cultural history, and criticism. Goldshtein shows that the challenge Ginzburg identified, namely, what literary prose should be in the aftermath of the Great Russian Novel, continued to spur writers to create new literary forms."[403] Perhaps thinking of Goldshtein's exuberance at his pluralistic world's "foaminess," they include him in the "New Sincerity" movement of Russian letters, but also admit that he "[expresses] both the desire for an unmediated expression of individual experience and the postmodernist understanding of sincerity as a complex of rhetorical devices and discursive principles."[404] To put it simply, the book's definition successfully accounts for Goldshtein's inclusion of both autofictional content and the

[403] Andrew Kahn, Mark Lipovetsky, Irina Reyfman, and Stephanie Sandler, *A History of Russian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 707.

[404] Ibid, 707.

enormous quantity of anecdotes, images, and scenes that he imagines in relation to, but outside of his own life as *associative maximalist rhymes*.[405]

Lipovetsky and his colleagues finally write that "Goldshtein proclaims an ideal of literature synthesizing genres and media, transcending all barriers, including those separating the biographical author from his/her literary image."[406] This claim is made largely in the context of Goldshtein's self-theorizing essay entitled "A Literature of Existence," in which Goldshtein writes about the ideal aesthetic method for fusing reality and fantasy, looking back to Eduard Limonov and Yevgeny Kharitonov, the latter of whom is an influential queer poet and short-story writer, as paragons of this practice whose method might be expanded upon so as to answer the challenge initially posed by Ginzburg. It is worth extensively quoting Goldshtein's polemic with and declaration of love for Limonov:

> Там, где у Лимонова автор не торчит из текста, как эрегированный фаллос, а уступает место кастрированной глади безличного бумагомарания (бойкая манная каша расхожего фабульного повествования, которую он с годами научился размазывать по столу не хуже и не лучше других), — там простыни не смяты, никто ни с кем не лежал и потомства не произвел. Эти книги его не стоит читать. Настоящая манера Лимонова — огонь прямого разговора, она не линейная, а концентрическая, с гипертрофированным авторским «я» посредине и в средоточии, и вокруг, порожденные этим неистовым центром, как его бесконечные эманации, разбегаются волны отчаяния, зависти, злобы, самодовольства, тоски, вожделения и любви. Когда Лимонов пишет не про себя, читать его безнадежно и скучно.[407]
>
> In Limonov's work, whenever the author does not stick out of the text like an erect phallus, but gives way to a smooth, castrated surface of

[405] Many of these scenes are unreflectively chauvinistic and bring to mind the misogyny of Alexander Theroux's *Darconville's Cat*, another cult novel that is often dredged up as an underread example of maximalism. This, in part, goes to show just how chauvinistic the world of the maximalist novel can be, as the term is a favorite of what are colloquially referred to as "lit bros" on "Book Twitter."

[406] Ibid, 707.

[407] Aleksandr Goldshtein, *Rasstavanie s nartsissom: Opyty pominalnoi ritoriki* (Moscow: NLO, 2011).

> impersonal scribbling (the brisk semolina of a common plotted tale, which, over the years, he's learned to spread out on the table no worse and no better than anyone else)—there, the bedsheets are not crumpled, no one has lain with anyone else, and no offspring have been produced. These books of his are not worth reading. Limonov's real style is the fire of direct conversation, it is not linear, but concentric, with a hypertrophied author's "I" at its center as well as its point of focus, and, all around it, the endless emanations born of this frantic center scatter as waves of despair, envy, anger, complacency, melancholy, lust, and love. When Limonov does not write about himself, reading him is dull and hopeless.[408]

It first bears noting that, since Goldshtein himself uses the term "hypertrophic," Lipovetsky was wise to take this term forward as definitional for his novels and that Goldshtein's focus on hypertrophy shows how ridiculous it is for Ercolino to exclude Russia or any other literary culture from the inventory of where maximalist novels are allowed to come from, as hypertrophy (or "diegetic exuberance") is one of the most important categories outlined in his book. Goldshtein's analysis of Limonov must also inform our reading of *Remember Famagusta*. Like Limonov at his supposed best, Goldshtein also aims to "stick out" of his own text like "an erect phallus" at all times. Goldshtein's critical polemic also helps to show why he is relatively uninterested in ontologically broad and paranoid portraits of the world as such. He is always at the center of his own text, not the systems inside of which he theoretically exists. As such, statements like Roman Katsman's theorization of Goldshtein's novel as a "chaos novel" must be entirely rejected. He writes that:

> Роман Гольдштейна – это роман-хаос, основой которого является диссипативное письмо. Структурализованная концепция истории, фундаментальная для романа как жанра, возникает как свойство самого дискурсивного, нарративного, поэтического хаоса,не вопреки ему и не как его источник, а именно как его свойство и проявление.[409]

[408] My translation.

[409] Roman Katsman, "Roman-khaos," *Voprosy literatury*, no. 2 (2019): 63–79, at 2.

> Goldstein's novel is a chaos novel based on dissipative writing. The structured conception of history, which is fundamental to the novel as a genre, emerges as a property of discursive, narrative, and poetic chaos in itself, not in spite of it and not as its source, but precisely as its property and manifestation.

Not only does Katsman contradict himself at the very end of his paper when he claims that the "chaos" of the novel is made up of the very systems of life—chaos and systems are total antonyms—the novel is very intentionally structured around the "erect phallus" of autonomous sense data from Goldshtein's mind. Furthermore, as shall be discussed in greater detail at the end of this section of the chapter, a "chaos novel" is not possible, as it is necessarily modelled *resentfully* against the notion of an orderly text and for that reason is entirely defined by it. Goldshtein's analog symphony is a phenomenology of interior life with *no limits* imposed on what that might mean.

In looking more closely at the text, it first becomes apparent that the syntax of *Remember Famagusta* is not entirely standard and that the paragraphs are long *tourbillon d'images*. The book begins with an invocation of complexity that sets the template for the entire novel's language:

> В начале раздраженный возглас. Сердитое восклицание. Крик. Два крика с крохотным промежутком, в несколько медовых сот советской осени. Еще были живы пчелы империи. Жужжали с юга на запад, с востока на юг, с севера на запад, юг и восток. Но им недолго оставалось. Десять лет, всего ничего. Посчитайте, когда это было.
> Я не хочу, не хочу писать критику, в тупиковой квартирке своей, моим не смущаясь присутствием, наоборот, нагреваясь от публики, даже в единственном ее жалчайшем числе, восклицал поэт-переводчик и по столу, покрытому домашней скатеркой, раз, другой, третий гремел кулаком, такое отрицание в человеке. Было это не в день показа мне его критики, частью напечатанной в толстом столичном, частью только еще и так далее. О нем что-то будет потом, далекого живого призову поминально. Падла, не возьму, шептал телефону Саша Сатуров, падла, не возьму, громче

> на втором звонке повторял, падла, не возьму, полногласно на пятом кричал и, пунцовея, волнуясь, тоже стучал по столу и не брал; не позволял и другим, кто был рядом.[410]

> In the beginning, there's an irritated whoop. An angry exclamation. A scream. Two screams separated by a miniscule interval—out into a couple honeycombs of the Soviet autumn. The bees of empire were still alive. They buzzed from south to west, from east to south, from north to west, south and east. But they didn't have long. Ten years: not much at all. You can calculate when that was.
> I don't want, don't want to write criticism in this dead-end apartment of mine, unembarrassed by my presence, on the contrary, warmed up by his public, even in this, its singularly pitiable number, the poet and translator made an exclamation and thundered his fist against the homespun-tablecloth-covered table once, twice, three times, such a contradiction in man. This wasn't on the day he showed me his criticism, partially printed in a thick journal, partially only a bit more and so on. There'll be something about it later, I'll call upon the distant and still-living in commemoration. Asshole, I won't pick up, Sasha Saturov whispered at the telephone, asshole, I won't pick up, he repeated louder upon the second ring, asshole, I won't pick up, he screamed at the top of his lungs upon the fifth, and, turning crimson, also knocked against the table and didn't pick up; he wouldn't let the others next to him pick up either.[411]

The first paragraph is never explicated; the nature of the "shouts" and "whoop" remain unknown, unless they are to be ascribed to the "poet and translator" in the second paragraph. At the same time, the poet and translator is probably not the "I" that otherwise defines the narrative, even though what are possibly his whoops open the book. Only the *memento mori* imposed upon Soviet Statehood by way of a non-standard metaphor (the "bees of empire") makes logocentric sense. The first statement of the second paragraph, with its pathos-laden repetition of "not wanting" potentially refers to the real Goldshtein and his usual occupation of writing criticism. Knowing also that Goldshtein didn't write poetry or translate, there is a further distinction to be drawn between the "I" and the "poet and translator." Here, then, are two characters, one of whom

[410] Aleksandr Goldshtein, *Pomni o Famaguste* (Moscow: NLO, 2004), 7.

[411] My translation. As of yet unpublished.

"whoops" and one of whom has been shown the other's criticism. Perhaps the poet and translator is eager to show the narrator his attempt to dabble in the former's trade. In any case, the practice proselytized in Goldshtein's essay "A Literature of Existence" is at play in the creation of an "I" that bears immediate resemblance to Goldshtein. However, as the paragraph continues, it hemorrhages legibility. First, there's a statement of intent that seems to come from Goldshtein's lips as he writes the book—"There'll be something about it later, I'll call upon the distant and still-living in commemoration"—but this runs up against the abrupt introduction of a new character, one Sasha Saturov, who seems to have come loose from the previous kitchen-table scene involving the narrator and the poet and translator.

This is typical of Goldshtein's method. Each chapter in *Remember Famagusta* presents a separate swirl of characters and images, some of whom go on to be a part of ensuing chapters' whirlpools. As in *Lookout Cartridge*, these characters are not properly introduced, but unlike in McElroy's texts, they do recur often enough for the reader to develop some small sense of who they are. In the first chapter, the reader is given descriptions of Sasha Saturov and his struggles with mental health, Sasha's son's institutionalization and runic poetic practice in the institution, the narrator's orientalist imaginings of the distant pasts of various Middle Eastern cities, the editorial board of a newspaper where the narrator works, the tale of one Lana Bykova's bathhouse masturbation—she also works with the narrator at the editorial board of the newspaper—a sudden revision of Sasha Saturov and his son Kolya's names and stories (Kolya is renamed Kolya Astvatsaturov and Sasha Saturov Levon Ter-Grigoryants), a recollection of the narrator's grandmother discussing the meaning of the Jewish nation, the tale of a Turkish caricaturist named Ismail Efendi, the long and relatively straightforward story of someone's grandfather on a train with a woman being accosted by a talkative stranger who leaves behind a

copy of the 16th Congress of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks (a stenographic rendering), which becomes the first text this grandfather has ever read, and quite a few more… Would it be such an exaggeration to say that "hypertrophy" is the defining principle of this text––especially knowing that every chapter in the book operates like this, with minimal repetitions of characters from section to section? On the other hand, is it possible to say that Goldshtein still sticks out of the text like an "erect phallus," given that the reader is never quite sure where his recollection becomes his fancy?

In the novel's second chapter, there is a scene of obvious novelistic maximalism when a young monk named Abovyan who works as a teacher has his life threatened by a bishop who owns a cheetah. The monk is in trouble for his un-monk-like urge to climb mountains. The chapter is largely devoted to this encounter and the story the bishop tells the monk as he threatens him, but Chapter Three then returns to something that is theoretically identifiable as Goldshtein's autofictional reminiscences. Also in line with Limonov's method, the more closely the text hews to Goldshtein's own life, the more testosterone-scented it becomes. A good deal of Chapter Three is centered around Goldshtein's hypertrophic memories of nice breasts:

> Когда-то, мальчишка, юнец, довольствовался я любым, лишь бы приветливым, бюстом, довольствовался — неправильное слово, радовался каждой на моем пути паре молочных желез: спятившему от фосфора рыбофилу все одно, форель и глупая камбала, пища илотов. Белье не задевало тоже, какая разница, чем укутаны перси. Как обидел я равнодушием подружку, пропевшую на ухо, что раздобыла втридорога на толкучке немецкий бюстгальтер, — еще бы, безлакунная социалистичность той жизни заправляла и общностью интимно-бельевых ресурсов, их мреющей мутью, я ж не испытывал скуки, дюйм за дюймом, с одинаковой благодарностью обсасывая всякие, в любом одеянии, холмики. Меня устраивали хиленькие, вислые, как козье вымя, в советской блеклой униформе грудки балаханской девочки из рабочей среды, стыдившейся их оголить, так запугало ее несоответствие классическим, бог весть в каком журнале вычитанным статям, и квашнеподобные прелести промысловицы с Артема — разбитная островитянка, ничего не стесняясь, звала их сиськами («я сисястая, ухвати-ка») и обряжалась

во что легче стирать. С этими женщинами было удобно, но второй, подцепившей меня в пересменку, меж мотористами, я, недомерок, скоро надоел.[412]

Once upon a time, a boy, a youth, I was content with only bust so long as it was affable, content with—not the right word, I rejoiced in every pair of mammary glands I came across on my path: to a fishophile who goes crazy about phosphorous, it's all the same, trout or stupid flounder, food for helots. The underwear didn't hurt either, what's the difference what the bosom's wrapped 'round with. How I offended my little girlfriend with indifference when she sang into my ear that she'd managed to get hold of an overpriced German bra at a flea market—why else, the lacuna-free socialisticness of that life also ruled the community of intimate underwear resources with their dimming dregs, I experienced no boredom, inch by inch, sucking at all sorts of hillocks in various kinds of dress with an identical gratitude. I was satisfied with stunted breasts, breasts that drooped like a goat's udder, the breasts of a working-class Balakhan girl in a faded Soviet uniform, she was ashamed to bear them, she was so frightened by the discrepancy between the classical, God only knows in what journal she'd read an article about it, and the kneading-trough-like charms of a field woman from Artyom—a carefree islander, unashamed of anything, called them "boobies" ("I've got big boobies, grab on tight"), and got suited up into something easier to wash. I was comfortable with these women, but the second one, who'd picked me up on a break between shifts and among motorists, soon got sick of me, an undersized object.[413]

This passage's trite content contrasts uncomfortably with its wild form. The reader can only marvel at the richness of Goldshtein's imagination and recollective power, but the intensely overrich quality of the prose, most of which *does* come from "some empirical common-sense datum on the order of the eyes of bodily daily life," unlike in Jameson's conception of Zola, produces a paradox. Even while the text is intensely meaningful for Goldshtein as writer and rememberer, the reader has no system commensurate to the author's creative principle of placing his own self at the center of text like an "erect phallus." To pilfer a term from Hegel's toolbox,

[412] Ibid, 46.

[413] My translation. Not yet published.

Goldshtein makes no attempt to "universalize" or "sublate"[414] his own experience, whereas the systematic or metaphysical *frisson* that underlies the hypertrophy of McElroy's prose creates a system of handholds, no matter how elusive, for the reader to grapple onto.

After the *bustiness* of Chapter Three, Goldhstein brings back one of several leitmotifs that structure the text: the bishop asking the monk if he "saw THAT" and the monk's response that "yes, I saw THAT."[415] What the meaning of this might be in the wake of the overripe description of what we can only imagine to be Goldshtein's adolescent love of breasts is totally opaque. This also brings us back to Ercolino's notion of "ethical commitment" as being definitional for the maximalist novel. There is no doubt that Goldshtein conceives of *Remember Famagusta* as a mammoth task of recollection: a total recording of the sins of empire, as he frames it in the preface. And yet, it can only ever be a memory that has meaning *for him* as author, as the content of the book is universalized so little. This, then, is the danger of allowing sense data to become autonomous and fully overwhelm the text. As with the malfunctioning quality of the ready-to-hand object in *Being and Time*, Goldshtein's non-sublation of his own stream of consciousness leads to a phenomenology that is entirely cut off from any network of meaning. It is possible to claim that this method is much more radical than even the system-atic excess of *Lookout Cartridge*. But, just as Cartwright ends up being the camera or god who contains the entire excessive totality of the objects, events, and places described in the text, so too is Goldshtein's mind the knot around which the now entirely autonomous sensuousness of

[414] Jon Stewart suggests that the Hegelian term "aufheben" cannot be captured by any single word, suggesting that it means "to sublate" in the Latinate sense, "to elevate," and "to negate" or "to destroy." See Jon Stewart, *The Unity of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: A Systematic Interpretation* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 40.

[415] Ibid, 46.

the text is woven. Fascinatingly, Edward Waysband also identifies Goldshtein's novel as being politically reactionary and playing into Russian Imperialism, writing that "Having mobilized the notion of the Levantine to valorize his position in a broad Russian literary context, Goldstein, however, failed to embody the main tenets of post-orientalist multiculturalism."[416] So, even while he attempted to create a Russian-Israeli vision of the Apollonian Mediterranean, he reproduced imperial tropes and orientalized many of the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern people he depicts. On the other hand, "Circulating in Israel exclusively among immigrants from the former Soviet Union, the Russian-Israeli Levantine literary idea with its ostensible cosmopolitan perspective clashed with the prevailing ethnonational segregationism of this milieu."[417] So, while Goldhstein represented a "cosmopolitan element" in the xenophobic circles of Russian ex-pats living in Israel, his engagement with foreign cultures is far from progressive. In the context of Goldshtein's own claim that the use of the "exotic" in the book is tantamount to a kind of excessive "grotesque," Waysband then writes that "The text of the book itself [..] does not create any ironic or critical distance between the narrator's perspective and Goldstein's evaluative standpoint as an implied author."[418] While Goldhstein's orientalism is better disguised than his misogyny, both issues point to the fundamental organizing principle of the work being Goldshtein's subjectivity—a fact that makes the attempt to step out from the self and take in the excessive phenomena of the world seem hamstrung from the start. The phenomena presented by Goldshtein within the text never challenge the hegemony of his authorship.

[416] Edward Waysband, "Alexander Goldstein's 'Tethys or Mediterranean Mail': A Russian-Israeli Levantine Literary Idea Reconsidered," *Ab Imperio* 2018, no. 4 (2018): 253–80, at 279.

[417] Ibid, 280.

[418] Ibid, 280.

Systems, the Self, and the Rhizome

With that in mind, is it right for us to be so harsh with Katsman as regards his idea of Goldshtein's chaos novel? The fundamental issue with his idea is that the term "chaos novel" can be nothing more substantial than a colloquial attempt to come to terms with the phenomenological or affective excess of these texts. An actual chaos novel would: 1. be patterned after the notion of order in fiction and, as such, to create it would be nothing less than an act of pure Nietzschean *ressentiment*, the creation of a new aesthetic mode to wage war against an old one, all the while owing its entirety to that elder aesthetic; and 2. even if the author were attempting to write a chaos novel, their own psyche would still be imprinting its own warp and woof upon the surface of the words. Beyond that, neither *Lookout Cartridge* nor *Remember Famagusta* are mere attempts to create chaos. Dialectically speaking, both texts first of all step out from the self *as such* and the limits of the author's individual sense experience so as to take account of the "semioblitz"of phenomena that characterizes modernity. McElroy steps out from the self in order to depict the heinously complex systems that rule over human lives. Even when his text seems to contain nothing but chaotic catalogs, Cartwright's transformation into a god offers a transcendental signifier that presents a totalizing structure for all of the "symphonies" (and not of cheese!) that make up the novel. With Goldshtein, the issue is more complex, as he attempts to write a new breed of exploded autofiction focused around the "protruding erection" of the self. In some sense, it is precisely that "explosion," or hypertrophy, that represents the self's interconnectedness with the world; the boundaries of the narrator's imaginings proceed beyond the precise material conditions of the life he's lived. As noted before, even Katsman ends

by making reference to the systems inside of which Goldshtein operates, writing that, in both of his novels, Goldshtein's prose "разрабатывает хаотически-детерминистическая модель поведения сложных динамических систем с тем большим основанием, уверенностью и упорством [...] что такие системы и есть сама жизнь."[419] While it would be an error to characterize the two texts as systems novels, they are bound together by the diegetic exuberance they exude in their expeditions out into *foaminess*. And both texts are structured by principles dramatically more meaningful than a resentful notion of chaos.

Another reason why the two books might colloquially appear to be chaos novels is their allegiance to an alternative system of narrative organization that might, referring to the work of Deleuze and Guattari, be called "rhizomatic." The origin of the term is their own conception of *A Thousand Plateaus* as a rhizome and their description of how the book was written:

> We are writing this book as a rhizome. It is composed of plateaus. We have given it a circular form, but only for laughs. Each morning we would wake up, and each of us would ask himself what plateau he was going to tackle, writing five lines here, ten there. We had hallucinatory experiences, we watched lines leave one plateau and proceed to another like columns of tiny ants.[420]

The rhizome is an organic structure that, unlike the tree, does not thrust toward a single peak with all of its being; ginger is the most well-known rhizomatic organism. Like ginger, Deleuze and Guattari's texts do not come to a single peak. Beyond that, there is a certain leftist communal spirit of fun and humor in this description, but also a rebellion against the "insomniac reason" of

[419] ["develops a chaotic-deterministic model of the behavior of complex, dynamic systems with great reason to believe, confidence, and perseverance [...] that such systems are life itself."]: Roman Katsman, "Roman-khaos," *Voprosy literatury*, no. 2 (2019): 63–79, at 20–21.

[420] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 22.

most serious writing endeavors. For Deleuze and Guattari, the structuring of language and narrative is an eminently political issue. They claim that "forming grammatically correct sentences is for the normal individual the prerequisite for any submission to social laws. No one is supposed to be ignorant of grammaticality; those who are belong in special institutions. The unity of language is fundamentally political"[421] and that "[Language] is not the communication of information but something quite different: the transmission of order-words, either from one statement to another or within each statement, insofar as each statement accomplishes an act and the act is accomplished in the statement."[422] The use of the word "order" in the latter statement should be taken not only to mean "word order," but the symbolic order that the state views as necessary to maintain. To fight against the proper grammar of language and the *proper grammar of narrative*, then, is an act of defiance against the tree-like Oedipal desiring machines that attempt to structure the libidinal power-lines that run through our world.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the tree-like narrativity of many 19th-century novels bolsters the calcified prison walls of the world's structures of power, even in Zola. Their notion of aesthetic political praxis is complex and does not require overt leftist political commitments, as, in their analyses, even a relatively conservative man like Proust is capable of rebelling by way of the rhizome, if only on the level of narrative structure. As Daniel Haines claims:

> Deleuze and Guattari articulate—despite their claims to the contrary—a 'theory of reading' based on the principle of immanent selections and motivated by the philosophical project of 'overturning Platonism.' Applying this theory of reading, as a way to explore and interpret this conservative investment in maintaining the separation of the literal and

[421] Ibid, 101.

[422] Ibid, 79.

> the metaphorical, is one of the essential tasks of a Deleuzian literary criticism.[423]

Of particular note here are the references to "immanency" and the destruction of the binary between literal and metaphorical, all principles at play throughout the whole of their philosophy. Deleuze and Guattari's own description of Proust's masterpiece is as neat an encapsulation of both the rhizome and this "theory of reading" as any other in their philosophy (or in anyone else's analyses thereof):

> In the literary machine that Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* constitutes, we are struck by the fact that all the parts are produced as asymmetrical sections, paths that suddenly come to an end, hermetically sealed boxes, non-communicating vessels, watertight compartments, in which there are gaps even between things that are contiguous, gaps that are affirmations, pieces of a puzzle belonging not to any one puzzle but to many, pieces assembled by forcing them into a certain place where they may or may not belong, their unmatched edges violently forced out of shape, forcibly made to fit together, to interlock, with a number of pieces always left over.[424]

Like Proust, neither McElroy nor Goldshtein are overt in their political commitments. However, there is a way in which both of their books war against accepted understandings by way of rhizomatic excess. For McElroy, the colloidal unconscious is an attempted expansion of the human understanding of which phenomena have bearing on daily existence. He is eager to show how the launch of a NASA rocket in Florida has a concrete impact on, for example, the love lives of New Yorkers on the Upper West Side. The key to what Goldshtein's war against the world's tree-ness might be lies in the preface to *Remember Famagusta*, in which he charges the

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[423] Daniel Haines, "From Deleuze and Guattari's Words to a Deleuzian Theory of Reading," *Deleuze Studies* 9, no. 4 (2015): 529–57, at 550.

[424] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 42–43.

reader to remember the sins of empire—to remember Famagusta. In order to do so, Goldshtein creates a language that is total anathema to the empire, the sins of which it paradoxically forms a recollection of. Perhaps this is a more effective way of challenging empire than what is presented in anti-Soviet books like *The House on the Embankment* or *Life and Fate*, which, while they are highly subversive in terms of the events they record, are deeply indebted to Soviet aesthetics.[425] But this also brings us to the fundamental issue of *excessive foaminess* that has prevented both McElroy and Goldshtein from finding wide readerships and encouraged critics like Katsman in their trite definition of Goldshtein's book as a "chaos text" and essentially all of McElroy's critics in their assertions that "it all comes down to technology." Both of these texts are essentially impenetrable to the non-specialized reader. The excessive foaminess of affect forces the phenomena described in these enormous catalogs and cheesy symphonies to malfunction. In Heideggerian terms, they are entirely removed from the networks of meaning, to which they belong in daily life. This draws all attention away from the narrative (which barely exists) and toward the phenomena themselves—as Jameson writes, the "alien guts and insides of the words themselves that are overwhelmingly juxtaposed and arrayed against us in such catalogues, which are very far from expressing their original Whitmanian gusto." For the general reader, *Lookout Cartridge* and *Remember Famagusta* are nothing but catalogs of dead phenomena arrayed overwhelmingly "against them." The movement outward from pure knowledge of the self and sense certainty fails insomuch as the inability to turn proper names into highly structured symphonic music pushes the dialectical movement of aesthetic growth back toward the self or, in what is completely the opposite tendency, toward excessively metaphysical systematization.

[425] Much like, perhaps, the theoretical chaos novel.

Alternate History and Networks of Meaning

In two of the 20th century's most famous alternate history novels, a comparably excessive phenomenological affect is also at play: Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and Witkiewicz's *Insatiability* (1930). Whereas *Gravity's Rainbow* deals with an excess of technical objects, best represented by the V-2 rocket that has an intrinsic connection to the protagonist's erections based on unethical conditioning experiments that were performed on him as a child with plastics, *Insatiability* is a series of excessive interior states as they might be represented in Proust or, more likely, Nádás, but, as is the case with the technical objects of *Gravity's Rainbow*, in the context of an alternate history. What is the further resonance of this excessive phenomenological affect in the context of alternate-history novels?

Critics have radically different conceptions of what the meaning of the alternate-history genre as a whole is. Matthew Schneider-Meyerson claims that "The alternate history novel [...] is not just, as some critics argue, about rewriting history, but a test of the limits of historical imagination. If indeed there has been or will be an expansion in the popular or national imagination of what is possible, counterfactual literature may serve as one canary in the coal mine."[426] Looking mostly at America and its fight against fascism in the context of contemporary neoconservatism, Schneider-Meyerson is rather topical in his application of what the genre might mean in political terms and in the context of actual change that he views as necessary in America. Thankfully, neither *Gravity's Rainbow* nor *Insatiability* could possibly be seen as a "canary in a coal mine" as regards testing the limits of the historical imagination, as a good deal

[426] Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, "What Almost Was: The Politics of the Contemporary Alternate History Novel," *American Studies* 50, no. 3/4 (2009): 63–83, at 79.

of their alternativity plays out in terms of racism and violence. In his essay about the alternate history novels of American Science Fiction, Geoffrey Winthrop-Young makes a comparable claim, writing that "SF [is] a genre that explores the divide between what is and what could be [and] Alternate History [...] exploits the divide between what was and what could have been."[427] Fascinatingly, Marlène Laruelle posits alternate history as a necessary condition for the success of nationalism in Russia. Though she references alternate-history fiction, she is dealing more with alternate histories that happen to be fictional and are presented as propaganda by the state. She writes that:

> Nationalist types of alternate history shed light on the fact that the national narrative does not always reflect rational or conventional stances, nor involve articulated argumentation. Indeed, conspiracy theories and the nationalist imaginary of a forgotten immemorial Russian Empire appeal to the public by merely playing with the historical imagination, a ploy that brings them close to fiction—or even to science fiction.[428]

Focusing on Fomenko's fictional *New Chronology*, an act of fictitious scholarship proposing that a "Russian Horde" had essentially conquered and ruled over the entire globe for quite a long time, Laruelle asks how Fomenko's readership actually approaches his work, then, appealing to Alexei Yurchak's *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More*, also wonders if they aren't engaging in a performative act of reproducing the state's ideology when they read.

All of these critical texts concur that alternate-history fiction "tests the world" much like Bakhtin's Menippean satire tests ideas. In his book about Rabelais, Bakhtin writes that "the

[427] Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, "Fallacies and Thresholds: Notes on the Early Evolution of Alternate History," *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 34, no. 2 (128) (2009): 116.

[428] Marlène Laruelle, "Conspiracy and Alternate History in Russia: A Nationalist Equation for Success?" *Russian Review* 71, no. 4 (2012): 565–80, at 580.

power of very physical images to satirize, or otherwise comment upon, ideas lies at the heart of Menippean satire."[429] This might also bring to mind Sloterdijk's globe being bubbled out into a foam, in which "discrete and polyvalent games of reason must develop that learn to live with a shimmering diversity of perspectives, and dispense with the illusion of the one lordly point of view."[430] Sloterdijk follows this definition up with the injunction, "Most roads do not lead to Rome—that is the situation, European: recognize it."[431] Alternate-history fiction recognizes that, if we take Rome to be the present historical moment, then there were many roads that did not lead to it and were not followed, but that might still be worth going down in attempt to test the ontology of the world in a way that draws from both McHale's definition of postmodernism (as characterized by ontological instability[432]) and Bakhtin's engagement with the Menippean satire. Phenomenologically speaking, it also bears asking whether alternate histories do not force the totality of all networks of meaning that make up the world to entirely malfunction. Do alternate histories, like brokenness and excess, also force the alien guts of the world's objects out to their surfaces?

Gravity's Rainbow*: Aberrant and still incomprehensible*

[429] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 24.

[430] Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 72.

[431] Ibid, 72.

[432] In referring to the ontological certainty inherent to postmodernism he claims to exist, McHale writes: "'Postmodernist?' Whatever we may think of the term, however much or little we may be satisfied with it, the referent of postmodernism, the *thing* to which the term claims to refer, *does not* exist." See Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987), 4.

In any case, the aberrant idiocy of Fomenko's series of *scholarly* novels, with its claims that Andronikos I Komnenos, crucified in 1152 AD overlooking the Bosphorus, was the prototype for Jesus, that the Hagia Sophia is the Temple of Solomon, and that Ancient Rome was actually in Egypt, is probably the most useful iteration of an alternate history upon which to build in dealing with *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Insatiability*. Pynchon's book, which shall be treated first given its relative similarity to *Lookout Cartridge*, inhabits a version of Europe during World War II that is both recognizable and jumbled in equal measure. While the V-2 rocket is a famous piece of military technology, its being dropped on all of the places in London where Tyrone Slothrop, the protagonist, has had sex because of obscene experiments done on him as a child by a pedophilic German scientist using the plastic that the rocket is made out of, Imipolex-G, is a desacralization of a historical phenomenon.[433] Unlike in McElroy, in whose books such objects are unaltered and treated in enormously dry detail, Pynchon has a legibly satirical intent in his desacralization thereof. His references to film and popular music also seem to play for laughs, as they both wear away at the distinction between high and low culture and show the line between media and real life begin to fade. Brian Edwards writes that "Pynchon's film references create a lively sense of play while according a leading place to this form of popular culture as an expression of people's lives."[434] Fascinatingly, it might be possible to claim that these film and music references are not as removed from the world's networks of meaning as objects and structures of power are; in other words, they malfunction less. As Scott Simmon writes,

[433] Here, we might also think of the desacralization of discourses that Lipovetsky identifies as being at play in Sorokin's work (see Chapter 8 of *Russian Literature Since 1991*, ed. Mark Lipovetsky and Evgeny Dobrenko (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[434] Brian Edwards, "Mixing Media: Film as Metaphor in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*," *AJAS* 1, no. 3 (1982): 1–15, at 15.

Gravity's Rainbow mimics the genre films that came out in Hollywood in the 30s and 40s so as to "[probe] into the desires and fears which created Western Civilization and which Gravity's Rainbow suggests may destroy it [...] the American genre film is perhaps our most accurate reflection of popular desires and fears."[435] Even when Hollywood cinema is treated as a mere phenomenon among many others in the complex mixture of Pynchon's stew, the tropes that define it still do not become illegible, unlike many of the other phenomena within the text.[436]

But, as in *Lookout Cartridge*, the astonishing complex of the world's systems that are under analysis creates a certain authorial temptation to make them legible. Linda A. Westervelt writes that "what interests Pynchon are the ways in which the human activity of seeing patterns in events becomes the tendency to misconstrue reality by suspecting plots, a tendency, which causes a loss of humanness when it leads to a loss of self-control and projecting responsibility outwards."[437] She then affirms that, insomuch as the reader is dealing with a fiction made up of plots, they are tempted into the same relinquishment of control as Pynchon's characters are in order to understand. As with McElroy's work, Westervelt does not believe that Pynchon's systems-driven rearrangement of history can be understood in any logocentric sense. In Slothrop's journey to discover why the V-2 rockets are so attracted to his erections—a journey from which he eventually almost entirely disappears and gives way to other characters in a fractalized vision of a European "Zone" that contains a multitude of fictional countries—there is

[435] Scott Simmon, "Beyond the Theater of War: *Gravity's Rainbow* as Film," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1978): 347–63.

[436] This also brings to mind Nádas's statement quoted in the introduction about the impact of Hollywood on the American novel.

[437] Linda A. Westervelt, "'A Place Dependent on Ourselves': The Reader as System-Builder in *Gravity's Rainbow*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 22, no. 1 (1980): 69–90, 69.

no solution to any riddle other than a bomb being dropped on a cinema in the book's final pages. Stephen de Paul makes an interestingly object-oriented move when he defines the novel by way of one of the main objects treated in its pages, writing that "there is indeed a plastic quality to Pynchon's book, aside from its hero's quest for the secret plastic Imipolex-G, used in the construction of one particularly sinister V-2 rocket."[438] The final lines of this paper take on a wicked double meaning in the context of a phenomenological reading of the text: "In Pynchon's terms, the myth of the natural man is good if only in its capacity of reminding us that it is the historical man of *plasticity* that really exists."[439] This is a neat redefinition of the rhizome in Pynchon's work; the "plastic" is an impossible-to-logocentrically-systematize rhizome that also has its origins in an alternate-history iteration of a desacralized historical object. Thinking of the V-2's screaming across the sky, one might claim that the narrative's *erect and parabolic plasticity* also defines the disintegrating structure of Slothrop's journey. As Heather Pokotylo writes, "Thus the main criticism leveled against Gravity's Rainbow, that it is 'incomprehensible' [...] becomes one of its primary successes: that it is able to overload the history of progression of organic narration and refract this into a multiplicity of virtualities that overrun the text."[440] These virtualities can be identified as the unnatural and excessive phenomena that undo the book's ability to narrate events.

For my phenomenological reading of the text in line with the objective and symphonic excess that is constitutive of malfunctioned worldhood, most important are not Pynchon's over-

[438] Stephen de Paul, "Plastic and the Parabola: The New Vocabulary of Attention in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*," *CEA Critic* 49, no. 2/4 (1986): 180–84, at 180.

[439] Ibid, 185.

[440] Heather Pokotylo, "Film Break: Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema*, and the Emergence of a New History" (PhD diss., McGill University, 2006), 107.

the-top references to the entertainment industry, but the V-2 rocket, Impolex-G, the Schwarzgerät, the Schwarzkommando, and the Zone. The Schwarzkommando is a fictional unit of Herero soldiers working for the Nazis who eventually develop a suicide cult around the V-2 rocket and the Schwarzgerät is a device related to a missing rocket that Slothrop ends up (ostensibly) looking for on his journey. In a characteristically rhizomatic passage, Pynchon describes Slothrop laid up in Berlin at some point on his journey, comparing him to Tannhäuser from Wagner's[441] opera:

> Later in Berlin, down in the cellar among fever-dreams with shit leaking out of him at gallons per hour, too weak to aim more than token kicks at the rats running by with eyes fixed earnestly noplace, trying to make believe they don't have a newer and dearer status among the Berliners, at minimum points on his mental health chart, when the sun is gone so totally it might as well be for good, Slothrop's dumb idling heart sez: The Schwarzgerät is no Grail, Ace, that's not what the G in Imipolex G stands for. And you are no knightly hero. The best you can compare with is Tannhäuser, the Singing Nincompoop—you've been under one mountain at Nordhausen, been known to sing a song or two with uke accompaniment, and don'tcha feel you're in a sucking marshland of sin out here, Slothrop? maybe not the same thing William Slothrop, vomiting a good part of 1630 away over the side of that Arbella, meant when he said "sin." . . . But what you've done is put yourself on somebody else's voyage—some Frau Holda, some Venus in some mountain—playing her, its, game… you know that in some irreducible way it's an evil game. You play because you have nothing better to do, but that doesn't make it right. And where is the Pope whose staff's gonna bloom for you?[442]

The swirl of names and thoughts, more legible and humorous than McElroy's texts, but still proceeding through objects, names, and images at a breakneck pace, is structured entirely around the Schwarzgerät and the Imipolex-G. Especially given Slothrop's eventual disappearance within

[441] Wagner is yet another one of the cultural references that gets ground into the sausage of Pynchon's text.

[442] Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 370.

the Zone and near-absence from the last quarter of the novel,[443] it is these alternate-history phenomena that are the entire scaffolding on which the text rests. Without them, perhaps, someone like Katsman would be right to call the book a chaos novel. But with them, the text is highly structured, even in its excessive deliriums. In this respect, I would refer to Dana Medoro's brilliant image of the "divination sieve" as necessary to filter through the excess of *Gravity's Rainbow*. She writes that:

> If there is a serpent in this American Eden, it may not be such a bad thing to find. This cosmological vision must be sifted or strained out of the discourses that contain it—just as the reader strains to understand the complexities of *Gravity's Rainbow*. This experience of sifting is, unlike the hunt for Slothrop, as much about losing things as about catching them.[444]

In my reading of Pynchon's novel, it is not a cosmological mystery the reader must sift for, but, to borrow a Poundian concept, alternate-history phenomena of "ideogrammic" importance and signifying power. It is by sifting these out that the reader can come to the final meaning of the novel, which is, in fact, nothing more than these phenomena unto themselves, laid out onto a table like Duchampian readymades.[445]

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[443] Here, we might think of Ishmael's comparable disappearance from the middle stretch (the meat) of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, a novel often considered to be postmodern *avant la lettre*.

[444] Dana Medoro, "The Sieve and the Rainbow Serpent: Bleeding *Gravity's Rainbow*," *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 28, no. 2 (1998): 186–213, at 210.

[445] Paul Bové makes a somewhat comparable claim, writing that "Reading [*Gravity's Rainbow*] is a discipline that purges settled forms of anthropocentric historical narrative by working obsessively through its forms and their entangled consequences in the creation. The result is a terrible beauty that puts history in place to welcome its derivative and subaltern relation to the entanglements of life." For my reading of the novel, one should read "forms" as "phenomena," which also isn't a line of argumentation alien to Bové's in the article. See Paul A. Bové, "History and Fiction: The Narrative Voices of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 50, no. 3 (2004): 657–80, at 677.

Another similarly excessive passage dealing with these alternate-history phenomena of "ideogrammic" power tells of the German filmmaker Der Springer who once made a propaganda film for the US about these African Nazis, but with white people wearing blackface. He uses the idea that his film called the actual Schwarzkommando into being as a way of offering himself up to make a film version of the Argentinian national epic *Martín Fierro*:

> Since discovering that Schwarzkommando are really in the Zone, leading real, paracinematic lives that have nothing to do with him or the phony Schwarzkommando footage he shot last winter in England for Operation Black Wing, Springer has been zooming around in a controlled ecstasy of controlled megalomania. He is convinced that his film has somehow brought them into being. "It is my mission," he announces to Squalidozzi, with the profound humility that only a German movie director can summon, "to sow in the Zone seeds of reality. The historical moment demands this, and I can only be its servant. My images, somehow, have been chosen for incarnation. What I can do for the Schwarzkornrnando I can do for your drearn of pampas and sky."[446]

This brings to mind Cartwright's possible transformation into a camera: a structuring recorder that gives order to the world in perceiving it as itself a transcendental signifier that borders on the metaphysical. Heather Pokotylo explains exactly what's at stake in Springer's (whose real name is von Göll) megalomania:

> Within each of these different takes on the actual, "paracinematic" existence of the Schwarzkommando, there seems to be a grain of truth. Looked at from the perspective of the creative, generative powers of the false, however, the question becomes not "how did the Schwarzkommando become real" but rather, "how could the Schwarzkornrnando not come into being?" Von Göll's film, like its creator, has moved through a series of becomings that started with a forgery, and becomes, through the artist's power of the false, transformed into its opposite—something real.[447]

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[446] Ibid, 388.

[447] Heather Pokotylo, "Film Break: Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema*, and the Emergence of a New History" (PhD diss., McGill University, 2006), 72.

Like the Zone, the V-2, and the Schwarzgerät,[448] the Schwarzkommando is a very politically charged re-rendering of historical fact. Unlike in Fomenko's case, wherein the Russian horde is a nationalistic and ideological conceit, there is no clear message to be drawn from the existence of an African-suicide-cult division within the German army, the idea of a pedophilic scientist experimenting upon an American child with the plastic that will be used in the construction of the V-2 rocket, or what is, for the majority of the text, the ideogrammatic impenetrability of the word "Schwarzgerät."

Whereas the excessive malfunctioning of the world and the way names are forced to wear their alien guts on their sleeves in *Lookout Cartridge* is purely a function of the excessive "semioblitz" of modernity, Pynchon adds an extra layer of foreignness, difficulty, and fantasy, in which the only legible message is desacralization. Phenomena are already incomprehensible before they've even become excessive, therefore doubly malfunctioning. Yet, paradoxically, this double-malfunction is what actually makes Pynchon's intention clearer than McElroy's to the general reader, as the intentional incomprehensibility is obviously ascribable to authorial intent. Indeed, Pynchon is testing the world, as Bakhtin sees other writers of Menippean satires as testing ideas. And not just testing the world, but also the phenomena within it: testing to see if the toxic cocktail of perversion, violence, and racism inscribed onto the surfaces of the alternate phenomena that structure his texts would be possible in the real world—if they really *stick out* all that much.[449] At the same time, these phenomena remain incomprehensible and excessive, even

[448] Which quite possibly ends up being the device that holds Gottfried, the victim of the German pedophile Blicero, who also conducted the experiments on Slothrop, *in* the rocket during the novel's explosive finale.

[449] The dueling qualities of meaning and meaninglessness in an alternate reality are comparably at play in the ideogrammic image of Stalin injecting himself with a drug under the tongue in Sorokin's *Голубое*

if they are possible—alternate roads leading to the Rome of the present day. This symphony of plastic, military technology, and black-face militias in propaganda films is not meant to cohere into any tree-shaped narrative, but shall certainly comment on the real phenomena of which it represents an intentional distortion. Here, it is worth remembering that just because something is perverse, aberrant, racist, or violent does not mean it has been comprehended; these are mere qualities that are appended on top of the incomprehensible, adjectives and not nouns. Pynchon's alternate phenomena are all of those adjectives, yet still signify nothing. Kathryn Hume and Thomas J. Knight make a beautiful point about music as a phenomenon within the broader context of the unknowability and incomprehensibility of Pynchon's text, writing:

> Pynchon shows man using and creating music, but such music seems to speak as well for other arts. What Pynchon implies about musical creation applies to his own verbal art, and the justification for music—including its ability to create pattern and rhythm, and its oracular force—compellingly justifies Pynchon's own art. We as readers cannot know events fully, let alone characters and their motives. But this sort of unknowability does not preclude adequate communication, prophecy, and spectacular fiction, any more than the unknowabilities in our own lives precluding them.[450]

I assent with Hume and Knight in their claim that the novel is about *that which remains legible within a broader framework that is unknowable*. What phenomena from the world retain their shape and resonance even when surrounded by the confused medium of a wildly alternate

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сало [*Blue Lard*] (1999). The fact that this is the most popular image in Stalin's cult of personality in Sorokin's novel is both intensely meaningful for what it suggests about the idiocy of Soviet power—even such a meaningless and aberrant image might well have become something like an Andrei Rublyov icon, Sorokin suggests—but, still, the reader doesn't even know what the drug in Stalin's syringe is.

[450] Kathryn Hume and Thomas J. Knight, "Pynchon's Orchestration of *Gravity's Rainbow*," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 85, no. 3 (1986): 366–85, at 385.

history? For Pynchon, the answer seems to be both the beauty and power of art and cinema *and* the aberrations of racism, violence, and scatological sexuality.

Insatiability: Still aberrant, but all feelings and no objects

In terms of its broader conceptual construction, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's *Insatiability* is rather similar to *Gravity's Rainbow*. Witkiewicz was very taken with a sort of *fin de siècle* decadence he drew forward well into the 20th century. He eventually committed suicide when the Soviets invaded Poland, afraid of being persecuted for (or prevented from pursuing) his decadent lifestyle. He also convinced his young lover to attempt suicide with him, but she survived. As E. J. Czerwinski somewhat ridiculously writes of the whole affair

> The Olympian sexual drive in both [Witkiewicz's] males and females makes them seem more acutely aware of life. The violent action that accompanies the sexual act is Witkacian irony, his own existential belief that ultimately led to his suicide in 1939, that action is life and life is, so long as man acts. The final act is suicide or art—except in art where the artist's vision transcends logic.[451]

This philosophy differentiates the maximalism of *Insatiability* from the gray gothicism of semi-transgressive Polish works of art by Witold Gombrowicz and Roman Polanski that have often defined the Polish artistic palette in the eyes of the English-speaking world. The novel tells the story of a new Chinese horde invading all of Europe and taking it over.[452] It focuses on a young soldier named Genezip Kapen and his highly transgressive love affairs, as well as the perpetual

[451] E. J. Czerwinski, "Witkiewicz on Witkacy," *The Polish Review* 18, no. 1/2 (1973): 10–13, at 11.

[452] Which calls to mind the propagandistic conceit of the Russian horde discussed in the previous section.

abuse of drugs engaged in by everyone around him. The fact that a Chinese leader named Murti Bing is forcing everyone to take a special pill called "DAVAMESK B 2," which facilitates the writing of something like Socialist Realism has been the most commented-on aspect of the book as a function of Czesław Miłosz's chapter about it in *The Captive Mind*. But that conceit is the mere scaffolding on which the excessive focus on bodily states of exception and a kind of psychedelic interior phenomenology of stimulants and psychedelics is hung. Frank Galassi identifies this total excess of interior and erotic affect as a "parody of the Polish aristocracy."[453] He also compares the excessive and impenetrable method of letting the exposition exist in great chunks of "INFORMATION" that interrupt the otherwise merely sexual and drug-fuelled narrative to Dos Passos's inclusion of newspaper scraps.[454] Galassi's article finally claims that Witkiewicz was obsessed with decadent "demonicism" because "he was enveloped in the absurdity of historical events and human choices" and "his trauma was so intense that he could not see beyond the occurrences of September 1939."[455] According to Galassi, it is for this reason that the "demonicism" of spiritual excess—of a different nature than the excess of products in Zola—rhymes with the hysterical quality of totalitarian society. Perhaps this helps to explain why Witkiezwicz's text reproduces the racism of totalitarianism—directed against Chinese and Jewish people—in a decadent and satirical mode. David Gerould describes the origins of this feverish attitude:

> Thoroughly—although ironically—Euro-centric, the author of *Insatiability* most often presents the invading forces as coming from the outside, representing a different culture that will subvert moribund old

[453] Frank Galassi, "The Catastrophic Society: S. I. Witkiewicz's *Insatiability*," *The Polish Review* 25, no. 1 (1980): 34–48, at 36.

[454] Ibid, 36.

[455] Ibid, 48.

> world values. In his first literary work, the one-act comedy *Cockroaches*, which at the age of 7 Witkacy [a childish nickname] printed on his own hand-press, a menacing gray object in the sky drawing closer and closer is revealed to be a cloud of cockroaches from America.[456]

The irony of a man who committed suicide because of the encroaching creep of totalitarianism being a somewhat unreflective Eurocentrist isn't lost on Gerould. As he later claims, there are multiple webs of excess that frame the novel: European excess as insatiability, which can be split up into individual, sexual, substance-based, intellectual, and demonic instabilities, history as an excess of fact that cannot be woven into the fabric of life (as it exists parallel to it), and a racist vision of eastern excess—the masses of Chinese soldiers echoing the masses of American cockroaches coming over the sea in the young Witkiewicz's fantasy. As he did in life, Witkiewicz retreats from the excess of history into the excess of definitionally European insatiability, killing himself in real life when he saw such hedonistic behavior as no longer possible in the face of an impending horde. As Galassi writes:

> Thus, European metaphysical quests—the essential expression of insatiability—are replaced by two instant ideologies, both from the East: mystic Murti-Bingism and materialistic Chinese communism. Opposed as these two at first may seem, in Witkacy's view both are designed to eliminate the conscious thinking mind and the inevitable suffering which it brings. The pill softens up the already demented and debilitated Europeans so that they can painlessly adjust to the political control which will definitively liberate them from their own madness and despair and turn them into smoothly functioning members of the state machine.[457]

There is a way in which the dueling excesses, or insatiabilities, of Witkiewicz's text are more comprehensible than those of Pynchon's. However, this is not reflected on the level of the

[456] Daniel Gerould, "Review of *Witkiewicz in Translation*, by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz and Louis Iribarne," *Science Fiction Studies* 6, no. 3 (1979): 342–44, at 342.

[457] Ibid, 344.

sentence and the paragraph; if anything, Witkiewicz's insatiable symphony, determined to eviscerate the alien guts of excessive European experience and bring them out into the light of narrative within endlessly wordy paragraphs, presents a less cogent vision than *Gravity's Rainbow* does during the experience of reading.

For example, in most genre fiction, the term "data dump" is used as a pejorative term to describe when an author does not weave world-building information neatly enough into the text.[458] In line with the conceptual conceit of history's *unweavability* into the fabric of personal experience, Witkiewicz makes these symphonies of alternate-history phenomena intentionally indigestible. Here is one such "INFORMATION" passage, in which there is quite a bit of anti-Chinese racism, as well as snarky remarks against Jews, the passage presented at only a quarter of its length in the book:

> INFORMATION: The country was being turned into a gigantic waiting room, gripped by a wild anticipation the likes of which have not been recorded in human history. Not even the Jews waited for the Messiah the way our people awaited the unknown. The chief pastime—aside from the automated-to-the-point-of-idiocy shift put in by every citizen in his or her own little sphere[459]—had become "waiting for the sake of waiting" ("*die Ewartung an und für sich*"). Even the Syndicate for National Salvation (=once and for all SNS) ("The Society for Nervous Sissies," as the shades of ex-communists had it) was in a strangely lethargic mood, having deferred in panic to the unknown deeds of Kotzmolochowicz. The general, as mysterious as ever (nobody was sure which political side he was on, and nobody ventured to inquire), was madly organizing the army, preparing it for feats unknown. Whom he intended to slaughter no one could say, not even he: he was as much an enigma to himself as to others, perhaps even more so—therein lay his strength. In those days of omniscience and unbridled introspection, not knowing what one wanted was more difficult than knowing. Moscow had been taken. Separating Poland from the Chinese avalanche was a belt of "buffer" (or "puffed-up") grand duchies: Lithuania, White Russia, and the Ukraine, where an

[458] This sort of "data-dumping" often being the function of video-game cut-scenes. Cf. Daniel Punday, "Involvement, Interruption, and Inevitability: Melancholy as an Aesthetic Principle in Game Narratives," *SubStance* 33, no. 3 (2004): 80–107.

[459] Is this not an apt description of a foam in Sloterdijk's mode?

> indescribable and utterly ordinary chaos reigned. From Romania, which had already been overrun by the Chinese, there was no news as yet. No cause for alarm; those "yellow monkeys" (resentment was growing) would not advance any farther. No one dreamed this state of affairs would last a lot longer than had been anticipated. In fact, only Kotzmolochowicz—and perhaps those of his immediate circle, though certainly not to the same degree—was relaxed (that was unquestionably his *perihelium*). No one who knew his fearless valor would have accused him of personal cowardice; yet among the "sabre rattlers" some panicky souls were shyly hinting that he should attack first before the Chinese had a chance to organize Russia in their own fashion. Meanwhile, strange things were going on in the only land where surprises were still possible. With the "worldwide" ban on the use of chemical gases and airplanes for warfare (the former were deployed in the realm of internal warfare as "psychic gases"; the latter as transportation) proclaimed by the all-powerful League in Defense of a More Humane War (headquartered in Caracas, Venezuela), which everyone, including the Chinese (thanks to Confucius, the only true gentlemen on our globe), observed with the utmost rigor, the chemical and aeronautic industries had ground to a halt.[460]

Whereas in *Insatiability*, the excessive symphonies of historical excess are presented in passages like this alongside the decadent interiority of aristocratic characters—journeys through the minds of depraved individuals who would easily find a home in the actual history of Nádas's *Parallel Stories*—the same overwhelming cauldrons of phenomena in Pynchon's book completely determine his character's lives, a fact represented by the main objects that I claim structure the text. Furthermore, the peripheral events and references to things other than the pill and Murti Bing in passages like this in *Insatiability* are never even remotely explained—they remain almost entirely opaque. This is similar to Sorokin's method in *Blue Lard* and, in fact, presages it; the reader is presented with an incomprehensible and unreal world, no less dense than the one which they inhabit, but for the fact that it happens to be an alternate reality. This is a form of world-building, in which the appearance of density and distance that characterize the real world are

[460] Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, *Insatiability*, trans. Louis Iribarne (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 238–39.

created by a method of intentional incomprehensibility, but, in the case of Pynchon and Witkiewicz, they are not so much interested in world-building as in making a fundamental point about the nature of historical phenomena. In Witkiewicz's case, these phenomena are like a news sidebar scrolling alongside depravity, whereas, in Pynchon, they utterly dictate the course of events, but still never become comprehensible. Other than the general drift of the "INFORMATION" and the anti-Chinese sentiment, none of the passage's references to strange organizations, drugs, alternate iterations of old countries, or proper names mentioned ever recur or play any role in the protagonist Zip's narrative.

The sorts of excessive symphonies the reader does wade through in Zip's narration are, again, much like the 200-page sex scene in Nádas's *Parallel Stories*. The lengthy state of exception does not actually create incomprehension as a function of its intense zooming-in on bodily phenomena. On the contrary, the point of this excess becomes almost too legible, unlike in *Gravity's Rainbow*, in which the incomprehensibility of historical phenomena is mirrored on the level of the body. *Insatiability*, then, more resembles *Remember Famagusta*, in that the excessively erotic subject matter becomes an all-too-legible life-preserver for the reader to grapple onto in stormy seas. As Czerwinski affirms, "The emphasis on scatology and sexual games in all of Witkacy's plays [Witkiewicz was also a playwright] is also a way to hold to audience's attention."[461] Late in the novel, for instance, as an example of such "attention-holding," Zip has sex with his new wife, before abruptly killing her (only escaping corporeal punishment for this misdeed because the Chinese have invaded and he submits to them):

> How marvelous Eliza was in her depravity! Everything in her that had appeared sacred, aloof, and distant in its expression (her eyes, her mouth, her gestures) now acquired a bestial aspect, without losing in sanctity:

[461] E. J. Czerwinski, "Witkiewicz on Witkacy," *The Polish Review* 18, no. 1/2 (1973): 10–13, at 11.

> such was how an angel-become-pervert might have looked. Everything that Zip had found serenely, sublimely, inviolably beautiful in her was suddenly set ablaze by the powerful fire of the body—not that statuelike body, but the real one, palpable in its indecencies, odors, and even (ah!) its blemishes. Therein lay the terrific erotic allure: namely, that such an angel (*tout court*), with a face as beautiful as a sunset-tinged cloud in a violet evening sky, could boast such legs, such magnificent, well-shaped calves of living flesh, and such hideousness that, without ceasing to be such, constituted, *at the very same time*, an unfathomable miracle. Hence the diabolical power of such things; the mysterious, forever incomprehensible pleasure they can bestow: the sinister, despondent—like all things too profound—pleasure. All the same, what could be more humiliating for a man than the sexual act? As a bestial relaxation enjoyed by warriors after battle, as an expression of male conquest over his female captive, it was tolerable. But in our day - what an abomination! Children and domestic life were something else again, though even these had been drastically transformed; the stultified and beleaguered male of today could hardly be compared to the paterfamilias of the past. Leaving aside some primitive forms of matriarchy, true "bagiarchy" a modern phenomenon. No one has triumphed more fully over the world and the mystery of the personality than women. Oh, if that moron Ovsusenko, chief Taylorizor in the erotic realm, could have beheld Zip and the innocent Liz right now! All the seemingly wasted motions invented by this couple! At one point Zip's body was convulsed as though he had been bitten by a scorpion. He would have to make up for lost time and lost opportunities; if infinity was not to be his, here was something to take its place.[462]

Witkiewicz's descriptions are, as a rule, very colorful ("sunset-tinged cloud in a violet evening sky") and his images are often incongruent, obscene, and specific ("angel-become-pervert," "bestial relaxation enjoyed by warriors after battle," "bitten by a scorpion"). Some incomprehensible names have invaded the passage—"Ovsusenko, chief Taylorizor in the erotic realm"—and certain plays on words strike the reader as a touch "lost in translation"—"bagiarchy"—but the lead-up to the murder in the passage is crystal clear in all of its erotic excess. This is because, as a rule, symphonies of sensuous or sexual excess do eventually lose

[462] Ibid, 486.

meaning, as in the 200-page scene in *Parallel Stories* or in any of the early novels by Guyotat,[463] but it takes rather a lot longer than it does for Zola's lists of cheese to yield up their alien guts. The lengthy state of sensuous exception must be pursued for much longer than the merely objective as presented in, for example, *Lookout Cartridge* in order to produce the same effect of malfunctioning networks of meaning. The "early-film" (to quote Jameson) style of cataloging commodities too quickly without any elucidation is not nearly as titillating as long-take pornography. Sexual arousal is more easily inflamed than Dasein's interest in objects; the latter requires a network of everyday meaning, one that is absent from *Lookout Cartridge*. To put it simply, Witkiezwicz's eroticism is not excessive or drawn-out enough to produce an effect other than the sort of B-movie tawdriness to be found in Giallo horror films; it operates in precisely the same mode.

What the reader is finally left with in *Insatiability* is incomprehensible historical phenomena presented as excessive and indigestible data dumps alongside sensuous phenomena that are a prototypical version of Nádas's lengthy state of exception, but are not lengthy enough to create erotic alienation. As a result, the "insatiability of the European soul" isn't criticized, but celebrated. What then ends up being most memorable at the end of the novel are two racist tirades presented without any shred of distance. After Zip has killed his wife and the Chinese have taken over, they execute his superior, a general nicknamed the "Great Slob." The General's wife Persy, the reader is made to understand, has always had the hots for Zip and immediately throws herself at him: "That night [...] Persy became Zip's lover who, for all intents a robot, 'possessed her sans pleasure.' [...] Afterward, Persy went to bed with the Chinese chief of staff,

[463] See *Eden, Eden, Eden* and *A Tomb for 500,000 Soldiers*, novels, in which, as in Sade's work, sex and violence entirely lose their titillating qualities and become entirely stultifying exhibitions of atrocities performed at war.

even though he reeked like a corpse, and with still other 'Chinks,' even though they, too reeked like corpses."[464] In any case, Zip let her do "as she pleased," as his Europeanness has been dulled by Murti Bing's pill. Finally, in the very last line of the text, while describing anti-Chinese riots that break out in Poland, Witkiewicz writes that "the situation degenerated into something that the Polish language is ill-equipped to describe. One day, perhaps, some very learned Chinese with the incorrigible soul of a 'Chink' might be able to record all this in English, provided he could look at it with un-Chinese eyes. But this is highly unlikely."[465] So much for incomprehensible phenomena presented in the context of an alternate reality… These words are far too direct not to pull the reader out of Witkiewicz's world and into our own, in which such racist attitudes are all too common. Oddly enough, according to Daniel Gerould's critical biography of Witkiewicz, the writer was "in his own words a semitophile and an enemy of racism, Witkacy was throughout his career fascinated by Jews. In his youth, according to his father, he was constantly surrounded by Polish Jews and became briefly engaged to one in 1912."[466] In that case, then, Witkiewicz's treatment of racism and antisemitism would be the depiction of a worldly phenomenon that he takes no position on within the narrative. Again, however, as with the sex and depravity, that racism is much more legible than all the other elements of the novel that surround it.

As in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Witkiewicz's perspective on the incomprehensibility and ridiculousness of historical phenomena is impossible to miss or misunderstand. Writing this

[464] Ibid, 522.

[465] Ibid, 524.

[466] Daniel Gerould, *Witkacy: Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz as an Imaginative Writer* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 203.

novel in the 20s, he predicted many of the imperial anxieties that would be directed toward China later in the 20th century and into the 21st. In his testing of the world, Witkiewicz also foresees a good deal of *foaminess*, neatly encapsulated by the "INFORMATION" sections. But, by creating two entirely parallel streams, one for incomprehensible historical phenomena and one for sensuousness and the libido, the novel effectively becomes entirely about sex, drugs, and racism. After all, as Deleuze and Guattari contend in *Anti-Oedipus*, any and all participation in a system of power is a libidinous act. As they write, "libidinal economy is no less objective than political economy, and the political no less subjective than the libidinal, even though the two correspond to two modes of different investments of the same reality as social reality."[467] Unlike in Pynchon's novel, in which it is impossible to separate state-of-exception phenomena from paranoia-inspiring historical phenomena, Witkiewicz's novel leaves the reader feeling as if they've just spent 500 pages at a very bizarre and racist orgy without its author having interrogated the incomprehensibility of worldhood or existing hierarchies. Ironically, with its sternly religious and nationalistic lack of excessive sexual content, Fomenko's semi-scholarly text might be more likely to encourage readers to question worldhood as it exists than Witkiewicz's. In any case, given the malfunctioning networks of meaning at play in both *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Insatiability* and the intentional incomprehensibility of their alternate histories, all of the reader's attention is drawn toward the phenomena within the world of the text, whether that be a V-2 rocket, a pedophilic plastic, or nymphomaniacal sex with a corpse-smelling "Chink" officer, these phenomena are all the reader has to grapple onto. In both Witkiewicz and Pynchon's cases, alternate history and excessive phenomena make a neat and

[467] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 345.

easy-to-understand point about the chaos of history and, finally, the futility of human attempts to engage with or understand history. In the context of a broader ontology that makes no sense, all the reader can do is look to phenomena. Here, Husserl's central maxim that phenomenology it is a field of study that allows philosophers to go "back to the things themselves"[468] is relevant. Both Husserl and these excessive writers attempt to describe the phenomena that exist within an incomprehensible framework—"die Dinge an sich"—and understand the world through them.

Excess and Worldhood: what's come of this dialectical movement outwards…

For both Pynchon and Witkiewicz, alternate realities are a simple way to depict the meaninglessness of historical phenomena by first altering them. To be sure, alternate realities treble the meaninglessness of phenomena that are presented excessively and without explanation; their meaning is malfunctioned all the more severely. As Heidegger writes, "Anything which is un-ready-to-hand in this way is disturbing to us, and enables us to see the obstinacy of that with which we must concern ourselves in the first instance before we do anything else."[469] This foaminess both makes phenomena more incomprehensible and more necessary to the reader's experience as the greater scaffolding of the text is completely incomprehensible.

Alternate histories do not end up being the driving force for difference between novels that present excessive symphonies of phenomena. What does is the refusal to totalize by way of subjective principle when attempting to deal with a world that is no longer entirely

[468] Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay (London: Routledge, 2015), 168.

[469] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 103.

comprehensible (if it is at all). Phenomenology is a paradoxical field of inquiry, as it refuses and attempts to destroy the "history of metaphysics," casting doubt on any *non-physical* claims, as well as ontic ones that purport to be ontological,[470] even while, on the other hand, being itself becomes the ultimate non-totalizing totalizing entity. That paradox is neatly encapsulated by Heidegger's statement that "So if it is said that 'Being' is the most universal concept, this cannot mean that it is the one which is clearest or that it needs no further discussion. It is rather the darkest of all."[471] In a second principle he claims to use so as to structure his book, the paradox becomes even more clear when he writes that "The indefinability of Being does not eliminate the question of its meaning; it demands that we look that question in the face."[472] This paradox is also at play in "The Origin of the Work of Art," in which Heidegger both discusses the simplicity of that which the artist is to bring into the clearing of Being (e.g. Van Gogh's painting of a pair of shoes), but ends up giving a strangely fascistic cast to his vision of the artist projecting meaning for his "Volk" into that clearing. As Heidegger somewhat ickily writes in that essay:

> Whenever art happens—that is, whenever there is a beginning—a thrust enters history; history either begins or starts over again. History here means not a sequence in time of events, of whatever sort, however important. History is the transporting of a people into its appointed task as entry into that people's endowment.[473]

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[470] While Heidegger is fairly straightforward in his definitions of things that exist within the framework of being as "ontic" and those that have to do with that very framework as "ontological," Herman Philipse is apt in his identification of a fundamental paradox of this division, writing that "consequently, Heidegger's ontology of Dasein turned out to depend on a specific ontic ideal, an ideal of authentic existence." Cf. Herman Philipse, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Being: A Critical Interpretation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 119.

[471] Ibid, 23.

[472] Ibid, 23.

[473] Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), 202.

To wit, Van Gogh's shoes are so important because they are merely shoes that exist within a network of meaning that comprises daily life, but, on the other hand, the reception of those shoes and their simple portrayal of being as such brings the Volk into its "appointed task." This paradox is very much at play with the writers discussed in the first chapter. Sloterdijk is also not immune to this paradox between descriptive and prescriptive phenomenologies.[474] Though he enjoins the modern European to recognize that "most roads do not lead to Rome," it would be impossible to claim that he is not nostalgic for the globe that defines the nation in the second book of the trilogy. At one point, he describes Goethe's creation of a statue with a perfect orb on a pedestal as a presentiment of the foaminess that is to be modernity:

> In the twilight of the orb epoch, a German poet would place a large orb of stone on a cubic pedestal on the property surrounding his summer house by the River IIm, outside the gates of Weimar as if it gave him satisfaction to declare his allegiance once more to the saturated world symbol of the Greeks against the dominant mentalities of the unfulfilled present with this provocatively pantheistic gesture, a tribute to fortune. In the shapes of cube and orb, the artist even resorted twice to geometric symbols of totality, each effecting a mediation between calm and movement in its own way. As if for the last time, the orb placer invoked the bright demonism of an unfragmented life in a complete world. When the young Goethe had his Altar of Good Fortune erected in April 1777, he addressed future generations with a hidden riddle whose answer was to be found in the times to come. In the light of the sphere tradition, the Weimar question to posterity can perhaps be formulated thus: what is to become of the orb in a time without kings-or: what is to become of the kings in a time without orbs?[475]

[474] This also relates to the paradox of Heidegger's work identified by Philipse: that the ontological first half of *Being and Time* is somehow forced into the profane historico-political meaning of the second half. Cf. Herman Philipse, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Being: A Critical Interpretation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[475] Peter Sloterdijk, *Foams*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014), 43.

Fascinatingly, Sloterdijk identifies the 18th century, what most historians would call the apex of nation-building, as being near the twilight of the orb. In this, an unfavorable reader might identify the reactionary anti-democratic tendency sometimes at play in Sloterdijk's work. But the Greeks invented democracy and, like many German philosophers before him, Sloterdijk seems inclined to identify them as an apex of "orbiness"—of encapsulated meaning that is necessarily non-rhizomatic. This paragraph's mournful elegy for encapsulated meaning runs directly against the current of the quoted pluralistic injunction to the modern European, but this paradox is never resolved.[476]

Alas, the desire to totalize takes over and transforms even phenomenology's wish to "return to the things themselves." In all four of the main books treated in this chapter, the main difference between the degree of success with which the authors portray an excess of foamy phenomena is what the totalizing force that lies behind the text is. In McElroy and Pynchon, the principle that underlies rhizome is intended to be an objective one. The fact of Cartwright's possibly becoming a god is not a literal transformation, but a reminder that all of the excessive phenomena within the text are still contained within the same system(s). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the impossibility of separating the incomprehensible strangeness of an alternate reality from the

[476] However, Kyle Dugdale comes close to encapsulating the issue with all of its contradictions when he writes that, "What is clear, nonetheless, is the centrality of architecture as a vocabulary through which to articulate the anxieties of a godless modernity. Indeed, architecture seems to be tied both to the problem and to the solution—both to the articulation of those insecurities and to their proposed alleviation. Just as literal architectures are expected to provide physical security, so metaphorical architectures are expected to provide metaphysical security. And in this respect, the route taken by Sloterdijk is clear. It is architecture that occupies the central position in his grand investigation of world consciousness." After this neat description, Dugdale immediately goes on to identify the origin of the project as a whole in volume two of Spengler's *Decline of the West*, a book mentioned in the trilogy by Spengler himself. So, while Sloterdijk is fairly objective in his descriptions of buildings and spaces, the phenomena at the center of his investigation, he also points to Spengler's literally fascistic philosophy as the origin of his project. Cf. Kyle Dugdale, "Die materielle Richtung der Utopieen: Uriel Birnbaum's Contribution to Sloterdijk's *Spheres*," *Utopian Studies* 25, no. 1 (2014): 194–216, at 200.

aberrant scatology and sexuality that defines it shows that the meaningless mechanics of history underpin everything—that even sex becomes a nasty sort of "shit-eating" in the 20th century and that even erections are conditioned by laboratory experiments involving plastics. In line with Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the rhizome as an alternate form of organization, neither McElroy nor Pynchon write chaos novels; they write texts preoccupied with excessive and, in Pynchon's case, alternate-history phenomena that are not structured by tree-like narratives. On the other hand, Goldshtein and Witkiewicz present two streams in their texts: the personal/sexual/excessive and the historical/political/excessive. As neither of them are as excessive in their treatment of the sensual as Nádas is in *Parallel Stories*, the characters having sex in *Remember Famagusta* and *Insatiability* keep their "alien guts" inside their body and the reader clings to hedonism amidst the incomprehensibility of history. The totalizing principles of the two books are Goldshtein's protruding erection and Witkiewicz's colorful demonicism, to refer back to Galassi's reading in the latter case. Neither of these tendencies mesh at all with the excessive historical sidebar scrolling alongside the text because, as noted before, historical phenomena and commodities give up their alien guts relatively quickly when described in too much detail, whereas sex and sensuous excess require literally hundreds of pages to create the same effect. As much as all four of these authors attempt to present phenomena merely as they are, they cannot avoid totalizing. And, even as they all fall on the "describe" side of Lukács's "Narrate or Describe?" dichotomy,[477] the question that differentiates them from each other is "Narrate or *Hierarchize*?" the more successful responses to this question made by McElroy and

[477] It also bears remembering Lukács's famous statement that "narration establishes proportions, description merely levels" in reference to the way these excessive symphonies "level" (or possibly even negate!) the structures of the texts they belong to. Cf. George Lukács, *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, trans. Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin Press, 1970), 127.

Pynchon thus creating hierarchy based on the more objective principles of systems and history. Goldshtein and Witkiewicz are entirely subjective in their excess and, as such, end up retreating back to the self as Céline and Proust do, incapable of following dialectical movement outward so as to encapsulate phenomena simply as they are. Insomuch as McElroy and Pynchon are successful in that movement, it is because their totalizing force is *the mere existence of a totality as such*, the same paradox at the heart of Heidegger's philosophy. The next dialectical movement, however, will make the totalizing impulses subliminally at play in this chapter seem positively chaotic—colloquially speaking, of course…

CHAPTER FOUR

ABJECT GEIST
WHEN PHENOMENOLOGY MEETS METAPHYSICS IN THE CONTEXT OF 20TH-CENTURY LITERATURE

"— Monseigneur, Pythagore faisait garder pendant cinq ans le silence à ses disciples pour leur apprendre à se taire.
" — Et vous l'avez gardé vingt ans, monsieur. C'est quinze ans de plus qu'un philosophe pythagoricien, ce qui me semble raisonnable."

Alexandre Dumas, Vingt ans après

What is Geist?

In a sense, it is possible to read the entirety of Hegel's polemic with the medieval concept of substance into the title of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*: Hegel does not posit Geist (Spirit) as an entity external to the human experience, but one that can be constructed by way of a phenomenology of extant things. Hegel's work represents an intermediate stage in the development of western philosophy. Whereas earlier theologians were often content to delineate the "substance" of the Godly as remote from human experience, Hegel attempts to show that the two are inextricably related. As Efraim Shmueli writes, "Hegel [identifies] reality with reason, [writing] 'What is reasonable is actual, what is actual is reasonable,' [meaning] by 'reason' not the human finite faculty of the mind and by 'actual' not that which is intelligible only to such a

mind."[478] Using a notion of "substance" as a stand-in for God that comes out of Spinoza's philosophy, Hegel shows that "Man's ideas are God's ideas. The emancipation of the human mind is essentially its emancipation from an unknown God of traditional Judeo-Christian theology."[479] To put it another way:

> Instead of creation of the world and the soul, they offer the emanation as physically and logically necessitated; instead of revelation both propose intuitive cognition to which the soul is capable, by its own natural power [...] The redemption of man through love of God is replaced by the climbing of the mind upwards, by which the way of descendence is reversed on the ascendence, through a series of logical operations.[480]

This series of logical operations is what Hegel outlines in the *Phenomenology*, a dialectical history of man's consciousness from the beginning of time to Hegel's era, as well as a theoretical extrapolation beyond his era to what he thought would be the dawning of Absolute Knowing—Man's knowledge that he himself is Spirit and the political and historical changes this necessitates. As has already been discussed in Chapter Two, once mankind knows itself to be God, Hegel seems to presume, they will also know everything else. As Peter Kalkavage writes:

> Absolute knowing emerges from the dialectical unpacking of the Christian God. This is not immediately evident from the text, where Hegel refers to God simply as the "object." His avoidance of the word "God" makes sense, since we are approaching the purely conceptual understanding of the divine and the purgation of religious images […] Once absolute knowing replaces piety, a new community will emerge, that of philosophic knowers. These devotees of reason will not oppose religion, like their enlightened predecessors, but explicate it.[481]

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[478] Efraim Shmueli, "Hegel's Interpretation of Spinoza's Concept of Substance," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 1, no. 3 (1970): 176–91, 176.

[479] Ibid, 191.

[480] Ibid, 191.

[481] Peter Kalkavage, *The Logic of Desire* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2007), 426–427.

Theology's vaunted endpoint is reached: the divine is seen as rational and actual, metaphysics is simply another branch of physics, and the end of Hegel's dialectical system has been attained.

Could one not say that Hegel was only able to make such claims because of his own position in history—at the beginning of the 19th century? What would become of his assertion that "What is reasonable is actual, what is actual is reasonable" in the 20th century? What would be the substance, Geist, and God collated out of the phenomena of 20th-century history? Writing in the wake of historical traumas, many 20th- and 21st-century writers answered the question of what an honest 20th-century metaphysics built from the phenomena of history might look like. Their depictions of this metaphysical system were viewed by many critics as satire, not to be taken seriously—the abjectness of their visions could not be in earnest. But, in arriving at an abject[482] mockery of a metaphysical system, were they not simply aping the historical conditions they had come to be in? Were these not the philosophic knowers of Absolute Knowing foreseen by Hegel? Any honest engagement with 20th-century history must end in a Geist that seems *unreasonable*, to be sure, but also one so extreme as not to seem *actual*…

As with the analysis of Handke's bibliography in Chapter One, there is some degree of scholastic irony at play in this chapter. Obviously, Hegel's "phenomenology" is rarely if ever referred to as "phenomenology" proper. Beyond that, there are very few philosophers who take seriously his idea that Substance or Geist is the integral of all extant phenomena. Hegel has outlived himself and, as discussed earlier in the dissertation, the upshot of his work has become far less important (barely important at all!) in comparison with his method—dialectical

[482] Referring back to the discussion of the abject in Chapter Two. When thinking of "abject" one might also think of the phrase "state of exception" that has occasionally been used in this dissertation.

reasoning. The philosophical framework that underpins this chapter is an academic reductio ad absurdum of Hegel's ideas, as well as a mirror of the way these authors engage with metaphysics. But the attentive reader will also find many of the less controversial attributes I have identified throughout this typology of phenomenological prose throughout the dissertation: spatiality, the abjectness of the body, and an excess of objects described. Only the legibility of history has changed position here, as, if we compare these books with, for example, *Parallel Stories*, we see that the phenomenological change that has occurred in concrete terms is history has gained the power of having a direct impact on and being reflected within the phenomena of the earthly world, itself a Hegelian notion not quite as wild as God being the integral of extant phenomena. In any case, I hope the reader will take this philosophical act of ventriloquism in the right *spirit*.

Generational Trouble in Warped Mourning

In examining literature after a period of intense national trauma, scholars often conceive of responses to trauma after the fact as being entirely distinct from responses to that same trauma that are articulated as it comes to pass; we might call these latter responses "coping mechanisms" or "contemporaneous forms of mourning." There is good reason for this particular attitude. In the Soviet context, for example, the writers who wrote directly in the wake of Stalin's horrific crimes against his country attempted to remember how things were in staunchly realistic terms, building verbal monuments to the suffering of their countrymen. This is also true in Europe. After World War II, European literature took on a mournful and realistic quality—many writers were taking stock of what had come to pass. This transition is perhaps best exemplified by

Sartre's movement from the experimental and the extreme with *La nausée* [*Nausea*] in 1938 to the banal chronicling of European history with his trilogy about the War, all three volumes of which were published in 1945 and 1946. But, as time goes on and national trauma becomes more and more distant, writers grow less concerned with the realistic consequences of traumatic acts and more fascinated with how its enactors conceived of themselves, sometimes even playing along with their particular ideological and philosophical systems of belief. In other words, as the therapeutic process ends up becoming more and more temporally removed from what happened, mourners find they have need of more creative ways to get to the root of their trauma. In doing so, they cease attempting to shed the cold light of day onto what happened in the depths of night and, perhaps, get closer to the lived truth of what happened.

Alexander Etkind's *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* is a remarkably astute analysis of the "memorial practices" that arose in the Soviet Union in the wake of the partial deconstruction of the violent systems erected by Stalin and responsible for terrorizing and torturing the Soviet people. The fifth chapter of the book—entitled "On Tortured Life and World Culture"—attempts to draw connections between several generations of art responding to the Soviet experience. Because it only became possible to discuss what had been happening in the Soviet Union in the wake of Stalin's death in 1953, Soviet literature from the 50s, 60s, and 70s is enormously preoccupied with issues of history, truth, and memory in comparison with the dominant postmodern idiom in the West during this same period, which, insomuch as it sometimes does return to traumas of the past, does so in order to carnivalize it and render it illegible from the perspective of traditional historical accounts. Here, we might think of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and the way in which it reshuffles, carnivalizes, and *queers* the history of WWII. It would be difficult to claim that

Pynchon's aim in using WWII as the raw material for his text is to memorialize the past. His disrespectful and uncanny treatment of the past, paradoxically, places the focus of his poetic on the future. At the end of this chapter, Etkind compares Soviet artists to archaeologists and diggers:

> This digger recovers facts like an archaeologist but also creates artifacts like an artist. It is all digging for him, and he does not separate the two roles—of the historian and the artist—that he plays in the process … Materializing memory in the public sphere often entails fiction rather than truth, allegories rather than facts, and irony rather than tragedy.[483]

This allusion to Benjamin's "digging man" is well-placed and there is no doubt that much of the historical seriousness of Soviet literature after Stalin's death could aptly be described as the work of "historian-artists." However, given the popular Soviet novels from this period that are entirely unironic, non-allegorical, and deeply realistic,[484] it is necessary to reconstruct Etkind's entire argument in the chapter in order to clarify how realistic, non-allegorical, non-ironic literature written by historian-artists might be related or give way to ironic, allegorical works that abandon the cold light of realism. I would like to differentiate the more restrained realism at play in works by Tolstoy and Turgenev from the "fantastical" realism at play in works by Dostoevsky—a "fantastical" realism Dostoevsky claimed was more psychologically realistic than pure realism. I use the term "realism" in this chapter to refer to the more restrained, non-fantastical form of realism. My purpose in writing this is not to entirely draw out the opposition between "historian-

[483] Aleksandr Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 109.

[484] Examples of this would be Grossman's *Life and Fate*, Grossman's *Stalingrad*, Trifonov's *House on the Embankment*, and Solzhenitsyn's *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, all works of literature which it would be difficult to describe as "ironic."

diggers" immediately responding to the trauma of Stalinism and those later generations who deal with the same experience in ironic and allegorical terms, but to gesture towards a broad trend as a call for other scholars to further examine (and, indeed, challenge) the framework of my idea.

Etkind begins the chapter in question with an anecdote about Tatiana Gnedich, a young philologist who was imprisoned in the gulag for twelve years, producing an incredible translation of Byron's *Don Juan* during that time. After her release, she went to live with her uncle, a famous translator and scholar, who immediately forced her to throw away the *vatnik* that had kept her company for those 12 years, even though Tatiana was deeply attached to it. Etkind writes that:

> In his memoir, Yefim could not reconcile his two feelings: his disgust at the filthy jacket that was Tatiana's personal site of memory, and his veneration for her talent, which enabled her to produce, huddled under this jacket, an astonishing cultural achievement. These feelings had to be kept separate; though they focused on one and the same person, they had nothing in common.[485]

Combined with Etkind's assertion that none of Tatiana's subsequent work matched up to the translation she produced in the gulag, one might surmise that the "feelings that had to be kept separate" are in fact two sides of the same coin. The disgusting, squalid conditions that produced the work cannot be separated from its gloriousness; "Yefim [Tatiana's uncle] notes in the same sparkling memoir that Gnedich's precious manuscript, the cherished translation of *Don Juan* that she brought from the camp, stank as much as her jacket. But there was no way to dispose of these papers."[486]

[485] Ibid, 83.

[486] Ibid, 83.

This anecdote suggests that the conditions for intellectual and artistic production in the Soviet Union were a kind of "reekingness" and an encounter with unfreedom and state violence. However, it is worth noting that Tatiana is not digging up a traumatic past with her work, but digging to escape from a traumatic present; she is not a historian-artist, but an escape-artist. Etkind characterizes this "longing for world culture" as an escape from the stifling physical and intellectual conditions of life in communal apartments, gulags, and small intellectual circles. Those "huddling together" to escape the violence of the state or console each other in its wake engage in a kind of groupthink distinct from and congruent to the groupthink of Soviet disinformation. In such a situation, "longing for world culture was a defense or maybe a compensatory mechanism for those who felt smothered by these tight, warm groups."[487]

Etkind then abruptly transitions from this gulag tale to a theoretical discussion of who was able to produce testimonies about gulag life: he quotes Nadezhda Mandelstam saying that "'only those who were about to perish in the camps, but accidentally survived, can testify about them.'"[488] The connection between the longing for world culture and the survivor's need to testify is initially mysterious. Etkind uses Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov as opposing examples of gulag testimony: "While Solzhenitsyn presented his experience of survival as a moral lesson for humankind, Shalamov steadfastly denied any value in the gulag experience," he writes.[489] Etkind characterizes Shalamov's refusal to find meaning in the gulag experience as radical, attributing it as the cause of the desecration of his grave in 2002. In line with this opposition between Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn, he also attempts to characterize artistic responses to trauma as being

[487] Ibid, 85.

[488] Ibid, 86.

[489] Ibid, 86.

determined by three tendencies—"working through," "acting out," and "making sense of"—before comparing Shalamov to Agamben in their common adherence to the attitude described by Walter Benjamin as that of the "angel of history":

> This warped creature would like to stop the flow of history and awaken its dead victims, but he is not free to do so; the "storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned . . . This storm is what we call progress." In Benjamin's time, this angel's final destination was the camp. Benjamin's soon-to-be-fallen angel gazes compassionately, though helplessly, at a soon-to-be-dead convict.[490]

If we were to place the "condemned-to-live" Soviet citizen next to the "soon-to-be-dead" convict, then the combination of the "angel of history" and the "digging man" mentioned at the end of the chapter—both Benjaminian modes of analysis—would be an apt way to describe many of the writers from the period of Soviet literature after Stalin's death. Even Solzhenitsyn, who differs from the angel of history in that he is determined to find meaning in his experience of the gulag, feels a compulsive need to dig, "recover[ing] facts like an archaeologist but also creat[ing] artifacts like an artist."[491]

It is in the subsequent parts of the chapter that Etkind's analysis of the role of writers in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death begins to break down. In them, Etkind lays the groundwork for his claims about the "irony" and "surrealness" of the historical-artistic work of Soviet artists by analyzing the practice of the artist Boris Sveshnikov. Etkind views Sveshnikov's work from the perspective of Bakhtin's carnival and Benjamin's analysis of surrealism as being "The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," an epithet indicating that the intelligentsia seeks

[490] Ibid, 88.

[491] Ibid, 109.

derangement and makes itself hallucinate with surrealism in its desire not to see the coming "collective body" of revolutionary change.[492] Whereas Benjamin is glorifying the collective body, Sveshnikov seeks to criticize it. There is no reason for Etkind to appeal to Benjamin's theory here; Benjamin is analyzing art from an entirely different historical milieu and this opposition does nothing to illuminate Sveshnikov's art (i.e it should be obvious that Sveshnikov's visual critique of the gulag presents a certain skepticism about the revolutionary potential of "collectivizing" bourgeois subjecthood, even without reference to Benjamin's theory of surrealism).

This section of the chapter marks a sharper departure from its initial analysis of gulag testimonies and escapes into world culture than Etkind would like the reader to realize. Etkind characterizes Sveshnikov primarily in terms of his being a "gulag goner" who was just barely saved from death (which is what Nadezhda Mandelstam describes as *the* necessary condition for then producing testimonies about the gulag). Etkind writes that "during his eight-year-long term in a labor camp in northern Siberia from 1946 to the end of 1953, and then during his long life after his release from the camp, Sveshnikov created amazing works of art that throw a new light both on the gulag and, more generally, on the Soviet experience."[493] In fact, Sveshnikov was remarkably ahead of his time in the Soviet context[494] and unique in a variety of ways, of which I will identify three: 1. his surreal and allegorical treatment of Soviet history is far more characteristic of later practitioners of "Sots Art" than it is of other artists of his generation, 2. he

[492] Ibid, 93.

[493] Ibid, 89.

[494] Whereas in the European context, Sveshnikov's surrealism was already *old hat*.

depicts the gulags as part of an evil, metaphysical[495] system, something which was very common for artistic treatment of the Nazis, but not of the Soviets,[496] and 3. his process of digging and/or record-keeping is entirely non-realistic (i.e. for Sveshnikov, nightmares become the primary source of history). The metaphysical quality of later Soviet art will end up being an important attribute of the opposition between the immediately postcatastrophic generation of "cold realism" and later generations of writers. The artificial development of Etkind's argumentation proceeds by identifying the necessary conditions for the production of gulag testimonies, briefly touching on more famous examples of those testimonies (Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn), then identifying Sveshnikov as someone who meets Nadezhda Mandelstam's criteria for being a producer of gulag testimonies. It is thus that Etkind gives himself license to identify the surrealness and *second degré* ironies of Sveshnikov's work as being entirely characteristic of this generation of "historian-artists" when that simply isn't the case. When faced with the metaphysical nightmarishness of the gulag guards in Sveshnikov's drawings presented as rats, we might instead think of Stalin and Khrushchev having sex next to a briefcase full of blue lard––a metaphysical substance that contains no entropy—in Sorokin's *Blue Lard*. In this scene and in Sveshnikov's images of the rat-guards torturing humans, Soviet citizen-artists reach a new phase

[495] In order to simplify the system of coordinates at play in the essay, one might suggest that a "metaphysical" perspective represents the highest possible allegorical mode of analysis—an allegorical mode of analysis that attempts to destroy the ontology of the world as it actually exists. Here, we might think of Benjamin's subjectification of metaphysical allegories; he writes that "the allegorical has its existence in abstractions; as an abstraction, as a faculty of the spirit of language itself, it is at home in the Fall. For good and evil are unnameable, they are nameless entities, outside the language of names, in which man, in paradise, named things, and which he forsakes in the abyss of that problem." Cf. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso Press, 1998), 234.

[496] The comparison Etkind makes between Sveshnikov and Spiegelman's *Maus* is illuminating in the sense that it shows how distinct Sveshnikov is from most artists in the Soviet Union and/or dealing with Soviet subject matter and how much easier it would be to formulate his practice alongside other artists engaging with the Holocaust.

in their therapeutic process. They no longer depict the trauma of their history realistically, they reconceive of it in new, not entirely serious, terms, often departing from the realistic and materialistic "truths" of the world.

But when Etkind claims that "materializing memory in the public sphere often entails fiction rather than truth, allegories rather than facts, and irony rather than tragedy,"[497] he is mixing up his generations and making a broad claim applicable to only *some* art and literature dealing with Soviet trauma and applying it to *all* such art. For decades, much of Soviet literature attempted to realistically deal with the trauma of war and political repression without even the hint of a smirk; when Etkind also suggests that "in a postcatastrophic situation, the digger of the past—the historian-cum-artist—needs mechanisms of estrangement, with humor being the most important and frequent of these mechanisms," he is using the surreal example Sveshnikov provides to disrupt a well-drawn narrative in a way that does not respect the broader generational trends of Soviet literature.

Etkind demonstrates the failure of his own argument when he jumps almost immediately from his discussion of gulag goners and Sveshnikov all the way to the Necrorealists, a group of filmmakers active primarily in the 1980s; this temporally heterogeneous *potpourri* of Soviet artists further highlights Etkind's inability to distinguish between different periods, or generations, of Soviet art. The fundamental issue with Etkind's treatment of Sveshnikov is that the artist was ahead of his time in his desire to treat the experiential raw material of the gulag *non-realistically*. Like Shalamov, Sveshnikov refuses to apply a moral framework to his trauma, but the ambiguity of Shalamov's work is that, as author, he refuses to forget his experiences and memorializes them as texts, even though they are presented without an ethical or moral

[497] Ibid, 109.

teleology. So while it is true that the "starting point [of Shalamov's prose] is the complete absence of comprehensible meaning or rational justification in the course of human history," this "absence" is presented realistically; in other words, grand historical and humanist narratives are abandoned in Shalamov's work, but in realistic terms.[498] Sveshnikov's work is in no way realistic enough to qualify as a historical "memory" of the gulag experience. In fact, Shalamov's aesthetic impulse is closer to Solzhenitsyn's than it is to Sveshnikov's; like the historian-narrator of Trifonov's *House on the Embankment*, these two writers are compelled to remember their traumas, even though they have radically different ways of doing so.[499]

Sveshnikov and later generations of mourning

The later generations of Russian artists to whom Sveshnikov bears some similarity felt the need to re-render the Soviet experience in fresh terms after it had already been *realistically remembered*. It is these later generations of artists who deal with the Soviet experience with "allegories rather than facts, and irony rather than tragedy,"[500] as Etkind claims is entirely characteristic of all Soviet artists. We might think of this ironic allegorical impulse in the context of Vladimir Sorokin's *Ледяная трилогия* [*Ice Trilogy*] (2003–2006), which frames the gulags and the concentration camps of the Holocaust as earthly instantiations of a justified metaphysical

[498] Andrew Kahn, Mark Lipovetsky, Irina Reyfman, and Stephanie Sandler, *A History of Russian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 733.

[499] Perhaps, this compulsory remembering and memorializing could be seen as part of the dissident groupthink that caused independent thinkers to feel "smothered by [the] tight, warm groups" of those "huddling together" to escape the violence of the state.

[500] Aleksandr Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 109.

project seeking to wipe out human life in the name of a divine order or Dmitry Bykov's *Оправдание* [*Justification*] (2001), in which Bykov presents a mentally ill man coming to believe in the metaphysical justness of the violence Stalin inflicted on the Soviet populace, doing his best to also convince the reader of his protagonist's new beliefs. After writing *Justification*, Bykov said in an interview that "in the process of writing [the novel] it became clear that imperial structures were more convincing than their opposite. The Stalinist empire is presented in the novel as much more seductive than contemporary life, from which the main hero seeks to escape. Perhaps that's a good thing."[501] However, judging by Bykov's active resistance to Putin's possible attempts to turn 21st-century Russia into an empire, this statement cannot be seen as entirely earnest; *Justification* is subtly ironic in its engagement with history and empire.

The poetic of *Justification* (a not entirely earnest justification of Soviet terror) is also characteristic of Vladimir Sharov's delirious historical novels, which critics have often taken to be satirical and postmodern, much to the horror of their author who would always insist, "Я считаю себя глубочайшим образом реалистом. Никаким постмодернистом я себя не считаю и никогда не считал."[502] [503] This statement takes on a less credible valence when one considers that Sharov's most widely read and discussed novel *До и во время* [*Before and During*] (1995) contains a depiction of Stalin being birthed by a fictional version of the French philosopher Germaine de Staël who self-generates into three or four identical iterations of herself

[501] Rosalind J. Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia, 1991–2006* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 460.

[502] "I consider myself to be a profound realist. I don't consider myself and have never considered myself to be a postmodernist."

[503] Mark Lipovetsky et al., *Vladimir Sharov: Po tu storonu istorii* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2020), 218.

(clones, for lack of a better word), sleeps with all those who play a role in the Russian Revolution, and ends up also being Stalin's lover. In her various iterations, she never gets any older or becomes any less desirable and her concupiscence is inextricably related to the malign character of the revolution that helps to bring about the apocalypse at the novel's end. Oliver Ready sees the book as a serious engagement with Russian history, but does not deny "the sense of complex cyclicality inherent in the novel's layering of epochs, locations and characters."[504] This, according to Ready, is because Sharov is operating in opposition to Leo Tolstoy's notion of great art: "that it must 'infect' the reader with feelings first experienced by the author."[505] Ready claims that "for Sharov, unlike late Tolstoy, life and morality are by definition complex."[506] In his other novels, Sharov also does not shy away from the notion that the history of the Stalinist terror and every other repression in the Soviet Union proceeded according to a kind of metaphysical design—that it was *meant to be*. History's actors are permitted to be squalid and ridiculous (sinful and whorish), but are elevated according to a greater plan that is capacious enough to contain both executors and their executees. Such historical improvisation was not viewed favorably by critics and "the editors of *Noviy Mir*, the magazine that *Before and During* was first published in, eventually spoke out against Sharov[...] [rejecting] the philosophy and poetics of Sharov's prose that they believed took too many liberties with historical facts, [also finding] Sharov's link between Orthodox Christianity and Bolshevism controversial."[507] As such,

[504] Oliver Ready, "How Sharov's Novels Are Made: 'The Rehearsals' and 'Before & During,'" *The Slavic and East European Journal* 64, no. 1 (2020): 42–61, 53.

[505] Ibid, 42.

[506] Ibid, 59.

[507] Lucy Harish, "Vladimir Sharov: Literature That Shines a Light on Dark History," *Museum Studies Abroad*, accessed July 14, 2025, https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/grammar/english-grammar-reference/definite-article.

Sharov's work should not be understood as purely ironic, but it should also not be taken as entirely in earnest—he had a doctorate in history and knew it too well to muddle it without knowing what he was doing. Indeed, he was attempting to order the real phenomena of the world into a metaphysical system that did not deny the realities of history, but also bent them into something else. The Geist that was produced by this process may not have been horrifying, but it was occasionally a bit… silly.

By not distinguishing between these later, more ironic generations of Russian writers and the artists processing the trauma of Stalin's terror directly after it came to pass, Etkind provides a collapsed two-part definition of all Soviet artists, one part of which is applicable to the first generation to begin processing the trauma of their country's history, and the latter part of which is applicable to later generations. The first generation of Soviet writers to begin engaging in cultural production in the wake of Stalin's death were historian-artists, determined to dig to the bottom of the truth of the trauma they had lived through. The ultimate *testimonial artifact* of this generation is Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* (1973). Like Benjamin's digging man, these artists assign a moral valence especially (and sometimes only) to the practices of remembering and memorializing, forced as they were to keep moving forwards like Benjamin's angel of history, with no hope of avenging their fallen countrymen and unable to see the possibility of resisting the state to bring a better world into being. Later generations of artists also continue to look backwards while moving forwards. They are the ones who treat their subject matter with "irony rather than tragedy" and often deal in allegories.

Paradoxically, this ironic, allegorical treatment of the past begins to allow Russian artists to begin to conceive of possible futures.[508] Just as Pynchon uses the history of World War II in order to process the new ethics and ontology of 1960s America in *Gravity's Rainbow*, so too do Russian writers use the deconstruction and re-conceptualization of their country's past to begin to think about a future beyond trauma. Unfortunately, as in the case of Sorokin's work on the "New Middle Ages" in *День опричника* [*Day of the Oprichnik*] (2006) and other novels, this imagined future rarely seems any more pleasant than their Soviet past.[509] The moment that might most readily act as a mission statement for how later generations reexamine their countries past ironically and non-realistically occurs in Sorokin's earlier work, in the alternate version of the Soviet Union depicted in the latter half of *Blue Lard*, when Stalin and Khrushchev discuss an alternate version of Solzhenitsyn's famous novel, the stress now moved to the "o" in "Ivan Denisovich":

> "Well, what is there to tell?" Khrushchev yawned. "Ivan Leopoldovich DenisOvich," the count put particular emphasis on the "O" as if to tease Stalin, "a true-blue Odessa kike, gets sentenced by the Special Council of the NKVD to ten years in the GULOVE for sexual perversions of the third degree. He had been an accompanist in the Odessa Philharmonic Orchestra. He lured high school girls from the upper grades to his house and gave them liquor with tranquilizers. When they fell asleep, he would shtup them in all of their holes, stuff their vaginas with his own shit, and sew them shut with golden thread. Then he would put them in wedding dresses, drive them to Luna Park, sit down with them on the carousel, and ride around until they woke up. What he liked most of all was the expressions on their faces when they opened their eyes. But in the novella, he just describes one day in the camp. How he shtups and how they shtup him."[510]

[508] So while the first generation of mourners looks back fixedly, later generations try to "take one long, final look," so they might be rid of the past.

[509] The irony of the "New Medieval" quartet being that, even as Sorokin attains linguistic and imaginative freedom more spectacular than at any other point in his career, the future he describes with that language is still *unfree*.

[510] Vladimir Sorokin, *Blue Lard*, trans. Max Lawton (New York: NYRB, 2024), 262.

This should not only be taken as irreverent japing with the sacred literary cows of the past; there is a profound way in which Sorokin is revealing how his examination of the horrors of the Soviet Union diverges fiercely from any sort of realistic method. The fact that this alternate version of Solzhenitsyn's novel is described in the context of an alternative history of the Soviet Union highlights that fact.

Realistic mourning after the fact versus coping in the moment

Throughout *Warped Mourning*, Etkind is also relatively uninterested in *simultaneous* or *contemporary* mourning practices, by which I mean to say practices that intend to cope with, rage against, or justify that which shall later have caused trauma, but hasn't yet, as it is still occuring. Though Etkind discusses how Tatiana Gnedich represents a desire to flee from the trauma and into a kind of denatured idea of "world culture," this desire to flee into the ivory tower of "great books" has relatively little to say about Soviet trauma itself. The best example of a simultaneous "mourner" or "coper" in Soviet literature who does not flee from trauma or attempt to shield his eyes from it[511] seems to me to be Andrei Platonov, an author the precise nature of whose work critics also have trouble making fundamental claims about—as with Sharov. Often, he is either seen as a reductio ad absurdum satirist writing in the mode of Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" or a starry-eyed believer in the Soviet project, subsuming violence into grand, inhuman teleologies. The two poles of this debate are most succinctly

[511] In reference to Tatiana's story, we might say that Platonov doesn't *throw away his reeking vatnik*.

represented by, on the one hand, Gorky's dismissal of Platonov as "pessimistic lyrical satire"[512] and, on the other, by Thomas Seifrid's repeated attempts to portray Platonov as a "metaphysician" comparable in many respects to the French writer Georges Bataille.[513]

As for critics who view Platonov as a mere satirist, Mikhail Geller has been the most long-winded in his desire to frame Platonov as a satirist through-and-through. In his book *Андрей Платонов в поисках счастья*,[514] he claims that Platonov is a writer of "Menippean satires," a genre Bakhtin famously identified and used to analyze Dostoevsky's early work. In bolstering Geller's claims, Elliot Borenstein describes Platonov's Menippean satire as "the wistful leave-taking of an idea that has dug its own grave."[515] Borenstein also argues that Platonov's version of Menippean satire differs from Dostoevsky's in that Platonov's characters do not "argue" theoretical or ideological positions, they instead embody them unreflectively.[516] Platonov's characters are "ideas [and language] set loose to change the world" and utterly failing to do so.[517] This is an entirely tragic form of satire, one that might be compared with the one that Natalia Poltatseva and Sergey Levchin identify as being operative in Platonov's work—the "gay tragedy … a tragedy of negativity [that] asserts there is no subject."[518]

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[512] Cf. Benjamin Kunkel, "Wresting Freedom from Necessity," *Dissent Magazine*, Spring 2001, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/wresting-freedom-from-necessity/.

[513] Cf. any of Seifrid's books or papers cited in this dissertation.

[514] *Andrei Platonov in Search of Happiness*

[515] Eliot Borenstein, *Men without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917–1929* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 226.

[516] Ibid, 226.

[517] Ibid, 226.

[518] Natalia Poltavtseva and Sergey Levchin, "Power and the Other in the Dramatic Works of Andrei Platonov," *Ulbandus Review* 14 (2011): 273–88, 277.

But there is another way of interpreting Platonov's work as a serious attempt to reconceive of the world under socialism *non-tragically* and *non-satirically* and, in doing so, to help build it. Perhaps the most important essay advancing this position is Thomas Seifrid's "Смрадные радости Марксизма,"[519] in which Seifrid compares Georges Bataille's and Platonov's respective Marxisms, writing about how they both are able to transform the "disgusting" nature of the material world (described by Seifrid as a "низший материализм"[520]) to a metaphysical plane (or, in the language of this dissertation, depicting its Geist). Indeed, in *Котлован* [*The Foundation Pit*] (1968), Platonov attempts to conceive of the *disgusting materialistic violence* of Stalinism as justified in the eyes of a "shining future." As one character sinisterly describes his decision to steal from the moneyed classes at one point in the novel (and perhaps, later, to do even more): "he had changed course and begun to nourish himself from the maximalist class, calculating that this would benefit the entire movement of the dispossessed into future happiness."[521] The decision to lead a parasitical existence is given metaphysical justification.

There is a way in which contemporaneous coping-with is a form of mourning that deals with the absence of a happy, or morally justifiable present and attempts to justify it from a metaphysical perspective that cannot necessarily be said to exist—pushing all of the knowing onto a philosophic community of Absolute Knowers[522] in the future. The mechanism at work in Platonov's contemporaneous mourning should be well known to anyone who has ever been told

[519] "The Reeking Joys of Marxism."

[520] the lowest of materialism

[521] Andrei Platonov, *The Foundation Pit*, trans. Robert and Olga Meerson (New York: NYRB, 2009), 32.

[522] Referring here to Hegel's "Absolute Knowing."

that an awful turn of events is merely "a part of God's plan"; such banal attempts to comfort the grieving are also indicative of the desire to erase trauma by framing it as part of a metaphysical narrative. Framing these ideas more concretely, one might say that Platonov wanted to support Soviet Socialism, but in a metaphysical style that diverged fiercely from typical Socialist Realist writers. He was determined to tease out its Geist without ignoring the reality of the world, not content with the mere "substance" at play in Marx's philosophy or how the Soviet state described itself, so far from the phenomena of Soviet existence. As Evgeny Dobrenko and Sergey Levchin write "Platonov proved that for an ideocratic regime, stylistic differences carry far more importance than ideological ones."[523] Or, to put it another way: by erecting the same system with real phenomena rather than imaginary, the system becomes offensive, brutal, a seeming satire…

As previously mentioned, Etkind not only neglects these contemporaneous mourning practices, he also groups two generations of mourning practices together—the first generation of "realistic" memory-making and the following generations of surreal and irreverent attempts to reconceive of traumatic events. It is this unhappy combination that allows him to write about, for example, Solzhenitsyn and Prigov as if they were contemporaries engaged in more or less the same sort of artistic practice. As previously demonstrated, this is not the case; the first generation of mourners tended to be far more preoccupied with monumental recollections of the truth of history than subsequent generations. However, Platonov cannot be said to be allied to either one of these groups; his time on earth coincided with the very trauma that is being mourned—the

[523] Evgeny Dobrenko and Sergey Levchin, "Platonov and Stalin: Dialogues in Double Dutch," *Ulbandus Review* 14 (2011): 202–15, 215.

trauma of Stalinism. Thinking of Bykov's *Justification,* we might wonder if the process of contemporaneous mourning and/or metaphysical justification ends up aligning itself rather neatly with the second generation of irreverent and non-realistic mourners…

For, when Etkind does see fit to discuss Platonov, it is to compare him to his fictional counterpart in a Shalamov story and to the writer Yuri Mamleev, an artist whose practice does *not* contend with the immediate aftermath of the Gulag and, in fact, doesn't really deal with any part of Soviet history. Etkind writes that "in his intuitive but pretentious prose, Mamleev depicts a crucial paradox of the postcatastrophic culture: its obsessive interest in the dead, which obstructs its ability to communicate with the living … Mamleev became a leader of the 'mystical underground' in the Moscow of the Thaw."[524] Etkind's agenda is more or less transparent here, in that he is attempting to conceive of Mamleev as a writer who is responding to the horrors of the Gulag with a form of abstract[525] mourning practice. As was previously established, insomuch as we can even say that Mamleev is responding to Soviet history, which isn't at all clear, he is doing so in an irreverent and mystical way that diverges wildly from the initial literary practices that arose in the wake of the death of Stalin. However, if we are to assent with Etkind that there is a certain similarity between Platonov and Mamleev, this would seem to suggest that contemporaneous mourning and/or justification *does* bear a certain resemblance to later-generation mourning practices. Shalamov portrays the fictional Platonov (to whom Etkind compares Mamleev) as an imprisoned writer forced by other prisoners to tell stories; he is entirely at their mercy, as, if the public of prisoners doesn't like the stories, "they will beat him

[524] Aleksandr Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 223.

[525] One might even say "non-figurative."

to death."[526] Perhaps Platonov's sin, the one alluded to by Dobrenko when he writes that stylistic differences can sometimes be more problematic than ideological ones, is that he doesn't occlude the violent realities (the true phenomena) of Soviet life in his attempt to charm the snake of the government and public and justify their way of building a shining future. While he wasn't beaten to death, one can hardly claim that other Soviet "prisoners" were especially fond of Platonov's stories.

Sorokin and Platonov: the generational narrative loops back in on itself

Writers like Mamleev and Sorokin also willfully dare the public to *beat them to death* with provocative subject matter that deals with death in a way often removed from the Soviet experience, unlike the violence in Platonov's work, which, in a very real way, *is* the Soviet experience. However, in Sorokin's 1991 novel *Сердца четырех* [*Their Four Hearts*], the Soviet experience is confronted at once directly and abstractly in a way that lines up neatly with Platonov's contemporary account of Stalinism in *The Foundation Pit*. Alexander Genis identifies *Their Four Hearts* as portraying a world in which "no distinction whatsoever is made between animate and inanimate matter, and its objects are equally likely to be machines or people. Therefore, the text can be read as sadistic if one considers the characters to be living and comic if one considers the characters to be nonliving."[527] In a way, this is a perspective opposite to the dichotomy Heidegger erects between the holistic quality of bodies and the particulate

[526] Ibid, 223.

[527] Mark Lipovetsky and Eliot Borenstein, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 211.

composition of technology when he writes that "my hand, on the contrary, is not a piece of me. I myself am entirely in each gesture of the hand, every single time."[528] We might also think of Seifrid's "The Reeking Joys of Marxism" and the claim that Platonov transposes the lowness of the material world onto a metaphysical plane. In reconceiving of the world in this way, Platonov justifies violent acts in his prose with strange, metaphysical linguistic constructions that barely seem to have been produced by human lips. The reader feels the truly inhuman effort of reconceiving the horrors of Stalinism from the perspective of a shining, perfect future. In moments like these, Platonov's language is melancholy and uncanny.

Sorokin provides no such justification for acts of extreme violence that are far more disgusting than anything to be found in Platonov. Instead, the violence in Sorokin's text is planned out with reference to a sort of divination practiced with nonsensical objects, orders given by unexplained organizational hierarchies, and the constant prerogative to turn other people's bodies into strange objects. Mark Lipovetsky describes this incomprehensible sequence of "necessary actions" as "a transcendental life that is theoretically incomprehensible."[529] This also brings to mind Benjamin's reading of "trauerspiel" as an:

> antinomical combination of transcendence and immanence [that] produces an uneasy hybrid, in which history—as a narrative of the human march towards redemption on the Day of Judgement—loses the eschatological certainty of its redemptive conclusion, and becomes secularized into a mere natural setting for the profane struggle over political power.[530]

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[528] Andrew J. Mitchell, *The Fourfold: Reading the Late Heidegger* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 44.

[529] Mark Lipovetsky and Eliot Borenstein, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 212.

[530] Peter Osborne, "Walter Benjamin," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified January 18, 2011, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/benjamin/.

As the reader finds out at the end of *Their Four Hearts*, the titular four's winding path through the novel ends with them being turned into frozen dice, dice which are to roll across a frozen field of "liquid mother," the liquefied corpse of their leader's actual mother. Even though the novel takes place after the fall of the Soviet Union, these dice are a neat "bodily metaphor" for Soviet attempts to create a new kind of human. As Mark Lipovetsky writes, "a trademark of Sorokin's postmodernist style is the transformation of verbal concepts into corporeal images … Through this travesty, Sorokin transforms the corporeal into a radical mockery and critique of authoritative discourses."[531] In that sense, whereas Platonov directly states the metaphysical horizon of futurity that lies behind the actions of his narratives, Sorokin offers only these bizarre dice—grotesque, a "radical mockery" of communism's attempt to remake humanity, and metaphysical only in the transgressions that produced them.

The novel is not only reminiscent of Platonov, it hearkens back to Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil* [*The Story of the Eye*] (1928), in which a male and female protagonist commit an astonishing array of awful sexual and violent crimes. As in *Their Four Hearts*, none of the crimes in Bataille's novel are explained; it is only the inherent Bataillean eroticism of such flagrant transgression that gives the reader a metaphysical *frisson*—not any direct linguistic attempts to refer to something outside of the novel's ontology. In a way, it is the triangle created by *Their Four Hearts*, *The Foundation Pit*, and *The Story of the Eye* that seems to most justify Seifrid's claims about Platonov and Bataille. Sorokin is the unhinged Bataillean blossoming of Platonov's vision with all of its repressed urges. He sutures Bataille and Platonov's visions together and, in so doing, further demonstrates the affinity of non-sentimental, later-generation

[531] Mark Lipovetsky and Eliot Borenstein, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 157.

Soviet mourning practices with the fever-dream quality of contemporaneous justifications. In the forthgoing analysis, I would like to develop the similarities between *The Foundation Pit* and *Their Four Hearts*, while also questioning what these similarities seem to reveal about the process of living both *through* and *beyond* national trauma. This is a challenge to and an expansion of Etkind's project.

The Foundation Pit *and Futurity*

In brief, *The Foundation Pit* tells the story of a man named Voshchev who is fired from his job at a machine factory for excessive "thoughtfulness" and decides to seek out a more meaningful life. The life that he eventually finds is a collective existence digging out a foundation pit for a new building, which shall house the Soviet citizens of the future. Voshchev discovers the pit after trying to sleep in it and being told off by one of the workers: "'from now on it's a site—it's going to be situated with stone. Come and have a look in the morning. Soon this place will be hidden forever beneath construction'" the worker tells him.[532] These strange verbal constructions are typical of Platonov's style and seem to be somewhere between psychologically damaged and metaphysical; the process of erecting a building is described in highly abstract terms, either as it might be seen by an AI system trying to understand what it means to build ("to cover up a building site") or from the hyperion peaks of the future (the philosophic knowers of absolute knowing), which cover up the pits of the past "forever." A man seeking out a meaningful life and helping to build a Soviet future is a typical Socialist Realist

[532]Andrei Platonov, *The Foundation Pit*, trans. Robert and Olga Meerson (New York: NYRB, 2009), 10.

trope. What ensues, however, is not a simple account of a building being built, but a Byzantine tale filled with random murders and death. The most significant event in the novel is the murder of the kulaks, who are hunted down by a bear, then sent down a river in a raft. This is an early example of a Sorokinian trope also at play in the titular four becoming dice: the metaphor of "liquidization" is interpreted by the peasants to mean that the kulaks must actually be exterminated by water.

In his afterword, Robert Chandler situates the novel "in a very particular historical and political context—Stalin's drive towards rapid industrialization and Total Collectivization."[533] As is well known to every casual scholar of Soviet history, after the Bolsheviks disposed of the landlords, they engaged in a process of rural "dekulakization" meant to reassert the power of the central government.[534] Working for the People's Commissariat of Agriculture, Platonov bore direct witness to the process of dekulakization, when, in August of 1931, he was sent to report on the progress of collectivization in the central Volga and northern Caucasus regions.[535] Platonov's private journal entries testify to the squalor, violence, and failure he was tasked with reporting on, while knowing that there was every expectation of him doing so untruthfully. Real phenomena were to be ignored and sham-phenomena fabricated. But, Platonov's work seems to suggest, what if the real phenomena were to be hemmed into the ideal system that was meant to contain them? What if another sort of socialism were to contain the violence that was helping to build it? Elsewhere, *The Foundation Pit* has been identified as "an energetic, rather than entropic, version of utopia. The first part of the novel depicts the creation of a house for the

[533] Ibid, 153.

[534] Ibid, 154.

[535] Ibid, 156.

entire proletariat of the district … [a satirical representation] of Stalinist industrialization. The second part [narrates] collectivization and the elimination of the kulaks."[536] In that context, the "collectivized village [becomes] a fairy-tale kingdom of the dead: people live in coffins ready to die at any moment."[537] This analysis suggests a vision of Platonov's novel that is entirely critical; the foundation pit is viewed as a monument to the ills of communism. In the context of this analysis of Platonov as skeptical satirist, special attention is given to the death of Nastya[538] at the end of the novel. The positive future becomes the disposed-of and decayed past—"the foundation pit turns into a grave for the girl Nastya (despite the Greek meaning of her full name, Anastasia—resurrection)."[539] This suggests that the death of Nastya represents the failure of communism. At the same time, it is Nastya's name and the precise framing of the end of the novel that provide the broadest metaphysical horizon for the ridiculousness and violence of the second half of the text.

In order to be buried, one must usually die, and so, at the end of the novel, the girl Nastya dies. For a substantial chunk of the text, she has been very sick, having fallen ill after having gone out to look for kulaks with the kulak-hunting bear. As her illness grows more severe, she becomes more and more obsessed with death, even asking for her mother's bones to be brought to her. Her death is the final death in the novel. Chiklin, a man who at one point kills a random

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[536] Andrew Kahn, Mark Lipovetsky, Irina Reyfman, and Stephanie Sandler, *A History of Russian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 659.

[537] Ibid, 659.

[538] Sorokin would later use the same name for the tale of a girl being burned alive in an oven and eaten by her family on the eve of the twentieth century, a possible reference to Platonov's earlier "sacrificial lamb." In an early draft of Sorokin's story, the metaphor of Nastya's name comes true and she literally comes back from the dead.

[539] Ibid, 659.

peasant while searching for the murderer of two of his companions, vows to dig a grave for her that is so deep that worms shall not reach her. Platonov writes that "He dug it for fifteen hours on end—in order that it should be deep and that neither a worm nor the root of a plant, nor warmth, nor cold should be able to penetrate it, and so that the child would never be troubled by the noise of life from the earth's surface."[540] At this point, neither the foundation pit, nor the building have been completed. In fact, the workers have just received the directive to make the pit twice as wide, making their previous work seem to have been rather pointless. The only completed acts in the course of the novel are the *liquidization* of the kulaks and Nastya's burial. But, because of Nastya's name, we cannot read this as a merely critical perspective on the Soviet experience. Platonov is hoping that the crimes he has witnessed will be justified in the eyes of a "happy future for the dispossessed" (one of philosophic knowers, perhaps) and that his characters' human qualities shall somehow be resurrected. The metaphysical horizon in his work is not created so much by the random acts of violence, as by the *frisson* that comes of imagining how the future shall cover up the pit of the past. And, indeed, he ends the novel with a short explanation of the ending:

> Will our soviet socialist republic perish like Nastya or will she grow up into a whole human being, into a new historical society? … The author may have been mistaken to portray in the form of the little girl's death the end of the socialist generation, but this mistake occurred only as a result of excessive alarm on behalf of something beloved, whose loss is tantamount to the destruction not only of all the past but also of the future.[541]

[540]Andrei Platonov, *The Foundation Pit*, trans. Robert and Olga Meerson (New York: NYRB, 2009), 149.

[541] Ibid, 150.

While it is partially an attempt to appease Soviet authorities, this note should also help to reveal that Platonov's project is not entirely critical. *The Foundation Pit* is a contemporaneous form of mourning that attempts to cope with and justify trauma *as it comes to pass*.

Seifrid concurs that there is a critical element to Platonov's work. But, as his Bataillean mode of analysis is concerned with the way in which Socialist Realist tropes become macabre and metaphysical, he ends up reframing the critical, or tragic, element of the novel as a negative metaphysical system. He writes that:

> The most authentic digging anyone does in the novel, then, is when Chiklin spends fifteen hours excavating a "sepulchral bed in eternal stone" for her— an inversion of the utopian "proletarian home" they had hoped to build. Instead of serving as a promise for the bright future, then, as it would have in a standard Soviet production novel, the foundation pit becomes a grave emblemizing the proletariat's continued subordination to the world of matter.[542]

It is difficult not to hear a touch of Heidegger in this reference to "authenticity." And it is true that, in being towards the shining future, the proletariat must also be towards their own death and obsolescence in the context of such a future. They must do awful things to dig the pit on which the glorious tenements of Soviet Socialism shall stand, but they themselves are not to live in it. This is the sort of literary trick that was common to the era, one by which the "Soviet novel negotiated the distance between an imperfect present and the utopian future … through the manipulation of narrative focus."[543] But, in *The Foundation Pit*, the imperfect present is so violent that it seems no one shall survive to see the utopian future—this perhaps being the reason why all residents of the village see fit to take up residence in coffins.

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[542] Thomas Seifrid, *A Companion to Andrei Platonov's The Foundation Pit* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 129–130.

[543] Ibid, 176.

Bataille vs. Platonov and Sorokin

For, surely, what makes *The Foundation Pit* Bataillean is *not* Seifrid's insistence that "Можно было бы даже предложить правдоподобную философскую генеалогию, согласно которой мысль Ницше ведет во Франции более или менее прямо к Батаю, который адаптирует ее к марксизму, сплавляет одно с другим."[544] [545] This interpretation rests on a misreading of the section of Bataille's *The Accursed Share* that deals with communism. In that section, Bataille writes that "hatred of communism, so general and so strong nowadays, has its primary source in that complete negation […] of individual reality. For the non-communist world in general, the individual is the ultimate end; value and truth are referred to the solitude of a private life."[546] It should come as no surprise that Bataille is in favor of the de-individualizing, anti-bourgeois actions of the communists without being a communist himself. His entire system of eroticism is based on the principle of the body seeking transcendence outside of itself by way of sex, violence, having children, defecating, and, eventually, dying. In all of these acts, the "monad" of the self feels itself stretched into a potential "dyad." And, in this stretching of the monad, Bataille conceives of himself as becoming free; Foucault writes of Bataille being "liberated from all forms of dialectical language," justifying this claim with the anecdote of

[544] Thomas Seifrid, "Smradnye Radosti Marxisma: Zametki o Platonove i Bataye," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 32 (1998): 48–59, 58.

[545] "One could even suggest a plausible philosophical genealogy, according to which, in France, Nietzsche's thought leads more or less directly to Bataille, who adapts it to Marxism and fuses one with the other."

[546] Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 150.

Bataille having occasionally woken up in the night having lost the ability to speak and having more generally lost "language" as such.[547]

This focus on the positive transcendental and liberatory potential of violence and eroticism helps to reveal an important fact about Bataille: he could not possibly be said to believe in the notion of trauma. He is never concerned with the consequences of enacted violence, only with the lived experience of its enactment. At the end of his section on communism, Bataille writes: "let him try to understand, or better, let him admire the cruel energy of those who broke the Russian ground; he will be closer to the tasks that await him. For, on all sides and in every way, a world in motion wants to be changed."[548] This suggests that it was the transgressive eroticism of the Bolsheviks' forward-thinking acts that Bataille admired, as well as their wasteful splendor. For, surely, they were not shy about the *liquidization* of human life, as one would be hard pressed to say they placed any value on any single person. It feels deeply wrong-headed to refer to violence as "trauma" when discussing Bataille's work. For him, something like Stalin's purges would have been a banquet to partake in, not something to be fretted about for generations afterwards. Bataille's response to the realistic writers dealing with the "trauma"[549] of the experience of Stalinism would be to tell them to enact new purges, to find new transcendental experiences and "world-changing" projects to get lost in… Endlessly reflecting on the past is the bourgeois perspective of a monad that refuses to become a "dyad."

[547] Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 51.

[548] Ibid, 168.

[549] One might literally said "quote-on-quote" trauma here to highlight the dubiousness of the claim from Bataille's perspective.

The permanently-in-the-present-moment quality of Bataille's philosophy also helps to reveal something about the eros of violence: it is only ever applicable to the violence of the present and not to memories of violence in the past or dreams of violence in the future. It also shows that, from Bataille's perspective, violence is only enacted for the procurement of momentary transcendence, no matter what future-focused language is used to justify it. That separates him from Platonov, whose entire project is to identify futurity as the horizon of something like Bataille's vision. Like Chiklin burying Nastya, Platonov's hope is that all of this broken ground will eventually yield some shelter for future generations. Sorokin, on the other hand, does his best to put on the mask of a good Bataillean in *Their Four Hearts*, but he reveals the purpose to which he puts on this mask in an interview with Sergei Shapoval, when he says that:

> Как-то я выступал на конференции по психопоэтике в Мюнхене, и сказал, что благодарен своим детским травмам и репрессивному обществу. Потом было что-то вроде банкета, и я поднял тост за Сталина как создателя репрессивного механизма, благодаря которому я состоялся как писатель. Это без иронии. Я думаю, что в будущем литературные занятия, если они не носят функционального характера, будут квалифицированы как болезнь. Чистые литературные фантазии, по-моему, это следствие перенесенных в детстве травм.[550] [551]

[550] "I once spoke at a conference on psycho-poetics in Munich and said that I was grateful for my childhood injuries and the repressive society in which I'd lived. Then there was a kind of banquet and I raised a toast to Stalin as the creator of the repressive mechanism, thanks to which I came to be a writer. This wasn't a joke. I think that in the future, literary occupations, if they don't have an applied character, will be viewed as a disease. In my opinion, pure literary fantasies are the consequence of childhood trauma."

[551] Vladimir Sorokin, *Sochinenie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh: Tom 1* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 1998), 13.

This demonstrates that, in *Their Four Hearts*, he is only pretending not to believe in trauma in order to overcome his own psychological baggage and get to the root of something like what the experience of Stalinism meant *in the moment*.

Both Platonov and Sorokin's responses to Soviet trauma go beyond attempts to logocentrically conceive of history. This brings to mind Bataille's *Theory of Religion*, in which he continues his project of underlining how human structures and relations do not operate based on utility at all, but are in fact dependent on wastefulness and transcendence. "No one can correctly answer the requirement given in the forms of objective knowledge, except by positing a non-knowledge," he writes.[552] In the context of this opposition between the "suspended" quality of knowledge, which necessitates waiting, and the immediate, non-logocentric quality of "divine life," one might also see how Platonov and Sorokin both cast "knowledge" as such off to the side and attempt to participate in the "solar anus" of a new, profane sort of incomprehensible divine life, Platonov using the excuse and/or coping mechanism of a "shining future" as he does so and Sorokin attempting to get to the root of past trauma.

The notion of the immediacy of "divine life" is also tied to Bataille's conception of the sovereign. Bataille argues that religions need to once again take on the violent, impulsive, wasteful quality of sovereignty, writing that "the weakness of the various religious positions is in having undergone the debasement of the order of things without having tried to modify it. Without exception, the religions of mediation left it as it was."[553] Sorokin and Platonov both engage with ideological structures (the "four" in Sorokin and the builders and their associates in Platonov) that do nothing more than "modify" and do so incomprehensibly and wastefully. That

[552] Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 98.

[553] Ibid, 99.

they imbue the four and the builders with a sacred quality might be called a thought experiment, the suspension of disbelief, or simply the omnipresent weight of the longing for positive transcendental meaning. Sorokin's work is far more Bataillean in its refusal to falsely identify futurity as the horizon of Stalinist atrocity, but it is ultimately still only a derivative function that approaches Bataille's vision, as he admits to being a traumatized individual picking at the wounds of the past.

Their Four Hearts*: Foundation Pits with no Tower Blocks*

To put it another way, *Their Four Hearts* engages only with the ground that was broken during the Soviet era and contends with the facts that no "tower blocks" ever came to be over Stalinist "foundation pits." This, then, must be the forbidden knowledge possessed by that future community of philosophic knowers… The titular four are a typical group that would be found in a piece of Socialist Realist prose: an old man, a handsome young factory worker, a young female athlete, and a little boy. The novel begins with a comical tableau: the old man, Shtaube, sees a young man (not the protagonist) drop a piece of bread into a puddle outside of a bakery and then throw it away. He ambushes the boy and gives him a long speech about how precious bread was during WWII, a speech that becomes more and more sexual. Eventually he tries to sexually abuse the boy, but the boy runs off. Seryozha, the young boy who is one of the four, catches Shtaube doing so and is convinced into letting the old man perform oral sex on him. As they walk away from the construction trailer where this has taken place, Seryozha notices that Shtaube has dropped his own bread from the bakery and points it out to him. "Fuck the bread,"

Shtaube replies, and they walk off.[554] The strange "adventure" that ensues is never explained in any way shape or form. The four decide on each of their next moves following the instructions of a nonsensical machine described in neologisms or orders from people the reader never sees. At one point, Olga, the young female athlete, has to eat another man's feces as he defecates into her mouth through a chair with its bottom cut out so that he will give them something indispensable for their mission—"the eighteenth segment."[555] But the "eighteenth segment" is only an outline of something traced onto a sheet of paper that seems to be utterly unrelated to the narrative that follows.

The one justification these acts are afforded—the "shining future" that Sorokin presents in the context of the novel—are the characters being turned into dice and rolled out onto a frozen field of the leader's mother's liquefied corpse—a concrete visualization of Soviet Geist. At the novel's close, Sorokin writes: "the roller dropped them into a frozen field that had been filled with liquid mother. Their four hearts stopped. 6, 2, 5, 5."[556] The teleology of the plot leads up to this neat set of four numbers, which are perhaps intended to somehow erase the messiness and horror of the previous episodes. Mark Lipovetsky defines this ending as "*repulsive harmony with the universe* … it is the total absorption of the human body by the substance of fate."[557] This is reminiscent of Hegel's description of Absolute Knowing—when the real coincides with the

[554] Vladimir Sorokin, *Their Four Hearts*, trans. Max Lawton (Dalkey Archive, 2022), 19.

[555] Ibid, 80.

[556] Ibid, 208.

[557] Mark Lipovetsky n, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 212–213.

actual and the actual with the real. Lipovetsky and his colleagues put it another way when they contend that:

> «Бог из машины» в финале «Сердец четырех» является, таким образом, аллегорическим текстуальным механизмом, который демонстрирует, что типажи, выступающие в ролях главных героев,– –на самом деле просто четыре идентичных объекта, принявшие разные обличья лишь для того, чтобы породить игру означающих в заданном жанровом сюжете.[558] [559]

This quote brings to mind Seifrid's interpretation of the end of *The Foundation Pit* as the triumph of matter over the proletariat. In Sorokin's novel, on the other hand, the mechanics of plot triumph over character. Perhaps less aptly, this particular analysis also suggests that the "given genre" *Their Four Hearts* plays at signifying within is that of a "типичный триллер,"[560] which doesn't seem to be an entirely justified claim.

In fact, to restate my earlier point, even though *Their Four Hearts* takes place after the fall of the Soviet Union, it is, in fact, about the very *modus operandi* of the USSR. Not only do the four titular characters fulfill obvious Soviet stereotypes,[561] much of the dialogue in the novel is concerned with explicitly Soviet scenarios that have been made obscene and desacralized. For example, at one point Olga tells the story of setting up a secret tryst with an apparatchik in order

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[558] "The '*Deux ex machina*' at the end of *Their Four Hearts* is thus an allegorical textual mechanism demonstrating that the *types* acting as the main characters are actually just four identical objects, which took on different outward aspects only so as to give rise to the game of signifying within the plot of the given genre."

[559] Mark Lipovetsky et al., *Eto Prosto Bukvy Na Bumage: Vladimir Sorokin: Posle Literatury* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2018), 245.

[560] "typical thriller"

[561] As Mark Lipovetsky identifies, "the four main characters of the novel … form something like a family unit fulfilling 'family' roles. However, as in Socialist Realism, the social family is formed on the basis of a 'common cause.'" Cf. Mark Lipovetsky , *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 212.

to be allowed onto the Olympic shooting team after qualifying, but being prevented from joining for political reasons; she is encouraged to offer herself to this apparatchik and recalls that "We drank and then he started fucking me: he has a thick, curved dick and it won't fit into my mouth. He smears Vaseline all around my anus and whispers, 'I only come in asses, Olenka.'"[562] Though something like this probably happened at one point or another in Soviet history, Sorokin is purposefully making a trope (offering a party official sexual favors) as obscene as he possibly can.

Shtaube's long monologues about the Soviet Union work to make Soviet discourse obscene in much the same way. At one point, Shtaube gives a nonsensical speech about rubber, Mendeleyev, and a Soviet woman guilty of an unknown crime:

> Then in the heroic capital of our Motherland, the city of Moscow! She was eating shit for twenty years in a committee of shitty, fucking, pissing, dicksucking Soviet mothers and daughters! Whatever three times thirty-three is, that's how many times she got fucked! Fucked down to her skeleton by cocks! She showed them all her shaggy, sour, wormy pussy! Fucking medals! An order! Ranks and merits! Fucking honor! Respect! And I shit and pissed on your hump! I shit and pissed on your sweaty tits! I shit and pissed on your mother, then I fucked her, you dirty-assed cunt![563]

Not only is this a Bataillean desacralization of Soviet speech and tropes, Sorokin seems to assent with Deleuze and Guattari that:

> The truth is that sexuality is everywhere: the way that a bureaucrat fondles his records, a judge administers justice, a businessman causes money to circulate; in the way the bourgeoisie fucks the proletariat; and

[562] Vladimir Sorokin, *Their Four Hearts*, trans. Max Lawton (Dalkey Archive, 2022), 92.

[563] Ibid, 137.

> so on … Hitler got the fascists sexually aroused. Flags, nations, armies, banks get a lot of people aroused.[564]

Sorokin dares to look at Soviet history without teleology and from the perspective of the unhinged libidinous quality of participating in the system *in the moment*, not from the perspective of what these acts were intended to accomplish. This must partially be because Sorokin knows no shining future came to pass; all that remained of Soviet dreams by 1989 were attempts to calculate the number of the dead, much like the numbers the dice roll to at the end of the novel. And, if no shining future came to pass, then perhaps violent, teleological acts done in the past must be seen as merely having been done to bring the doers in touch with the Bateillan Geist—the "solar anus"—of transgressive metaphysics. Perhaps extreme acts that are done because "the ends justify the means" are only ever done so that the doer can feel the *sheer erotic weight of the means alone*.

An Ouroboric Rune

Their Four Hearts, *The Foundation Pit*, and *The Story of the Eye* form a perfect triangle in their joint illustration of the fact that a future that does not come to be cannot be used to justify past atrocities—perhaps even shining futures that *do* come to be are inappropriate justifications for the evil that's been committed. To wit, without the possibility of the future alluded to in the note at the end of the novel, *The Foundation Pit* disintegrates into *Their Four Hearts*, in which acts much like those committed explicitly for the sake of subjective and erotic transcendence in

[564] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Penguin, 2009), 293.

Bataille's novel are justified only by an abstract system of mechanical divination and a mysterious hierarchy that informs their doing, an Abject Geist in which to "know" is to enjoy committing acts of violence. To put this simply and with reference to the quote from *Anti-Oedipus* I cited earlier, perhaps, for the psychological and philosophical reasons that Bataille explains in his philosophy, all of the atrocities in history were *done* simply because the *doing* felt good. Here, we might also think of Jonathan Littel's *Les Bienveillantes* [*The Kindly Ones*] (2006), a novel that grew out of *Le sec et l'humide* [*The Damp and the Dry*] (2008), Littell's theoretical analysis of the life and writings of the Belgian Nazi Léon Degrelle after the fashion of *Male Fantasies*, Klaus Theweleit's famous psychoanalytic analysis of the Nazi psyche. For Littell, Nazism is explicable by way of sexual neuroses. His totalized portrait of a gay SS officer who commits matricide, has an incestuous relationship with his twin sister, and manages to be in all of the most significant theaters of WWII and meet all of the most significant Nazi figures is an attempt to create an ontology of Nazism that orbits around the anus. This mix of fact and fiction has caused Philippe Carrard to theorize the book as "historical metafiction," writing that:

> It is this use of actual rather than fictional characters as middlemen that makes *The Kindly Ones* into a piece of historiographic metafiction. Indeed, by challenging the conventions of the historical novel, at least those identified by Lukacs, Littell's text becomes self-reflexive. Specifically, by making readers play a guessing game (Is "Bierkamp" an historical figure? Should I go to Google to find out?), it offers a reflection on the topic: Who deserves the label "historical character"?[565]

I claim that Littell's refusal to identify the fictional and non-fictional elements of the book are not just an attempt to interrogate the notion of historicity, but because his goal in writing the book is not to do with history so much as with philosophy. Just as Vladimir Sorokin describes his

[565] Philippe Carrard, "Historiographic Metafiction, French Style," *Style* 48, no. 2 (2014): 181–202, 184.

method of imitating classical Russian writers' styles in *Blue Lard* as an "essence-hunt," so too is Littell attempting to render the Geist of Nazism in a way that transcends literal questions of facticity. As Zoë Roth writes, "*The Kindly Ones* renders visible the transnational and translational connections underpinning the continuity of violence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries."[566]

At one point in his exegesis of Degrelle's life, Littell cheekily claims that Nazis needed to be "fucked in the ass" so that they wouldn't become Nazis: the Holocaust felt good to them because of their deep sexual repression. While one might easily take issue with the banality and crudeness of this notion, it *is* an attempt to construct a dialectical Gestalt out of fascism. In his second novel, *Une vieille histoire* [*An Old Story*] (2018), Littell goes further, by stripping away all historical particularities and plunging his reader into a world of "substance" that exists apart from any contingent phenomena: a roving, genderless body is plunged into situations of "solitude," "love," "war," "sex," "death," "child-rearing," which is to say all of the most indelible realms of human experience, but each situation plays out as it would in a nouveau roman, coldly and without characters who appear to be real humans. It is a world of Substance in the medieval sense, one that is not weighted down by the world itself—a realm of sheer archetype (though the extreme sex acts and constant orbiting around the anus that continue in this novel do somewhat problematize that reading). The movement toward such a broad philosophical conception of existence was already legible in *The Kindly Ones* by way of Littell's insouciant play with historical detail, but it gives way to the stripping away of any and all detail in *An Old Story*.

[566] Zoë Roth, "War of Images or Images of War? Visualizing History in Jonathan Littell's The Kindly Ones," *Journal of Modern Literature* 41, no. 1 (2017): 81–99, 97.

How does this relate to the initial section of the essay that was concerned with Etkind's failure to effectively divide different generations of Soviet literary mourning practice? It is my contention that to understand literature after Stalin, one must also examine literature *under Stalin*. The degree to which authors like Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov attempt to paint the atrocities of Stalinism in a cold and realistic light makes it utterly unclear how anyone could have possibly done such terrible things; that which is done in the dead of night no longer makes sense in the morning.[567] On the other hand, Platonov's constant refrains about the future and attempts to cope with and/or justify the atrocities of the present from a metaphysical and ideological point of view occlude the true human impulses at play. Sorokin suggests that, in his fundamental idealism, Platonov misidentifies the metaphysical horizon at work in *The Foundation Pit* as the future, when really it is the transcendental quality of violence itself. This suggests that later generations of Soviet writers had the courage to make sense of life as it actually ended up turning out without the shining future having come to pass. The mourning-process finally comes to rest in a Bataillean mode, one that strips away all lofty or future-oriented motivations for human behavior. Here, we might also think of the end of Sorokin's *Тридцатая любовь Марины* [*Marina's Thirtieth Love*] (1995), which turns official language into something erotic, a quality it must have had (from Deleuze and Guattari's perspective) for some not-insignificant number of functionaries. By reframing traumatic historical experiences in

[567] For example, the frantic quality of Shostakovich's opera *The Nose* hardly suggests a culture that is taking mournful stock of tragedy as it comes to pass. Existing *alongside* atrocity, trauma, and state violence brings the citizens of that state into a state of mania and (possibly) transcendence that is reflected in national art (cf. the concept of "attunement" in Heidegger's *Being and Time*). Even if something like the over-the-top cymbal crescendos of *The Nose* was the actual soundtrack to the national mood of Stalin's purges, they would be entirely inappropriate to the "bourgeois monadism" of Solzhenitsyn, Grossman, or Trifonov. Nothing less than Mozart's monochromatic mourning in *Requiem* would suit the mood of these authors' work.

unrealistic terms that sometimes reproduce the surreal experience of living through it,[568] later generations of mourners come to a new conclusion: those responsible for great atrocities participated in them because they were ordinary humans with, as Bataille might have put it, *typically transcendental libidos*. The first generation of mourners who frame themselves as mere diggers and monks of remembrance are, despite their insistence on realistic remembrance, the furthest from what the experience of living through and committing these acts must have really felt like. To understand a tragedy of such unimaginable scale, mourners must allow themselves the freedom to think irreverently and allegorically. In doing so, they form an ouroboric rune and, perhaps, meet their ancestors on their own terms. They have reached the Geist that ruled over the atrocities of their country's history. But they are not freed by this knowledge, do not belong to a future philosophical community that is calm and placid; they are horrified by it. The non-chronological dialectical movement of this dissertation that builds itself up from the autofiction of Proust and Céline finds its awful final form in this gestalt—the Abject Geist of Sorokin, Platonov, and Sharov—in such a way that it must collapse back down to the in medias res first chapter of the dissertation. This, in turn, reveals why "Abject Geist" was such a neat formulation to use in this chapter. For Kristeva, the abject is the obscene and the corporeal that reminds the human subject of their own forgotten body and, therefore, the interposition of the Real into the symbolic order. But what if one were to attempt to turn what she turns "the objective frailty of the symbolic order" into a symbolic, nay, even a metaphysical order? Then one would arrive at Abject Geist, a form of metaphysics that is unbearable in its abjection. Thus, in the face of such horror, the 20th-century writer recoils from a totalized conception of the world that sculpts every one of its phenomena into a metaphysical vision. But this abject metaphysics that is built from

[568] And not "*having* lived through it."

the actual phenomena of existence rather than sham-phenomena collated for a party committee or an idealized notion of substance as entirely apart from the world *as it is* does not confine itself to Russian literature. We can find specimens of that idiom wherever the mechanisms of history have been brutal and inhumane (which is to say: everywhere in the world).

America as Bellona or The Atrocity Exhibition

As a point of comparison from America, we might look toward Samuel Delany's 1974 postmodern science-fiction novel *Dhalgren*. This novel tells the story of a city called Bellona that exists in the middle of America and which some strange catastrophe has befallen. The only people who live there are hippies, Scorpions (members of a strange gang resembling the Hell's Angels), and people trying to live their lives by pretending that the world is exactly as it was before the catastrophe. The protagonist is a man who has forgotten his actual name and goes by the nickname of "Kid." The story is told from his perspective and disintegrates as it goes along, eventually looping into its own beginning like *Finnegans Wake*. As Kid moves around the city, the very topography of Bellona constantly shifts and reconfigures itself around him, as in moments like this:

> "Watch out for the edge," he said. His toes and the ball of his foot went over the board side and dangled. "And those damn meat hooks."
> "Huh…?" Then she laughed. "No—that's *across* the street!"
> "The hell it is," he said. "When I came running out of here this morning, I nearly skewered myself."
> "You must have gotten lost—" she was still laughing— "in the basement! Come on, it's just a couple of steps down."

> He frowned in the dark (thinking: There *was* a lamp on this street corner. I saw it from the roof. *Why* can't I see anything…) let go the jamb, stepped… down; to another board, that squeaked."[569]

In a way, *Dhalgren* reads like a more traditional novel that has been stripped of its normal setting and plot development, leaving a mass of signifiers that constantly shift around the abstract characters. It has been widely identified as an allegory for America in the 1960s and the difficulty of race relations during that time (many of the characters are black and the protagonist is ethnically indeterminate). In his foreword to the novel, William Gibson writes that "in *Dhalgren*, the unmediated singularity [of the 1960s] has survived, free of all corrosion of nostalgia."[570] (xiii). Elsewhere, it has been written that:

> [The] double awareness [of race] manifests itself in *Dhalgren* not as a specific presentation of black experience—characters and events in the novel represent a variety of races and experiences—but as irony. *Dhalgren's* readers are brought to an ironic cultural double perception of "the true and the real" akin to the "twoness" felt by Du Bois as, repeatedly, archetypes of American thought assumed to be "true" undergo ironic reversals in the "real" experience wrought by the novel.[571]

An ideal reading of *Dhalgren*—a novel that portrays the 60s as a cataclysm of shifting signifiers, uncertain events, and tenuous identity—would be one that does not force the protean shape of the novel into a teleological mode and does not force each character to cohere into a particular 60s identity.[572] The novel then becomes a portal into a particular mode of experience that is dependent on no ontic contingencies (to use the language of Heidegger), but seeks to enter into a

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[569] Samuel R. Delany, *Dhalgren* (New York: Vintage, 2001), 103.

[570] Ibid, xiii.

[571] Mary Kay Bray, "Rites of Reversal: Double Consciousness in Delany's *Dhalgren*," *Black American Literature Forum* 18, no. 2 (1984): 57–61, 57.

[572] A trap I fell into just a few sentences ago by identifying the scorpions as something like the Hell's Angels.

fractalized archetype of the sixties as such. Initially, Delany envisioned the book as "five dissimilar governments being overthrown by a 'group of people just exercising the wonderful world view of the flower children.'"[573] Todd Comer writes that:

> Readers of *Dhalgren* in 1975 would have been incapable of understanding Bellona as anything other than a near analogue of cities recently torn asunder by urban riots. What follows, then, needs to be understood as involving an ethical critique of concrete political structures and as not simply concerned with the writing of the text before us because [...] the city along with every subjectival creation is a product of myth. Delany's text interrogates such monumental myths through a representation of the city (and thereby the subject) as wounded and open to certain ethical possibilities. In its fragmentation Delany's text represents, internally and externally, subjectivity at its limit.[574]

Subjectivity, in other words, that is driven up into some greater system of organization, which Comer identifies as both myth and community. The characters in Delany's novel do not inhabit an actual topography and it is as if to exaggerate this lack that the book is explicitly not the account of a real place, but a totalized Gestalt, in which specific, historical particularities are of absolutely no importance. Unlike in Handke's work, what the reader is confronted with in *Dhalgren* is a world which is impossible to write directly or to have a primary, unmediated experience of. It is a world that exists only in aggregate—only as superstructure. And it represents another kind of dialectical endpoint: when the political structures that Comer indicates Delany as critiquing can no longer hold fast and begin to crumble. For Delany, Absolute Knowing is the indelible truth that every institution the west was built on is corrupt, unjust, and violent. The endpoint of history becomes Bellona's perpetualized state of emergency—a riot that

[573] Todd A. Comer, "Playing at Birth: Samuel R. Delany's 'Dhalgren,'" *Journal of Narrative Theory* 35, no. 2 (2005): 172–95, 173.

[574] Ibid, 175.

never ends as the true paradise of the children of the sixties. Though Delany is sympathetic to the ideals of the sixties, the sinister quality of Bellona suggests that the only state of being possible to be found on the endpoint gestalt propounded by the hippies is a riot that lasts forever…

Though J.G. Ballard was not an American, he managed to write the most *geistig* encapsulation not just of the ideals of the sixties, but of the whole American 20th century in his *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), a series of fragments about a protagonist who bears a variety of different names (Talbert, Traven, Travis, Talbot) encountering surreal situations that draw from the phenomena of WWII, plastic surgery, John F. Kennedy's assassination, and many other historical events, but makes them abject, obscene, massages them into a metaphysics that goes beyond the particularities of the history they emerge from, as with Littell's *The Kindly Ones*, but in far more radical fashion. On the subject's of the book's genesis, Ballard wrote that:

> I was terribly wounded by my wife's death. Leaving me with these very young children, I felt that a crime had been committed by nature against this young woman – and her children – and I was searching desperately for an explanation . . . To some extent *The Atrocity Exhibition* is an attempt to explain all the terrible violence that I saw around me in the early sixties. It wasn't just the Kennedy assassination . . . I think I was trying to look for a kind of new logic that would explain all these events.[575]

The book's most famous vignette, which was partially responsible for Nelson Doublejay Jr. personally ordering that all copies of the already-printed volume be shredded and that the publication be cancelled, thus leading to Grove Press picking it up, is entitled "Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan," in which Ballard writes:

During these assassination fantasies

[575] J. G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, introduction by Hari Kunzru (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), xviii–xix.

> Ronald Reagan and the conceptual auto disaster. Numerous studies have been conducted upon patients in terminal paresis (GPI), placing Reagan in a series of simulated auto crashes, e.g. multiple pileups, head-on collisions, motorcade attacks (fantasies of Presidential assassinations remained a continuing preoccupation, subject showing a marked polymorphic fixation on windshields and rear trunk assemblies). Powerful erotic fantasies of an anal-sadistic surrounded the image of the Presidential contender. Subjects were required to construct the optimum auto disaster victim by placing a replica of Reagan's head on the unretouched photographs of crash fatalities. In 82% of cases massive rear-end collisions were selected with a preference for expressed fecal matter and rectal hemorrhages. Further tests were conducted to define the optimum model-year. These indicate that a three year model lapse with child victims provide the maximum audience excitation (confirmed by manufacturers' studies of the optimum auto disaster). It is hoped to construct a rectal modulous of Reagan and the auto disaster of maximized audience arousal.
> **Tallis became increasingly obsessed**
> Motion picture studies of Ronald Reagan reveal characteristic patterns of facial tones and musculature associated with homoerotic behavior. The continuing tension of buccal sphincters and the recessive tongue role tally with earlier studies of facial rigidity (cf., Adolf Hitler, Nixon). Slow-motion cine films of campaign speeches exercised a marked erotic effect upon an audience of spastic children. Even with mature adults the verbal material was found to have a minimal effect, as demonstrated by substitution of an edited tape giving diametrically opposed opinions…
> **with the pudenda of the presidential contender**
> Incidence of orgasms in fantasies of sexual intercourse with Ronald Reagan. Patients were provided with assembly kit photographs of sexual partners during intercourse. In each case Reagan's face was superimposed upon the original partner. Vaginal intercourse with "Reagan" proved uniformly disappointing, producing orgasm in 2% of subjects.[576]

It is worth reproducing a substantial excerpt of this vignette in order to clearly display the fragmentary nature of the text's style (one notes that there are two distinct lines of text playing out simultaneously, one in bold and one not), as well as how many references to the most iconic

[576] Ibid, 165-166.

and problematic personages of 20th-century history Ballard manages to slip into the text. One also notes that, as Hari Kunzuru writes:

> The book's obscenity, the reason it still has the potential to shock, is a function of its objectivity. It is clinical when, for decency's sake, it ought to feign emotion. It looks on our sacred treasures, our culture's real sacred treasures—the imaginary bodies of famous people—and responds with all the violence and lust and revulsion that the healthy well-adjusted citizen suppresses. Decency is what separates rational economic actors, dutifully maximising their personal benefit, from the racaille, from scum. It is the source of order. Ballard's fictional refusal of it was—and remains—a threat.[577]

And yet, there exists the possibility that Ballard is operating on a higher level of "order," depicting something that transcends ontology or polity (the latter of which is what Kunzuru is concerned with) and extends into the realm of metaphysics. After all, the fragmentary nature of the book means that it contains no recognizable topography or geography; the reader moves through it as if through an exploded nucleus of historical phenomena, a rune illuminating the Clearing of Being in metaphysical rather than ontological fashion—for this is the point at which metaphysics departs from phenomenology while still making use of phenomena, when, as Hegel believed himself to be doing, the light cast by worldly phenomena is pointed up into the welkin to illuminate "Substance" instead of being directed toward the Clearing of Being as Heidegger would have done… Albena Lutzkanova-Vassileva writes that "The novelty of Ballard's work [...] resides precisely in its conception of the media environment as space for reenacting and semantically evaluating the subject's psychically distressful traumas by means of his/her dissolution in a variety of protean identities, combined through multivalent bonds with media-

[577] Ibid, xiv.

engendered moduli and icons."[578] Dissolving, in other words, into an over-soul that is *no escape* from our world, but a heightening of its worst tendencies, as if to immerse oneself in the worst phenomena present in the field of being that is the world were also a way of seeking out the "oceanic feeling" described in Romain Rolland's letter to Sigmund Freud. Dennis A. Foster neatly puts this into words when he writes that:

> The common presumptions of transcendence and autonomy belong to the general spiritualization of the body that Western culture accomplished in attempting to deny the utter contingency and helplessness of the individual organism. It has become ever more difficult, however, to maintain this fiction under the conditions of the twentieth century: human paltriness before the feasible means of destruction; the instrumentalization of the body in its cybernetic relation to industrial (and entertainment) technology and in its availability to medical techniques; the dependence on sources of knowledge and pleasure that are increasingly beyond any individual's control. Such conditions imply for Ballard the growing emptiness of the symbolic order and, consequently, the death of its earthly representative, the subject. Whatever may be horrific in this change cannot be found in the cool vision of Ballard's prose. Technology has covered the gap, providing, as The Atrocity Exhibition demonstrates, a way of submitting your body to a larger purpose, of deriving pleasure by becoming the object of pleasure. This appeal is, perhaps, the one Baudrillard sees in the hyperreal, in becoming a filmic body, death's beloved. And, so, seamlessly are you edited into your culture's desires.[579]

How perfectly, then, *The Atrocity Exhibition* sutures our argument shut: Ballard's protagonist makes himself one with the oversoul of atrocity because it *feels good* in the sense of *Anti-Oedipus* and *Their Four Hearts*, except that, here, it is a deranged iteration of the religious impulse that gives sexual pleasure—patching oneself into a literalized oversoul of collective

[578] Albena Lutzkanova-Vassileva, "Trauma, Media Technology, and Psychic Restoration in the Contemporary British Novel: The Testimonies of J. G. Ballard's 'The Atrocity Exhibition,'" *CLA Journal* 45, no. 3 (2002): 388–404, 403.

[579] Dennis A. Foster, "J. G. Ballard's Empire of the Senses: Perversion and the Failure of Authority," *PMLA* 108, no. 3 (1993): 519–32, 531.

violence and hysteria. It isn't just that the subject has died in the context of 20th century history and we are to lament its passing, but that the ability to move beyond bourgeois subjectivity and back into a kind of medieval spirituality (perhaps a more honest iteration of Hegel's "Absolute Knowing" in which the peasant never had any idea that he was anything other than a collective phenomenon) is both necessity and pleasure. For those intrepid pioneers of 20th- and 21st-century living who are able to take pleasure in the eros of their dissolution as subjects into boundless collective violence, Hegel's maxim is transformed to something like "What is pleasurable is actual, what is actual is abject" and Spirit is revealed to be not knowledge, but thanatos and eros in equal measure. This, Ballard suggests, is how one must proceed from phenomena to metaphysics using Hegel's dialectical method in the 20th and 21st centuries. A stiff drink, to be sure, but it is placid and perfect for those who can choke it down. And what about for those who cannot? What then? To answer that question, we must move to Germany, to where the disavowal of the 20th century's collective violence has been swift and intractable.

To Prüm!: A Germanic Detour

Michael Lentz's 2018 novel *Schattenfroh*, on which strikingly little criticism has been written, presents an alternative metaphysics of the German 20th century that extends all the way back to the Middle Ages. In it, a son named Niemand, a fictional stand-in for Lentz himself, is forced by his father's ghost, an entity called Schattenfroh—a German family name that means "shadowglad," but sounds like "schadenfroh," which means "damageglad" and is a word used to describe those who feel joy when confronted by the misfortune of others—to write the book that the reader is making their way through. The book begins in a highly abstract mode:

> One calls this writing. I have no paper, no pen, no typewriter, no computer. I am writing into my brainfluid. I must write that I am here voluntarily. And so I write: I am here voluntarily. And, as I am here voluntarily, I have voluntarily subjected myself to the confines of this society. I write: As I am here voluntarily, I have voluntarily subjected myself to the confines of this society. Society demands amusement. My mission is to write everything down from the beginning. I said it can't be done. I don't know when the beginning is and I don't know what everything is. They've suddenly changed something. In the meantime, I had to sit very still, clacking noises and voice-like rumblings could be heard just like in the slice-writing tube, whose fascinating images I've never dared examine, as they might confront me with inalterable truths in the interior of my body, truths that no longer allow a line to be dragged out between life-threatening and death-bringing.[580]

But, as the book goes on, the protagonist's journey to fulfill his father's commands and the commands of the "Frightbringing Society," both a parody of the famous German Fruitbearing Society [Fruchtbringende Gesellschaft] and a stand-in for society at large, takes on an increasingly epic heft as he travels through Bosch paintings, goes back in time to medieval Prüm, the city of his birth, by entering a tapestry on the wall of his father's municipal-administration office, is nearly executed there for being an intruder from the future, then returns to the present, where he once more begins to travel around with the ghost of his father, discussing a great deal of family history as they go (Nobody's grandfather was a priest who was imprisoned by the Gestapo and narrowly escaped execution), is once more captured by metaphysical forces reminiscent of medieval armies, then is told precisely how he is going to be executed by having the impalement scene from Ivo Andrić's *The Bridge on the Drina*—reproduced at great length—read to him, but manages to escape execution once more by sending in a Doppelgänger to be executed in his place. At the end of the book, after a long digression about early printing-press technology, Nobody is able to "deprint" the book the reader has come to the end of, a text that is

[580] Michael Lentz, *Schattenfroh*, trans. Max Lawton (Dallas: Deep Vellum, 2025), 19.

explicitly the product of German totalitarianism, family abuse, and an overweening father who is variously identified with the devil, the Nazis, Bismarck, the Catholic Church, Martin Luther, and the men who killed Thomas Müntzer. But the episodes I lay out here represent moments of relative clarity in the book. Between these moments, the book enters a fractalized mode in which fragments from a great variety of sources are blended together into a singular prose-poetic flow of information, in which the names of the characters in the book, as well as the historical figures, philosophers, and authors mentioned, are constantly turned into anagrams. In fact, whole sentences are sometimes repeated and turned into anagrams, which Lentz explicitly associates with Kabbalistic practice. This is also what happens at the end of the book when the "tzimtzum," or God-created world, of *Schattenfroh* is deprinted: the first 35 pages repeat in reverse, their constituent parts separated by anagrams of the name "Schattenfroh," from which one letter after another is subtracted. Insomuch as Schattenfroh/Lentz's father is the Geist of the world that is the book—a metaphysical world of Absolute Knowing in which that which is real is identical to that which is repressive and totalitarian—Lentz refuses to inhabit this world and frees himself from it by destroying the book that he has been forced to write. It is this movement of deprinting that, in achronological terms, returns us to the in medias res opening of the dissertation: to Handke and Knausgaard's unornamented phenomenologies…

CONCLUSION:

NO FUTURE AND NO PAST

To Refuse Absolute Knowing

The dialectical progression of the dissertation has thus exhausted itself, refused the Abject Geist of Absolute Knowing that the winding paths of phenomenological literature in the 20th century culminated in. Moving outwards from the engagements with personal experience at play in Proust and Céline's autofiction (which, in the case of Proust, turned out to be less phenomenological than earlier thought), 20th-century writers sought to include more and more information in their models of the world, first with the notion of "worldhood" and "alternative worldhood" in books like *Remember Famagusta*, *Lookout Cartridge*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, and *Insatiability*—to such an extent that a ressentiment-fuelled chaos phenomenology was created, one that necessitated the attempt to order the multiplicity of phenomena into a Geist-oriented state of Absolute Knowing. In the context of this sadistic Absolute Knowing, the writers from Russia, Germany, and America treated in the last chapter reacted to the trauma of history by hemming it into a metaphysical model that seemed all-encompassing, the rub being that the model ended up being unbearable in its abjection, the crumbling of the symbolic order rather than Hegel's dream of the "real as actual, actual as real" as he surveyed the future from the first few years of the 19th century—something sinister, perverse, and abject. It is Lentz who, at the end of *Schattenfroh*, finally deprints this iteration of the 20th-century novel: after his book, it is no longer possible to write Absolute Knowing and the writer retreats to the bare phenomena of books by Handke and Knausgaard, which, in their turn, pave their way for even more *limited*

writers, the "Dimes Square" diarists of New York or Sally Rooney's unembroidered closet dramas, which are called novels, but, on a formal level, more resemble plays or scripts. They also pave the way for identity-based neo-realist novels with no ambition other than lighting up a very small "clearing" in the field of one person or group's "being." Indeed, the return to the certainty of one's own being and experience played out for a second time in Handke and Knausgaard's novels, as well as in a great many other works of 21st-century fiction, brings Marx's notion that history repeats itself "first as tragedy, then as farce" to the fore: in comparison with the horse blinders Handke, Knausgaard, and all their successors wear, the "limitations" Proust and Céline placed on their vision of the world to write their iteration of autofiction seem as expansive as the novels of Balzac or Zola, so concerned with ordering the hierarchies of France into their all-encompassing cycles of novels.

The only way of constructing this dialectical narrative is achronologically, but, having put it together by means of bricolage, the state of contemporary letters becomes clearer: today's novels do not feed on the last scraps of postmodernism, as so many critics would have us believe, but inhabit an epistemological crisis: the inability to either form the phenomena of the world into anything sensible in terms of the world itself without reference to metaphysics or the terror that comes on when one catches sight of the metaphysical system of Absolute Knowing that is formed by the phenomena of history ordered into their rightful Geist… In this situation, the only option is to retreat to a literary idiom that captures nothing but those few glimmers of selfhood that are indisputable and unquestionable, a vision of the world bolstered by political ideologies that frame the experience of the other as sacrosanct… And, for the dialectical scholar of what phenomenology might mean in literature, all that remains is to wait for *My Struggle* and all that comes after it to deprint itself just like the final pages of *Schattenfroh*… As Nobody

writes at the novel's beginning: "Reduction is not a good prerequisite for the long journey that lies ahead of me."[581] The new community of philosophic knowers foreseen by Hegel becomes a school of navel-gazing writers who know only the experience they've lived through, communicating it to the reader in simple prose practically bereft of ambiguities. Reduction may not be a good prerequisite for the journey that lies ahead, but it is also the end of our dialectical trek through 20th- and 21st-century letters…

Zero equals zero; phenomenology is dead, long live phenomenology!

It is undeniable… I am partly to blame for this algebraic equation having cancelled itself out. Like an incompetent high-school student on test day, I have ended up with "zero equals zero" and the teacher refuses to offer me any clues as to where I went wrong. What has each chapter left us with? In Chapter One, we bore witness to Knausgaard's patricidal engagement with Handke's eventually *suicidal* project. The middle period of Handke's work seemed to be a good model for what phenomenology in 20th-century prose might mean because of its chilly treatment of spatiality, geography, and phenomena, not with a murky screen of fake chaos over them as would be the case in Chapter Three's "chaos novel," but phenomena bathed in beautiful antique light—the world as God might see it, uncovered in the clearing of Being, as Heidegger would say. Or, as Handke's narrator writes in *Repetition*, "I saw in this nascent script the emblem of a hidden, nameless, all the more magnificent and above all unbounded kingdom."[582]

[581] Ibid, 20.

[582] Peter Handke, *Repetition*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 33.

Alas, this kingdom could not last… not even for a day! Handke was more and more taken in by the prolix, the banal as such, but, even worse than that, the self-referential. In his later period of production, Handke is no longer able to see the world as it is; instead, he sees the world as Handke-characters see it. The characters themselves are constantly being dredged up from previous novels, self-repetition, a Marvel movie of avant-garde Austrian prose… Handke loses his ability to see the world in phenomenological terms because he becomes a writer of some renown and his interior writer's world, one of fantasy, becomes the phenomenological plain out onto which he gazes (and this isn't even mentioning his political issues…).

In some sense, there is phenomenological development at play in Knausgaard's *My Struggle* cycle when compared to Handke's earlier work. He adds the body to the Poundian ideogrammatic quick-cuts of Handke's middle-period novels. This development from *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* (itself a massive influence on Knausgaard) to his *My Struggle* cycle is like the movement from the photography of physical impressions—murky, enticing, impossible to fully make out, a cell-phone camera on in your pocket and you don't even realize it—to open-world video games. But, even as we gain the overview of landscape Knausgaard is so skilled at producing in his writing, we lose the object—the phenomenon qua Poundian ideogram—and the camera of Knausgaard's prose ends up being like that of a social-media livestreamer—an extended selfie in writing. But Knausgaard too "committed suicide" in the later stages of his project… After *My Struggle* and the pointless graphomania of his *Seasons Quarter*, he soon moved on to writing a biblical-horror cycle, one he is still working on. This cycle, so far comprising the books *The Morning Star* (2021), *Wolves of Eternity* (2023), *The Third Kingdom* (2024), and *The School of Night* (2025), bears resemblance to nothing so much as it does the work of Stephen King. Knausgaard himself was even excited to hear critics comparing him to

Maine's great bard of American banality in a conversation with the writer Torrey Peters.[583] Other than the comparisons to Stephen King, critics have really failed to conceive of what Knausgaard's move to "genre fiction" might mean. Certainly, there is a phenomenological plain at play in the texts, which is to say that the novels read like Stephen King subjecting his texts (already so filled with the detritus of daily life) to an even more intensely everyday edit by our self-serious Norwegian. But the true accomplishment of the cycle's first book, *The Morning Star*, lies in the fact that it takes Knausgaard's Handke-influenced presence-by-way-of-dull-prose technique and applies it to the machine-gun fragments of what is a silly horror novel. Not only did Knausgaard manage to get out from Handke's shadow entirely, he seemed to be having fun while doing so.

Handke's shadow aside, this move to genre fiction raises troubling questions about phenomenology's future in 21st-century prose. As mentioned earlier in the dissertation, Wyndham Lewis was most critical of *Ulysses* for the way that it allowed the detritus of a squalid Dublin life *anchored to a very specific time and place* to overpower the classically-tinged story Joyce wanted to tell—like being on the banks of the Liffey and seeing all that washes up as a bum reads *The Odyssey* to you off in the distance. On this subject, Lewis writes:

> I regard Ulysses as a time-book; and by that I mean that it lays its emphasis upon, for choice manipulates, and in a doctrinaire manner, the self-conscious time-sense, that has now been erected into a universal philosophy. This it does beneath the spell of a similar creative impulse to that by which Proust worked. The classical unities of time and place are buried beneath its scale, however, and in this All-life-in-a-day scheme there is small place for them. Yet at the outset they are solemnly insisted on as a guiding principle to be fanatically observed. And certainly some

[583] Torrey Peters, "Planet Knausgaard: Norway's Most Famous Self-Exile Debarks for a New Frontier: Genre Fiction," *Vulture*, August 31, 2021, https://www.vulture.com/article/karl-ove-knausgaard-torrey-peters.html.

> barbarous version of the classical formula is at work throughout, like a concerted daimon attending the author, to keep him obsessionally faithful to the time-place, or space-time, programme.[584]

Judging from this, the fundamental objection Lewis has to *Ulysses* is the way Joyce's intensely close-up focus on the here-and-now combined with his interest in mythic time, grand narratives, and classical dramatic unities of time and place end up creating a hodgepodge of temporality that is fundamentally atemporal (a fixation of Lewis's in this book, which, generally speaking, is about how the "time-cult" of the west has demonized "space"). The phrase I take to be most significant to his critique, however, is his problematization of how Joyce is "obsessionally faithful to the time-place, or space-time, programme." Lewis, it seems, would wish for Joyce to explode out from beyond this single day, to stop raking through the muck on the banks of the Liffey, seeing what he can dredge up… It would not be possible to claim that Joyce sought to heed Lewis's criticism when he wrote *Finnegans Wake*—Joyce even puts Lewis into that book as Shaun, an unsympathetic character (as far as the reader can tell)—but it certainly abandons the strictures of time and space, as well as any sort of phenomenology.

Alright, but why this digression to an esoteric rivalry between the greatest modernist and the one whom nobody reads anymore? Because, in *Finnegans Wake*, with his escape from the "time-place, or space-time, programme," Joyce ends up in a jumble of phonemes that is an impossible large-scale rerendering of a man being caught masturbating in a public park in Dublin, just as it is simultaneously about everything that had ever happened in the whole course of human history (as well as in the history of the universe). Joyce's escape from the phenomenology of *Ulysses* is a metauniverse of multilingual fireworks. Given that Knausgaard is

[584] Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), 105.

equally mired in the "time-place, or space-time, programme" of his own life, what is his escape from phenomenology—from contingency? It is airport-bookshop thrillers. Pastiches of Stephen King. In those, the endlessly expansive "video games" he makes of his own life in the *My Struggle* cycle give way to a re-rendering of a popular form that he doesn't even elevate—genre fiction pure and simple. *Finnegans Wake* and the biblical-horror cycle represent two attacks on and abandonments of the "time-place, or space-time, programme,"another way of describing the phenomenological impulse at play in both *Ulysses* and the *My Struggle* cycle. But, if *Finnegans Wake* is a tragedy, a "persistent snore in the next room" as Nabokov termed it, Knausgaard's biblical-horror series is surely a farce, one critics are not quite sure what to do with. Let's put it yet another way: if the sense-certainty at play, at least in some way, in both *Ulysses* and the *My Struggle* cycle, is sublated and we move onto something like Absolute Knowing in *Finnegans Wake* (an Absolute Knowing that is indistinguishable from *no knowledge at all*), does this not imply that, for Knausgaard, Absolute Knowing *is* a Stephen King novel? For Knausgaard, not even Abject Geist is possible and there is no attempt to order phenomena from a state of exception into an ontology or metaphysics of modernity. What this seems to suggest is that, today, the only possible option for the phenomenologist who sees to the mucky bottom of his own pond (he just isn't that deep!) is to fly away into the airless graphomania of genre fiction, some slight aftertaste of earlier literary exquisiteness in the meat—it's called an *elevated burger*, so terribly overpriced… In the biblical-horror cycle, Knausgaard abandons the clearing of Being and nothing is illuminated.

On the subject of Absolute Knowing, Hegel himself writes that, "The realm of Spirits which is formed in this way in the outer world constitutes a succession in Time in which one Spirit relieved another of its charge and each took over the empire of the world from its

predecessor. Their goal is the revelation of the depth of Spirit, and this is the *absolute Notion*."[585] It is debatable whether Joyce managed to discover the "depth of Spirit" in *Finnegans Wake*[586]—many dissertations and books could be written on the subject and attempt to apply Hegel's dialectics to Joyce's movement from *Ulysses* to the *Wake*, but there is no question that Knausgaard discovers nothing of the sort in the biblical-horror cycle. This should help to explain why Knausgaard's heirs are floundering so much in their phenomenological kiddie pools, so much shallower than even Knausgaard's work… We see this with Dimes Square scribes, with writers like Honor Levy, Sean Thor Conroe, and Rachel Cusk… The body becomes a sort of selfie moving across a flattened semi-phenomenological plain that really isn't phenomenological at all. If Knausgaard's selfie was at least 3D, his heirs are less than two-dimensional.

The point of this conclusion, however, should not be to abuse writers for their failures to fit into a typology I have created in the interests of earning a doctorate. This Hegelian detour (by way of Joyce) is an attempt to show the extent to which the equation of Chapter One cancels itself out—and the fact that Knausgaard, as the youngest writer of phenomenological fiction treated in this dissertation, cannot even run away to calculus integrals of abject phenomena that build themselves up into a metaphysical system of coordinates, that which is, as I have termed it, Abject Geist. In this context, one might also draw the diagram of a ladder showing how Céline and Proust descend to Handke and Knausgaard, who then descend to Levy and Conroe with *My First Book* (2024) and *Fuccboi* (2022)… In my dialectical history, each attempt to phenomenologically conceive of the world by way of prose fails, the *things themselves* are

[585] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford University Press, 1977), 492.

[586] And it is also a question that, in a certain sense, doesn't have much to do with this dissertation…

elusive, and a more reduced idiom comes to reign… In Chapter Two, even Céline fails to truly conceive of the body unto itself in his prose. As a doctor, he might have, being so comfortable in the abject—in what Kristeva termed the "objective frailty of the symbolic order,"[587] a potent reminder of our own doomed corporeality… But his hatred and political affiliations encouraged him to use his knowledge of the body as a means to proselytize a specific vision of the world that moved away from "the things themselves," Husserl's originary maxim of phenomenology. In that same chapter, we see how Proust, who might well have been able to use his lengthy descriptions of sensuous impressions in the context of an incredibly well-drawn vision of high-society Paris to erect a phenomenological vision of, not only the world his narrator inhabits as he inhabits it, but the way memory acts upon the body of his narrator as a phenomenological instrument later on. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

> True reflection presents me to myself not as idle and inaccessible subjectivity, but as identical with my presence in the world and to others, as I am now realizing it: I am all that I see, I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical situation, but, on the contrary, by being this body and this situation, and though them, all the rest.[588]

Instead, however, Proust's narrator gives in to endless comparisons—Hegelian mediations[589]—that occlude the world he seeks to describe. He is reduced to the status of a vampiric Henry James character, a void denizen, somebody who only sees the world as it is through the endless gear-shifting of the veil that language places over it. In Proust and Céline's chapter, only two

[587] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 70.

[588] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception: An Introduction*, trans. Donald Landes (London: Routledge, 2011), 525.

[589] And note how Hegel's phenomenology is always getting in the way of Heidegger's phenomenology of Dasein or Merleau-Ponty's of the body!

later phenomenological writers of the body, Péter Nádas and Lydia Ginzburg, maintain some shred of phenomenological probity (in fact, these might be two of the only authors in this whole dissertation that end up having some sediment of insight to carry forwards, their novels the only works that aren't ruined algebra equations…).

The authors treated in the final two chapters fare no better… In Chapter Three, those phenomenological writers who wish to bring together a stunning and incomprehensible number of phenomena from our world and not systematize them in any way find that their inherent biases necessarily creep into the text and distort its object. A writer is no god—not even a gnostic one—and a text is no world. Even beyond those considerations of bias and distortion, even beyond the issue that no chaos novel is possible because it is patterned off of a vision of order and is, as such, nothing but an act of Nietzschean ressentiment… even beyond that, the novels of Chapter Three are hardly legible even to intrepid readers of literary fiction. One would be better off reading the phone book. Thus does Chapter Three leave us with another equation in which all terms cancel out. Every other dialectical movement exhausted, the writers of Chapter Four then have no choice but to swing for the fences, aiming for an abject iteration of Absolute Knowing, not one in which "from the chalice of this realm of spirits foams forth for Him his own infinitude,"[590] as Hegel quotes at his treatise's conclusion, a very happy ending for Geist indeed, but one in which shit, blood, and cum foam forth from that same chalice. "What if we take the true phenomena of the world as it exists (the phenomenological half of the equation) to be the building blocks of Substance—of God (the metaphysical half of the equation)?" these writers ask. The answer is not a pretty one. If the chaos novels of Chapter Three are unreadable from a

[590] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford University Press, 1977), 492.

logistical perspective (one of comprehension), novels of Abject Geist are unbearable in what they suggest vis-à-vis the metaphysical quiddity of our historical age… Just as writers like Proust and Céline are horrified by their historical eras and retreat to the contours of the self, just as Husserl and Heidegger return to an elemental vision of existence in their phenomenology, Handke and Knausgaard (again, speaking non-chronologically—this dissertation moves in terms of dialectics rather than time) must eventually flee from Abject Geist and retreat to an even more reduced iteration of the self, the prose more bare and no broader visions of history or society, much less plot… Even Céline comes to seem like a socialite compared to Handke and Knausgaard… And where do we then locate the ultimate farce of Marx's formulation ("first as tragedy, then as farce") if the first retreat to the self in Céline and Proust was a tragedy, then the first metaphysical move to Abject Geist was also a tragedy of "terrible gnosis"? The farce lies in the fact that Handke reached for an Absolute Knowing that was so bound up in Serbian nationalism, whereas Knausgaard landed on a biblical-horror cycle you couldn't even call abject… all this without even rehearsing the dreadful state of the autofiction that has come to reign in Knausgaard's wake. Here, we must make an appeal to Michael Lentz, our friend from Chapter Four, and beg him to deprint it… deprint it all… like Kurtz at the end of *Heart of Darkness* ("Exterminate all the brutes!"), we beg to be rid of all these texts, to be returned to the 19th century, to be put back into a Sloterdijkian bubble or sphere, to regain our metaphysical certitude in the state of things… we'd even settle for ontological certitude… but we find this to be an *impossible ask*… the ink remains on the pages of these books… they will not be deprinted… and the clock of history will not be turned back…

Another dead phenomenological text to add to the pile

Why is it that the temptations of Hegel's phenomenology and metaphysics loom so large for the iteration of phenomenology that became both popular and prevalent at the beginning of the 20th century? Some scholars suggest that Hegel's method, when stripped of its idealism proper, is actually the best way of apprehending the "things themselves." As George Boger writes:

> Hegel's resolution of Kant's antinomies consummates the development of objective idealism and prepares for its transposition into mature materialism. His dialectical methodology overcomes Kant's epistemological dilemma respecting phenomena and noumena. This solution provides the form for apprehending true infinity and, as I maintain by analogy, precisely the form for apprehending any object. I expressly distinguish within Hegel's system the movements of nature and of human cognition as Reason knows both nature and itself; each movement retains the same principal dialectical laws. Rather than their ideal isomorphism we recognize an incomplete identity that reflects the limited extent of human knowledge at any time; there exists only a difference between what is known and what is not yet known.[591]

Given the definitional importance Boger ascribes to the difference between that which is known and that which is not yet known, it is clear that he is focused on dialectics as such and has abandoned Absolute Knowing—an idealist snakeskin to shed. What J. Ellis McTaggart writes on the subject of dialectics is even more cogent to the self-cancelling conflagration we have borne witness to in my dissertation:

> The dialectic system is not so wonderful or mystic as it has been represented to be. It makes no attempt to deduce existence from essence; it does not even attempt to eliminate the element of immediacy in

[591] George Boger, "On the Materialist Appropriation of Hegel's Dialectical Method," *Science & Society* 55, no. 1 (1991): 57.

> experience, and to produce a self-sufficient and self-mediating thought. It cannot even, if the view I have taken is right, claim that its course is a perfect mirror of the nature of reality. But although the results which it attains are comparatively commonplace, they go as far as we can for any practical purpose [...] For, if we accept the system, we learn from it that in the universe is realised, the whole of reason, and nothing but reason. Contingency, in that sense in which it is baffling and oppressive to our minds, has disappeared. For it would be possible, according to this theory, to prove that the only contingent thing about the universe was its existence as a whole, and this is not contingent in the ordinary sense of the word.[592]

In other words, Hegel's dialectical method proves the existence of reason—the form of reason that it operates as, which is dialectics, the reason that it destroys with, the reason that it uses to impel Geist from one Gestalt of consciousness to the next—but nothing more. This implies that, when you strip the arbitrary endpoint of Absolute Knowing from Hegel's work, it becomes nothing more than a destructive methodology by which shapes of consciousness are destroyed and moved on from.

I too have refused to force this dissertation to cohere into some Absolute Knowing—a form thereof that would probably constitute a static typology of phenomenological prose in 20th-century literature. Instead, each of its chapters has ended up proving the notion that a kind of literary dialectics based in avant-garde prose does indeed exist as a possible methodology of analysis, but nothing more. Is it not also significant that phenomenology as a field of both philosophical and literary inquiry has disappeared? It is a dead school of criticism and I have hardly helped to resurrect it with my constant appeals to Hegel and my failure to apprehend a static typology of phenomenology. Here, let us remember Terry Eagleton's definition of phenomenology: that it was a "new philosophical method which would lend absolute certainty to

[592] J. Ellis McTaggart, "The Changes of Method in Hegel's Dialectic," *Mind* 1, no. 2 (1892): 205.

a disintegrating civilization."[593] Phenomenology is a profound form of skepticism that arises in the wake of the failure of a society's grand narratives, privileging the *a priori* perceptive capacities of human beings over reason. Once more, we recall Husserl's foundational maxim that the phenomenologist is to go "back to the things themselves."[594] In other words, the phenomenologist is to go out into the world, but by way of a philosophical text, a text over which the world itself must always have primacy.

Did we not see this same issue play out in the dissertation? In every case, the writers of phenomenological prose were stymied by these own perceptive biases, by the artificial attempts they made to reflect certain elements of the world (most especially with chaos), then, finally, were tempted to systematize the phenomena of the world into an earlier form of phenomenology—Hegel's phenomenology of Spirit. In no case did their works of intellectual bravado ever actually make contact with the world. It remained unassailably *out there*.

The world, in other words, was never accessed by way of text. It remained consummate and outside of the covers of the books I have treated. In a recent interview with Joshua Cohen for *The Paris Review*, Vladimir Sorokin bristled when asked about the question of literature "describing the world." "I don't like the term description of the world, it contains a clear reference to secondariness—to illustrativeness. No, instead, a writer must conceive of his own worlds—not describe the world that's already been created. Tolstoy, Kafka, and Joyce were able to create their own worlds," he declared.[595] Sorokin's bristling is not a unique phenomenon.

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[593] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1996), 47.

[594] Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations* (Routledge, 2015), 168.

[595] Joshua Cohen, "The Guts of the Russian Brontosaurus-Cow: A Conversation with Vladimir Sorokin," *The Paris Review*, July 21, 2025, https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2025/07/21/the-guts-of-the-russian-brontosaurus-cow-a-conversation-with-vladimir-sorokin/.

Today, writers and philosophers both no longer wish to be "secondary" to something that exists beyond their grasp. Projects like Knausgaard's biblical-horror series or the Marx-influenced fantasias of a great many literary and philosophical scholars seem preferable to the intellectual appeal of playing second fiddle to the world and returning to what is *out there*, which is becoming the domain of secondary (or tertiary) talents, a way to write that requires no imagination—the world-building capacities of the gnostic god who is author sputtering down to the ground as they fail to lift off… Perhaps phenomenology died as a field of study in both philosophy and literary studies because, just off to the side of any page, there it is—the world, already consummate enough that it needs no description and any description necessarily fails to capture it, often by imposing a false teleology onto it, a set of political ideals that has nothing to do with the things themselves…

It is partially to reflect this current state of affairs with regard to phenomenology that I have allowed the polarities in each chapter to cancel each other out, have allowed myself to end up with dialectical failures, with equations in which "zero equals zero." I join Peter Handke in one of those middle-period novels of his, the closest we get here to a static vision of what phenomenology actually *is* in 20th-century prose… I join him and I gaze out at a degraded modern landscape. We see "the ground under the raised huts, where the miniature geological formations, sheltered from the effects of precipitation, differed from the originally related but subsequently ruined forms of the outside world."[596] For a moment, I feel that Handke has illuminated the clearing of Being. But then I put down his book and see that the world is not inside of it, that no artificial aesthetic construction is able to capture its consummateness—it is

[596] Peter Handke, *Slow Homecoming*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: NYRB Classics, 2009), 39.

too complex, too chaotic, its narratives cannot be drawn from one single person playing god. No. The world is out there—the world always has been out there—and literature is *in here*.

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