Against Redemption: Interrupting the Future in the Fiction of Vladimir Nabokov, Kazuo Ishiguro and W.G. Sebald

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ABSTRACT

Against Redemption: Interrupting the Future
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This dissertation considers how Nabokov, Ishiguro and Sebald – each of whom has abjured, in different ways, a sense of national belonging – rethink community in relation to the legacies of totalitarianism, imperialism and fascism. I read *Ada*, *The Unconsoled* and *Austerlitz* both through and against theories of community proposed by Bataille, Blanchot, Nancy and Agamben. Forming a sort of counter-discourse to numerous recent "traumatic" discourses, these philosophical treatments of community would interrupt a prevailing belief that any engagement with the past inaugurates melancholic repetition; they seek instead to locate alternative constructions of community in a present that would be neither a transition to a predestined future nor the redemption of a lost past. Community, as a question of whether belonging can resist nostalgia or anticipation for some (national) immanence lost or to come, largely determines the novels' temporal logic. Each addresses the possibility of divorcing the present from an orientation toward loss by interrupting narrative futures precipitated by "catastrophe" and a sense of "imminent crisis." And yet each, in its confrontation with political upheaval, historical impasse and the ostensibly ruptural logic of modernity itself, threatens to overtake that logic where interruption is pressed into the service of self-perpetuation. For if the novels resist a "future anterior" by interrupting an indebtedness to the past, they also exceed the

present that each would delimit by refusing to end. Together they reveal persistent difficulties with formulations of interruption, limit and abandonment that would resist fantasies of national redemption: each novel is itself a fantasy of national unbelonging that attempts to substitute its own aesthetic totality for a sense of nationhood that has been lost and that remains, despite Nabokov, Ishiguro and Sebald's disavowals of national identity, a locus of longing. However, although myths of national origins and rebirth do continue to play out in these novels, an experience of the "limit of community" – that threshold between the present and what it is not, between finitude and indeterminacy – continues to challenge any "literary immortality" that would overwrite it.

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Chapter One. Introduction: Interruption and Community

I.

I remember experiencing a certain dread one night when I was nine while returning home with my family after a visit to relatives. Nothing could be seen beyond the streaky reflections on the car windows, and so we listened to the small, random sounds people make when they are confined, when they are waiting, when, for the moment, nothing more is asked of them. We were only traveling from one upstate New York town to another, a three-hour trip made many times before, but while everything was familiar – the skim of tires through slush, the creaking of leather coats, the friendly staccato of the blinker as we changed lanes – I felt we ourselves were somehow unfamiliar, unseen. My brother and sister, flanking me on either side, were no barrier against the empty blackness outside, and the occasional glare of a passing car, the brief illumination of a green highway sign, even the moon which never failed to reappear after we passed a small hill, could not convince me that we were simply making our way home alongside other travelers. But it is not quite correct to say we were unseen, because my fear arose precisely from the sensation that I, and I alone, could see us, exactly as if we were being filmed. I couldn't get over the notion that we were traveling beyond some script, and that the end credits were rolling over us. When they were finished – and this was the unthinkable horror which I tried to avert by pressing my back hard against the seat – I would still remain. We were disappearing into the gesture of a future, with everything important and recordable already completed behind us. Nothing could account for this feeling: I had not just experienced some critical event, and we were only returning home where our routine lives were doubtlessly awaiting us. Later I considered

that such a feeling of having exceeded my own undisturbed life must have arisen from the suggestive power of B-movies broadcast on Saturday afternoons, which always seemed to end with a lone car receding into a pastel horizon. Later still I decided that film had only lent its conventions, its formal effability, to an otherwise unbearable – because indescribable – experience. But it seems to me now that what was most unbearable was the very fact of having discovered a way of envisioning what could not be experienced, that is, my own survival beyond lived time. By imagining an interval beyond both a fulfilled past and a realizable future, I had authored not only my own death but my inability to die.

I had experienced, perhaps, time itself. As Vladimir Nabokov describes it, the "only thing that hints at a sense of Time is rhythm," but it does so negatively, withdrawing its movement to reveal " a dim hollow," a "narrow and bottomless silence."[1] The beats we associate with rhythm "only embar Time": "human life is not a pulsating heart but the missed heartbeat." The "missed heartbeat" – an interval not lived as such – constitutes "human life." In *Ada, or Ardor*, Van Veen concurs with his creator, declaring that time is "not the recurrent beats of the rhythm but the gap between two such beats, the gray gap between black beats . . . "[2] The "texture of time," with which *Ada* is only the most explicitly preoccupied among Nabokov's writings, may be felt but not located in or as space. Only memory resides in the "gray gap" between rhythmic beats, calling upon a remembered past and conjuring the only future Nabokov will acknowledge: the created work of art. But creation sets rhythm going again, and so time is averted, once again dissolving into its specious metaphors of transition, passage, lapse. Or, perhaps, I had experienced what Kazuo Ishiguro describes as the "wound" to which writers repeatedly return in order to create new aesthetic worlds. In writing "out of something that is unresolved somewhere

deep down," the "best writers . . . come to terms with the fact that it is too late. The wound has come, and it hasn't healed, but it's not going to get any worse; yet the wound is there."[3] In returning to what is no longer open to resolution, one accepts that a radical break has severed one not only from the past but from a future: nothing will heal the wound and restore a sense of continuity, but neither will the wound worsen and finally extinguish the life it has interrupted. Rather, one must dwell within the wound, within a state of irresolution that cannot hope to attain a sense of unity aside from the consolations of fiction. Or, again, in feeling as if I had exceeded a life in which everything had already come to pass, I had perhaps set myself up to believe, as W.G. Sebald writes in *Austerlitz*, that I might return to "find everything as it once was"; past events could only occur insofar as I thought of them, as I bore solitary witness to what could no longer be determined, which would then "open up the bleak prospect of everlasting misery and neverending anguish."[4]

Time stops, it disappears, it has never existed. And time returns, perpetuating what can no longer be called a present. These contradictory conclusions overlap in the above conjectures: time, subordinated to memory's capacity to disconnect and resurrect, to banish or restore or revise at will, has no sooner ceased to be the measure of experience when it reasserts itself as an unrelenting extension and expansion that disarticulate experience. "Time" in Nabokov's *Ada*, Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled* and Sebald's *Austerlitz* takes on different historical modalities, but it is not ultimately reducible to them. In the narrative I related above, the future that exceeds the intentions and determinations of a lived past is *also* a construction, but one that is no longer the province of either desire or resistance. If memory endures, it must do so in its orientation to a past that cannot be recalled because it is sacrificed to a future that cannot be determined. I have begun with this narrative because it

illustrates, in a local way, in a *banal* way (because banality, too, attends the "missed heartbeat"), the interruption between past and present that *Ada*, *The Unconsoled* and *Austerlitz* both respond to and construct. These novels, I will argue, do not properly belong to that growing genre[5] of "traumatic narratives" that is often primarily concerned with meeting – or rather, failing to meet – the claims of some lost past through the divagations of a limited, thwarted memory. If anything, memory here is outsized, a hypertrophied faculty that threatens to usurp historical time which, in different ways in the fiction of Nabokov, Ishiguro and Sebald, has seemed to end. Rather, each novel traverses the rupture between past and present, between memory and history, in an attempt to inhabit interruption itself.

This dissertation will recount the specific temporalities and historical contexts within and against which these novels situate their explicitly mnemonic narratives. The particular juxtaposition of these texts rehearses and extends certain questions concerning the relationship of memory and history that have arisen in recent scholarship. Each novel thematizes the interminable dissatisfaction and irresolution that follow from a belief that relation to the past is threatened, lost or forgotten. It is now commonplace to assign to the historical acceleration of Western modernity and its often violent consequences a ruptural force that has systematically sundered all relation to the past. Dominick LaCapra has termed our contemporary preoccupation with loss "a generalized 'hauntology'" in which any and all engagement with the past is equated with mourning if not with melancholia. A wide range of disciplinary discourses have produced "post-traumatic" responses to modernity that are in danger of becoming "routinized in a methodology or style that enacts compulsive repetition, including the compulsively repetitive turn to aporia, paradox and impasse."[6] In understanding history as structurally and inevitably traumatic, such discourses succumb to the frustrated

repetitions and involutions of thwarted mourning. The novels, by contrast, in their belated return to a past they can neither recall nor reclaim, seek to interrupt the melancholy and nostalgia to which their narrators are in danger of falling prey, or to which they willingly fall headlong. *Ada* attempts to preempt a sense of belatedness arising from some "cataclysm" through a chiasmic reversal that withdraws both the novel's beginning and end into the center of its design. *The Unconsoled* interrogates the possibility of refounding community in a globalized world where national identity has withered away by constructing a temporal logic in which it is always both too late and not yet time to confront an unspecified, imminent "crisis." *Austerlitz* addresses the traumatic aftermath of the Holocaust through its narrator's repeated attempts to recover an unremembered, unexperienced past through the collection and reordering of its remains. *Ada*, *The Unconsoled* and *Austerlitz* attempt, with varying degrees of success, to reconstruct the present's relation to the past by interrupting and thereby overcoming the very notion of loss that inaugurates repetition, melancholy and nostalgia.

In this dissertation, I read *Ada*, *The Unconsoled* and *Austerlitz* alongside various philosophical concepts of interruption proposed by Walter Benjamin, Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben that consider the possibility – or impossibility – of establishing a differential relation between past and present. It is not my purpose here, however, to apply philosophical concepts to works of literature in order to either prove or disprove them. Rather, I hope that such an interdisciplinary approach (leaving aside the necessity or possibility of extricating one discipline from another) will provide ways of reassessing an historically specific sense of rupture and loss that prevail in art and thought in the latter half of the twentieth century. I have gathered this particular grouping of

philosophers for several reasons. Together, their focus on interruption as potentially (though not unproblematically) agential provides a sort of counter-discourse, a way of thinking beyond the poles of mourning and melancholia that limit traumatic discourses. Interruption here is not a radical break (for example, a "traumatic" rupture), but limns a present that attempts to abandon both presupposition and anticipation. If *Ada*, *The Unconsoled* and *Austerlitz* issue from radical breaks (from cataclysm, crisis and rupture), they return to putative origins not to regain or overcome them, although this is an ever-present temptation, but to establish a present that seeks only its own finitude, a present that would be neither a transition to a destined future nor the restoration of a past.

Moreover, philosophical inquiries into the possibility of a differential relation between past and present take into account not only the idea of temporal rupture, but also its attendant feelings of nostalgia for what has passed: that is, a conception of community – mythic, organic, or otherwise immanent – that has been superseded and that, perhaps, may be regained. Through such inquiries, I consider the ways that the novels of Nabokov, Ishiguro and Sebald rethink community in relation to the ruinous legacies of totalitarianism, imperialism and fascism. Much recent scholarship has traced the rise and evolution of the nation-state, for instance, hypothesizing that it is either the product of or has given birth to modernity, that it is either surviving or expiring in its agonistic relationship with the forces of globalization, or that new, "radical" forms of cosmopolitanism have multiplied and thereby disarticulated the centripetal force of the nation as a locus of belonging. The novels, although they often circle and sometimes directly engage with questions of national identity, seek modes of belonging that transcend it. Nabokov, Ishiguro and Sebald have each felt as if he did not "belong" to the nation in which he was born or lived. Their failure, or refusal, to

make a home of any homeland is somewhat different from that sense of unbelonging commonly felt by émigrés, exiles and authors from former colonies. Nabokov, exiled from Russia after the Soviet Revolution, claimed only the sovereign realm of imagination as his home. Ishiguro, who was born in Japan but who has lived most of his life in England, has said that he has always "felt like a writer who didn't belong"[7] and turned, in *The Unconsoled*, from what critics understood as his (Japanese-British) documentary realism to "a landscape of the imagination." Sebald emigrated from Germany, ill at ease in a country haunted by a history of genocide and destruction with which it had not yet come to terms. He offers that "[f]or those whose business is language, it is only in language that the unhappiness of exile can be overcome."[8] Sebald makes this statement in reference to Jean Améry, and yet such a recourse to language as a substitutive belonging (a fulfilled longing) is easily applied to his own writing. Unbelonging, for all three, is a matter of exile, forced or voluntary, from a national body politic whose history and/or destiny is abjured; it is an exile to be overcome in language.

For Sebald and Ishiguro, as we shall see in the following chapters, national identity is inextricably linked to some myth of greatness either lost or to come, in whose name atrocities have been committed and might yet be perpetrated. Nabokov, however, expelled by the Soviets, did feel "mentally and emotionally at home"[9] in America and found there and in Western Europe a "spacious freedom of thought"; at the end of his life, in "rosy exile" in Switzerland, he claimed to be "trying to develop . . . the same fertile nostalgia in regard to America, my new country, as I evolved for Russia, my old one, in the first post-revolution years of West-European expatriation."[10] If Sebald and Ishiguro reject nostalgia for forms of national belonging that are oriented to redemption and restoration respectively, Nabokov

fabricates a nostalgia for what has been lost, for what must be lost if new "homelands" are to be conjured, homelands divorced from any land except the imagination's "horizons of shimmering deserts."[11] Nabokovian nostalgia, then, is not so much the pain associated with wishing to return home as it is the fertile pleasure of recreating and multiplying "homelands." All three writers disavow "nationhood" insofar as it has demanded belonging to a unifying totality, whether such (exclusionary) belonging has been expressed in the Soviet State, the Third Reich or the British Empire. Although more or less privileged members of their nations, Sebald and Ishiguro have nonetheless sought to extricate themselves from those nations' destinies, or rather, from the idea of destiny itself, as they posit an "end" of history that can open new forms of belonging no longer oriented to the restoration of the past or redemption in the future. Nabokov, too, exiled from a past dismantled by the Communist Revolution, also deems that history has ended, and eschews any sense of national belonging in a future that would mirror the totalizing force of the Soviet State.

Ada, *The Unconsoled* and *Austerlitz* envision post-historical worlds in which national belonging is relinquished or dispersed in different sorts of "cosmopolitan" sensibilities that are expressed not only in "weak" national or "post-national" settings (*The Unconsoled* and *Ada*), but in the diverse pretexts and contexts that inform their structures and language (*Ada* and *Austerlitz*). Nabokov renounces what he sees as Communism's eradication of individuality as well as of his own individual past. In *Ada*, a "disaster" that has come and gone has left the world divided between Antiterra (further divided between ostensibly Western and Soviet territories) and Terra (a putative world); what remains is only the "tense-willed" possibility of surviving all disaster, including death, in a community of (incestuous) lovers that resists all law. *The Unconsoled* anticipates an "imminent crisis" that seems to

have already divested its unnamed city of its past glory; the city of the unconsoled looks to music for a restoration that, also alleged to be "imminent," never takes place. Where Ishiguro interrogates Britain's sense of national dissolution following decolonization and globalization through an allegorical treatment of an imaginary community, Sebald in *Austerlitz* confronts post-Holocaust national guilt, exile and displacement through the collection of allegories of modernity's inevitable tendency toward dislocation and death. Austerlitz never actually recovers his name that had been obscured following the murder of his family and which he searches for in the same manner in which he studies the "bourgeois age," which for him "pointed in the direction of the catastrophic events already casting their shadows before them in time."[12] It is only the "negative community" of the dead, those who are "outside time," to which Austerlitz hopes to belong, a community that falls beyond the past's determination to install itself in the future. "Community" in each novel is a problem of interrupting this determination, of unworking the past's claim upon a future that in each case is withdrawn as a site of realization and completion. As Agamben writes, it is a matter of "rendering uncertain the limit that separates absence from presence," the given from its latent possibilities.

"The future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger," Jacques Derrida has written.[13] A common, and commonly ambivalent, focus for the philosophies of interruption under consideration here as well as for the novelists is the danger inherent in envisioning what Derrida calls a "future anterior" where *what will have been* is decided in advance. Where for Heidegger "becoming" is oriented to both the future (to death as "the possibility of impossibility") as well as to the past (specifically, to a restoration of *Volksgemeinschaft*), for Bataille, a student of Alexandre Kojève,[14] becoming is a matter of

anticipating NOTHING – nothing that might be used for the profit of a future that hopes to safeguard the investment of the past. Bataille's response to the fascisms of the 1930s, apotheoses of unreasoning homogeneity, resulted in Acéphale, a group that conceived (irrational) resistance to instrumental reason through sacrificial death: nothing would remain of this "headless" community but the momentary liberation effected by its self-destruction; Acéphale, however, dissolved in 1939 without issue, that is, without carrying out a sacrifice that was to be without issue. Blanchot, on the other hand, had written in the 30s for right-wing journals like *Combat* and *L'Insurgé* against Léon Blum's Popular Front. He charged the Sarraut government with "hearing the appeals of unfettered revolutionaries and Jews" and "humiliating France." For critics like Blanchot, Blum's government ought to have intervened in the Spanish Civil War against the rise of communism, but it ought not "to precipitate young Frenchmen, in the name of Moscow or Israel, into an immediate conflict" with Hitler's Germany. But if Blanchot in the 30s proposed this "shameful state" could not be "regenerat[ed] through measures of decency but through a series of bloody shocks,"[15] he would write in 1984 in "Intellectuals Under Scrutiny," "It is that intellectuals, attached as they generally were to the principle of freedom, did not heed the fact that the good (the liberation of a people) would be gravely compromised the day it required or even tolerated that evil (war) should hasten or ensure its advent."[16] The brutality of fascism – no longer a theoretical proposition in occupied France – prompted a radical change in Blanchot's political sympathies and reshaped his philosophical views. Against Heidegger's being-toward-death in which death is "mine" to assume, Blanchot took up Emmanuel Levinas's idea of death as relational: "the dying of the other" opens one to one's own death, a death that can no longer be assumed as "mine" alone but as that which sets oneself in relation to the

other through his or her very absence. "Only a finite I (a self having finitude for its sole destiny)," Blanchot writes, "necessarily comes to recognize, in the other, its responsibility for the infinite."[17] It was in part due to the tragedy of the Holocaust and his own belated efforts to take responsibility that Blanchot elaborated a temporality in which we are "*[a]lways returning upon the paths of time, we are neither ahead nor behind: late is early, near far*."[18] If Blanchot is preoccupied with incessancy and the impossibility of any present, Nancy, a member of the postwar generation, theorizes a "limit of community" through which singular beings are exposed to one another in their common finitude: here, at this limit, the present emerges as a "temporal spacing." Drawing on Bataille's refusal to put to "work" an idea of community for some anticipated future as well as on Heidegger's idea of being-with and being thrown into a world that determines us before such a limit can be effected, Nancy responds to an increasingly globalized world that can no longer draw sense from the ideas of an origin or afterlife: "for as long as the world was essentially a relation to some other (that is, another world or the author of the world), it could have sense. But the end of the world is that there is no longer this essential relation, and that there is no longer essentially (that is, existentially) anything but the world 'itself.' Thus the world no longer has a sense, but it is sense."[19] We are always creating anew a "sense of the world" that, unlike the material circumstances in which we find themselves, is never given beforehand.

Benjamin, although his recourse to the messianic sets him quite apart from the philosophers mentioned above, also rejected understanding history as a goal-oriented progress. For him, the world had not "ended," and yet one could glimpse the fulfillment of history at its end by interrupting the "homogeneous, empty time" that a historicist tradition effected in its simultaneous erasure and self-interested legitimation of the past. The

incompleteness of the past harbored possibilities not yet realized; the very failures of the past (as illustrated in Benjamin's studies of the moribund and outmoded) suggested that the world into which we are born is not inevitable, accomplished. "One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm," Benjamin writes in the Eighth Thesis of "On the Philosophy of History." Benjamin reformulates Carl Schmitt's idea of sovereignty, in which the sovereign decides between the norm and the exception, between order and chaos. The sovereign "both includes and excludes itself from the purview of the law" because it establishes itself in this very decision. For Benjamin, however, exception has become the norm. The "state of emergency" that fascism created had become "not the exception but the rule" because it had been lent the lineaments of fate. Benjamin called for "a real state of emergency . . . in the struggle against Fascism"[20]: only through sustained interruption, such as that proposed by historical materialism, can tradition and the legitimation it can confer on barbarity and normalized states of exception be overthrown as illusory. Benjamin opposes the fascist "state of exception" to the "real" messianic state of exception at the end of time wherein humanity, freed from the law that decides on what is "exceptional," is redeemed.[21] For Agamben, who belongs to Nancy's generation, Schmitt's sovereign is a limit upon which law can "maintain itself in relation to an exteriority" it has predetermined. Agamben argues that "states of exception," in which law is suspended during times of emergency such as war, have become normalized: modern democracies tend toward totalitarianism.[22] Law becomes indistinguishable from life insofar as the "inclusive exclusion" by which law establishes itself is "bare life," that is, life that the law both abandons and threatens with death.[23] Agamben proposes that "a completely new

politics" would have to overcome the sovereign ban that founds itself on the exception of bare life.[24]

These philosophical positions respond to different historical circumstances and stages of the twentieth century – from communism to fascism to globalization – and yet each is concerned with some idea of interruption as the reaching but not breaching of a limit (to be elaborated in Section II). The "end of history" has either transpired (Bataille), or it is projected onto some ultimate, inevitable and external horizon (Benjamin), or it can never take place (Blanchot). But what has not ended, even in ostensibly post-historical stances like Bataille's (or post-"world" ones like Nancy's), is an enthrallment to the idea of a future that grounds itself on presuppositions of the past, and it is an ensuing idea of "transition," which fails to effect real change, that must be interrupted. Each of these philosophers, however, has been criticized for failing to outline a practicable politics, for reverting to mysticism, for harboring a latent nostalgia for the very modes of immanent thought they would resist. In other words, the persistence of irrationality and of nostalgia for immanence not only deters these philosophers from instantiating something like a "project," it also haunts any attempt to counteract its force. But if these formulations of interruption fail (and many of them "fail" deliberately) to develop *practices*, what they struggle to articulate is how a moment, in which anything like the putting into practice of an idea or identity, emerges only in relation to an "outside" – that is, to what is not (or in Benjamin's case, to what is *not yet* and cannot be until "after the end of history"), to what it is not. This may seem to produce what Antonio Negri has criticized in Benjamin's conception of "now-time" as "the conversion of historical, plural, punctual, multiversal materials into the thaumaturgical illusion of empty innovation."[25] But Benjamin's

interruptive moment cannot be reduced to "an abstract break, the abstract unity of productive time, and therefore the methodical dimension of equilibrium."[26] Benjamin himself understood that the "critical moment upon which all reading is founded" is "perilous"[27] precisely because such a moment (now-time) emerges only in relation to *reading*, to an understanding that develops over time and that necessarily loses whatever "unity" might have been glimpsed in that moment. What is "abstract" about the ideas of interruption under consideration here is their abstraction or withdrawal from a "future anterior" that determines in advance what will have been; rather, as Derrida writes, "there is as yet no exergue" for what "guides our future anterior."[28] Interruption is the site of a movement that proceeds aoristically, that is, without reference to a horizon that would be its completion. Even Benjamin's pronouncement that "the past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption,"[29] which Adorno criticized as a precipitous determination of the future that ultimately defends the status quo of the present, does not automatically effect an "equilibrium." Rather, as Rebecca Comay has provocatively suggested, "the fantasy of a premature reconciliation" between past and future may be "a necessary one" since the "impatience of prematurity is founded in the radical nonsynchronicity of every time."[30]

As I mentioned above, the settings of *Ada*, *The Unconsoled* and *Austerlitz* are, in different ways, "post-historical" worlds. For Van in *Ada*, an ongoing preoccupation with war and social conflict is misguided because, "actually, we had passed through all that."[31] Some citizens of *The Unconsoled* determine that the "cold modern city"[32] they have become is the last, and inevitable, stage of their ruinous history. For Austerlitz, modernity tends inexorably, not merely towards obsolescence, but towards destruction and death. Such attitudes reflect

those of their authors regarding "endings": Nabokov held that the Communist Revolution was the death knell of Russia; Ishiguro contends that postwar, post-imperial England has lost the right to write Realism which is, now, the province of those who are still undergoing "great clashes of ideologies" elsewhere; and Sebald professed that an endless series of haunted ruins "is the main theme of the history of postwar Germany."[33] These pronouncements have various relationships to the "endings" posited or contested by some of the philosophers above. For Nabokov, the "end" of Russian history was, however paradoxically, liberating. In this he is close to Bataille, but for Bataille the "end of history" meant the liberation of the irrational from its confinement in the irrationalism of instrumental reason, whereas for Nabokov a decided breach between the irrational and the rational – taking the form of an "absolute abyss yawning between the barbed-wire tangle of police states and the spacious freedom of thought we enjoy in America and Western Europe"[34] – frees a "tense-willed" imagination to develop "determinate schemes." If Bataille called for sacrifice as a way of canceling our guilty indebtedness to a future, Nabokov determines nothing need be sacrificed to the Soviets or to the future they have stolen so long as a perfect and perfectly guiltless memory preserves the past intact. However, as I argue in Chapter Two, *Ada* explores the consequences of trying to effect something like Blanchot's "literary immortality" even as it withholds the future it would imperiously determine by abandoning itself to what Bataille calls the "miraculous" of the "sovereign moment." The citizens in *The Unconsoled* are divided between hopes of reclaiming the glorious past of their city and resigning themselves unhappily to the casualty that it has become in the wake of globalization. In Chapter Three, I argue that that the melancholic repetition sustained by looking toward the future for the resurrection of a mythic past is interrupted by an

abandonment at the limit of community. At this limit, no work, no message, no pronouncement of the future is offered; rather, their withdrawal effects an opening, what Nancy calls "the geographical locus of an indefinitely multiple exposition"[35] of singularities to one another that resists sublation into an immanent totality. This abandonment, however, cannot fend off a return to myth-making; the limit in *The Unconsoled* is ultimately elided, given over again to guilt, nostalgia and anticipation. Austerlitz turns away in shame and despair from a past that has already ended and whose ruins are reflected in an utter "disintegration of personality."[36] He is unable, as the philosopher Gianni Vattimo writes of "survivors" of "post-apocalyptic" narratives, to discover "possibilities" in an "ironic-nostalgic inventory of the talismans of progress."[37] But in the desubjectification that shame effects, *Austerlitz* traverses the limit at which, as Agamben writes in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, the "I is suspended" between presence and absence, between the human and the inhuman, between past and future. The mortification Austerlitz experiences – as both shame and the (virtual) death that shame points towards – opens him, perhaps, to what Agamben calls a "remaining time" that emerges wherever there is division and loss. In Chapter Four, I examine the ways *Austerlitz* puts into play the alternately melancholic and fetishistic activities of Benjamin's brooder and collector against the interruptive force of historical materialism, which seeks to wrest the possibilities of a remaining time from an *incomplete* past. But if the novel attempts to interrupt its own preoccupation with the "co-existence" of all moments and their dissolution into an indifferent, impenetrable grayness, it nonetheless continues to order the remains of the past into a seamless whole.

Where I read *Ada* and *The Unconsoled* against their grain, as it were, discovering in them productive contradictions between their authors' self-declared antipolitical,

antihistorical stances and the political and historical tenors inevitably arising from their obsession with "private" memory, *Austerlitz* deliberately weaves filaments between itself and Benjamin's historical materialism that are unraveled at every turn. In all cases, the novels respond to calamitous events of the twentieth century, shuttling between a sense of loss – in the form of post-Revolution exile, post-imperial inconsequence, and postwar guilt and "amnesia" – and a future that *threatens* to take shape. Such a future would be, in *Ada*, a "literary immortality" in which a pre-"calamity" past perseveres unaltered; in *The Unconsoled*, a restoration of "the happy community" the city once was; and in *Austerlitz*, a resurrection of and cohabitation with the dead "outside of time." The future, in other words, would be not be an overcoming of the past so much as an evasion of its inevitable loss, an erasure of the temporal movement that produces a relationship between past and future and thus an erasure of the possibilities, good and bad, arising from their noncoincidence. But those "futures" are never permitted realization – except, perhaps, as futures that haunt any attempt to resist them. For no sooner is a future invoked, a future that would bypass the exigencies of the present and reinstall the past, then it is interrupted. Like the philosophers under discussion here, the novels exhibit a wariness concerning any future that might be a "future anterior," a future based on the presuppositions of a past whose legacy has produced the "ruptures" that the novels repeat as well as inscribe, deliberately, as an interruption no longer born of loss. Here, interruption limns the present.

Ada, *The Unconsoled* and *Austerlitz* seek to interrupt their own versions of a mythic community, either lost or to come, as they resist the past (as a site of original loss) as well as the future (as fulfillment or destiny). Each novel performs the strategic evasion of unification that characterizes postmodernism: they assemble decontextualized elements into self-

reflexive, disjunctive, openended narratives. *Ada's* narration moves between the past and present and between first- and third-person, frequently interrupted by asides from its titular subject. In *The Unconsoled*, distance is continually contracted and expanded just as difference is alternately posited and elided. *Austerlitz* draws on disparate textual sources, pursuing clues to a past that refuses to yield its secrets. And yet these novels, literally riven by hesitancy and indeterminacy, are in fact forcibly openended and curiously seamless, despite appearances to the contrary. If none come to rest within a definitive account of a past they seek to reclaim or preserve, their "openendedness" is not necessarily a submission to, or even a negotiation with, what remains, in all three, a qualified, provisional engagement with the past. Rather, while each, as I will argue, interrupts an orientation to loss as well as conceptions of community that develop from such an orientation, *Ada*, *The Unconsoled* and *Austerlitz* also seem to close the circle they trace around loss. Each novel, in its confrontation with the ostensibly ruptural and self-annihilating logic of modernity, threatens to overtake that logic where interruption is pressed into the service of self-perpetuation. Where beginnings and endings are erased, refuted, or evaded, nothing like the recognition of finitude that resists nostalgic or prescriptive desires for immanence can take place.

The personal narrative that I recounted above bears no relevance, of course, to the perpetual exile that besets these novels, in different ways, as the fallout of war, genocide and globalization. But the ec-stasis and a-topia that I had felt in imaginatively protracting a life I could no longer determine resembles what Blanchot has called "literary immortality." In responding to some "cataclysm" I had neither experienced nor could recall, my recourse to a language of aesthetic closure (a closure that could only be "aesthetic") ironically engendered a "survival" in which neither a future nor a past could delimit a *presence*. Literary

immortality, for Blanchot, "is the very movement by which the nausea of survival which is not a survival, a death which does not end in anything, insinuates itself into the world, a world sapped by crude existence."[38] In the various "unworkings" of community which these novels seek to enact, that is, in their attempts to disable a nostalgic dependence upon received notions of a bygone, mythic community that might be sustained or restored for the future, there is at work a certain fascinated dread regarding the immemorial to which they are ambivalently oriented. There is also, perhaps, a persistent desire for communion, that is, for immanence and fusion, with the past (with the dead) that drives the "literary immortality" that *Ada*, *The Unconsoled* and *Austerlitz* variously seek or effect in failing to end (to die). As the Spanish writer Enrique Vila-Matas writes in response to Blanchot,

> Whoever affirms literature in itself affirms nothing. Whoever looks for it is only looking for what escapes, whoever finds it only finds what is here or, which is worse, what is beyond literature. That is why, in the end, every book pursues *non-literature* as the essence of what it wants and passionately desires to discover.[39]

"Non-literature" is not (only) the real; it is also the other of thought that declines expression in conventional temporal categorizations or in the maneuverings of memory that transgress and elide those categories. It is what resists form, objectification, corroboration. But neither can it be approached ("pursued") without a desire that will always both miss and exceed it, that will yearn for the (missed) past in a future it has brought about. If non-literature is also always "the real," and if we cannot hope to parse the two, it is perhaps because all that language cannot reach in some way takes shape, and cover, in language itself. We assign meaning to the world in language which, as Bataille writes, necessarily "impoverishes reality" since "otherwise we could not glimpse what is not visible to begin with."[40] Whatever

can be found "here," in literature, is also what has always escaped its presumption to give form, its pretense, as Sebald says, "to know more than is actually possible."[41] That is, literature is always oriented to an absence whose outline it traces and whose limit it cannot exceed; literature is "affirmed" only in relation to what it is not and to what it cannot hope to overcome. For Van in *Ada*, "the Real world" is "in us and beyond us,"[42] it both inheres in our situated interpretations of it and eludes our capacity to give it scope. This "both/and" harbors the same danger it does in certain postmodern formulations, such as that proposed by Linda Hutcheon regarding postmodernism's "use-and-abuse" relationship to modernist forms and ideologies. If something can be said to be *both* itself *and* what it excludes or resists in order to be itself, then what arises is a polarity between terms that is effectively neutralized insofar as a decision between them is never made. The philosophies of interruption that I am convoking here demand that the difference between terms, and between times, be continually redrawn and redecided so that the possibilities generated by such a differentiation be sustained. In their self-interruption, the novels delimit a present in relation to a future that might recall the past of its making without being indebted to it. But the novels also threaten to absorb that limited present, casting their shadows before them in time. If they trace an absence, the very absence that informs their qualified presence, they also attempt to project themselves into it, to supplant and fill out what remains an unbearable void, and thus to guarantee their own endurance in a future they have constructed. Ishiguro has said that he is "interested in the way words hide meaning": the "language I use tends to be the sort that actually suppresses meaning rather than chase[s] after something just beyond the reach of words."[43] In all three novels, something like this "suppression of meaning" takes place alongside an effort to interrupt their own "reach" into the future. But what is "here," in

language that would affirm only itself, points also to a "beyond" that cannot be determined. Thus the "futures" of these ostensibly "post-historical" novels are *indeterminate*, but what indeterminacy can mean thereby is not only an ethical-political abjuration of totality; it is also a terrifying enthrallment to what one has created but can no longer recall, much less conclude.

II.

"Amongst the many definitions" that today compete in the articulation of the concept of modernity, Vattimo offers that "there is one that may be generally agreed upon: modernity is the epoch in which simply being modern became a decisive value in itself."[44] The "decisive value" of "simply being modern" is inextricable from the self-reflexivity that could assign such a value in the first place: value resides in a present sense of "being modern" only in relation to a past whose relevance is believed to be lost, forgotten, or overcome. But where modernity's "temporal logic of negation,"[45] as Peter Osborne terms it, has rendered void the transitional continuity supplied by tradition, it is also widely held by many contemporary thinkers to have severed community from society, memory from history, and history from itself as it abolishes its own content.[46] This pervasive sense of rupture now constitutes something like the "semblance of continuity"[47] Walter Benjamin identified as the operative force of tradition. Yet it may be that postmodernism attains a kind of "distributive unity"[48] only in a sense of temporal disruption that in fact cannot be sustained *as such*. If Franco Moretti has contended that the works generally ascribed to "Modernism" are "too dissimilar" to be gathered under one name, for Osborne, modernism "can be unified," not as a body of works or a set of practices, but "*only* at the level of pure temporal form."[49] "[M]odernism is

the cultural condition of possibility of a particular, distinctively future-oriented series of forms of experience of history as temporal form"; possibility, here, is realized by "a rupturally *futural* sense of the present as an (always, in part, destructive) transition to a (temporary) new order." Modernism describes the transition to a "new order" as *pro-visional*, as that which looks ahead toward a future that cannot, finally, be secured. As the very movement of a translation of anticipation into actuality, modernism can be said to be a "universal" concept that underlies all of its instances, which are themselves translations of modernism's "temporal logic of negation" into new cultural and national contexts. Postmodernism, however, is often thought to negate such a transitional, translational logic itself. Some mourn a future that cannot overcome its nostalgic dependence upon the recycled images and consoling forms of the past.[50] Where the idea of a radical break between past and present is rejected, those relations to the past that endure in postmodernism are believed to be too tenuous to ground a critical self-reflexivity or project a future. Sanguine pronouncements of the "post-historical," on the other hand, attempt to preempt melancholy by securing survival beyond the wake of an "accomplished" past.[51] In each case the present, even when it is not theoretically reduced to some schizophrenic syntax of non-relation,[52] is yet subject to detemporalization where it must navigate the Scylla of nostalgia and the Charybdis of progress. Wherever it may not attempt a "narrative unification of experience"[53] between past and future, the present cannot be realized. It is given over either to the eternal potential of some sacrosanct indeterminacy or to a kind of blank melancholy suffered by "survivors" who cannot themselves die and who have therefore nothing left to sacrifice to or for a future.[54] Where history has ended or cannot (yet) begin (again), it may not be interrupted.

Ideas such as Vattimo's oscillation of being[55] and Lyotard's postmodern sublime advocate the provisional and the indeterminate, and indeed much contemporary aesthetic production is characterized by multiple and competing points of view, elliptical or disjunctive narration, and an almost de rigueur commitment to indeterminacy, undecidability and openendedness. But while the ideological, psychological, and political desires and biases with which we construct history are often foregrounded in such works, it is the very *time* of such constructions which needs to be thought. As Andrew Benjamin notes in a slightly different context, if what such practices have "opened up thereby is the possibility of another thinking," it is one "that will always demand an account for being open-ended."[56] The philosophies of interruption eschew the ideas of the transitional, the universal and the futural that Osborne identifies in modernism, but most do subscribe to what he argues, drawing on Benjamin, is modernism's translational logic: in translation, the "meaning of the 'original' cannot be supposed to reside wholly 'within' the original itself." Rather, translation produces "the otherness of the 'other'" as product.[57] Bataille and Nancy reject the idea of an "original," whereas for Blanchot the immemorial to which art is always impossibly oriented is originary, and for Benjamin and Agamben the *promise* of the future is "originary" insofar as it is "non-epochal," translated from one time to another without ever arriving at a final translation until after the end of history. However, they all isolate the temporal logic of interruption as that which makes present the very possibility of otherness because it resists a sense of continuity that would reduce the other (other singularities, the otherness of oneself, other times) to the same; in each case, it is not a "new order" but a relationship to otherness that is provisional. The limit established by interruption is itself limited, partial, fragile. Philosophies of interruption might be said to form a counter-discourse to both post-traumatic

discourses and formulations of postmodernism that posit ceaseless rupture and ceaseless continuity. In what follows, I outline the different articulations of interruption proposed by Benjamin, Bataille, Nancy, Agamben and Blanchot before proceeding in Section III to their relevance to the interruptions that *Ada*, *The Unconsoled* and *Austerlitz* perform.

In his prefatory essay to Agamben's *Idea of Prose*, "Integral Actuality," Alexander García Düttman comments on Adorno's description of "the consolatory gesture" offered by the hesitancy often inscribed in poetry.

> Does to console mean to affirm the presence of what seems lost and to negate its loss? No. For such an affirmation is nothing but a denial, a vain attempt to reassure what is unconsoled. The consolatory gesture – the gesture of the poem itself, not a gesture represented by the poet – consists rather in enduring the indecision which makes any limit tremble; in order to console, it is necessary to know how to render uncertain the limit that separates absence from presence, it is necessary to know how to locate the uncertainty that traverses this limit like a trembling that cannot be sounded out.[58]

García Düttman asks whether or not the consolatory gesture, "instead of restoring a particular presence," aims instead at "integral actuality." For Benjamin, "The messianic world is the world of overall and integral actuality," a world in which the endless deferral of signification cones to an end and language becomes "a prose which has broken the chain of writing."[59] "Integral actuality" is the structural inherence within the present of "now-time" of what lies outside of history beyond its end. The flow of "empty homogeneous time" of historicism is interrupted in the "flash" of a memory seized "at a moment of danger."[60] The flash of memory interrupts the appearance of temporal continuity sustained by tradition. What is passed on in tradition is a manner of passing on *as such* in the form of a covering over or

forgetting, not merely of what has *been*, but what might have been *otherwise*. Interruption within the present frees historical experience from the repetitions of melancholy, from "the semblance of eternal sameness." For Freud, the melancholic repetition of "acting out" may become the "working through" of mourning. Here an analysand may work through the repetition, not by gradual cognitive understanding, but only "when the resistances are at their height."[61] In working through, what happens *again* in acting out also happens *for the first time* in belated remembrance. Insofar as this heightened moment does not effect "recovery" but is rather open to "intervention," it suggests the intensity of "now-time." But for Freud, working through is a "transition" from "an artificial illness" to normality,[62] whereas for Benjamin there is no such transition. In historical materialism, what is recovered only to be lost is the very relation between past, present and future. That is, the immediacy of relation perceived at the moment of recognition also destroys relation as historical continuity. In the uninterpreted blast of recognition, the past figures an unwritten "universal history" that exists only in the messianic world. The immediacy of the dialectical image, revealed by the "profane illumination"[63] of memory, lights in turn the "general and integral actuality" of redemption where the prose which has broken the chain of writing "does not deliver any message."[64] But because a dialectical image "attain[s] to legibility only at a particular time,"[65] it submits to the material force of historicization. What remains of memory's flash is only what is developed over time as its "after-image" which "delivers a posthumous shock"[66] to a past it renders in its own belatedness.

No longer bound to any "(pre)supposition," however, language *after* the end of history becomes no more than its own exposition. As García Düttman writes of Agamben's reading of Benjamin's integral actuality, the idea of prose evades either "poetic singularity"

or "philosophic generality" in order to present "the thing no longer separated from its intelligibility . . ." The world of integral actuality establishes a "between" that is no longer oriented to "two extremes" but rather "exceeds what it simultaneously separates and brings together . . ." [67] To be without recourse to presupposition also means to be outside the "order of calculation." It is to move between possibilities wherein "each possibility begins to oscillate, ceasing thus to remain in itself." The hesitation or indecision in poetry that seeks integral actuality is irreducible to any one possibility, and thus "exposes possibility to a virtual or deferred realization." However, one cannot "persist within pure possibility" since one would no longer be *hesitating* before its fulfillment. "Perhaps," García Düttman suggests, "hesitation also indicates a certain work of mourning that puts an end to the melancholy of potentiality."

> Hesitation touches the limit in which opposite or simply different terms no longer affirm their identity, their opposition, their difference. This touch is nothing but the experience of integral actuality – of an act exhausting potentiality or of a potentiality actualized as such: at the moment when potentiality reaches its limit, it interrupts itself, it ceases to be what it is without becoming what it is not.[68]

By interrupting itself, the touch of hesitation resists the ceaseless deferral of possibility it inaugurates, "for just as hesitation (the experience of the undecidable) is only hesitation of it ends in giving rise to a decision (provisional and embarrassed, irrevocable and final), the experience of integral actuality is only such an experience if it includes the force of exclusion inherent in any decision."[69] But such a force of exclusion is precisely what power performs in separating possibility from its enactment, and so there is the danger that the very exclusion that establishes the experience of integral actuality can in fact dissolve it by "opposing itself

anew to a potentiality and thus producing the very possibility of power."[70] Agamben responds to this problem by thinking about "the redemptive task assigned to memory." García Düttman points out that the idea of prose, exemplified in the German Romantic definition of the novel as that form which "distinguishes itself by a kind of double, contradictory potentiality, by the possibility of limiting itself and extending itself infinitely,"[71] is suspended between presupposition and anticipation. The idea that presents the thing itself does not presuppose a past; the idea is itself immemorial. Agamben writes that for "man" in his infancy, in his initial exposure to a world, "it is a question of remembering precisely nothing: nothing that happened to him or manifested itself, but which also, as nothing, anticipates every presence and every memory."[72] Nothing is founded here, no new epoch, community, society. Rather, "what we want is to save the epoch and society from their wandering in tradition, to grasp the *good* – undeferrable and non-epochal – which was contained in them."[73]

What is "good" is undeferrable and non-epochal: it is a present that is not a transition between a lost past and the future where it will (or will fail to) be resurrected. It is what is coming, what is always coming about, interrupting itself to mark only that "zone," as Agamben writes in *The Coming Community* [*La comunità che viene*], "in which possibility and reality, potentiality and actuality, become indistinguishable."[74] As Nancy puts it in *The Inoperative Community* [*La communauté désouvrée*], interruption "occurs at the edge, or rather it constitutes the edge where beings touch each other . . ."[75] We have not broken away from something, such as an original community now lost to the upheavals of modernity, for we do not exist prior to an interruption that shares and divides us. When we are exposed to our own and to another's finitude at the edge or "limit of community," the present emerges as

a "temporal spacing"[76] between singular beings: the "myth" of community where we are gathered and fused, an immanent community lost to the past or projected onto the future, is interrupted. Nancy, like Agamben and others, follows Levinas's critical revision of Heidegger's conception of Being-toward-death. Because for Heidegger we "appropriate" death as our "ownmost," as the anticipation of "the possibility of the impossibility of existence in general," death is always "mine," it is "non-relational." Moreover, where "a unity of experience" has been lost to modernity, it is now the future that dominates our movement toward authentic being. For Levinas, however, we can only know of our death, of our finitude, in experiencing the deaths of others. Taking over Levinas's construal of death as relational and his allegiance to the present (to a here rather than a there) and privileging the idea of *Mitsein* (being-with) in Heidegger's thought, Nancy rejects the idea of "common being" in favor of "being in common," which means "*no longer having, in any form, in any empirical or ideal place, such a substantial identity* [a "common substance"] *, and sharing this* (narcissistic) *'lack of identity*.'"[77] Nancy invokes Bataille's idea that "Sovereignty is NOTHING" wherein anticipation (of an object, of an objective) "dissolves."[78] Here, calculation, anticipation, instrumentalization founder when "an unanticipated, unhoped-for aspect, considered impossible, reveals itself."[79] For Nancy, the experience of Bataillean sovereignty is an "abandonment" of being to what is outside itself. Being is exposed to its own finitude, not in terms of Heidegger's "mine-ness" which is subsumed in a universal or absolute Being, but only insofar as it is a singularity exposed to another singularity: "Community means, consequently, that there is no singular being without another singular being" and that "there is no communion of singularities in a totality superior to them and immanent to their common being."[80] Such an idea of community resists producing human

essence as either a work or work, as an "operative immortality"[81] by which the deaths of singular beings are "reabsorbed or sublated in a community, yet to come, that would attain immanence."[82] An "inoperative community" is that which "no more makes a work out of death than it is itself a work."[83] Heidegger's "authentic being" and organic community is rejected as a being-toward (or working toward) subject to the future; instead, where community denotes only a limit that is interrupted as soon as it is reached, it is "unworked" (*désouvrée*). Anything one might offer as a "work," whether it is a people, a nation, or a work of art, is "abandoned" at this limit, its proposal of exemplarity withdrawn.

In the "zone" of which Agamben writes, the "imperceptible trembling of the finite that makes its limits indeterminate and allows it to blend, to make itself whatever [*qualunque*], is the tiny displacement that everything must accomplish in the messianic world."[84] Agamben's reference to a "messianic world" may be misleading here. For Agamben as for Derrida, who has written of the "messianic without messianism," the "messianic world" is not to be understood as a theological horizon that would effect an apocastasis or restoration. Rather, as Derrida writes, it announces only the "the coming of the other, the absolute and unpredictable singularity of the other."[85] For Nancy, "Only in this communication [our sharing of finitude] are singular beings given – without a bond *and* without communion, equally distant from any notion of connection or joining from the outside and from any notion of a common and fusional interiority."[86] Agamben also eschews "fusional" communities, but for him, shared properties, for instance, "being-called Italian, -dog, -Communist," are what call our sense of belonging together "radically into question."[87] Agamben is more optimistic than Nancy regarding the fundamental "ambiguity" already at work in every community that resists any notion of immanence. Whereas for Nancy there can

be no example of community that does not invoke immanence, for Agamben "pure singularities communicate only in the empty space of the example, without being tied by any common property, by any identity. They are expropriated of all identity, so as to appropriate belonging itself."[88] What singular beings want is not a specific community that gathers exclusive "properties"; rather, they want to appropriate belonging itself as it is oriented to "whatever being," to the other "*with all of its predicates*, its being such as it is"[89] "Whatever" or *qualunque* designates potentiality and not arbitrariness or lack. Referring to the Latin term *quodlibet* (what(ever) pleases), Agamben asserts that "*Quodlibet ens* ['whatever entity'] is not 'being, it does not matter which,' but rather 'being such that it always matters.' . . . Whatever being has an original relation to desire," that is, to will (*libet*).[90] Whatever being therefore retains some value for the idea of individuality (or individuation) as opposed to Nancy's insistence upon an anti-individualistic "singularity."

Blanchot, whose *Unavowable Community* [*La communauté inavouable*] is a response to both Nancy and Bataille, argues that what "calls me into question most radically . . .[is n]ot my relation to myself as finite or as the consciousness of being before death or for death, but my presence for another who absents himself by dying."[91] It is this proximity to absence (to another's death) that allows one to be, as Bataille expresses it, "beside himself." This is what Blanchot calls "negativity community" which effects only "an exteriority that thought does not master, even by giving it various names: death, the relation to the other, or speech . . ."

> Inasmuch as the community on behalf of everyone rules (for me and for itself) over a beside-oneself (its absence) that is its fate, it gives rise to an unshared though necessarily multiple speech in a way that does not develop itself into words: always already lost, it has no use, it creates no work and does not glorify itself in that loss.

> Thus the gift of speech, a gift of "pure" loss that cannot make sure it is ever received by the other, even though the other is the only one to make it possible, if not speech, then at least the supplication to speak which carries with it the risk of being rejected or lost or not received.[92]

The community is unavowable – literally, it cannot "speak to" the other with any assurance that what it would offer as its content, its legitimation, its desire, will be received. Nor does it make of its failure (its gift of pure loss) a new content to be conveyed (to be put to "use"). Nancy also suggests as much when he says that although the myth of immanent community, when it is interrupted, can again be made into a myth, some "voice, or another, will always begin interrupting the myth again – sending us back to the limit." Robert Bernasconi, however, has parsed the differences between Blanchot's and Nancy's thought, arguing that whereas Nancy subordinates alterity to ontology (being is a simultaneous sharing and dividing; the other emerges only "as secondary and as constituted"), Blanchot follows Levinas in privileging alterity (the "other is an interruption": "the heterogeneous appears suddenly"). For Blanchot, "An ethics is possible only when – with ontology (which always reduces the Other to the Same) taking a backseat – an anterior relation can affirm itself, a relation such that the self is not content with recognizing the Other, with recognizing itself in it, but feels that the Other always puts it into question to the point of being able to respond to it only through a responsibility that cannot limit itself and that exceeds itself without exhausting itself."[93]

This idea of an "anterior relation" that compels a response that can never quite assume responsibility (as a knowledge that could predicate decision or action) can be found throughout all of Blanchot's postwar writing. For Blanchot, the origin of a work – whether

this be its founding event or its inaugurating desire – is always anterior to and outside of it. The work, in approaching an origin that was never present, never *in* any present, may "present" only the experience of absence. The work is only possible in its ceaseless subjection to an origin that is not discoverable in time. In *Unavowable Community*, Blanchot describes this "ecstasy" (of the work being beside-itself) as being "beside-oneself," which is a matter of "going beyond knowledge" and "impl[ies] un-knowledge." Ecstasy's "decisive aspect is that the one who experiences it is no longer there when he experiences it . . . The same person (but he is no longer the same) may believe that he recaptures it in the past as one does a memory: I remember, I recall to mind, I talk or write in a rapture that overflows and unsettles the very possibility of remembering." What remains is only an "extratemporal memory or remembrance of a past which has never been lived in the present (and thus a stranger to all *Erlebnis* [experience])."[94] Relation to the other also cannot take place in the present. Commenting on Marguerite Duras's *La maladie de la mort*, Blanchot avers that the relationship in her novella – between the man who suffers from "the malady of death" and the woman he desires to desire but whom he can only "possess" apart from a love that is lost before it ever happens – forms a "community of lovers," that is, a "negative community" whose members "unite only to live (and in a certain way to celebrate) the failure that constitutes the truth of what would be their perfect union, the *lie* of that union which always takes place by not taking place."[95] The "fulfillment of all veritable love" is realized "by losing not what has belonged to you but what one has never had, for the 'I' and the 'other' do not live in the same time, are never together (synchronously), can therefore not be contemporary, but separated (even when united) by a 'not yet' which goes hand in hand with an 'already no longer.'"[96] Here, Nancy's "temporal spacing" is not effected by the unworking

of community; diachrony is what allows that unworking to take place. It is not being per se that is shared and divided but an alterity to the immemorial (the no longer) and the future (the not yet) that divorces one from the present and from self-presence (one is "no longer the same" after an experience that he or she has missed).

In Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster*, disaster is what is always imminent and already past. "Disaster" signifies not only historical events like the Holocaust, but the immemorial event of our own death which is "always already past" but which we nevertheless await, "constructing a future to make it possible at last – possible as something that will take place and will belong to the realm of experience."[97] As the "immemorial unknown," death names whatever "has not been experienced" except as "traces." If for Blanchot there is an "authentic" death in which one finally discovers finitude as "the happiness of being neither immortal nor eternal," there is also another death (the "other night") in which the "profoundly obscure point towards which art, desire, death and the night seem to lead"[98] is never reached, but exceeded. Here the "responsibility that cannot limit itself and that exceeds itself without exhausting itself" is no longer an "ethics"; rather, one is carried past the instant of death, conscious but no longer a determining subject. Just as the disaster is for Blanchot an impossibility to forget what has not yet happened – what cannot finally have happened and so never stops happening – the other night is an experience of insomnia, of ceaseless, restless thought that can find no object. In the "absence of time,"[99] in the suspension between an unremembered past and an undeliverable future, writing pursues what it cannot relate. There is always "another book," for what is "exterior to any book" may yet be "heard" in the silences and gaps that writing registers.[100] Such "fragmentary writing," however, cannot "introduce a practice one could define as interruption. Interrupted, it goes

on." Fragmentary writing is "risk itself": if it may only claim to complete itself, symbolically, in the absence of time, it is also the case that fragments "are always ready to let themselves be worked upon by indefatigable reason" into a false totality.[101]

The various positions described above do not define interruption as a radical break but rather as a movement between presence and absence. For Benjamin, tradition as "catastrophe," wherein the "status quo" thus preserved "*is* the catastrophe," is not, ultimately, "an ever-present possibility but what in each case is given." There are "places where tradition breaks off – hence its peaks and crags, which offer footing to one who would cross over them." Historical phenomena "are saved through the exhibition of the fissure within them," through an inherent discontinuity that, like "those elements of a work that have already emerged and played a part in [tradition's] reception," is *also* what in each case is given. [102] For Agamben in *The Coming Community* (which was published in 1990 and therefore submits rather prematurely to the idea that "[c]ontemporary politics . . . all over the planet unhinges and empties traditions and beliefs, ideologies and religions, identities and communities"),[103] "[b]elonging, being-*such*"[104] is a "bordering," "a point of contact with an external space that must remain empty."[105] This external space (the "outside") "is not a determinate space, but rather it is the passage, the exteriority that gives access" to "the experience of being-*within* an *outside*." Rejecting any "common foundation," any presupposition, the coming community moves only toward its "potentiality" which names not only the potentiality to be but "to not-be."[106] Potentiality, as that which harbors also the potential of not-being or "inactuality," substitutes a progression toward a future, as the goal of a transition to "another thing or another place," with the movement of being's "own taking-place."[107] For Nancy, "interruption turns community toward the outside instead of

gathering it in toward a center – or its center is the geographical locus of an indefinitely multiple exposition." In interruption, "singular beings compear," that is, they appear and are exposed to one another simultaneously, communicating "through the repetition and the contagion of births" their multiple voices. [108] The ideas of "taking-place" or "compearing" expel both nostalgia and anticipation of completion and fulfillment because the "locus" of community is always moving, always being created anew. An "indefinitely multiple exposition" guarantees that the borders of any "center" will always be a site of contestation, not simply because new voices and perspectives are continually being added to any given conception of an "us," but because any "us" emerges only insofar as it is oriented to what it is not, and what it is not – the outside along which singularities are continually emerging – cannot be determined. Neither presuppositions nor projects determine what only the present determines for itself: the borders of its own finitude. For Blanchot, however, ec-stasis or being beside-oneself does not delimit a present; interruption produces an incessancy in which only "inactuality" (as desubjectification) takes place. *Ada*, *The Unconsoled* and *Austerlitz*, I will argue in each chapter, inscribe in different ways a movement between presence and absence which are ever in danger of being conflated.

III.

Ada, *The Unconsoled* and *Austerlitz* address the possibility of divorcing the present from its orientation toward loss, whether loss is due to the ruptural force of some catastrophe in particular or of the historical acceleration of modernity in general. Each novel, as I mentioned above, foregrounds the activity of memory as their narrators attempt, fail or refuse to construct a relationship to their pasts. Each perpetuates a present from which they feel

absent as they struggle to construct a future that will make their "deaths" – decision, resolution, closure – possible at last. These shared formal characteristics and strategies, I believe, are responsive to the idea of community. I have juxtaposed these particular texts because "community," as a question of whether belonging can resist nostalgia or anticipation of some immanence lost or to come, largely determines their temporal logic. They are preoccupied by many of the same fears and concerns that the philosophies of interruption attempt to articulate in the wake of political upheavals and historical impasses. The novels perform rather than theorize interruption in narratives that both resist and exceed their own endings. They open up a space outside their own "discourses" of memory and loss, a space that, if it is ultimately absorbed and contained, made into an *inside*, nevertheless points to the possibility of a "passage" to "the experience of being-within an outside."

Ada is authorized by the deaths of its narrator and its subject who, we are told, "die, as it were, *into* the finished book . . ."[109] Tracing a tempestuous love affair with his sister Ada over the course of a century, Van enlists the power of a "retrospective imagination"[110] to overcome historical, "objective time"[111] and the waste it lays to experience. He hopes to secure meaning and identity by resisting not only time but space, all those "sleights of land" that exile one from a cherished past. In the novel's quasi-science-fictional scheme, an unspecified "L disaster" has divided the world into the free and totalitarian territories of Antiterra.[112] But there is yet another world, Terra, whose existence is contested and which is believed to be either edenic or infernal. Although they are "counterparts" to one another, Terra and Antiterra are not concurrent; a temporal "gap" divides them, "with not *all* the no-longers of one world corresponding to the not-yets of the other." The "preposterous discrepancy" between their histories and

temporalities produces a lag that ensures that endings that have already transpired will have not yet occurred in some other future.[113] *Ada* itself, seeking antiphonal correspondences between past and present, attempts to evolve by imperceptible degrees into "other varieties of dreaming and thinking." This "evolutionary progress" has no last stage, but rather returns to an originating "cataclysm" in order to "fork and re-fork."[114] Forking and re-forking is the imagination's reinvestment of the past in a future where it may be replayed endlessly.

In disavowing historical progression, *Ada* forestalls the future where death lies. Moreover, Van and Ada's incestuous relationship, which resumes, after a brief submission to his prohibition, when their father dies, breaks with the law. Sterile, (almost) contemporary, the siblings choose not the past but themselves as an origin that cannot give rise to a future: they attempt to inhabit a perpetual present. By dying into the book they themselves have written, a book born of their deaths that do not take place, they seek to achieve a (rather literal) literary immortality. "Poetic and cosmopolitan,"[115] they transcend all boundaries, spatial and temporal, national and political. And yet for Nabokov, the "*true* Present" is "unremembered," "an instant of zero duration."[116] What Nabokov, and Van, want is to penetrate the ec-stasis and timelessness that the work of art always forsakes in its temporal rhythms. In other words, they want to "know" what Bataille calls the "sovereign." But "[k]nowledge is never sovereign: to be *sovereign* it would have to occur in a moment. But the moment remains outside, short of or beyond, all knowledge."[117] Such a moment is always lost for Blanchot: one is no longer the same, one is no longer *there*. In *Ada* Nabokov again makes his habitual claim on imagination's power to safeguard the past from the perversions, distortions and displacement that, for

him, it has suffered under the Soviet state. Van seeks, imaginatively, to survive "cataclysm" by evolving into "a permanent state of stupor"[118] that knows no "presupposition" and no anticipation. Such a stupor is what Nabokov has described as the "greatest happiness" in writing, a moment in which "not understanding" allows one to be both ec-static and receptive.[119] There is here both a resistance to nostalgia and to determination, a moment in which one is beside-oneself, in which the work is beside-itself: here, Bataille's "sovereign moment," in which anticipation dissolves into NOTHING, opens one to the possibilities of "an unanticipated, unhoped-for aspect" experience.[120] In his sister Ada, Van finds not another Nabokovian pseudo-double but one whose identity, "even at the moment of [his] perception" of her, does not produce "the agony of a supreme 'reality,'" (or the unveiling of an illusion), but rather a "memory" of what has not been fully known, of what cannot be held in the claw-like "quotes" that reality otherwise seems to wear.[121] But this dissonance, this belatedness, produced by both time and the irreducible singularity of the other, is elided where Van attempts to forestall the future by dying with Ada into the "glittering now"[122] of the book whose own immortality will secure the meaning of their lives, a meaning that resists potentiality and risks subjection to an "indefatigable reason" that is no longer the author's own.

For Ishiguro, "the best" writers do not return to a lost past but to the "wound" that remains in its stead. Where "bad writing" persists in returning to what is no longer open to resolution, good writers accept that a radical break with something has occurred and write "out of" what had been "unresolved" at its conception. It is thus that a "wound" may inaugurate prosthetic worlds, consoling aesthetic versions of a real world beyond the power

of determination. In *The Unconsoled*, Ishiguro explores the idea of the wound as both the ruptural logic of modernity that severs all relation and as the "limit of community" that, for Nancy, "is not, perhaps, an experience that we have, *but an experience that makes us be*."[123] At its limit, community interrupts its labor of gathering individuals into an immanent totality, whether this is an immanence lost to the past or one to be founded in the future. Where community interrupts itself, fusion is impossible; instead, relation obtains only in the temporal spacing between singular beings who share nothing but their common exposure to finitude. Through Ryder, a cosmopolitan "outsider," and Brodsky, a soon-to-be-resurrected has-been, both of whom are to commence a new epoch through aesthetic production, Ishiguro opposes the time of melancholic repetition to that of interruption.

In *The Unconsoled*, Ishiguro portrays the disaffection and resentment following England's postwar fall from imperial eminence. Like Ishiguro's England, the city of the unconsoled has fallen from international relevance into resentment and nostalgia; the novel fitfully interrogates the possibility of refounding community in a globalized world where national identity has withered away. The citizens anticipate a future "crisis" that they hope to keep at bay by restoring the grandeur and integrity of a community now lost. Ryder is an fact an erstwhile citizen, an insider who disavows the past as well as the present. As the Reader/Writer of the tale he relates, Ryder anticipates events that he ensures will never happen, for its is always too late and too early; it is never *now*. Consequently Ryder never performs the recital that is to herald the past. Whereas Ryder attempts to inhabit an impossible present where everything is at once too late and not yet time, Brodsky interrupts the novel's melancholic involutions by moving forward precisely when and where it is felt to be too late. Ryder withholds the work of art, paradoxically leaving in his wake an

unrealizable future, but Brodsky, his "mind full of the future," rages onward in his performance toward the present, toward the "between" that Ryder habitually elides with the rhetoric of consolation. In his refusal to found a new epoch upon the ruins of some putative original rupture, Brodsky presents and abandons himself and his work at the moment of interruption: here the "wound" of traumatic rupture that Ryder's tyrannically seamless narration ironically reproduces is reenvisioned as the limit of community and not as a gathering around originary loss. Although Brodsky is ultimately absorbed into Ryder's narrative logic of "not yet/too late," *The Unconsoled* offers, at the limit of community, both the impossibility of community as well as the enduring "traumatic" memory of its universal promise.

In *On the Natural History of Destruction*, Sebald quotes Jean Améry's description of the insidious "reasonability" of Nazi Germany: "in the metallic brilliance of its totality the SS state appeared as a state in which the idea was becoming a reality."[124] The idea of German superiority and domination was effected not only through physical violence, but through the manufacture of "a reality" that assumed a reasonability through the enforced forfeiture of reason (of "memory and coherence," as Primo Levi describes it) on the part of those it subjected. If the "metallic brilliance" of a mythic idea become real admitted little or no resistance, the very memory of what transpired during the Holocaust also assumed an impregnability for many postwar Germans in the form of a national failure to acknowledge it. Born in 1944 in Germany, Sebald did not learn of the Holocaust until he was a teenager, and the omission, which took on the form of an irreality, informed the preoccupation with memory and loss which characterizes all of his writing. Where Ishiguro focuses on nostalgia for mythic immanence, Sebald dwells on the inevitability of catastrophe in the future to

which a desire for "totality" leads. If in *The Unconsoled* the anticipation of a restoration of the past is to be interrupted, for Sebald the past's hold on the present has been denied and obscured and, for that reason, is all the more deeply entrenched and irrefutable.

In *Austerlitz*, the redemptive task assigned to memory involves the literal collection of the remains of the past. For Austerlitz, the study of the nineteenth century supplies a "compensatory memory" that substitutes itself for the one he has lost of his own childhood. In *Austerlitz*, the constructivist activities Benjamin assigned to the allegorist and the collector are played out in Austerlitz's researches into a past he has continually turned away from in shame. The narrator is impressed by the way in which "Austerlitz put his ideas together as he talked, forming perfectly balanced sentences out of whatever occurred to him, so to speak, and the way in which, in his mind, the passing of knowledge seemed to become a gradual approach to a kind of historical metaphysic, bringing remembered events back to life."[125] But Austerlitz can no more make "perfectly balanced" sense of his studies than he can pass on "knowledge" of the past. He has become Benjamin's *Grübler* or brooder; sifting through clues, he "gradually approaches" only a "disintegration of personality." He is also a consummate collector, continuously tracking down leads that drive him ever forward, beyond that point at which, in historical materialism, time would be brought to a standstill. The narrator's description of Austerlitz's "historical metaphysic" seems to suggest a dialectical moment is arrived at in which the past is rescued, its relevance to the present resuscitated. But Austerlitz often states his belief in "the co-existence of times": for him, a "cessation of happening" is not an ethical-political act that can reassign meaning as "a temporal index" to a future where the past will be redeemed, but an incontrovertible fact. Time has ceased to be a construct that lends coherence to experience; it is only an enveloping grayness in which all

experience dissolves. But in Austerlitz's inability to bear witness to the past, in the very shame that seems to make of the past a totality, complete and incontestable, he experiences a "simultaneous subjectification and desubjectification" that, for Agamben, problematically attests to the "non-place" of articulation. [126] "Testimony can exist only through a relation to an impossibility of speech—that is, only as *contingency*, as a capacity not to be" that "suspends" the "I."[127] What was never seen, known nor spoken but nonetheless *was*, survives in the impossibility to bear "complete witness." This simultaneous presence and absence, if it does not quite "bring remembered events back to life" in terms of a Benjaminian blasting of history, nevertheless resists the totality Austerlitz confers upon the past ("neverending anguish") and upon the future (modernity's tendency toward dislocation and death, epitomized in the Germans' "notion that the promise of their greatness was about to be fulfilled").[128] It is precisely where vision is impaired, where not all may be revealed and known (as the narrator hopes) that another vision, one that resists the "blind violence" of calculation and "order," one that is partial and limited, can take place. The novel examines its own "compulsory will to order" by interrupting its own desire to uncover a comprehensive allegory that can accommodate all instances of ruin and that would reduce the Holocaust to one more item in the collector's series. And yet *Austerlitz* never ceases looking (and fearing) for the past in the future as the novel closes with yet another canny return to a site of historical trauma.

If for Nabokov, who champions his utter disinterest in all things political, and for Ishiguro, who denies all historical accuracy, "cataclysm" and "crisis" liberate memory from the claims of political decision and historical accountability, for Sebald traumatic rupture seems to have rendered memory "compensatory" and history, as temporal differentiation,

impossible. For Nabokov, loss is overcome in memory's ability to "hoard impressions," to outwit history through the sheer force of an individualistic will. Ishiguro looks to memory as a "universal" capacity to make use of an ever-negligible "history." Memory, too, for Sebald substitutes itself for a history that is absent or unknown, except for him memory seems to produce exactly the same effacement and tendency toward extinction that history does. For all three, memory is unloosed from history, for better or for worse. Unlike much contemporary fiction that presses the relationship between memory and history into a sometimes fraught, sometimes playful antagonism, their severance in *Ada*, *The Unconsoled* and *Austerlitz* seems practically a *fait accompli*. For the issue here is not primarily the elusiveness of historical truth and its obfuscation (or illumination) in rivaling testimonies (as it is in the novels of Tim O'Brien, Art Spiegelman, Bernhard Schlink, Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon and Salman Rushdie, to name only a few). Rather, what sets memory and history in opposition is some specific sense of rupture between history and memory that the latter restages in its characteristic repetitions and evasions. Each novel attempts to reappropriate that "rupture" – that cataclysm, crisis or trauma – as a force of interruption that might reinstall experience as the experience of temporal difference. Such a difference is called upon to open the present to the undecidable possibilities of a future. In other words, history returns wherever interruption delimits a present that is oriented to what lies outside or beyond it as potential, including the potential not to be. What is resisted is not only the melancholic repetitions of an aggrieved memory (or, in the case of Nabokov, the delirious nostalgia of a seemingly omnipotent memory), but the presumed immanence of a mythic community that in each case would absorb the future. But in each novel, in different ways, the "limit of community" remains a gesture that is all but revoked; it is a limit that is

invariably exceeded as the novels resume their orientation toward a past and a future that are no longer possibilities. That is, there is no longer hesitation, undecidability, or oscillation between a "no longer" and a "not yet" that have become indistinguishable because interruption seems to produce temporal in-difference. In what follows, I examine the specific encounters that *Ada*, *The Unconsoled* and *Austerlitz* stage in their attempts to interrupt their orientation to loss and to develop alternative ideas of community. I pay attention to each author's aesthetic rationale and its problematic relationship to historical and political concerns that often emerge precisely where they are disavowed or evaded. In doing so, I consider the viability of various philosophical concepts of interruption and of community. While such theories articulate ethical stances for resisting an "operative immortality" that sublates singularities into an immanent totality or our wandering in the empty, homogeneous time of tradition, they do not, perhaps, sufficiently account for the force of exclusion that interruption wields against the possibilities it would keep in play. There is always the danger that not just the determining power of the past will be resisted, but the past itself. Moreover, there seems to be at work in these novels a compensatory "aesthetic" totality wherever the totalizing power of lost pasts and imminent futures is avoided; such power returns in the form of a persistent desire for mythic communion.

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[1] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 186.

[2] Nabokov, *Ada,* 538.

[3] Ishiguro "Stuck," 30-31.

[4] Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 101.

[5] Here I am not making a claim that an actual literary "genre" has developed but rather pointing out that a growing interest in and privileging of the "traumatic" is redefining the way we read, study and classify literature. A *Harper's* Index-style account of trends over the past 15 years could be rendered as follows:

Number of hits returned from an MLA search for "trauma" in journal articles:
For the years 1990-1995: 29; for the years 2000-2005: 250.

[6] LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," 699.

[7] Ishiguro, "The Novelist in Today's World," 115.

[8] Sebald, *ONHD*, 161.

[9] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions,* 131.

[10] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions,* 49.

[11] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions,* 114.

[12] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 140.

[13] Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* 4.

[14] For Kojève, history had ended insofar as economic prosperity in the West had increasingly delivered people from poverty and the struggle that came with it: with freedom from want would come harmony, but also the "end of man" whose nature, defined by such struggle, would be exhausted.

[15] Quoted in Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism*, 76-77.

[16] Blanchot, "Intellectuals Under Scrutiny," 223. Blanchot was notoriously quiet about his role in the 1930s, and it is often debated whether his postwar writing is a sort of coming-to-terms with it, however oblique. Interestingly, at the end of this essay, Blanchot scrutinizes his own role as an intellectual in a "personal confession" only by quoting the following words of René Char, which he says he recalls almost every day "in the most vulnerable part of my memory": "I want never to forget that I have been forced to become – for how long? – a monster of injustice and intolerance, a cooped-up simplifier, an arctic individual with no interest in the fate of anyone who is not in league with him to kill the hounds of hell. The round-ups of Jews, the scalpings in police stations, terrorist raids by Hitler's police on stunned villages, lift me off the ground and strike my chapped face with a red-hot slap of molten iron" (225).

[17] Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster,* 64.

[18] Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster,* 58. Emphasis in original.

[19] Nancy, *Sense of the World*, 8.

[20] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 257.

[21] See Catherine Mills' articles on Agamben's "messianic politics" for a comparison of Benjamin's and Agamben's responses to Schmitt's idea of the sovereign.

[22] See Agamben's *State of Exception*.Agamben takes as his starting point the Bush administration's detention of noncitizens suspected of terrorism and the proposed set-up of military tribunals, legitimated by a declaration of a state of emergency.

[23] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 27.

[24] *Homo Sacer,* 11. Antonio Negri criticizes Agamben's continual reversion to the idea of the "limit" as "death"; rather, we might "focus not on this limit but on our power continuously to overcome it and to believe, in other words, that such a power produces the world thanks not to its contact with such a limit but to its capacity to expand each and every time beyond it, to its ability to leave it behind over and over again." Negri here is isolating the passivity implicitly advocated by Agamben's insistence upon "bare life" or *vita nuda* as the limit of modern biopolitics. For those like Negri who adhere to a Marxist tradition, various ideas of unworking or insufficiency such as Agamben's or Nancy's or Blanchot's preempt any positive outcome of decisive action. (Negri, "It's A Powerful Life: A Conversation on Contemporary Philosophy," 172).

[25] Negri, *Time for Revolution*, 112.

[26] Negri, *Time for Revolution,* 113.

[27] Benjamin, *Arcades Project*,463.

[28] Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* 5.

[29] Benjamin, *Illuminations,* 254.

[30] Comay, "Materialist Mutations of the *Bilderverbot,*" 372.

[31] Nabokov, *Ada,* 582.

[32] Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 107.

[33] Sebald, *ONHD*, 77.

[34] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions,* 113.

[35] Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 60.

[36] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 123.

[37] Vattimo, *Transparent Society*, 85.

[38] Blanchot, *Work of Fire*, 340.

[39] Vila-Matas,. *Bartleby & Co*., 157. Emphasis in original.

[40] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 245.

[41] Sebald, "An Interview with WG Sebald," 92.

[42] Nabokov, *Ada,* 20.

[43] Ishiguro, "Stuck," 10.

[44] Vattimo, *Transparent Society*, 1.

[45] Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, 57.

[46] See, for example, Pierre Nora's *Realms of Memory*.

[47] Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 486.

[48] Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory,* 57.

[49] Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory,* 59

[50] For Jean-François Lyotard, postmodernism, in its characteristic indeterminacy and heightened self-reflexivity, discredits what he has labeled *grand recits*. "Metanarratives" are denounced as oppressive and illegitimate because they cannot accommodate a multiplicity of emerging identities and histories or their competing discourses. A widespread wariness of the closure effected by "totalizing" narratives finds extreme expression in Lyotard's idea that the postmodern *precedes* the modern. The postmodern is that which resists form and disrupts continuity, fleeing this way and that from the "terror" of unity. Unlike classic modernist works, it does not break rules so much as seek to invent new ones. But because what is truly postmodern and therefore "sublime" cannot, by definition, be realized, it cannot be represented. If Lyotard demands we "invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented" and warns against the "hope to totalize them into a real unity," it always remains the case in aesthetic production that "the rules of what *will have been done*" arrive "too late for their author." That is, the rules are realized "too soon" in a work that ought to have been produced without recourse to "preestablished" criteria of legitimation. Any "work" that could keep faith with the "unpresentable" would have to be born simultaneously with the laws of its production which it would already have transgressed. As it is, we yield to "the solace and pleasure" of a shared "nostalgia for the unattainable" instead of enduring the commingled pleasure and pain of the sublime. Therefore, for Lyotard, we are always backsliding into the modern: we give form to the formless postmodern, succumbing to our nostalgia for the familiar rules of representation. The modern is the (inevitably unified) product, and in that sense the future, of the (failed) postmodern (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 81).

[51] In *The Transparent Society*, Gianni Vattimo discovers in the very failure of transparency, in disorientation itself, an emancipatory potential available to both political and aesthetic experience. If "[t]here is no single history, only images of the past projected from different points of view," this is not cause for regret. No longer tethered to the linear trajectory of universal history, being is freed in an oscillation between belonging and

disorientation that continually produces new "dialects" against a positive background of nontransparency. Vattimo writes of contemporary "post-historical" narratives or counter-utopias that, like utopias, "optimize" by realizing the "extreme implications" of "what are at present only possibilities" (76). The "post-apocalyptic" narratives of recent decades in which some crisis has already come and gone are yet utopic since "for the survivors this somehow amounts to a form of liberation," one wherein they may contemplate an "ironic-nostalgic inventory of the talismans of progress" (84-85). Counter-utopias do not return to an idealized past but rather construct "an existence that is no longer historical" and represent "an accomplishment, a passage to the extremes, based on a full realization of what is, for now, our (only) possibility" (85-86). "Possibility" under such circumstances, as Vattimo postulates, must follow from the recognition that the "rationalization and progressive enlightenment of the world have worn thin before its very eyes" (85). Any "utopia" now would have to forego its characteristic "admixture of foresight and optative, wishful anticipation" and instead focus on "inventory, nostalgia, *revival*" (86). Where the concepts of a linear or cyclical history are abandoned, a new philosophy of history takes shape that is "ironic-hermeneutico-distortive" (88); here, "[h]istorical occurrence . . . would be neither progress nor regress nor even a return of the same, but an 'interpretation'" of those things that, having been fully realized, reveal their inherent limits (87).

[52] For Frederic Jameson, representation as a kind of "intervention in the here and now" is virtually impossible in postmodernism. Unable to gain purchase amid an explosion of images and surfaces, contemporary art cannot locate itself within its own late-capitalist present, let alone offer a critical perspective of it. The novel in particular seems to have suffered a peculiar enervation in the latter half of the twentieth century since, like most traditional art forms, it has lost the critical distance and political potency of irony, offering in its stead a "blank irony."

[53] Osborne, *The Politics of Time,* 197.

[54] Vattimo's announcement of the post-historical seems to dispense not only with historical continuity but with the sacrifice that, as he himself points out, Heidegger acknowledged was the price of the end of the language of metaphysics.

[55] See Peter Hitchcock's *Oscillate Wildly: Space, Body and Spirit of Millenial Materialism* for a critique of Vattimo's use of the concept of oscillation. Hitchcock points out that Vattimo's argument for a "weakened" reality in fact "invokes a conspicuous foundation of material practice" (33) since oscillation is itself "a determined principle of movement and materiality" (32). Moreover, Vattimo fails to suggest how we might wrest possibilities for "emancipation" emergent in a "chaos of . . . plurality" that can also follow "the logic of late capitalism" (36).

[56] Benjamin, *The Plural Event*, 192.

[57] Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory,* 56.

[58] García Düttman, "Integral Actuality," in *Idea of Prose*, 11.

[59] Quoted in García Düttman, "Integral Actuality,"18.

[60] Benjamin, *Illuminations,* 255.

[61] Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through," 147–56.

[63] Benjamin, *Reflections,* 179.

[64] García Düttman, "Integral Actuality" 18.

[65] Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 462.

[66] *Illuminations* 175.

[67] García Düttman, "Integral Actuality," 19.

[68] García Düttman, "Integral Actuality," 12.

[69] García Düttman, "Integral Actuality," 12.

[70] García Düttman, "Integral Actuality," 13.

[71] García Düttman, "Integral Actuality," 17.

[72] Agamben, *Idea of Prose,* 97.

[73] Agamben, *Idea of Prose,* 98.

[74] Agamben, *Coming Community*, 56.

[75] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* 61.

[76] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* 19.

[77] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* xxxviii. Emphasis in original.

[78] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 208.

[79] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 210.

[80] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* 26.

[81] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* 3.

[82] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* 13. Nancy has in mind totalitarian or fascist states that demand the sacrifice of lives for their own establishment and perpetuation. But such a "will to immanence" can be found in less extreme examples, for instance, in modern democracies that invoke, instead, ideas of freedom, security and national traditions to ground themselves.

[83] Nancy, *Inoperative Community*

[84] Agamben, *Coming Community* 56.

[85] Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 28.

[86] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* 29.

[87] Agamben, *Coming Community,* 10.

[88] Agamben, *Coming Community*, 10-11

[89] Agamben, *Coming Community*, 2. Emphasis in original

[90] Agamben, *Coming Community*, 1.

[91] Blanchot, *Unavowable Community*, 9.

[92] Blanchot, *Unavowable Community,* 12.

[93] Blanchot, *Unavowable Community,* 43.

[94] Blanchot, *Unavowable Community,* 19.

[95] Blanchot, *Unavowable Community,* 49

[96] Blanchot, *Unavowable Community,* 42

[97] Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster,* 65.

[98] Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus,* 99.

[99] Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster,* 60.

[100] Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster,* 99.

[101] Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster,* 58.

[102] Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 473.

[103] Agamben, *Coming Community,* 83.

[104] Agamben, *Coming Community,* 2.

[105] Agamben, *Coming Community,* 67.

[106] Agamben, *Coming Community,* 35.

[107] Agamben, *Coming Community,* 2.

[108] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* 60.

[109] Nabokov, *Ada,* 587. Emphasis in original.

[110] Nabokov, *Lolita*, 13.

[111] Nabokov, *Ada,* 536.

[112] Nabokov, *Ada,* 18.

[113] Nabokov, *Ada,* 18.

[114] Nabokov, *Ada,* 536.

[115] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions,* 156.

[116] Nabokov, *Ada,* 550.

[117] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 220.

[118] Nabokov, *Ada,* 536.

[119] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions,* 69.

[120] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 210.

[121] Nabokov, *Ada,* 219-220.

[122] Nabokov, *Ada,* 556.

[123] Nancy, *Inoperative Community,* 26. Emphasis in original.

[124] Sebald, *ONHD,* 155.

[125] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 13.

[126] Agamben, *Remnants*, 106.

[127] Agamben, *Remnants,* 130.

[128] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 167.

Chapter Two. The "Unremembered" in *Ada, or Ardor*

I. Absolute abyss

When *Lolita's* success in 1955 prompted the translation of Nabokov's Russian novels, American readers were conducted into a foyer of newly-appended Forewords before gaining admittance to the English editions. Like Alfred Hitchcock in his monitory preambles, the émigré author imposes his poker-faced profile between his audience and the work at hand. He is not concerned, however, to prepare the reader for the moral implications of the ensuing story but to divest him or her of any and all moralizing baggage before entering a world where "it is only the author's private satisfaction that counts."[1] In his Foreword to *The Eye* (1930/1965), Nabokov reminds the reader, "As is well known (to employ a famous Russian phrase), my books are not only blessed by a total lack of social significance, but are also mythproof . . ." Already "well known," the pronouncement is gratuitous, but Nabokov cannot resist another opportunity to evict Freudians, Marxists, and other morbid mythologists from his imaginary worlds. The reader is advised not only against deep-diving for "general ideas" and "types," but against the teleological pursuit of unveiling "mystery." What matters, always, is "pattern," which in *The Eye* appears "in a merging of twin images" at the end of a journey "through a hell of mirrors." In Nabokov's "rain-sparkling crystograms," everything is reflected, each image turned inward toward its double.[2]

Although Nabokov "disclaims all intention to trick, puzzle, fool, or otherwise deceive the reader,"[3] his characters are perhaps less fortunate in escaping their creator's madhouse of mirrors. In his Foreword to *Bend Sinister* (1947/1964),[4] Nabokov admits that he took pity on the hapless philosopher Krug as he faces a firing squad by blessing

him with madness and "dismiss[ing] the cast" of his persecutors; nothing remains except the "oblong puddle" with which the novel began. Krug's "blessed madness" emerges when he realizes he is subject not to a surreal totalitarian state but to his creator's aesthetic designs: "he suddenly perceives the simple reality of things and knows but cannot express in the words of his world that he . . . and everybody else are merely my [Nabokov's] whims and megrims."[5] Krug's inarticulate perception opens "a rent in his world leading to another world of tenderness, brightness and beauty."[6] This other, timeless world promises what Nabokov calls "aesthetic bliss."[7] Here, "curiosity, tenderness, kindness, [and] ecstasy" are "the norm,"[8] and death is virtually banished. Nabokov's assertion in *Bend Sinister* that "death is but a question of style" is precisely the kind of aesthetic dismissal of material reality and exigency that provoked his erstwhile friend Edmund Wilson to write him a censorious letter: "You're not good at this kind of subject which involves questions of politics and social change."[9] Nabokov nevertheless smugly repeats the line in the novel's Foreword seventeen years later and adds that, when Krug's child is about to fall victim to pederasty and murder in the middle chapter of the novel, "comfortably Krug returns unto the bosom of his maker."[10] But if Krug "understands that he is in good hands,"[11] he may only do so under the auspices of madness, condemned to dwell in a breach between two worlds that no language can unite.

Nabokov's disavowals of "social significance" are legendary, easily assigned to his disgust with the "primitive and banal mentality of enforced politics" promulgated by "the Soviet police state"[12] which forced White Russians like the Nabokovs into exile. His various denials of sincerity and provocation in his post-1955 Forewords are undoubtedly responses to the moral and legal havoc wreaked upon his reputation by "Hurricane

Lolita." Like Ishiguro, each book Nabokov wishes to write is only "a subjective and specific affair,"[13] but unlike the Japanese-British author, he does not write for an international readership but "for myself in multiplicate, a not unfamiliar phenomenon on the horizon of shimmering deserts."[14] The exile, banished from his homeland, finds himself replicated in an "inner prospect" between and beyond national boundaries, in "the absolute abyss yawning between the barbed-wire tangle of police states and the spacious freedom of thought we enjoy in America and Western Europe."[15] However, when asked in a 1969 interview about the "esthetic distance" he has maintained while "witness[ing] extraordinary changes" (in Russia in 1917 and in 1930s Berlin), Nabokov replied, "I have bridged the 'esthetic distance' in my own way by means of such absolutely final indictments of Russian and German totalitarianism as my novels *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*." [16] If politics "leave [him] supremely indifferent,"[17] he nonetheless offers his two ostensibly political allegories, aberrant though they may seem alongside his tales of private obsession, as a sort of defense against the apoliticism he otherwise habitually and cheerfully touts. Aesthetic distance between worlds may be "bridged" only by "*absolutely final* indictments" of monological cruelty. But as we have seen, even the absolute finality of death is excluded from the crystogrammatic patterns of Nabokov's art, where time is suspended in a constellation of reflections. The "absolute abyss" separating barbarism from freedom, past from present, and life from death cannot be spanned, that is, it cannot be *endured* except in the timeless world of art. The only finality Nabokov's fiction achieves is its own ponderous mass, which betrays the "timeless" and private realm of imagination to which he would recall his material creations.

Ada, *or Ardor*, Nabokov's most "poetic and cosmopolitan novel,"[18] is indeed what Ishiguro calls "a landscape of the imagination," but it is notably different from *The Unconsoled*. In Ishiguro's novel, all boundaries are permeable in a globalized world where "crisis" is "imminent." *Ada*, however, is "cosmopolitan" precisely because some crisis has already, and finally, occurred. Its apparently unbounded world is characterized by the kind of elegant, detached, old-school cosmopolitanism Ishiguro satirizes in Ryder. Van and Ada, the offspring of various Russian and European lines, move as easily between English, French and Russian as they do among the fantastic colonies of a "dream-bright America." (The approximately one hundred years of *Ada's* unfolding and refolding – from the 1860s to the 1960s – bear almost no trace of such minor historical events as the American Civil War, the Communist Revolution, World Wars I and II, and the Holocaust.) *Ada's* world has already been doubled before the novel begins, a matter "too well known historically, and too obscene spiritually, to be treated at length . . ."[19] We are given no definitive account of the "L disaster" which has "both caus[ed] and curs[ed] the notion of 'Terra,'" a world reputedly distinct from *Ada's* setting, Antiterra, also called Demonia. (Many critics have identified the "L," rather unhelpfully, as *Lolita*.) Van finds "the mere geographic aspect of the affair" amusing: Terra – *earth* – cannot be represented by "a varicolored map." He finds laughable the idea that Antiterra's Estoty, an "American province" whose "quaint synonym" is "Russia," is, on Terra, a country actually called Russia, "transferred as if by some sleight of *land* across the ha-ha of a doubled ocean . . ." In one of his many execrable puns, Van reduces not only geographical but national and political boundaries to mere illusion. Also "scientifically ungraspable" is a "preposterous discrepancy" between Terra and Antiterra

> in regard to time – not only because the history of each part of the amalgam did not quite match the history of each counterpart in its discrete condition, but because a gap of up to a hundred years one way or another existed between the two earths; a gap marked by a bizarre confusion of directional signs at the crossroads of passing time with not *all* the no-longers of one world corresponding to the not-yets of the other.[20]

Differences between the West's progress-oriented, liberal democracies and Russia's Communism and "backwardness," including its outmoded Julian calendar, become negligible, if not imaginary, since Estoty is in fact American. Rupture gives rise to divergent beliefs in and about Terra's reality. For some of those who concede its existence, the "dissimilarities" between the "two earths" seems not only to prove that each is real (and not a "specular" projection of the other), but that each is real because each is *possible*. It is as if two chess games were being played, whose "identical openings and identical end moves might ramify in an infinite number of variations, on one board and in two brains, at any middle stage of their irrevocably converging development."[21] If Van dispenses with the details of the L disaster, too exhaustively discussed to recount again, it appears, on one hand, that the very potential for disaster never ceases to happen in "a gap marked by a bizarre confusion of directional signs." The idea of a lag between the two worlds resists the future as well as the past: endings beget beginnings in an elsewhere, and vice-versa. But this unending recurrence is, precisely, the disaster. If dissimilarities and discrepancies between the two worlds give rise to "an infinite number of variations at any middle stage of their irrevocably converging development," that irrevocable convergence subsumes whatever chance possibilities had been promised by infinite variation. According to this Terrarean philosophy – which rejects the narrator's

proposition that not all the no-longers of one world correspond to the not-yets of the other – whatever is "no longer" on one earth has "not yet" happened on the other, but it will, eventually. It does not require Van's various degrees in philosophy to realize that not only a cherished past, but also the past's violence, can be revisited. Likewise, the exclusion of real, historical violence from the novel's fantastic world, where everything may be infinitely reordered, cannot forestall cruelty and suffering.

The excess produced by one world is recuperated in another – herein lies Nabokov's aesthetic-economic schema through which the past can never be lost, abandoned or forgotten. The spatial is subordinated to the temporal: lost homelands are recalled and secured in memory. In what follows, I will argue that Nabokov withdraws the past and the future into *Ada's* chiasmic design in an effort to preempt loss and belatedness. Art, for him, is timeless, and yet the rhythmic movement of art is subject to – and subjects one to – temporal differentiation. Chiasmus in *Ada* cannot, finally, suspend the cross-reading that it sets in motion; it cannot safeguard the past for future imaginings that preserve it intact by establishing a "*true* Present" at its pivotal center. In the endurance of art, of aesthetic vision, Van passes between what Blanchot calls the two slopes of literature. These slopes (*penchants*) name the writer's approach to and repulsion from the origin of the work of art. The first is approached by intention, which modulates into a fascination that undoes intentionality; the writer then passes into a second slope of passivity and desubjectification, toward what Blanchot calls a "literary immortality" that "is the very movement by which the nausea of survival which is not a survival, a death which does not end in anything, insinuates itself into the world, a world sapped by crude existence."[22] In seeking what lies outside of language and time – the "unremembered" – Van can no longer determine the meaning he hopes to assign to the past by arresting it in

language. Because the "literary immortality" that Van constructs excludes the possibility of death, the possibility of meaning itself – for which death is its ultimate reference – is negated and dismembered. If *Ada* seeks "other varieties of dreaming and being beyond man's notion of Time"[23] in evolving beyond an idea of the future as progress or death, what it discovers is a sort of progression *within* death in which one dreams only the fragmentary visions of insomnia.

For if *Ada* begins with the proposition that "happy families," unlike unhappy ones, are "dissimilar,"[24] leading us to expect through *Ada's* ensuing play of differences an attainment of aesthetic bliss, we must keep in mind that in Russian, "ada" means Hades or "of hell." If Van and Ada "ever intended to die," the editor of Van's own "posthumous" family chronicle, *Ardis*, informs us, "they would die, as it were, *into* the finished book, into Eden or Hades, into the prose of the book or the poetry of its blurb."[25] The suffering that the inevitability of dying portends is to be overcome in the literal impossibility of death. That abjured death effects what Blanchot calls a "literary immortality," in the form of a fixed, "glittering 'now,'" in which an infernal, insomniac, unmasterable survival takes place. The excess, I will suggest, that Van cannot ultimately master is what Levinas and Blanchot have called the *il y a,* the "there is" or neutrality of "being in general" that cannot be reduced to or contained within the *individual* being that Nabokov treasures. The "tense-willed imagination" that Van enlists against "Siamese Space and the false future"[26] is, for Levinas, the subject's hypostasis, its self-positioning in time as it assumes, and takes responsibility for, its existence. But this attempt at mastery is also the very movement by which the subject confronts, and succumbs to, the weight of existence itself: "Despite all its freedom effort reveals a condemnation; it is fatigue and suffering."[27] Van's "deliberate consciousness," as it "bunches the recent past

with the imminent future" in order to eternalize "an objective perception of the real present,"[28] cannot free itself of what Levinas calls the present's "enchainment in relation to itself."[29] The subject cannot escape the facticity of existence, what Heidegger would call its "thrown-ness." But what Heidegger understands as the subject's resoluteness, its anticipation before a death that can be appropriated as what is "most my own," is for Levinas a responsibility for and commitment to the other that has always already been made and that can never finally be met. For Levinas, "[t]he meaningful continues beyond my death."

The concept of the *il y a* gives rise to somewhat different tenors in the thought of Blanchot and Levinas, but for both it names an impersonal alterity that precedes and exceeds any intersubjective relation. Such alterity can neither be reduced to the Same nor appropriated; the *il y a* names an alterity that, as Joseph Libertson glosses in *Proximity, Levinas, Blanchot, Bataille & Communication*, "approaches as it escapes manifestation."[30] According to Libertson, Levinas, Blanchot and Georges Bataille practice a philosophy of proximity in their preoccupation with communication as the "positing of a differentiation in being which is not a negation," but rather that which initiates "a withdrawal of power in the failure of negativity which leaves behind an uneliminable remainder."[31] All three, like the other writers that I have gathered under a philosophy of interruption, do not seek to overcome an exteriority or alterity that reason and imagination confront; what cannot be appropriated and totalized as a determinate future can be met only as "an alterity which has no power, but against which we have no power."[32] As Bataille writes in regard to Levinas's *il y a*,

> Commonly I do not know the *there is* (in the same way that I do not know a thing), when I know *this* or *that* . . . But on the other hand, I wake myself up to it

> as to the poetry of an empty immensity, opening onto it the door that I imagined to give unto my room. The *there is* from the very fact that it is not *this*, which I can relate to *that*, as to a genus of which it is the example, cannot exist in me (before me) except in the form of ignorance. At the same time supreme ignorance necessarily reveals the nudity of *that which is*, reduces to an unintelligible presence in which all difference is destroyed, to which the name *there is* belongs.[33]

Where "all difference is destroyed," one finds oneself in Nabokov's "*true* Present," in "an instant of zero duration" that temporal difference cannot characterize or alter. However, as I will argue, in seeking an absolute present, Van also discovers the qualified present that Bataille identifies as the "sovereign moment," as an experience of *non-savoir* or unknowing. Bataille understands the Levinasian *il y a* as "a night of non-knowledge" that can yet be a "deliverance" precisely because a subject cannot take a position in relation to it: "the passion of knowledge – I mean passion without measure – alone has the force to lead knowledge to the moment in which it is dissolved . . ."[34] Where there is no hypostasis, there is "a fusion of the subject and the object"; as Libertson puts it, "The *il y a* is an involvement with existence that forecloses the distinction between consciousness and object, without foreclosing their difference."[35] In other words, one is not *negated* in the confrontation with the *il y a*; rather, one is *exposed*, deposed from a position of mastery that would make use of the objects in its purview.

For Bataille, the excess that *Ada* attempts to master should not be saved for and implemented in a future that will legitimate the past which, for him, is moribund: "*Life beyond utility* is the domain of sovereignty."[36] Against anticipation of the future, which "is always the unavoidable calculation of reason,"[37] Bataille proposes sovereignty which

is oriented only to the present moment. Although "[w]e know nothing absolutely of the moment,"[38] we are nonetheless conscious of it even as that "consciousness is at the same time a slipping-away of the moment." When "anticipation dissolves into NOTHING," when it gives itself over to "unknowing," we are freed from our servitude to the future and the objectification and utilization of "*what is supremely important to us*." The sovereign moment, within which we suspend anticipation of a future without abandoning the present, can happen at times of heightened emotional response. In sorrow and in joy, thought stops because the "*object* of the laughter, the *object* of the tears . . . takes away all knowledge from us" and "detach[es] us from the ground on which we were groveling, in the concatenation of useful activity." This "miraculous moment" in which we are beside ourselves, both present and absent in a "now" that is already slipping away, is found in both "happy tears" as well as "unhappy tears."[39] Even in unhappiness, even in the face of death which is always unbelievable, we experience the miraculous because here, too, "an unanticipated, unhoped-for aspect, considered impossible, reveals itself."[40]

Ada gestures toward this unanticipated – because also unremembered – aspect of experience in the ceaseless forkings and reversals of Van and Ada's incestuous love affair. There is a certain ethical and, dare one suggest, *political* gesture in *Ada*. Bataille's politics (or, at certain points of his career, his apolitics) are, of course, not Nabokov's (and Nabokov's truculent apoliticism is, of course, a politics in its own right). If Nabokov would have scoffed at both the mystical and Marxist elements that condition Bataille's thought, particularly that of the 1930s, he would nonetheless have shared the latter's privileging of heterogeneity over homogeneity as a resistance to fascism and totalitarian. And although Nabokov would have rejected out of hand Bataille's calls for (a proletarian) revolution through sacrificial violence, the "ecstasy" that characterizes the

Nabokovian realm of "aesthetic bliss" bears relation to the unproductive expenditure that Bataille opposes to the economy practiced by societies of acquisition. Whereas such an "economy never imagines" the present because it "negates *that which is*, the present, to the profit of the future, *which is not*," unproductive expenditure involves "energy [that] is lost *to the profit of the present instant – which is*, whereas the future *is not*." Such an intensification of the present instant, like art's "positive squandering of energy" through which an "excess of energy shines," characterizes a sovereign or miraculous moment.[41] The unrecoverable loss that cannot be invested in a future destabilizes the subject which is beside itself; as Bataille writes of Levinas's *il y a*, "There is no longer the subject of the objective world, opposed to the object that he is not, that he appropriates usefully if he can."[42] To be beside oneself is to lose oneself in ecstasy, in the miraculous, in unknowing; it is also to lose one's bearing where, as Libertson writes, "the intervals which consecrate identity and non-contradiction"[43] are flattened out. In the face of death, which takes on a miraculous character because we cannot know it, Bataille holds that the dying and one watching the dying are equally "cast, transported and breathless, somewhere between heaven and earth."

> This motion appears to be partly dreadful and hostile, but *external* to the one threatened by death or the one dying; it is all that is left, depriving the one who watches the dying as much as the one who dies. Thus it is that, when death is present, what remains of life only lives on the outside, beyond and *beside itself*.[44]

The experience of unknowing in the face of death orients both oneself and the other to the exteriority of death; they are joined – they are in common – in a mutual ecstasy that deprives each one of his or her hypostasized identity. For Bataille, community is nothing but the relation between an ecstatic "inner experience" and an exteriority one cannot

appropriate or master. The exteriority that death poses for oneself and another "reveals to all persons," as Michèle H. Richman remarks, "both their finitude and extension into boundless ecstasy."[45] Bataille, writing of festivals that generate unproductive expenditure, says that "[t]he individual who participates in the loss [of being] is vaguely aware that this loss engenders the community sustaining him."[46] Through sacrificial violence by which no new political order is instituted,

> Those who look at death and rejoice are already no longer individuals destined for the body's rotten decay, because simply entering into the arena with death already projected them outside themselves, into the heart of the glorious community of their fellows where every misery is scoffed at . . . The community is necessary to them in order to become aware of the glory bound up in the instant that will see them torn from being.[47]

In *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*, sacrifice is a matter of eliminating a heteronomous threat in order to preserve a totalitarian homogeny: Cincinnatus and Krug are to be put to death for "gnostical turpitude"[48] and "unprovoked dissension."[49] Ostensibly, these "sacrifices" do not take place. Cincinnatus walks off of a gallows, and Krug's firing squad vanishes; each is spared by an authorial conferral of immortality. But that immortality, as the narrator admits at the end of *Bend Sinister*, is a "slippery sophism."[50] The admission that the "aesthetic distance" which banishes death is no more than "a play upon words"[51] is offset, however, by a persistent belief that death itself is no more than a submission to the unreal. Cincinnatus simply asks himself at the moment of his execution "why am I here?" and witnesses the surreal insanity of the world that would put him to death "coming apart."[52] It is easy to understand Wilson's criticism where violence and death due to political tyranny are made the equivalent of linguistic

sophistry. “Social change” hardly seems viable where Cincinnatus, who insists on doing everything “by myself,” dispels reality by refusing to participate in it. But the Cincinnatus who finds “unnecessary” the countdown to his beheading is already no longer himself; he is no longer by himself, but beside himself as “one Cincinnatus” anticipates imminent death and “the other Cincinnatus” hears the countdown “fading away into the distance.” The approach of death brings about “a clarity he had never experienced before – at first almost painful, so suddenly did it come, but then suffusing him with joy . . .”[53] In being beside himself at the approach of death, Cincinnatus makes “his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him.”[54] If this ending seems only another example of Nabokov’s teasing bids at an afterlife, a claim for the individual’s singular resistance to tyranny and to death, it seems also that death, whose sudden irruption causes both pain and joy, results in a destabilizing of self that opens one to community. Cincinnatus keeps his head, of course, but here one may glimpse Bataille’s headless community in a gathering of beings akin to one another only at the point of death.

In *Ada*, Nabokov does not attempt another “absolutely final indictment” of totalitarianism through the isolated efforts of one man against a surreal tyrannical state. Rather, in this novel there is an attempt to rethink community outside both political and national boundaries through a love affair. What Bataille calls the “negative miraculous” of death – “the impossible coming true” – produces, “in a negative form, the unanticipated, the miracle that takes one’s breath away.” When the person in whom one “had recognized being” dies, he or she ceases to be an “object of thought”: his or her absence effects a dissolution of anticipation. Only death, when it “strikes down the one we love, the one who is close to us,” can make apparent that closeness in the

immeasurable distance it opens between the present and any future we might look forward to.[55] In facing death, thought "comes to a halt" and its object – here, the dead – "dissolves into NOTHING, because, ceasing to be useful, or subordinate, it becomes *sovereign* in ceasing to be."[56] For Bataille, lovers form a community of "consumption" in opposition to "the State, which is a society of acquisition."[57] Having evolved, incestuously, beyond the capacity to reproduce, Van and Ada both resist projecting a future and also attempt to determine and totalize the future by dying together, "as it were, *into* the finished book."[58] In the sovereign moment that *Ada* hints at, the dead – the past – ceases to be useful, and the individual who would harness it for an immortal future discovers his own finitude, his "marvelous mortality."[59] There is here a suspension of determination, of the determination that Nabokov both pursues in his fiction and condemns in his "absolutely final indictments" of "totalitarian" thought. This suspension occurs when, caught between the indeterminate possibilities of pleasure and pain, Van gives himself over to unknowing, to "stupor"[60] that is not, or not only, the stupor of insomnia. Ada and Van, too, oppose the sublation of individuals into a society of acquisition in severing ties to the past that would reproduce the continuity that sexual reproduction establishes and perpetuates. However, their "community of lovers" seeks its own parallel immanence in the eternality of the book. The sovereign moment is, ultimately, only glimpsed before being subsumed in what Alfred Kazin has criticized as the "pure freedom of [Nabokov's] exiled state"[61] – an unfree state of exile from the finitude of the present.

II. Magic carpets

For Nabokov, "human life is not a pulsating heart but the missed heartbeat."[62] As I wrote in the introduction, rhythm "hints" at time, negatively, by withdrawing its movement to reveal the "bottomless silence" of what cannot be expressed or given form. The "recurrent beats of the rhythm" of aesthetic creation make present only the "gray gaps" of memory in which a present that was missed is reawakened in a future that cannot fix it once and for all. The work of art forsakes Time, substituting its own movement – away from the past and towards the future – for "pure" time's stasis. Pure or "neutral" time,[63] the "Tender Interval" between "vivid events,"[64] is not identical with the "modest Present," which relies on our awareness and is tinged with "the lingering freshness of the Past." The "*true* Present" is "unremembered," "an instant of zero duration,"[65] that is, the double of unembarred eternity.

By describing life as a "missed heartbeat," Nabokov equates life with that other phenomenon that evades expression: death. This odd conflation finds expression only in his tireless pursuit and celebration of the "timeless" world of art. His aesthetic aspirations – for Nabokov, aspirations should be nothing but aesthetic – are encapsulated in an anecdote he relates at the beginning of his autobiography, *Speak, Memory!*, in which a young man experiences panic upon seeing a home movie made shortly before his own birth. For the "young chronophobiac," the sight of his mother's waving from an upstairs window, "like some mysterious farewell," and of his baby carriage awaiting him like a "coffin," intimate not only the death crouching inside each new life but "the two eternities of darkness" surrounding the "extraordinary visions" of any given lifespan.[66] Such an apprehension of "first and last things" strikes an "adolescent note"; grown men "accept the two black voids, fore and aft," as the immovable bookends of their lives.

Nabokov rejects these limits, making "colossal efforts to distinguish the faintest of personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life." As Bataille writes in relation to Levinas, "the time proper to impersonal existence differs from that of individual being."[67] Butting up against "the walls of time" separating him from "the free world of timelessness" where experience exceeds both life and death as we (cannot) know it, Nabokov seeks "a secret outlet" from within the "prison of time." Discovering, to his horror, that time is "spherical and without exits," he explores the "next best" thing: childhood. Looking back upon his childhood, Nabokov sees the "awakening of consciousness as a series of spaced flashes, with the intervals between them gradually diminishing until bright blocks of perception are formed, affording memory a slippery hold."[68] One comes to consciousness by dissolving the intervals of time over which impressions have accumulated. Pulsing along a linear continuum, consciousness makes itself available to memory by *resembling* timelessness, by constituting itself as synchrony. Memory is then free to play in this artificially synchronic dimension, and to derive from it works of art which in turn resemble the diachronic rhythm of memory.

In childhood, one is closer to the "*true* Present," to the "black voids" which have not quite separated themselves into "fore and aft."[69] One is, of course, in time, conscious, accumulating memories that must terminate with one's death. But the art that arises from such memories launches the future just as it is launched into a future where meaning is altered or forgotten or otherwise betrayed. Lost is the "retrospective appeal" of individual memories that become "more closely identified" with one's novels than with any "former self." Nabokov's *Pale Fire* is undoubtedly the most trenchant riposte to the critical destiny of literature ever written. But as Nabokov points out, in writing nothing is "safe from the intrusion of the artist" himself, who may only pretend to "save" an object of the

past, as Nabokov claims to do in *Speak, Memory!* with his real-life governess-cum-character, by lending it the lineaments of autobiographical realism. Once a "treasured item" of the past is "abruptly placed" in a novel's "artificial world," it is in danger of no longer bearing any relation to the lived past where, for Nabokov, it is eternally fixed.[70] Art, the "only immortality" we may "share,"[71] as Humbert Humbert writes to, or rather, of Lolita, threatens an immortality that disarticulates individual experience. The wholly imaginary worlds Nabokov creates, where "only the author's private satisfaction counts" and where "death is but a question of style," cannot secure the "privacy" of a discrete life that nevertheless endures beyond the reach of a memory and will that could determine it.

For Blanchot, again, literature is divided between two slopes. It seeks what precedes it, the objective existence of things that is negated in language, which substitutes it with its own meaning. In the first slope, literature "wants to grasp the movement [of negation] itself" by adopting the viewpoint of an "imaginary whole" to which "real things" might refer before their dissolution in language. Language, too, possesses materiality, and in making things "*really* present outside of themselves," and *after* themselves, it supplants the writer's consciousness which "illuminates things and makes decisions."[72] Neither the world nor beyond it, literature attests to "the presence of things before the world exists, their perseverance after the world has disappeared";[73] by attempting to become a thing itself, literature can no longer represent, but only present. On the second slope, literature discovers that the meaning it would like to wrest from its own movement of negation has become "detached from its conditions, separated from its moments, wandering like an empty power . . . ."[74] Literature is thus divided:

> It is negation, because it drives the inhuman, indeterminate side of things back into nothingness; it defines them, makes them finite, and this is the sense in which literature is really the work of death in the world. But at the same time, after having denied things in their existence, it preserves them in their being; it causes them to have a meaning, and the negation which is at work is also the advent of meaning, the activity of comprehension.[75]

Ada moves uneasily between these slopes. It attempts to arrest the movement through which art betrays Time by appealing to the "black voids" where art's origin and future lie. If Humbert Humbert would perpetuate his nymphette, Van in *Ada* tries to co-opt the immortality of the book itself by drawing both its beginning and end into its center through a chiasmic structural reversal. Blanchot says that writing "marks and leaves traces," but the traces do not refer to the marks since there was never any "initial presence that would still be there as remainder or vestige." Because there is never any present, which is "always crossed too late or too soon," writing cannot memorialize it. Its traces do not refer, but nevertheless continue to signify "the meaning of the meaningless embedded in the word as the expression of the obscurity of existence"; [76]they bear witness only to what Blanchot calls the other or essential night where finitude is impossible. But for Nabokov, the "*true* Present" is unremembered because it resists crossing or movement altogether. The true present is nonetheless *there* as the ground of signification, but it could only appear "if our vision were not asymmetrical," if we could somehow suspend the signifying relation between past and present, "fore and aft." *Ada* attempts to install this present, this "glittering 'now,'" through the symmetrical vision produced by chiasmus even as it acknowledges the asymmetry to which our vision is, in fact, subjected. Van attempts to forestall the future by dying with his lover/sister Ada into the

"now" of the book whose own immortality will secure the meaning of their lives. The work of securing the "now" requires vigilance and involves preempting belatedness: by inverting fore and aft, *Ada* seeks to avert the trauma of awakening in a future detached from the past. But as both Blanchot and Nabokov understand, literary immortality cannot arrest the movement of signification over time. By projecting its "now" into a future of ceaseless rereading, *Ada* courts the dangers of insomniac vision. In its crystallization of the "now" of its inspiration, it attempts to suspend its own movement towards the future: it denies itself the death that for Bataille, Levinas, Blanchot and, I would add, Nabokov, constitutes our relation to others.

Having confessed his disbelief in time in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov famously declares, "I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip." He then describes as the "highest enjoyment of timelessness" an observer's pleasure in standing among butterflies, but "behind [this] ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is a momentary vacuum into which all I love rushes."[77] The doubled pattern of the carpet creates a passageway to timelessness, to ec-stasis, which invites the otherness of "all I love." The design formed by folding the magic carpet of art interrupts the movement that went into its making, drawing into the center of its "extraordinary visions" the black voids of "fore and aft." But the interruption is "momentary," that is, subject to time: it lies behind, or is superimposed upon, timelessness. "Hard to explain," it is the indescribable exteriority that attends the careful plotting of art. The doubling for which Nabokov's "timeless art" is legendary brings into being its own double: the time it would arrest or overcome. While Nabokov scorns hapless "visitors" to his aesthetic citadel, nothing precludes him from tripping over his own design. In *Invitation to a Beheading*, written ten years before

the "magic carpet" chapter of *Speak, Memory*, Cincinnatus, writing from his prison cell, also invokes a "figured rug." He writes of an imagined world where the tortured "walk unmolested":

> *there* time takes shape according to one's pleasure, like a figured rug whose folds can be gathered in such a way that two designs will meet – and the rug is once again smoothed out, and you live on, or else superimpose the next image upon the last, endlessly, endlessly . . . .[78]

Time moves according to its *own* pleasure once the symmetry of the design is "smoothed out," and one must "live on," or else one continues to superimpose designs like a woman selecting a belt, "rhythmically butting the velvet with her knees."[79] As I have begun to suggest, the "or else" is not quite the choice it appears to be. The timeless, deathless world of creation is always shadowed by the world of rhythmic birth and death, and vice versa. "Impersonal existence," writes Bataille, "lacks distinct instants and the possibility of rhythm. All the points of time are alike there, like the points of space in a black night. The position of a subject for whom the instant can cause an irruption in being would be necessary, Levinas writes, 'so that this insomnia, which is like the very eternity of being, stops.'"[80] The opening that art offers between the world of "impersonal darkness" and the world of rhythmic creation is a dangerous passageway. As in the personal narrative I related in the introduction, one can endure, endlessly, if one slips into the black fold between the overlapping designs of aesthetic vision. At the end of *Bend Sinister*, just as the narrator has conferred immortality upon Krug, he hears a "tower clock" which he has "never heard in the daytime"; after its strikes twice, it "hesitate[s] and [is] left behind by the smooth fast silence that continue[s] to stream through the veins of [his] aching

temples; a question of rhythm."[81] This is no "Tender Interval": here, the past rushes away, and all that remains is the "Future (Sham Time)."[82]

The future, Van argues, "is the idea of a hypothetical present based on our experience of succession, on our faith in logic and habit. Actually, of course, our hopes can no more bring it into existence than our regrets can change the Past." The past is "changeless, intangible, and 'never-to-be-revisited,'"[83] and yet because it has been lived, it "has at least the taste, the tinge, the tang, of our individual being." The future, however, "remains aloof from our fancies and feelings." On one hand, it is beyond individual determination, an expanse of nonbeing. But it is also "an infinity of branching possibilities." Should some "determinate scheme . . . abolish the notion of time," then the future would no longer be the "unknown, the not yet experienced and the unexpected, all the glorious 'x' intersections [which] are the inherent parts of human life." These "'x' intersections" name chiasmus. Chiasmus produces not only spatial or geometrical inversion but an appearance of temporal reversal. The ancient Greeks, who employed chiasmus as a mnemonic device, also *read* chiasmically. The alphabet was learned from beginning to end, then backwards, until one could read it simultaneously in both directions. Similarly, when scrolls were unrolled, there emerged "a symmetrical perception of overall content," leading one "to focus on the content of its center."[84] Nabokov's magic carpet produces this perception of symmetry in its folded patterns, at the center of which, as I noted above, lies a passageway to timelessness. In his family chronicle, Van has "given new life to Time by Cutting off Siamese Space and the false future" – by proceeding chiasmically:

> My aim was to compose a kind of novella in the form of a treatise on the Texture of Time, an investigation of its veily substance. With illustrative metaphors

> gradually increasing, very gradually building up a logical love story, going from past to present, blossoming as a concrete story, and just as gradually reversing analogies and disintegrating again into bland abstractions.[85]

The chiasmic structure of Van's family chronicle moves from "past to present" and from present to past: there is no future aside from the testimony of this movement itself – *Ada*. We are to be led into the "novella's" center, "the black voids, fore and aft," which lie outside of time. It is here, in ec-stasis, that "an infinity of branching possibilities" makes itself available.[86]

They may only count as possibilities here because they are beyond determination. In chiasmus, as Sanford Budick notes, "cross-reading is set in motion." The "glorious x-intersections" Van traces in his recounted life generate an "illimitable circulation of relations, forward and reverse," creating "a species of absence between its binary terms which are not simply antitheses or negations of the terms themselves." Rather, in the "despatialization of relation" between terms effected by chiasmic "turning and counterturning," the resulting gaps "indicate that all representations contain an unrealized dimension, so that each manifestation has a kind of invisible, latent, dead accompaniment."[87] It is this "unrealized dimension" that haunts each constellation of meaning that Van attempts, in fact, to *determine*, but not reveal, through chiasmus. This dimension is death: it is what cannot be experienced except, as Bataille writes, as "the impossible becoming true," as something that can be neither anticipated nor determined.

In Nabokov's first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, we are told there is a "method" in "the author's way of expressing the physical process of dying." In a book that imaginatively and fitfully reconstructs his dead brother's life, the narrator describes another book in which his brother has described death, detailing first pain and

sickness in "thought images" that cause us to "stumble and crawl through hideous landscapes," then reversing the method by delivering a "slow assault of horrible uncouth visions drawing upon us and hemming us in . . . lustily, wickedly." But through this exhausting and exhaustive account, "pain fades," and we arrive at "the moment when a wave of light suddenly floods the book, when, "[b]y an incredible feat of suggestive wording, the author makes us believe that he knows the truth about death and that he is going to tell it." At this moment, "nothing could be insignificant," but just at "this last bend of the book," as we pause to consider whether we will pursue the author to the end, "that minute of doubt [proves] fatal: the man is dead." But if "[w]e hold a dead book in our hands," it nevertheless seems to the narrator "that the 'absolute solution' is there, somewhere, concealed in some passage . . . ." We have simply missed it in our haste, in the habitual deception that things in their "familiar guise" perpetrate. In *Ada*, we are to believe, the "solution" may be there, but it is missed.

Toward the end of *Ada*, Van dreams of a sneering hitch-hiker who asks, "how did [Van] explain that in our dreams we know we shall awake, is not that analogous to the certainty of death and if so, the future – "[88] It is a question Van does not answer in the dream, but the entire novel concerns awakening to death. Like *Lolita*, *Ada* is authorized by the deaths of its narrator and subject: Van and Ada "die, as it were, *into* the finished book,"[89] which we may only "reread" after "all the persons mentioned in [the] book are dead."[90] Their deaths are drawn into the book, which ensures their immortality. But it is Van's own "rain-sparkling crystograms," his "determinate schemes," that open a passageway to the second slope of literature where he cannot locate himself; the "Siamese Space" Nabokov and Van scorn is finally and ironically overcome. He who has

seen and stored everything in order to prevent the future from betraying the past might go on seeing, incessantly.

III. Insomnia

Throughout Nabokov's writing, one finds repeated declarations of faith in memory's capacity of retention. This faith is uncompromised by the fallacious and fictive distortions memory is subject to in his most notorious character, Humbert Humbert. "Analyz[ing]" the origins of his nymphette-omania, Humbert Humbert writes that he "surrender[s] to a sort of retrospective imagination which feeds the analytic faculty with boundless alternatives and which causes each visualized route to fork and re-fork without end in the maddeningly complex prospect of my past."[91] Our antennae may quiver warily upon reading that loaded verb "analyze," and we ought to mistrust any "faculty" fed by the Humbertian imagination. But what feeds the imagination – memory – is not itself suspect. Perfect recall is not a matter of laying down "history as it really happened" – Nabokov would have been resolutely indifferent to handwringing over "historical truth" or recent theoretical discussions concerning the entwinement of memory and history. For him, history and memory are unproblematically synonymous; the fictive distortions and contortions of a retrospective imagination are all the "truth" that matters. Like his nemesis Freud, Nabokov believes memory conserves everything, but there are critical differences in the ways they conceive of the relationship between memory and time. As Richard Terdiman summarizes Freud's thinking, memory overwhelms us with an infinity of past associations that must be constrained to "reestablish the present as a site of stability." By refusing "chance" a role in psychic life and by asserting that "the unconscious memory is eternal," psychoanalysis sought to "insure intelligibility and interpretive boundedness": nothing is lost over time, it is only concealed. Interpretation is

as "materially realist" as the distortive and substitutive processes which have rendered unconscious memories unreadable; it "maneuvers in the same space" as these processes and "plays them backwards."[92] Only psychoanalytic intervention can penetrate psychic defenses and reestablish temporal differentiation between past and present by "working through" them. Nabokov's aestheticism also "plays backward" memories, but it refuses all boundaries, including death. The desired result is artificial synchrony: Van, "reconstruct[ing] his deepest past," realizes the "details of his infancy . . . could be best treated . . . when reappearing at later stages of his boyhood and youth, as sudden juxtapositions that revived the part while vivifying the whole."[93]

Van's first conscious memory arises from a "traumatic" cataclysm averted. When he was seven months old, a piece of plaster "crashed into [his] cradle" during an earthquake, and because the "195 days preceding that event [are] indistinguishable from infinite unconsciousness, they are not to be included in perceptual time . . ."; Van therefore considers himself 195 days younger than his birth record would indicate.

> In the same sense of individual, perceptual time, I can put my Past in reverse gear, enjoy this moment of recollection as I did the horn of abundance whose stucco pineapple [the falling plaster] just missed my head, and postulate that next moment a cosmic or corporeal cataclysm might – not kill me, but plunge me into a permanent state of stupor, of a type sensationally new to science, thus depriving natural dissolution of any logical or chronal sense. Furthermore, this reasoning takes care of . . . Universal time . . . also known as Objective Time . . . . Nothing prevents mankind from having no future at all – if for example our genus evolves by imperceptible (this is the ramp of my argument) degrees a *novo-sapiens* species or another sub-genus altogether, which will enjoy other varieties of being

> and dreaming, beyond man's notion of Time. Man, in that sense, will never die, because there may never be a taxonomical point in his evolutionary progress that could be determined as the last stage of man in the cline turning him into Neohomo, or some other horrible slime.[94]

Evolution here is a matter of extinction *as* mutation. "Dissolution" is a movement of imperceptible change beyond "man's notion of Time," that is, beyond temporal differentiation. By putting his "Past in reverse gear," Van can experience possibilities which had not come to pass. Having missed, or been missed by, death, he can imagine another catastrophe which would lead not to death but to "a permanent state of stupor."

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov writes of another, historical "cataclysm."

> I would submit that, in regard to the power of hoarding up impressions, Russian children of my generation passed through a period of genius, as if destiny were loyally trying what it could for them by giving them more than their share, in view of the cataclysm that was to remove completely the world they had known. Genius disappeared when everything had been stored.

Cataclysm here is the Communist Revolution, which was to make exiles of most of Nabokov's generation whose privileged parents were deemed dangerous or undesirable by the new Soviet government. Memory is most powerful and purposeful *before* the cataclysm that destroyed these children's world, "as if" the future had retroactively granted the "genius" of "hoarding impressions." But something else also encouraged Nabokov's own childhood genius. When he was almost six, an "exciting sense of *rodina*, 'motherland,' was for the first time organically mingled with" the usual signs of the Nabokovs' return to Russia after from a year abroad – "the comfortably creaking snow, the deep footprints across it . . . ." That "year of difficult decisions and liberal hopes had

exposed a small Russian boy to grown-up conversations." Affected "in some way of his own by a mother's nostalgia and a father's patriotism," Nabokov experienced his "first *conscious* return" to Russia. Sixty years later, this initial experience of awakening to a shared past seems like "a rehearsal – not of the grand homecoming that will never take place, but of its constant dream in my long years of exile."[95] Waking (coming to consciousness) is a rehearsal for dreaming (retrospective imagination, aesthetic creation). By inverting the usual sequence wherein one awakens from a dream, Nabokov opens a space in which the "boundless alternatives" supplied by the imagination introduce chance – the "maddeningly complex prospect" of "infinite possibilities" and different futures – into the replay of an original memory. The chiasmic inversion of dreaming and waking also pre-empts belatedness. "Everything is stored," and the genius of hoarding impressions makes off with its booty once a traumatic rupture has taken place: the Soviets are left with nothing. If home and homeland are, like the past, never to be revisited, they are not *missed*. Rather, they are juxtaposed on the same temporal plane as their recollection: nothing is lost and there is no future, except as it is played out in the dream of fiction.

Nabokov's construal of awakening to consciousness as preceding the act of dreaming seems to avoid the traumatic awakening which Cathy Caruth describes in *Unclaimed Experience*. Caruth discusses Freud's and Lacan's theories of trauma in terms of awakening from a dream of one's own death. For Freud, one may "wake up in another fright." Caruth points out it is "not only the dream but, indeed, the very *waking itself* that constitutes surprise . . . . What is enigmatically suggested, that is, is that the trauma consists not only in having confronted death but in *having survived, precisely, without knowing it*." Caruth interprets the "flashback" of the nightmare of dying upon awakening

as "the very incomprehensibility of one's own survival"; one not only tries "to grasp that one has almost died," but also attempts to "*claim one's own survival*.[96] She relates incomprehensible survival to Freud's notion of the death drive, which begins when, through some mysterious force, life arises from the "inanimate matter" to which living beings are driven to return. "The origin of the drive is precisely the experience of having passed beyond death without knowing it," and the "attempt to master this awakening to life that the drive ultimately defines [is] its historical failure: failing to return to the moment of its own act of living, the drive departs into the future of a human history."[97] Lacan, as Caruth shows, extends traumatic awakening in terms of ethical responsibility.[98] "Awakening," for Lacan, "*is itself the site of trauma*, the trauma of the necessity and impossibility of responding to another's death."[99] This responsibility takes the form of surviving to tell what was *not seen*. What was not seen – the "irreducible inaccessibility and otherness" of death – is not understood: awakening cannot be mastered, only "*passed on* as an act that does not awaken the self but, rather, *passes the awakening on to others*" as "an encounter with the real that must take place each time anew . . ." "Failure and loss," therefore, open difference and the future.[100]

Nabokov, we have seen above, claims in *Speak, Memory!* to have seen everything in time. Van's treatise postulates man may "never die," may never return to quiescence, because a final "stage" could not be determined in man's evolution into a "*novo-sapiens* species." Other, atemporal "varieties of dreaming and being" will "prevent [our] having any future at all": we will not revert to the "horrible slime" of insentience and quiescence. Such a post-chronal anti-Future would resemble the "'primitive' form of Time" Van imagines may have existed when "the Past was not yet clearly differentiated from the Present, so that past shadows and shapes showed through the still soft, long, larval

'now.'" But I would like to look more closely at Nabokov's understanding of awakening. The imbrication of dreaming and waking produces worlds that betray mastery precisely because they refuse the categories of loss and failure. In "storing" everything, one withdraws any future where loss could be communicated, and instead may succumb to an excess of solitary vision of "past shadows and shapes."

Nabokov mentions in *Speak, Memory!* that he was unable to visit his mother often in Prague; he also missed her death shortly before World War II. Whenever he "did manage to go to Prague, there was always that initial pang one feels just before time, caught unawares, dons its familiar mask."[101] The "pang" is complicated. On one hand, it refers to the pang of nostalgia: in rejoining his mother, he is in a sense returning to his original home, or at least it seems so until time "dons its familiar mask." Elsewhere Nabokov writes of this unmasked, pure time and the unfamiliar prospect it opens in terms of his mother's "intense and pure religiousness [which] took the form of her having an equal faith in the existence of another world and in the impossibility of comprehending it in terms of earthly life." If one cannot comprehend this other world, one might "glimpse, amid the haze and the chimeras, something real ahead, just as persons endowed with an unusual persistence of diurnal cerebration are able to perceive, in their deepest sleep, somewhere beyond the throes of an entangled and inept nightmare, the ordered reality of the waking hour."[102] It is only when one is "wide awake," fully "conscious, that mortality has a chance to peer beyond its own limits . . . ." If "nothing much can be seen through the mist," still one feels "one is looking in the right direction."[103] The wakefulness of a "tense-willed mind," even in the depths of sleep, discerns the fulfillment of its own "ordered reality" within and beyond the "entangled and inept nightmare" we dream – or that history dreams for us. One sees in wakefulness "the bright mental image (for

instance, of a beloved parent long dead) conjured by a wing-stroke of the will; *that* is one of the bravest movements a human spirit can make . . . .” The dead live again when the living bravely awaken to “another world” beyond the nightmare of familiar, linear, habitual time. The dreamer, having infiltrated unconscious timelessness from within, transgresses the limits of mortality. Wakeful glimpsing is chiasmic: one sees “something real ahead” from the point of view of the mortal, time-bound self one will have left behind. Essentially the opposite of Benjamin’s messianic vision in which one sees the unrealized possibilities of the past from the virtual viewpoint of the end of time, Nabokov’s formulation installs the imagining, all-determining past in the future. But the pang Nabokov mentions is experienced *before* the time of exile and loss reasserts itself. What does it mean to have felt a pang from *within* “pure time”? In the discussion of cataclysm above, we saw how the inversion between waking and dreaming forestalls loss and belatedness. What remains at their intersection?

The “bright mental image” described above is shadowed by the unbidden images seen during insomnia. The “haze and chimeras” beyond which Nabokov glimpses “another world” are like the hallucinatory “praedormitory visions” he sees just before falling asleep, the visual counterpart of auditory hallucinations in which he hears “a neutral, detached, anonymous voice” speaking nonsense. Such images, not to be confused with “the bright mental image,” are like “the stab of an afterimage, which the lamp one has just turned off wounds the palpebral night.” A “shock of this sort” (the wounding “stab of an afterimage”), however, is not necessary to precipitate these visions which “come and go” as they please. They do not require “the observer’s participation,” and yet, unlike in literal “dream pictures,” the observer is “still master of his senses.” Nabokov, who lends his insomnia to nearly all his protagonists, particularly Luzhin in *The Defense*,

Sebastian Knight in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and Van in *Ada*, fears falling into sleep. Insomniacs are recreant: prostrating themselves at the feet of "Somnus, that black-masked headsman," they refuse, at the last moment, to join "the most moronic fraternity in the world" we become when we submit to "the nightly betrayal of reason, humanity, genius." But insomnia is in fact worse than unconsciousness because it can do nothing but anticipate its inevitability. Fully sentient but lacking agency, the insomniac loiters in a purgatory of inarticulate, fragmentary visions at the threshold of sleep. Insomniac vigilance is a parody of "diurnal cerebration" within "deepest sleep"; its visions are the degraded shadows of the bright, timeless image Van describes as the "conscious spanning of an infinite expansure" in an "eternal Present."[104] The insomniac, neither awake nor asleep, is subjected to vision without being himself a subject. Here, the chiasmic movement of the visions' coming and going produces nonsense without cessation – images do not terminate in a constellation of meaning.

Insomniac visions compel one to bear witness *before* the fact, before facticity or the *il y a*. Both Levinas and Blanchot theorize insomnia in terms of confronting the inarticulate, inexhaustible presence of being that precedes subjectivity and exceeds mastery. For Levinas, "the rustling of the *il y a* is horror," a "horror [that] is in no way anxiety about death," but of the impossibility of dying. The *il y a* endures beyond our finite being; we are forced to contemplate it without being able to situate ourselves in relation to it. "We could say that the night is the very experience of the *il y a*." In the night, which Blanchot calls the other or essential night as opposed to the "first" night of inspiration, we are conscious only of "an existence that is still inhuman,"[105] before and beyond our subjectivity. The infinity of presence that would remain should all existents be annihilated bears traces of the divine for Levinas but it is also shadowed by the horror

of the *il y a*. The "traumatism of awakening" we experience in relation to the infinite allows us to posit ourselves as subjects in relation to an Other for whom we bear responsibility. We awaken to "an unrepresentable past" owing to a "provocation that has never presented itself, but has struck traumatically." The "I" is torn from its slumber in anonymous being, but this awakening is "not a recollection." Rather, it "hollows out a desire that cannot be filled," a desire "for what is beyond satisfaction, and which does not identify, as need does, a term or end."[106] We try to meet this desire and the responsibility it entails through figuration. In positing an "I" and another whom we might apostrophize, we orient ourselves to what lies outside us – and outside memory. Because we cannot finally grasp the infinite which precedes us and which is only seen as a sign in figuration, we are thrown back upon ourselves. The hypostasis of the subject in Levinas's thinking takes issue with Heidegger's idea of temporality. Temporality for Heidegger, as Tina Chanter, puts it, "is an ecstasy, a 'being outside of oneself' . . . . Ecstasy is . . . found to be the very event of existence."[107] As Chanter defines Levinas's objection to Heidegger, "it is the second part of the word ecstasis, and not the *ex*, that determines the meaning of existence." Stasis as "position, placing, standing" also characterizes the hypostasis of the subject; it "marks both the mastery of the subject, and its lapse into the there is."[108] The subject, having positioned itself ec-statically in response to the Other, is recalled to the nocturnal stasis of the *il y a*. For Levinas, "It is the very return of presence into the void left by absence . . . it is an indefectibility of being, where the work of being never lets up; it is its insomnia." Should one cease to exist, the *il y a* itself remains awake, watching us without revealing itself: "Vigilance is anonymous. It is not *my* vigilance of the night, but the night itself that watches. It watches."[109]

Levinasian insomnia is interminable vigilance where there is nothing to be seen except an "atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, or the murmur of silence."[110] Critchley defines the difference between Levinas and Blanchot's understanding of the *il y a* in terms of literature. For Levinas, "the moment of the *il y a*, the neutrality that has to be faced and surmounted, is the moment of literature," whereas for Blanchot, such an overcoming "would only constitute a strategy of evasion, motivated by fear."[111] Literature is the "non-literal and ever-incomplete 'translation' of dread into language, a 'translation' that does not provide a representation or intuitive fulfillment of dread, but rather that dread is at work in language."[112] In "Orpheus's Gaze," Blanchot writes that Orpheus transgresses the law forbidding him to turn around and see Eurydice as he leads her into daylight because he wishes to see her in the night "when she is invisible, and not as the intimacy of a familiar life, but as the strangeness of that which excludes all intimacy; it does not want to make her live, but to have the fullness of her death living in her."[113] His desire costs him both Eurydice and the song he was to sing of her, but Blanchot determines that such a desire is what makes Orpheus an artist in the first place. The artwork is sacrificed to the desire for its origin which then betrays it: the work is unworked, scattered as Orpheus will be scattered by the rending hands of the Thracian women, still calling out Eurydice's name in his deathless desire.

The "profoundly obscure point towards which art, desire, death and the night seem to lead"[114] is never reached; the revelation of that moment is betrayed in the passage from day to night. It is not reached because it is exceeded. For Blanchot there are two deaths: while one is authentic, the other describes the experience in which writers, in their inability to seize what is invisible, what withdraws and conceals itself, allow the ineffable

– silence – to speak through them. "The poet," as Donald Marshall describes it, "holds open the interior space of the world, draws the visible back into the invisible, by means of form, by giving the exactitude of the precise word to that experience of anxiety which separates him from the world." A "finite order grows out of our preoccupation with our own finitude," but the movement towards the "profoundly obscure point" effects "an odd reversal" which carries us "past the instant of death itself."[115] When we find ourselves in this "indeterminate realm which can never become the foundation of anything, we encounter a necessity that has nothing to do with the authenticity of the 'I ,' but belongs to what is 'outside' me, to what speaks through me, though 'I' cannot speak it."[116] One is conscious but no longer a determining subject. Just as the disaster is for Blanchot an impossibility of forgetting what has not yet happened – what cannot finally have happened and so never stops happening – the other night "draws out diurnal activity to the point where it turns over into the utter neutrality of fatigue and sleepless exhaustion."[117] It is interminable vigilance without cessation in which we, believing ourselves masters of the worlds we create, are "exposed to the greatest confusion because literature has already insidiously caused you to pass from one slope to the other and changed you into what you were not before."[118] It is only at the point of (authentic) death, Blanchot suggests, that one experiences "the feeling of compassion for suffering humanity, the happiness of being neither immortal nor eternal."[119] As in Levinas, death opens one to the experience of the Other, but here it is not a matter of exposure to the divine, but rather to our common finitude.

If Nabokov's exuberant celebration of individualistic aesthetic creation seems at odds with both Levinas's religious transcendence and Blanchot's bleakness, Nabokovian

insomnia nevertheless shares many things in common with that described by Levinas and Blanchot. The "black voids, fore and aft," precede and exceed finite life and constitute "the free world of timelessness" Nabokov seeks in his art. But the "missed heartbeat" of pure time cannot be represented. As Ada says, "We can know the time, we can know a time. We can never know Time. Our senses are simply not meant to perceive it. It is like – "[120] Ada's attempt at simile is interrupted, impossible to complete because nothing and everything can supply its second term. Levinas writes of the *il y a* that "[t]here is no determined being, anything can count for anything else. In the equivocation, the threat of the pure and simple presence of the *il y a* takes form."[121] This "equivocation" is at work in *Ada*, as we shall see, in the suspension between the two slopes of literature, the "neither here, nor there" where desire originates. For Van, "the ardis of Time, one-way Time," seems "useful" one moment but "dwindles the next to the level of an illusion obscurely related to the mysteries of growth and gravitation."[122] The irreversibility of time on one hand preserves the past by making it inaccessible to anyone but those who possess an intense "retrospective imagination" (and Nabokov often seems to consider only himself an able imaginer). But it also introduces the idea of the progress of time that leads to the extinction of the subject along with the "relinquishing forever [of] all one's memories."[123]

Van hopes to secure meaning and identity by resisting space, all those "sleights of land" that exile one from a cherished past. *Ada*, seeking antiphonal correspondences between past and present, attempts to evolve by imperceptible degrees into "other varieties of dreaming and thinking." This "evolutionary progress" has no last stage, but rather returns to an originating "cataclysm" in order to "fork and re-fork." Nabokov is the mandarin master fashioning hermetic worlds from the "boundless alternatives"

inaugurated by "retrospective imagination." He resists the idea of "traumatic awakening" to death and the future by withdrawing them into the center of aesthetic vision. It is here, however, that not only the "bright mental image" is arrested, but also the creator himself who, having admitted chance into his creation, finds himself subject to insomniac paralysis. The time-generated rhythm of creative memory is shadowed by what lies outside memory: the *il y a* of eternal, desubjectified vigilance. In *Ada*, Nabokov will come as close as possible to an admission of time's lapse, the finitude of death and the extinction of individual memory that he dreads, and yet, in the end that never arrives, he attempts to cheat death – but only, perhaps, at the cost of suffering passively the "haze and chimeras" of insomnia.

IV. Lemans

Nabokov's insistence in his Afterword to *Lolita* that there are no doubles in his novels is only partly facetious. His fiction is littered with doubles, but they are not the Dostoyevskian doubles whose simplistic Jekyll-and-Hyde natures (as he understood them) he denounced. Nabokov's "twin images" mirror one another, but they are neither perfectly identical nor perfectly opposite. When a "double" merges with his "twin," individual identity becomes unstable, multiple, elusive. In *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert pursues his "brother," Quilty, with whom he briefly unites in a concatenation of pronouns ("I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us").[124] Only violence restores singularity, but in the form of monological tyranny. When Humbert Humbert kills Quilty and when, in *Pale Fire*, John Shade is murdered, Humbert Humbert (already doubled) and Charles Kinbote/Charles the Beloved may gain sole ascendancy over the text, but only in a narcissistic deadlock with themselves as writer

and reader, creator and created. In *Ada*, however, Nabokov develops the idea of mirroring literally, thus attempting to preserve the fragile partition between reflected images, whether they are people, worlds, or times. Van and Ada themselves are enantiomorphs, the left and right hand versions of a 180º rotated image. Mirror images of one another, Van and Ada (V/A) have complementary markings: "She had on the back of her left hand the same small brown spot that marked his right one."[125] The discovery of their siblinghood only reinforces their fateful sense of closeness. As Van tells their father Demon, "We have really more things in common than, for instance, ordinary lovers or cousins or siblings."[126] Of course, they are all three, but in the redundant overlapping of their relationships they remain distinct. While *Ada* is Van's opus, the novel is really a collaborative effort (if, for the moment, we discount Nabokov's ultimate sovereignty as McFate), with Ada interjecting and amending Van's memories as she sees fit. *Together* they would die into the book.

Just as the discrepancies between Terra and Antiterra seems to confirm the relative "organic reality" of each because a "perfect likeness would rather suggest a specular, and hence speculatory, phenomenon,"[127] all doubling in *Ada* founders on asymmetry. Even the literal twins Marina and Aqua are not entirely identical; it is only the latter's madness, and her susceptibility to being tricked by Van's biological parents, that enable her to double for Marina as Van's mother. All of Nabokov's novels celebrate "asymmetry": the ideal uniformity that Communism espouses is everywhere scorned in his fiction, which is (over)committed to the ineffable particularity of the individual. *Ada*, though, is both an extension of and a departure from earlier Nabokovian asymmetry, both in its foregrounding of mirroring and its attempts to ground itself in "pure" time and in its obsessive celebrations of heterosexuality, which bears certain implications regarding

time.[128] *Ada* is "a book addressed to young laymen and lemans – and not to grave men or gravemen."[129] It addresses not only young men not yet inducted into the grave matters of art and death (of art as death), but also their female "lemans." Van's own leman, Ada, who "repeat[s]" Van's characteristics in "a feminine key,"[130] is not only the titular subject but also participates in the book's creation. While Van often reduces Ada to his idealized vision of her, and while Lolita and the poem "Pale Fire" certainly exceed Humbert Humbert's and Kinbote's attempts to contain them, *Ada* nevertheless endeavors to render equal the relationship between object and subject. It would seem this balancing act is only possible in the literal genital "enantiomorphism" of heterosexuality, incestuous or otherwise.

When Van relates their first sexual encounter, with Ada fumbling awkwardly and pityingly with his penis and Van (like so many Nabokovian heroes) pre-ejaculating, Ada interrupts to ask, "*why* are you doing your best to transform our poetical and unique past into a dirty farce?"[131] In one of their many parenthetical asides, Van and Ada argue over Van's recollections from the perspective of old age. Here Van defends himself – his book – by stating the truism that "if people remembered the same they would not be different people." Ada rejoins, "But we are not 'different'! Think and dream are the same in French. Think of the *douceur*, Van!"[132] Ada's point here is difficult to parse. She seems to imply that one of them *thinks* while the other *dreams*, but that these amount to the same thing, and therefore "Vaniada" is one person. "If it is imagination that presents correspondences to the memory," Benjamin writes, "it is thinking that consecrates allegory to it. Memory brings about the convergence of imagination and thinking."[133] But Ada and Van *do* remember differently, not so much in terms of their particular memories as in their very modes of recollection. In their adolescence, during the second installment

of their trysts at Ardis in 1888, Van and Ada "seek a scholarly excitement" in reconstructing the summer of 1884. Having destroyed their diaries because they seemed "false," the siblings "rely on oral tradition," sharing and amending each other's memories. Creating the past together through memory is more pleasurable – and more true – than relying on "historical" documents. Van assigns their disagreements over the past "to sexual differences rather than to individual temperament."[134] Sexual difference gives rise to different temporalities. "Ada tend[s] to see those initial stages as an extremely gradual and diffuse growth, possibly unnatural, probably unique, but wholly delightful in its smooth unfolding which precluded any brutish impulses or shocks of shame." But "Van's memory can't help picking out specific episodes branded forever with abrupt and sometimes regrettable, physical thrills." Their memories are gendered, inflected by the contrasting rhythms of male and female orgasm (the reviled Viennese quack's fingerprints seem to be all over this apparently unironic formulation). Where for Ada "insatiable delectations" are cumulative and diffuse, arrived at "without having expected or summoned them," Van can "tabulate every informal spasm" that he experienced alone before their love was consummated. His memory is "tense-willed," hers is passively Proustian. Van points out the "philosophic and moral distinctions between the shattering force of self-abuse and the overwhelming softness of avowed and shared love": while their nascent love was ill-timed, the shared growth of that love produces a synchronizing "softness," *douceur*. In their heterosexual union, Van's discrete "impulses" are absorbed, and morally improved, in Ada's "smooth unfolding." Together, Van and Ada seem to constitute some whole, androgynous being.

Whatever perfect enantiomorphism Van and Ada wish to form together, it is complicated not only by the many interruptions to which their lifelong and deathlong

affair is subject, but by their half-sister Lucette, who is a technicolor reprint of Ada's black-and-white original image. Against the unnaturally pale skin and black hair of Van and Ada, Lucette's coppery glow introduces an upsetting, third term. Lucette tells Van that she and Ada have recently "interweaved like serpents and sobbed like pumas." When a maid walks in on them kissing each other's "*krestik*," their "heads clamped in such odd combinations," it appears each sister is "giving birth simultaneously to baby girls, your Ada bringing out *une rousse*, and no one's Lucette, *une brune*."[135] The "baby girls" with red and black hair whom Lucette describes are a joke, but they recall a dream Van has in which "Aqua impersonating Marina or Marina made-up to look like Aqua arrives to inform Van, joyfully, that Ada has been delivered of a girl child whom he is about to know carnally . . ." Van, the son of Aqua-impersonating-Marina, experiences in his dream lust for his own offspring, but it is not like, or not only like, Humbert Humbert's fantasy of mating with his and Lolita's daughter and granddaughter in order to replicate, endlessly, his original leman. Van is sterile, no doubt due to inbreeding, and so in reality there is no fear of producing a child with Ada. Moreover, *sibling* incest, unlike the virtual incest Humbert Humbert perpetrates on Lolita as her fraudulent stepfather, is a matter of generational belonging. By sharing the same branch on the family tree, Van and Ada share a common "temperament."

Ada parodies and reformulates several Romantic incest narratives. Sibling incest for the Romantics was often a matter of rejecting the past insofar as siblings were unwittingly drawn to each other, not because of shared birth (the "impersonal" past over which we have no control), but because of shared experiences (the near past and present which we create ourselves).[136] In *Ada*, Van and Ada knowingly and gleefully commit incest, and Van's sterility precludes them from creating a child (a future). "Incestuous

cohabitation," Van informs us in regard to the Romantic "opus 'Sex and Lex,'" had been banned in the nineteenth century because it interfered "with the continuity of human evolution" and "led to various forms of decline," including mutation and sterility. Controversy ensued, with one judge "perceiving in 'the deliberate suppression of a possible benefit for the sake of avoiding a probable evil' the infringement of one of humanity's main rights – that of enjoying the liberty of its evolution, a liberty no other creature had ever known."[137] Liberty here is the singularly human right to evolve – to *advance* – toward its own extinction. This is not an argument for the freedom to commit suicide. It is, rather, an interpretation of aesthetic freedom. Mutation is a matter of paths "forking and reforking," creating new patterns over time. Sterility interferes with evolution, and short-circuits time's progress. Van and Ada, as they incestuously mirror one another on the same generational, temporal plane, are unable, as in Nabokov's inversion of dreaming and awakening, to engender a future.

V. The first slope: the glittering "now"

In *Ada*, chiasmus opens interminable seeing. Van, who continually revisits the past in his imagination, takes for granted that we are the "careful *re*readers" of his chronicle: whatever original reading we have undertaken disappears into its apparently ceaseless repetition. The novel opens with an inversion of the beginning of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*: "'All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy families are more or less alike' . . ." Although we are told that this "pronouncement has little if any relation to the story to be unfolded now,"[138] it is clear that the "family chronicle" of *Ada* will be an attempt to hold in opposition its binary terms. Against the homogeny of happiness and the appealing aberrance of despair so beloved by The Novel (that genre

Nabokov wishes to prove "does not exist"), Nabokov argues for the singularity of happiness: Eden is made, not original. When Van thinks of his family tree, a "geneaologic awareness" that produces no "thrills," he feels "esthetically moved by the velvet background he was always able to distinguish as a comforting, omnipresent sky through [its] black foliage . . ."[139] The branches of the tree that Van and Ada trace in Marina's falsified diary in the attic of Ardis terminate in their secret siblinghood. Discreetly erased dates are easily reassigned to reveal the unremarkable truth of their incestuous relationship, so when Ada advises, "Destroy and forget," we are disinclined to believe that what has been destroyed cannot be recalled. The branches are grafted in Van and Ada's births, but their union is not represented in the family tree at the front of the book, and neither are their deaths. In the specious genealogical representation of the Veen family, Van and Ada are distinct and deathless. In the art of his book, Van can trace and retrace the patterns of foliage as long as the ground of their design remains a comforting omnipresence. The velvet background appears benevolent only when it relieves a fixed pattern; one is "esthetically moved" by the crystallization of some fabricated meaning.

Chiasmic forking and reforking is a matter of "[f]ancy rac[ing] with fact in never-ending rivalry and girl giggles."[140] But when, "against the green moving backdrop of one of our Ardis sets,"[141] Ada proposes that the future is the province of imagination and that, as "lovers *and* siblings," she and Van "have a double chance of being together in eternity, in terrarity,"[142] Van rejoins that imagination fails because one passes alone into "that Next-Installment World." At the (purported) end of his life, he concludes that "the work of fancy is handicapped – to a quite hopeless extent – by a logical ban: you cannot bring your friends along – or your enemies for that matter – to the party. The transposition of all our remembered relationships into an Elysian life inevitably turns it into a second-rate

continuation of our marvelous mortality."[143] Despite Van's rational pessimism, however, *Ada* proposes that *Ada* is precisely that Next-Installment World. The transposition of Van and Ada's love in the second half of the novel is not second-rate. In his youth, the "new naked reality" produced by Van's perception of Ada can only "be repeated as often as he and she were physically able to make love." After a lapse of seventeen years, they are reunited in middle age when Ada, finally a free widow, calls him. The only time he has heard her "telephone voice" was once during their youth, and this disembodied voice, "by resurrecting the past and linking it up with the present," installs "the glittering 'now' that was the only reality of Time's texture." Van imagines this "centerpiece in his deepest perception of tangible time" as "darkening slate-blue mountains . . . with the spangles of the sun dancing through the poplar"[144] – an image evocative of the family tree against a benevolent sky or of the "amphitheatric" view produced by symmetrical vision. The shock of seeing one another aged is overcome when they make love again "in full defiance of death, with bad fate routed . . . ."[145] In their old age – "the difficult descent" – their life "respond[s] antiphonally to their first summer in 1884,"[146] even after Van becomes impotent. The "centerpiece" of their reversal is the "glittering 'now'" that draws into itself the movement forward toward "the highest ridge" and the retrospective movement of their shared memories as they replay their life in *Ada* as elderly collaborators: the book, with its chiasmic rhythms, becomes the conduit for entering that "now." In the final section of the novel, which Van declares is its "true introduction"[147] and which recapitulates all of its events in a facetious, self-congratulatory tone, we are given to surmise "that if our time-racked, flat-lying couple ever intended to die they would die, as it were, *into* the finished book, into Eden or Hades, into the prose of the book or the poetry of its blurb."[148] The book is to be published posthumously; the editor's

prefatory note that "all the persons mentioned by name in this book are dead" does not exclude the possibility that Van and Ada have indeed died into the book. Moreover, the family tree at its beginning which does not record either Van and Ada's union or deaths seems to draw their living deaths into its "green moving backdrop" – into the center of the moving patterns on the magic carpet of art. Here, in the forking between the eternities of Eden or Hades that aesthetic rhythmic movement produces, Van and Ada endure as a constellation in the omnipresent sky of *Ada.*

By dying with Ada into the book, Van seems to have passed beyond chronological time by disappearing into the center of aesthetic vision. He has stored everything in his chronicle, which closes in upon itself in the "hysteron-proteron" (last-first) structure of its finale-introduction: death is but a question of style. We are not, however, privy to what this "merging of twin images" ought to reveal since it has been launched beyond our own eternally chiasmic reading. For Van, "the written word exist[s] only in its abstract purity, in its unrepeatable appeal to an equally ideal mind. It belong[s] solely to its creator and c[an] not be spoken or enacted by a mime (as Ada insisted) without letting the deadly stab of another's mind destroy the artist in the very lair of his art."[149] That the reader of *Ada* is necessarily for Van a *re*reader suggests that such "abstract purity" is never communicated in the first place – or the last place. Unlike Ada, who may "feel secure, with only a breathing blackness before me (instead of our Fourth-Wall Time)" when "authored,"[150] we are excluded from "the free world of timelessness." And yet I am as reluctant to concede this victory over time to Van as I am to the reader. *Ada* seeks to champion happiness and rescue the singularity of the individual from its fate of desubjectification (in death, in the State) by attempting to project a duet of individuals, memories intact, into a textual afterlife. With "bad fate routed" and happily-ever-after

taken to new heights, it is sometimes difficult to understand the relentless allusions to despair and the infernal in *Ada* (Hades). As we shall see, the divine time of edenic pleasure is always slipping into or overlapping with the inferno of meaningless space. As in the personal narrative with which I began this dissertation, the aesthetic closure, the stylistic death we lend to our visions, may lead to a simultaneous suspension and movement; unable to arrest that vision, to meet finally the origin of a desire we cannot satisfy, we confront the *il y a*. "Oh come, art cannot hurt. It can, and how!" One assumes that this exchange at the end of the novel is between first Ada, then Van, but it doesn't much matter since the "hero and heroine" now "overlap, intergrade, interache," and we cannot tell "who exactly survives, Dava, or Vada, Anda or Vanda."[151] Art wounds both, and both survive, but surviving art is not exclusively a matter of passing into a realm of aesthetic bliss.

VI. The second slope: the perfidious combination

When Van chooses to obey his father's command that he end his relationship with Ada, he writes her a "good-bye" letter and, like any dutiful Romantic hero, points a pistol at his head and presses the trigger.

> Nothing happened – or perhaps everything happened, and his destiny simply forked at that instant, as it probably does sometimes at night, especially in a strange bed, at stages of great happiness or great desolation, when we happen to die in our sleep, but continue in our normal existence, with no perceptible break in the faked serialization, on the following, neatly prepared morning, with a spurious past discreetly but firmly attached behind.[152]

"Nothing" and "everything" happens, much like the "here and there, neither here, nor there" where Demon's prohibition against incest seems to Van "right." At a decisive moment, when "right" ought to be *either* here *or* there, we are drawn into the ec-static center of chiasmic forking where the finality of death is overcome, the linear succession of time interrupted. What occurs when Van pulls the trigger is "not perceptible," and therefore results in the *appearance* of succession in a "faked serialization." In the death one dreams during "great happiness or great desolation," nothing and everything happens: one simultaneously dies and endures. *Ada* is certainly not Nabokov's first novel to pose the idea of living (through) death. Like Van, Smurov in *The Eye* shoots himself yet goes on living to discover, as Nabokov writes in his Foreword to that novel, that "the very bitterness of tortured love proves to be as intoxicating and bracing as would be its most ecstatic requital."[153] At the moment Krug faces a firing squad in *Bend Sinister*, textual "immortality" is conferred upon him by his author: "death [is] but a question of style."[154] Cincinnatus in *Invitation to a Beheading* simply walks off the platform where he has just lain prone beneath the headsman's shiny axe and makes "his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him."[155] In each instance, death is submitted to – and made equivalent with – aesthetic freedom. The doomed pass imperceptibly into a new, deathless, timeless "life."

But what of the "spurious past" that remains "discreetly but firmly attached behind"? In *The Defense*, the chessmaster Luzhin becomes obsessed with the idea that his life is folding in upon itself: after he suffers a nervous breakdown and is forbidden to play chess, each move in his development toward the mastery of chess seems to recur, in reverse order, driving him back toward the moment when, at ten years of age, he was told he would be known only by his family name, Luzhin. Luzhin attempts to "contrive a

defense against [the] perfidious combination"[156] of an elaborate, epanaleptic game of which he has become an unwitting pawn by making "chance," unprepared and unprecedented moves. Nevertheless, the game continues to play itself out.

> And the thought that the repetition would probably continue was so frightening that he was tempted to stop the clock of life, to suspend the game for good, to freeze, and at the same time he noticed that he continued to exist, that some kind of preparation was going on, a creeping development, and that he had no power to halt this movement.[157]

At the end of the novel, standing on a window ledge in a locked bathroom and looking below where "[s]ome kind of hasty preparations were underway," Luzhin sees "exactly what kind of eternity was obligingly and inexorably spread out before him." When the door is finally busted open and people call out "Aleksandr Ivanovich" – the name Luzhin had before his career in chess (and the novel) began – "there [is] no Aleksandr Ivanovich."[158] Caught in what the narrator of *The Gift* calls "a constellation, a ravishing work of art, a planetarium of thought," Luzhin finally turns away from the fate arranged for him under the auspices of absolute aesthetic freedom by turning toward death. But in turning toward death Luzhin also turns toward the beginning, toward his Christian name, which he again assumes only at the instant of suicide. His fear of continuing to exist according to the dictates of some rhythm even as he suspends "the game" is in fact realized: the "eternity" spread before him is *both* behind and ahead; it is at once the perfidious, intricate, endlessly prolific game of art from which he tries to rescue himself *and* it is death, which Van calls "the featureless pseudo-future, blank and black, an everlasting nonlastingness, the crowning paradox of our boxed brain's eschatologies!"[159] Luzhin falls without dying and without possessing his private name. He has no identity as

an individual subject who exerts control over the past – he is absent from the place where his name is called, lost to the inexhaustible presence and eternal vigilance of the *il y a*. The past that is still "firmly attached" but "spurious" gives the lie to any opposition between seamless continuity and interruption; instead, we have something like Blanchot's idea of disaster, of ceaseless interruption, of insomnia, "with no perceptible break in the faked serialization."

This is, perhaps, the "L disaster" that brings into apparent being two worlds that no language can bring into temporal relation. Fyodor in *The Gift* invents (as did Nabokov) chess problems and solutions. He cannot play well, and is in fact disturbed by a "disharmony" between his "chess thought" and the actual playing of the game which always betrays that thought. He "achieve[s] the utmost accuracy of expression" when, following something like "poetic inspiration, he envision[s] a bizarre method of embodying this or that refined idea for a problem . . . ."

> If he had not been certain (as he always was in the case of literary creation) that the realization of the scheme already existed in some other world, from which he transferred it to this one, then the complex and prolonged work on the board would have been an intolerable burden to the mind, since it would have to concede, together with the possibility of its realization, the possibility of its impossibility.[160]

The realization of Fyodor's vision is contingent upon the possibility of its impossibility; both possibility and impossibility must exist in "some other world" besides his own mind. That Fyodor can only achieve brilliant perfection in his "chess thought" but not in a game played against another, and that he considers "[e]very creator is a plotter" whose "secrets are spectacularly exposed" only "in the final instant," negates any world but the

one designed upon a "fine fabric of deceit."[161] In the cosmopolitan, anachronistic world of Antiterra where *Ada* takes place, the idea of Terra invites visions of heaven and hell. "Sick minds identified the notion of a Terra planet with that of another world and this "Other World" got confused not only with the "Next World" but with the Real World that is in us and beyond us."[162] "Sick" people, like the mad Aqua, attempt to relegate the demonic or angelic to one world or another. But fourteen-year-old Van, discomfited by lust but not yet disappointed by love, senses for the first time "a glowworm of strange truth" in Aqua's fantasies of Terra as "a minor hymnist's paradise." Lying sleepless in his hammock at night, he is overwhelmed by "that meaningless space overhead, underhead, everywhere, the demon counterpoint of divine time, tingling about him and through him . . ."[163] The "Terror of Terra" is "meaningless space" as opposed to "divine time," and yet divine time easily slips into meaningless space, into the nightmare of eternity, "fore and aft," that Luzhin leaps out of and into. The "Real World that is in us and beyond us" is, in fact, an "Other World" insofar as we cannot see it: we "embody" it as an "idea" never to be "realized." In *Ada*, Nabokov nevertheless attempts to install both the day and the night, the impossible realization of vision, in "the gap marked by a bizarre confusion of directional signs" between Terra and Antiterra – that is, in the passage between past and present, self and other, time and timelessness.

During Van and Ada's third reunion, Ada brings with her a photo album of pictures taken, mostly surreptitiously, by a voyeuristic servant, Kim. The album contains posed pictures as well as a series of "indecent" photographs charting the course of Van and Ada's illicit affair during their summers at Ardis. The pictures not only arouse Van and Ada's own voyeurism, they also invite reflection upon time and vision. While Ada holds a reading loupe to "live" Van's body as if it were another image for her perusal,

Van recalls his "live" attempt to arrest a moment in which he leans over Ada, a moment captured in a photograph commissioned, then rejected, by their mother.

> In full, deliberate consciousness, at the moment of the hooded click, he bunched the recent past with the imminent future and thought to himself that this would remain an objective perception of the real present and that he must remember the flavor, the flash, the flesh of the present (as he indeed remembered it half a dozen years later – and now, in the second half of the next century.[164]

Van's "deliberate consciousness" competes with the camera's "hooded click," drawing both past and present into a moment become momentous through an act of sheer will. In seeing himself seeing, he safeguards both the moment and its place in history. The album, however, has launched a different, corrupt history unauthorized by its subjects, and only writing can restore their stolen memories. Van's oppositional stance toward the album is characterized by Nabokov's own distrust of what counts as "objective" history. Nabokov maintained throughout his life a hearty disgust for "Leninist" American intellectuals who found in Communism articles of faith and who seemed to him unable to grasp its violent expression in and betrayal of the Russia he had left behind. Despite the denunciations of violence to be found in all his fiction, Nabokov nevertheless criticized protesters of the Vietnam War: he wanted the Communist assassins of his childhood routed at any cost. "That ape has vulgarized our own mind-pictures," Van cries out, threatening to "horsewhip [Kim's] eyes out or redeem our childhood by making a book of it: *Ardis*, or a family chronicle."[165] He does both. But more is at stake here than the "righting" of history. Ada suggests Kim's is a sort of "crippled art," but Van declares it "the hearse of *ars*, a toilet roll of the Carte du Tendre!" If Van grudgingly holds that the motion picture is superior to the stage play if only because it preserves the director's intentions through

repeated performances, he fears the photograph's claim on a future divorced from intention altogether.

In "The Two Versions of the Imaginary," Blanchot asks "what happens when one lives an event as an image."[166] The image always takes place after the object it represents, returning the object to us as its idealized double, as the presence of its absence. In the manner of an image, a corpse resembles the dead person who no longer exists and whose "cadaverous presence establishes a relation between here and nowhere": [167] "We do not cohabitate with the dead for fear of seeing *here* collapse into the unfathomable *nowhere*."[168] In "cadaverous resemblance," the "absolute neutrality of death" lies behind the image, haunting us. Although we may try to embody an image with meaning, appealing to the "life-giving negation" through which art can be at once "faithful to the figure and to the truth which admits no figure," the image ultimately "founder[s] in the formless prolixity of indetermination."[169] Only "sometimes," Blanchot writes, can we master absence through the image, while at other times we are subject to absence itself. "To live an event as an image," we can neither regard it "disinterestedly" nor participate in it "freely and decisively." Rather, the distance from which we regard things to make use of them and supply them with meaning begins to take hold of us. A "transformation" takes place by "infinite degrees," [170] as it does in literature's passage from one slope to the other, "arous[ing] things as reflections and . . . thicken[ing] consciousness into a thing." We are drawn into the ec-stasis of the image; here "the 'real' enters an equivocal realm where there is no longer any limit or interval, where there are no more successive moments, and where each thing, absorbed in the void of reflection, nears consciousness, while consciousness allows itself to become filled with anonymous plenitude." Although a "universal unity seems to be reconstituted" and thereby controlled through this

transformation, we are in fact passive, enthralled by the "neutral double of the object in which all belonging to the world is dissipated."[171] In attempting to assume "a standpoint of being that precedes the world," we find we can neither act nor choose among equivocal meanings. Moreover, "meaning does not escape into another meaning, but into the other of all meaning," into the "passion of indifference"[172] of which the cadaver is the image par excellence.

Although Blanchot's writing on the image does not directly concern the photographic image, his ideas of intentionality and indeterminacy are nevertheless significant in understanding Van's disconcertment when faced with Kim's album and his own attempt to die into the book. Photography is "the hearse of *ars*" because it assumes what Barthes calls in *Camera Lucida* the standpoint of "that-was-now."[173] Because the photograph "cannot *say* what it lets us see,"[174] it does nothing but "ratify what it represents." As mere attestation, it does not register the temporal difference between then and now; rather, time is "immobilized." Language, on the other hand, cannot offer the "certainty" of a photograph. Its failure to "authenticate itself" gives rise to both the "impotence" and "voluptuous pleasure" of elaboration and invention, of imagination's labor.[175] But in the photograph, "nothing can be refused or transformed,"[176] and therefore "nothing in it can transform grief into mourning."[177] And yet, the madness of photography's "absolute" realism "oblig[es] the loving and terrified consciousness to return to the very letter of Time: a strictly revulsive movement which reverses the course of the thing, and which I shall call . . . the photographic *ecstasy*."[178] As in Blanchot's formulation of the subject's encounter with the image, the self confronts what is beyond control and finds itself transformed through a reversal that throws the subject back onto

itself. This transformation affirms nothing and produces nothing. The photograph may attest to a that-was-then, but in being "returned to the letter of Time," we do not locate ourselves in any here-and-now that could establish a relation to the "then," that is, a memory. If, as Gregg Horowitz writes in *Sustaining Loss: Art and Mournful Life*, memorials have traditionally enabled mourning "by making palpable the loss they resist . . . as a rhythmic process of loss and retrieval," the photograph

> disable[s] vision by having already performed the perceptual retrieval of the lost before the witness to it ever looks. . . . In doing the looking for us, the photograph performs the entire act of memory before our eyes (in both the temporal and optical senses of 'before'). It is, with the photograph, as if the promise of redemption at the end of history had withered away in its premature fulfillment.

We no longer need to look, to store, to retrieve – or fail to retrieve. "The photograph enables the look of the past to be present without remainder, with no trace of failure";[179] it possesses what Van calls the "genius of total recall" without supplying the "flesh of the present." In the photograph, Barthes says, "everything is given, without provoking the desire for or even the possibility of a rhetorical expansion": it cannot "make us 'dream.'"[180] The time of the photograph, whose "grammatical expression" is aoristic,[181] is close to what Nabokov calls the "missed heartbeat." The camera's unconscious detachment of the moment from its imagined context reduces it to an instant of zero duration. That is, the camera sees what Van cannot: an absolute present, unremembered. Although he can recall himself looking at the moment of the camera's "hooded click," he cannot recall himself.

Because a photograph "fills sight by force" but produces a "counter-memory"[182] removed from subjective involvement, it prompts anonymous vigilance before the *il y a*, before what exists before we ever look. Van believes he has captured what would "remain an objective perception of the real present" which he may recall again and again; his "bunching" of past and present in this moment is like that " primitive' form of Time" he imagines we may rediscover once we evolve beyond the idea of the "future." Of course, what he has retained is a subjective image of the perceived present. Belying his claims to objectivity, the camera also compels Van to recall only his failure to see Time itself. Writing *Ardis* (*Ada*) can redeem the past by countering the ostensible finitude of the photographic image which withdraws the future from subjective recollection. But Van also must inflict punishment on Kim, whose eyes he destroys in one of Nabokov's many parodies of the primal scene.[183] "Hooded," Kim "sees" without himself being seen. The problem is not that he has witnessed Van and Ada's sexual escapades, but that he has produced an image that bears witness to the Time that writing will always miss, to a scene from which Van is forever absent. The camera's click constitutes some kind of super-primal scene that preempts another "staged" primal scene. In riffling through their mother's diary in the attic, Van and Ada are like the "bitter little embryos spying, from their natural nooks, upon the love life of their parents"[184] that Nabokov ridicules in *Speak, Memory!* As I mentioned above, the family tree at the front of *Ada* maintains the lie of their separate parentage, but does not give the dates of their deaths that are to authorize the book's publication. Their "real" births and deaths are outside of the book: the births, learned in the attic, precede the "historical" documentation of the tree, and their deaths, we are to assume, have not yet taken place. These equivocal signs allow Van to draw

their births and deaths, the "fore and aft," into the book's center where Van and Ada's memories will be secured. The photograph, however, resists all attempts at determination and elaboration: that was then, never to be recalled. In supplying a counter-memory that is the other of all memory, the photograph makes visible "the difference between the vital flow of the lifeline and its irrevocable interruption by death,"[185] a difference that cannot be spanned.

By dying into the book, Van attempts to "live an event as an image," to master his own absence by assuming the vantage point of ecstasis. But he may only assume the immortality to which literature is destined. In an episode in which Van imagines confronting Rack, one of Ada's alleged lovers who lies dying in a hospital, he outlines the agony one perchance dreams in "a probable hereafter." We may imagine the nothingness that preceded our existence, Van says, but we "cannot accept *two* nothings . . . ." "Our awareness of being is not a dot in eternity, but a slit, a fissure, a chasm . . . between the back and fore panel." The future cannot repeat the past – "oblivion is a one-night performance" – and so we must look forward to "the possibility of some prolonged form of disorganized consciousness" in which we suffer "as clusters of particles" on the "infinite rack of tomorrow."[186] Here, the difference between the two voids, fore and aft, which is at once the measure of our lives' "extraordinary visions" and the "instant we need to become aware of disappointed or fulfilled expectations," produces a spurious remainder. A forking takes place, just as it does between the bright mental image and the meaningless, fractured insomniac vision, between thought and "the growth of the book," between the past that cannot be revisited and the infinite branching of possibilities that retrospective imagination engenders. If through one critical lens Nabokov's aestheticism seems to celebrate a certain postmodern ethos of infinite play, through another one gazes

in horror, as if looking through the wrong end of a telescope, upon "the perpetual disaster of receding time" from a no-place of desubjectification and fragmentation. When Van dictates Lucette's suicide for his secretary Violet, a telling error occurs: "Although Lucette had never died before – no, *dived* before, Violet – from such a height, . . . she went with hardly a splash through the wave that humped to welcome her." It is not clear whether "died" had been Van's (unacknowledged) slip of the tongue or is Violet's typo; either way, its comic effect arises from the fact that one cannot die more than once. But the error is also to be understood literally. The death Lucette has sought at first seems easy, natural, destined, but she begins to flail and gasp. "As she began losing track of herself, she thought it proper to inform a series of receding Lucettes – telling them to pass it on and on in a trick-crystal regression – that what death amounted to was only a more complete assortment of the infinite fractions of solitude."[187] Here the aesthetic freedom of advancing towards extinction fractures being. Lucette can die more than once because she cannot finally die. "Losing track of herself" as a finite being, she attests only to this fact, passing it on to herself "in multiplicate."[188]

Nabokov declares in *Strong Opinions* that he doesn't "give a damn for incest one way or another" and "merely like[s] the 'bl' sound in siblings, bloom, blue, bliss, sable."[189] Certainly there is more to incest in *Ada* (not the least of which is that it presents Nabokov with another opportunity to confound the sensual and the moral).[190] What interests me here is the way that incest and sterility, in the novel, short-circuit time's progress and bring about "other varieties of dreaming and being beyond man's notion of Time." Nabokov writes "by projecting into an imagined section of time the growth of the book, whose every line belongs to the present moment, which in its turn is nothing but the ever rising horizon of the past." The book, imagined from the future, dwells in a

present constituted by an ever-accumulating past. The now of the book emerges from this "spiral unwinding of things." If "every dimension presupposes a medium within which it can act, " then in "the spiral unwinding of things, space warps into something akin to time, and time, in its turn, warps into something akin to thought, then surely another dimension follows – a Special space, maybe, not the old one, we trust, unless spirals become vicious circles again."[191] Van and Ada, it would seem, have emerged from a "dream-bright America" into a "Special space": they have outrun linear time (the Veen line is exhausted), and dwell in the eternal now of the book. But Van's dream of having had a child with Ada whom "he is about to know carnally" betrays a fear of dwelling in what he calls "the panic and pain of infinite night."[192] Like Lucette's "infinite" death, his dream of having produced a child with whom, it is inferred, he might produce another, and so on, also suggests a perpetual regression that nevertheless promotes the future, a sort of vicious spiral in which "diurnal cerebration" devolves into insomnia.

Van "nobly" refuses to requite Lucette's love because she is his *half*-sister, that is, *because their union would not be incestuous enough*: if their origins are not identical, if she is not "strengthened by a strain of his father's demon blood,"[193] then a first-rate Elysian life cannot be guaranteed. But in his dream of (imaginatively) producing and possessing Ada's child, "objective time" is not terminated. The rhythm of creation endures, uncontrollably, in the "fissure . . . between the back and fore panel," but it does not engender the "continued being" of what has been lived, of what has "the taste, the tinge, the tang of our individual being." If incestuous sterility was to crystallize the meaning of Van and Ada's love after their deaths, the dreamt child signifies that signification itself continues, but only as "the empty power of bestowing meaning – a strange impersonal light." Always turning round to see "the perpetual disaster of receding

time," we ourselves become a spurious remainder, divorced from our own "marvelous mortality," our finite subjectivity. Being endures beyond determination, dissolved in "the maddening prospect" of infinite, chance, but not "tense-willed" possibilities. Just as Van's father's prohibition against incest is "right, here and there, not neither here, nor there, as most things are,"[194] and therefore determines nothing except the perpetual deferral of desire, of "an insatiable itch,"[195] Van receives from his dead mother no "unequivocal, indeed all-deciding sign, of continued being beyond the veil of time, beyond the flesh of space."[196] The attempt to install the past in the future fails: the two voids do not become symmetrical, contemporaneous. One cannot adjoin the worlds of past and present, seamlessly weaving into one design past and present with no "spurious" remainder to upset the balance. Instead there is a continual traversal between them of disorganized, disarticulated, disembodied desire. In seeking the immortality of the past in art, Van forsakes the finitude that is the only measure of our common being.

VII. The dead book

"[W]e simply speak with our wounds; wounds procreate,"[197] Van says. I argued above that Nabokov inverts the usual sequence of dreaming and awakening in order to preempt belatedness. Having seen loss in time, "in view of the cataclysm" that would erase a homeland but not its memories, the exile calls new worlds into being for himself "in multiplicate." But these new worlds, these infinite possibilities, issue from cataclysm or rupture. They are doubles of the "real" world left behind or torn away. When Van recounts his near-death experience in his cradle, he returns to that moment in order to imagine another "cosmic or corporeal cataclysm" that might "plunge [him] into a state of permanent stupor." This second, imagined cataclysm and its ensuing state of stupor

double for the actual danger and death he had escaped. Nabokov's aesthetic practice seems to be little more than a desperate enactment of Freudian melancholia in which trauma, real or imagined, inaugurates repeated attempts to master it. Alfred Kazin, who perhaps remains Nabokov's shrewdest reader to date, has written that "[f]iction for Nabokov is unmotivated imagination resting in the pure freedom of his exiled state. The non-Nabokovian world must always be shown up as unnecessary to Nabokov's freedom." As Kazin sees it, mastery – "pure freedom" – is contingent upon excluding the real (the "non-Nabokovian"). But as we have seen, freedom is hardly "pure" in Nabokov's worlds. Imaginative freedom is motivated by nostalgia, by the keen pang of difference and distance that cannot be overcome. Attempts at mastering the future by securing the past as both thoroughly knowable and infinitely recuperable draw experience into the center of the magic carpet of art. Here, the "vacuum into which all [one] love[s] rushes" is only "momentary"; the next moment threatens a future of exile from one's own marvelous mortality, from a subjectivity defined by individual memories. But might Nabokov's aesthetics offer something beyond the pursuit of private loss? Does Van's grave fear of "relinquishing forever one's memories" lead only to a stupor that is nothing but "the featureless pseudo-future"?

Levinas writes of the *il y a* that "[t]here is no determined being, anything can count for anything else. In the equivocation, the threat of the pure and simple presence of the *il y a* takes form." We have seen this "equivocation" at work in *Ada* in the "not neither here, nor there" where desire originates. For Blanchot, this ambiguity is a matter of being suspended between the two slopes, between day and night. But that "permanent stupor" to which "cataclysm," imagined or otherwise, gives rise threatens not only the "plenitude of the void, but may, in fact, gesture toward "other varieties of being and

dreaming." In *Strong Opinions* Nabokov says, "The greatest happiness I experience in composing is when I feel I cannot understand, or rather catch myself not understanding (without the presupposition of an already existing creation) how or why that image or structural move or exact formulation of phrase has just come to me."[198] The urge to act or create arises from incomprehension, from stupidity, from stupor.[199] As Michael Wood comments, "it is a moment in and out of time, because a moment later there will be nothing to catch, except another self for whom the experience is already a memory."[200] To catch oneself "not understanding" is to lose oneself twice: one is both outside of oneself, ec-static and receptive, and one is caught, again, in the time of aesthetic creation and language. But this interruption, this brief experience of "the missed heartbeat," creates the "greatest happiness." It is a moment of coming to language without "presupposition" and without anticipation: it is the sovereign moment. As Bataille writes, "What is the meaning of art . . . if not the anticipation of a suspended, wonder-struck moment, a miraculous moment?"[201]

For Bataille, again, the sovereign moment arises from "unknowing." In trying to understand not only the miraculous moment of aesthetic creation but also "the miraculous character of the most dreaded event," he realizes that "I no longer anticipated the moment I would be rewarded for my effort, *when I would know at last*, but rather the moment when *I would no longer know, when my initial anticipation would dissolve into* NOTHING."[202] Death, like aesthetic vision, is "the impossible coming true, becoming *that which is*."[203] *That which is* is the "world sapped by crude existence," divorced from the possibility of being either determined (by intention) or delimited (by death), but it is also the very set of conditions that, in dissolving our anticipation of the future and the completion of a work that would reward our efforts to secure that future, opens for us a

relation to alterity, to both the other and to the possibility of things being otherwise. The miraculous character of death delivers us from the calculating reason that would make use of an object by withdrawing that object from the domain of thought, leaving us with only "an unreasoned impulse" by which, if we continue in our anticipation, we must do so "against all reason."[204] For Bataille, community (and not a society of instrumental reason or acquisition) establishes itself (if one can use that word) only when it abandons its prescriptions for the future and its desire to sublate individuals into a totality. Blanchot comments on the sacrifice (never carried out) that Bataille had envisioned for Acéphale, which "does not allow the community nor those who give themselves to it, any form of presence, thereby sending them back to a solitude which, far from protecting them, disperses or dissipates itself without their finding themselves again or together."

> The gift or the abandonment is such that, ultimately, there is nothing to give or to give up and that time itself is only one of the ways in which this nothing to give offers and withdraws itself like the whim of the absolute which goes out of itself by giving rise to something other than itself, in the shape of an absence. An absence which, in a limited way, applies to a community whose only clearly ungraspable secret it would be. . . . [A]bsence belongs to the community at its extreme or as the ordeal that exposes it to its necessary disappearance.[205]

Sacrificial death for Acéphale signifies, for Blanchot, not the latent desire for communion that Nancy criticizes but the exposure of its subjects, and of subjectivity, "to the infiniteness of alterity, while at the same time deciding its inexorable finitude."[206]

Van and Ada, as I discussed above, are enantiomorphic; they are not doubles who may be reduced to the Same. Van fears he cannot take her with him in the afterlife; their hope to secure their past for a future freed from the ravages of historical time is not,

ultimately, possible. In being unable to carry on reproductive continuity, they exhaust their family history and oppose society's desire to install a first-rate Elysian life in its prescriptions for a future. In some respects, Nabokov does succeed in resisting historical time with his peculiar love story in which Van and Ada transgress the social prohibition of their love. As Bataille writes, "Literature does what it can to insert love into history, making of that ahistorical part of ourselves an element enmeshed in the great mechanism of constructions unmaking themselves that history is."[207] While Van and Ada produce a work of literature, they can only do so by sacrificing themselves to it. "[S]ecrecy and silence" are essential" for Bataille's community of lovers: here, "nothing takes place that does not signify the totality of being affirmed at one go, compared with which all the rest [historical "discourse" and "formulas"], whose meaning is definite, has no meaning ultimately but that of the void."[208] If the "totality of being" is "affirmed" in the community of lovers, it cannot be spoken, it cannot produce a formula. It takes the "shape of absence," an absence that the sovereign moment effects in its ecstasis: "Sovereignty is never an object of discursive knowledge, except obliquely, but it is communicated from subject to subject through a sensible, emotional contact." The work, *Ardis*, cannot communicate, except sensibly, obliquely, the shape of the absence (death) that has authorized it. When Van's editor "weighs" the book, he holds only a "master copy which the flat pale parents of the future Babes, in the brown-leaf Woods, a little book in the Ardis Hall nursery, could no longer prop up in the mysterious first picture: two people in one bed."[209]

In his despair during a separation from Ada, Van attempts an "exercise" in relaxing

> "the muscles of consciousness" – namely, putting oneself back not merely in the frame of mind that had preceded a radical change in one's life, but in a state of complete ignorance regarding that change. He knew it could not be done, that not the achievement, but the obstinate attempt was possible, because he would not have remembered the preface to Ada had not life turned the next page, causing now its radiant text to flash through all the tenses of his mind.[210]

The preface, the fore panel, cannot be recalled except through the retrospective activity of what follows from it: one cannot aspire to unconsciousness, to timelessness, without eliciting the black beats of temporal rhythm. Writing can only "hint" at the "missed heartbeat" of time. It *misses* time, the "human life" it turns away from in its rhythmic movement. "The world," as Bataille notes, "is always richer than language; language then impoverishes reality, and it must do so; otherwise we could not glimpse what is not visible to begin with." In dying into the book, Van hopes to "remember" the "preface" to his life, "to distinguish," as Nabokov writes in the beginning of *Speak, Memory!*, "the faintest of personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of [his] life." By turning the last page of a book, of a life, the temporalizing "tenses" of the mind not only replay the "radiant text" but also recall, negatively, the ec-static "state of complete ignorance" or unknowing that precedes "radical change." Van's mental exercise here is a matter of putting the "Past in reverse gear" and revisiting radical change, not in order to alter what ensued from it but to secure it in reexperiencing it. All that he may hope to secure, however, is reexperience itself. Sovereign moments, Bataille writes, "like the deeply rhythmed movements of poetry, of music, of love, of dance, have the power to capture and endlessly recapture the moment that counts, the moment of rupture, of fissure. As if we were trying to arrest the *moment* and freeze it in the constantly renewed

gasps of our laughter and sobs."[211] While that reexperience may lead to protracted "diurnal cerebration" in the infinite night of the *il y a*, it is also a matter of attempting to remember nothing. As with the absences generated by chiasmic "cross-reading," rereading as reexperience is enabled by forgetting, by abandoning oneself to the miraculous, where sorrow and joy are secondary to the experience of finitude.

It will be recalled that in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the reader misses the secret of death that the narrator was about to reveal. We may interpret this "minute of doubt" in several ways. *Ada* never "tells" death, it never performs "the *conscious* spanning of an infinite expansure." Van and Ada are always dying into the book, haunting and haunted, just as we are always rereading it without ever arriving at an "absolute solution." What is passed on can be experienced only as mystery but not spoken. There is therefore no destiny, based "on our faith in logic and habit," to which we are committed and which we share. In withholding the "absolute solution," Nabokov dissolves anticipation and preserves infantile openness. Infancy, Lyotard observes, is "whatever does not permit itself to be written, in writing." Something, therefore, always remains unread, missed, forgotten. The unknown future – a future "aloof from our fancies and feelings" – is deferred, freed from the imposition of "determinate schemes." The author does not know the truth about death; in passing on what is not written but only gestured towards, he offers only the passage itself between the infancy that "anticipates every presence and memory"[212] and the language that misses it. Cataclysm cannot "remove completely" a world that "destiny" cannot recall completely in the "hoarding up of impressions." In this way the "black voids, fore and aft," do not meet where language is withheld except as passage.

And yet, alongside what might constitute a measure of political thought in this suspension of determination, there remains a stubborn fear in Nabokov's fiction – and, perhaps, a threat. The sovereign moment in *Ada*, always only glimpsed, is ultimately exceeded. As haunting and haunted, living-dead and dead-living, Van and Ada are both present and absent, in "Eden or Hades," unable or unwilling to stop the ceaseless rhythm that their art engenders. *Ada* is itself a sort of elaborate funereal game, continually invoking absence in order to arrest it in its imagined doubles. At the end of Nabokov's penultimate novel *Transparent Things*, when the character Person is falling to his fiery death, the narrator avows, "This is, I believe, *it*: not the crude anguish of physical death but the incomparable pangs of the mysterious mental maneuver needed to pass from one state of being to another."[213] The "mysterious mental maneuver" is precisely what Vadim Vadimovich N. (V.V.N.) in Nabokov's last novel *Look at the Harlequins!* cannot or will not perform. Unable to rotate in his mind a journey from point A to point B and back again, he must always restart from point B. A literal, late-life attempt to turn around, to return, results in collapse and paralysis. In trying to embody thought, he succumbs to the "[m]adness [that] had been lying in wait . . . since infancy." Madness manifests itself in "feeling the sepia stare of those watchful eyes" of "evil shadow[s]" *and* as "a flash of delight so rich and shattering that the very absence of an immediate object on which it might settle was to me a form of escape."[214] This haunting madness spans the ambiguity of the *il y a*. The *il y a*, says Levinas, is like "those strange obsessions that one keeps from childhood and which reappear in insomnia when the silence resounds and the voids remain full." But there is another intuition a child makes. In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot describes the "unexpectedness" of a child's experience in gazing at the sky. The sky, at first ordinary, is "suddenly open, absolutely black, revealing (as through a broken

window)" a sense of "absence" where "everything has been lost since always and forever." The child feels a "ravaging joy" in "the vertiginous knowledge . . . that nothing is what there is and above all nothing beyond." Here the child's "vertiginous knowledge" constitutes an intimation of the finitude through which one feels "compassion for suffering humanity" in the knowledge that one is "neither immortal nor eternal."

But N. fears less "the awfulness of that watchful thing" expressed in "the distress of insomnia" than he does the "motley of madness which, after pretending to adorn my existence with special forms of inspiration, mental ecstasy, and so forth, would stop dancing and flitting around me and would pounce on me, and cripple me, and for all I know, destroy me."[215] *Look at the Harlequins!* poses as a not-so-sly recapitulation of Nabokov's oeuvre, complete with a list of Russian and English works by V.V.N; it seems also a conflicted capitulation to art. Returning, turning around, turning back time – each is impossible, for what is glimpsed in "ecstasy" can find no containment in an object, in the objectification of language. At this moment "escape" seems possible where there is nothing left to see, nothing to tell. But one kind of madness modulates into the other: ecstasy becomes "motley," riven by time and subject to extinction. It seems at the end of a long career that the motley madness of art is preparing its inevitable destruction. A weakened N. rolls his wheelchair, "mumbling comfortably, dropping off, mumble dying away – "[216] Whatever dying words N. mumbles, they are interrupted, prevented from finding expression in a completed thought. Is the mumbling another evasion, a withholding of some "absolute solution" that is, in fact, concealed only because we fail to see it? Is Nabokov attempting to pass on this failure of vision which "we, writers and readers, should be unable to make out (myopic, myopic)"? At the same time, one thinks of the end of *Speak, Memory!* where Nabokov writes of an object "that the finder cannot

unsee once it has been seen":[217] does N. take the reader prisoner in his resistance to death, haunting us with his insomniac visions in his mad, destructive embrace of the *il y a*?

VIII. Casual illusion

Toward the end of *Ada*, Van's youthful philosophical "novel" *Letters From Terra* is rediscovered and made into a film. In *Letters*, a scientist has conversations with a literally microscopic "Roving Reporter" from Terra, who reveals that she has been an instrument of "cosmic propaganda" in telling of the "bliss" of her planet: "Terra cheated, . . . and human minds and human flesh underwent on that sibling planet worse torments than on our much maligned Demonia [Antiterra]."[218] Certainly, here, Nabokov has in mind Communist propaganda.[219] When the book is made into a film fifty years later, complete with commercial tie-ins such as "L.F.T." dolls, a conspiracy is launched in which people believe in "the secret Government-concealed identity of Terra and Anti-Terra. Demonian reality dwindled to a casual illusion." It is difficult to speak of this political expression of the Terra-Anti-Terra/Demonia relationship in the novel, which is underdeveloped. The relationship is not, of course, reducible to an opposition between the "barbed-wire tangle of police states and the spacious freedom of thought we enjoy in America and Western Europe." Terra, in its receptivity to the alternately demonic and edenic features that "sick minds" would attribute to it, is less a symbol of the Soviet Union than a repository for all that one hopes either to preserve or stave off. It is a universal concept: it is the other of history. Van at first sues the filmmakers "for having distorted Terrestrial politics as obtained by Van with such diligence and skill from extrasensorial sources and manic dreams,"[220] but he later accepts authority as the film's source. The accusation of distortion is partly another jab at Nabokov's critics through

which he once again champions the freedom of the imagination over political import. The film supplies something closer to real-world political history, with its wars and revolutions, than *Letters From Terra,* which is faithful to the "real-world" political history of *Ada*, that is, to "the cloudless course of Demonian history in the twentieth century, with the Anglo-American coalition managing one hemisphere, and Tartary, behind her Golden Veil, mysteriously ruling the other . . . ."[221] For Van, the Terrarean history proposed by the film and its fanatics is not fantastic because it is untrue, but because, "[a]ctually, we had passed through all that."[222] In avowing that "[o]ur world *was*, in fact, mid-twentieth-century," Van is stating that the world is in us and beyond us, no longer subject to the ravages of time or the boundaries of place.

Van's fantasy of utopia is a fantasy of surviving historical upheaval, and Kazin's point about excluding the non-Nabokovian world holds true here. Readers of Nabokov never fail to point out that he had made a home of the state of exile, refusing for the greater part of his life to establish a traditional home and instead relying upon memories of the past, revived in language. Memory's imaginative prowess is both a compensatory power against cataclysmic loss and it is a power bestowed by loss. "In its immediacy," Bataille writes, "sovereign thought is 'off its hinges'; it exceeds the bounds of knowledge; it destroys the world that reassures, that is *commensurate* with man's activity."[223] If Nabokov in *Ada* destroys the world that is "commensurate with man's activity," the world of prohibitions and totalitarian uniformity, of war and suffering, he does not replace it with a "world that reassures." Where knowledge is incommensurate with the sovereign moments that the novel glimpses, in those places where "NOTHING is encountered where knowledge and unknowing are both actual," *Ada* exceeds the

bounds of unknowing, effecting only the "collapse of that which is not": the absolute sovereignty of the "tense-willed" imagination.

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[1] Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, xviii.

[2] Nabokov, *The Eye*, iv.

[3] Nabokov, *The Eye,* iv.

[4] Of Nabokov's two pre-*Lolita* English-language novels, only *Bend Sinister*, and not *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, was reissued with a Foreword, no doubt because Nabokov was anxious to prevent its reduction to a "political message."

[5] Nabokov, *Bend Sinister,* xiv.

[6] Nabokov, *Bend Sinister,* xv.

[7] Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," in *Lolita,* 314.

[8] Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," 315.

[9] Quoted in Galya Diment, *Pniniad : Vladimir Nabokov and Marc Szeftel*.

[10] Nabokov, *Bend Sinister,* xix.

[11] Nabokov, *Bend Sinister,* xviii.

[12] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions,* 58.

[13] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions,* 115.

[14] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions,* 114.

[15] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions,* 113.

[16] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions,* 156.

[17] Nabokov, *Bend Sinister,* 11.

[18] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions,* 179.

[19] Nabokov, *Ada,* 17.

[20] Nabokov, *Ada,* 18.

[21] Nabokov, *Ada,* 19.

[22] Blanchot, *Work of Fire*, 340.

[23] Nabokov, *Ada,* 536.

[24] Nabokov, *Ada,* 3.

[25] Nabokov, *Ada,* 587.

[26] Nabokov, *Ada,* 562.

[27] Quoted in Robbins, J., *Altered Reading*, 102.

[28] Nabokov, *Ada,* 402.

[29] Quoted in Nabokov, 100.

[30] Libertson, *Proximity*, 208.

[31] Libertson, *Proximity*, 216.

[32] Libertson, *Proximity*, 210.

[33] Bataille, "From Existentialism . . .," 172.

[34] Bataille, "From Existentialism . . .," 172-73.

[35] Libertson, *Proximity*, 205.

[36] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 198. Emphasis in original.

[37] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 210.

[38] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 202.

[39] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 203.

[40] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 210.

[41] Bataille, "From Existentialism . . .," 174-75.

[42] Bataille, "From Existentialism . . .," 176.

[43] Libertson, *Proximity*, 205.

[44] Quoted in Goldhammer, *Headless Republic*, 185.

[45] Quoted in Goldhammer, *Headless Republic*, 184.

[46] Quoted in Goldhammer, *Headless Republic*, 184.

[47] Quoted in Goldhammer, *Headless Republic*, 185.

[48] Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, 72.

[49] Nabokov, *Bend Sinister,* 49.

[50] Nabokov, *Bend Sinister,* 241.

[51] Nabokov, *Bend Sinister,* 241.

[52] Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading,* 223.

[53] Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading,* 222.

[54] Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading,* 223.

[55] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 206.

[56] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 204.

[57] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 163.

[58] Nabokov, *Ada,* 587. Emphasis in original.

[59] Nabokov, *Ada,* 586.

[60] Nabokov, *Ada,* 536.

[61] Kazin, *Bright Book of Life*, 316.

[62] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions,* 186.

[63] Nabokov, *Ada,* 548.

[64] Nabokov, *Ada,* 538.

[65] Nabokov, *Ada,* 550.

[66] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory!*, 19.

[67] Bataille, "From Existentialism . . .," 173.

[68] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory!,* 21.

[69] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory!,* 20.

[70] Nabokov, *Speak,, Memory!,* 95.

[71] Nabokov, *Lolita,* 309.

[72] Blanchot, *Work of Fire,* 330.

[73] Blanchot, *Work of Fire,* 328.

[74] Blanchot, *Work of Fire,* 329.

[75] Blanchot, *Work of Fire,* 338

[76] Blanchot, *Work of Fire,* 329.

[77] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory,* 139.

[78] Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, 94.

[79] Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, 94.

[80] Bataille, "From Existentialism . . .," 173.

[81]Nabokov, *Bend Sinister,* 241.

[82] Nabokov, *Ada*, 548.

[83] Nabokov, *Ada*, 544

[84] McCoy, "Chiasmus," 6-7.

[85] Nabokov, *Ada,* 562-63.

[86] See R.J.A. Kilbournand Samuel Schuman for discussions of chiasmus in *Ada*.

[87] Budick, "Cross-Culture, 235.

[88] Nabokov, *Ada,* 561.

[89] Nabokov, *Ada*, 587. Emphasis in original.

[90] Nabokov, *Ada*, (fictional) Editor's Preface.

[91] Nabokov, *Lolita,* 13.

[92] Terdiman, *Present Past*, 317.

[93] Nabokov, *Ada,* 31.

[94] Nabokov, *Ada,* 536.

[95] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory!,* 96-7.

[96] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 64.

[97] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience,* 65.

[98] Lacan develops his idea of traumatic awakening through a reading of one of Freud's patient's dreams. A man, whose son has just died from a long illness, relates a dream in which the boy appears beside him, asking, "Father, don't you see I'm burning?" In reality, an overturned candle has set the deathbed on fire while the father has been sleeping. The father's dream resurrects the child and places him at a critical moment where the father must respond to save his child. The father sees the "burning" (the child's death) only while asleep: "he cannot see it and be awake at the same time." The "dream, as a delay, reveals the ineradicable gap between the reality of a death and the desire that cannot overcome it except in the fiction of a dream" (Caruth, 102).Lacan's interpretation understands "the child's request, the plea, to be seen" from within the dream as a repetition of the father's having "*seen too late* to prevent the burning" during

the child's illness. "To awaken is thus precisely to awaken only to one's repetition of a previous failure to see in time." In dreaming of the plea instead of awakening to answer it, the father extends the child's life by not awakening to the reality of his death. "Awakening, in Lacan's reading of the dream, *is itself the site of trauma*, the trauma of the necessity and impossibility of responding to another's death" Caruth, 100). Because awakening from death (inanimate matter, quiescence) inaugurates the death drive as well as consciousness, "trauma [is] the very origin of consciousness and all of life itself." In Lacan's reading, the dream is "the story of an impossible responsibility of consciousness in its originating relation to others, and specifically to the deaths of others" (Caruth, 104).

[99] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*

[100] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*

[101] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory!,* 49.

[102] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory!,* 39.

[103] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory!,* 50.

[104] Nabokov, *Ada,* 551.

[105] Blanchot, *Work of Fire,* 339.

[106] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 144.

[107] Chanter, *Time, Death and the Feminine, .*

[108] Chanter, *Time, Death and the Feminine*

[109] "*La veille est anonyme. Il n'y a pas* ma *vigilance á la nuit, c'est la nuit elle même qui veille. Ça veille*." Emmanuel Levinas, quoted in Critchley, *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing*, 67.

[110] Levinas, *Time and the Other,* 144.

[111] Critchley, *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing,* 68.

[112] Critchley, *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing,* 41-2.

[113] Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus,* 100.

[114] Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus,* 99.

[115] Marshall, "The Necessity of Writing Death," 233.

[116] Blanchot, *Work of Fire,* 243.

[117] Critchley, *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing,* 73-4.

[118] Blanchot, *Work of Fire,* 333.

[119] Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death*, 5.

[120] Nabokov, *Ada,* 562.

[121] Levinas, *Entre Nous*,

[122] Nabokov, *Ada*, 538.

[123] Nabokov, *Ada,* 585.

[124] Nabokov, *Lolita,* 299.

[125] Nabokov, *Ada,* 105.

[126] Nabokov, *Ada,* 243.

[127] Nabokov, *Ada,* 19.

[128] The doubling between male characters in *Pale Fire* and *Lolita* is a matter of struggling to dominate a text, to occupy the same position in time and space; one or the other must be eliminated. Such tyranny is, allegedly, apotheosized in Kinbote's homosexuality, in keeping with a cultural climate that understood homosexual "inversion" as narcissism. In "Dissenting in an Age of Frenzied Heterosexualism: Kinbote's Transparent Closet," Jean Walton argues against critics who not only equate Kinbote's homosexuality simply with narcissism and insanity, but also see homosexuality in general as a metaphor for something else, such as "the artist's minority point of view," as Frank Kermode puts it. Walton sees Kinbote as partially a literal, if oblique, critique of heterosexism, particularly that expressed by Nazi Germany and which victimized Nabokov's brother Sergey, who died in a concentration camp. Walton and Steven Buehm in "Queer, Queer Vladimir" explore Nabokov's conflicted engagement with homosexuality. One might look, too, to *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: the narrator tries to understand the life of his dead brother, who in many respects resembles Sergei. Brian Boyd has suggested that "[t]he centrality of Lucette in *Ada* . . . in some ways seems to reflect Nabokov's sense of Sergei: the non-favorite, the frail one beside his confident sibling, the concentration camp victim . . . the one we're invited to ignore, and even want to dismiss from the story, but eventually realize we should never have overlooked" (Grossman).

In *Ada*, as I discuss throughout this chapter, heterosexuality is, among other things, a way for Nabokov to avoid perfect "symmetry" in his treatment of time. Van and Ada's sexual and sibling rivalry is not a violent struggle between doubles. But if their collaboration seems a genteel affair, with Van enjoying ultimate control, it is interesting to note that in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the mysterious woman who holds the key to Sebastian's life story is Ada's physical double. Witholding information, playing tricks, and disguising her identity, it is she who controls the narrator.

[129] Nabokov, *Ada,* 17.

[130] Nabokov, *Ada,* 102.

[131] Nabokov, *Ada,* 120. Emphasis in original.

[132] Nabokov, *Ada,* 120.

[133] Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 346.

[134] Nabokov, *Ada,* 109.

[135] While homicidally jealous of Ada's male lovers and visibly discomfited by the lesbian undertones of Ada's friendship with Cordula de Prey, Van is willfully indifferent to Ada and Lucette's sexual forays. He is, in fact, a specular participant in these sororal trysts or, as Ada calls them, "*vanouissements*," which Nabokov translates in a footnote as "swooning in Van's arms." Lucette and Ada make love "for hygienic purposes," Lucette says, whenever they happen to be "boyless and boiling." The usual straight male fantasy of lesbian relations as unthreatening and virtually masturbatory is, however, compromised: while the sisters may imagine themselves in Van's arms, the tumbling series of "monograms, anagrams, adalucindas" represent an exclusive coupling (and then quadrupling) of females that denies Van's procreative power .

[136] See Richardson's "The Dangers of Sympathy: Sibling Incest in English Romantic Poetry." Richardson argues that incest in Romanticism departed from its Gothic antecedents. Where Gothic incest usually took place between parents and children and emphasized "nature over nurture, birth over experience," in Romantic writing "the emphasis is on a shared childhood, on experience that unites the couple through countless mutual associations built up during the most idyllic stage of life" (739).

[137] Nabokov, *Ada,* 134.

[138] Nabokov, *Ada,* 3.

[139] Nabokov, *Ada,* 9.

[140] Nabokov, *Ada,* 531.

[141] Nabokov, *Ada,* 583.

[142] Nabokov, *Ada,* 583-84.

[143] Nabokov, *Ada,* 586.

[144] Nabokov, *Ada,* 556.

[145] Nabokov, *Ada,* 562.

[146] Nabokov, *Ada,* 574.

[147] Nabokov, *Ada,* 567.

[148] Nabokov, *Ada,* 587.

[149] Nabokov, *Ada,* 425.

[150] Nabokov, *Ada,* 426.

[151] Nabokov, *Ada* 584.

[152] Nabokov, *Ada,* 445.

[153] Nabokov, Foreword, *The Eye.*

[154] Nabokov, *Bend Sinister,* 241.

[155] Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, 223.

[156] Nabokov, *The Defense*, 214.

[157] Nabokov, *The Defense,* 214-215.

[158] Nabokov, *The Defense,* 256.

[159] Nabokov, *Ada,* 585.

[160] Nabokov, *The Gift*, 171.

[161] Nabokov, *The Gift,* 172.

[162] Nabokov, *Ada,* 20.

[163] Nabokov, *Ada,* 73.

[164] Nabokov, *Ada,* 402.

[165] Nabokov, *Ada,* 406.

[166] Blanchot, "The Two Versions of the Imaginary," 261.

[167] Blanchot, "The Two Versions of the Imaginary," 256.

[168] Blanchot, "The Two Versions of the Imaginary," 259.

[169] Blanchot, "The Two Versions of the Imaginary," 255.

[170] Blanchot, "The Two Versions of the Imaginary," 261.

[171] Blanchot, "The Two Versions of the Imaginary," 262.

[172] Blanchot, "The Two Versions of the Imaginary," 263.

[173] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 94.

[174] Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 100.

[175] Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 85.

[176] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 91.

[177] Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 90.

[178] Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 119.

[179] Horowitz, *Sustaining Loss*, 142-43.

[180] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 49.

[181] Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 91.

[182] Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* 91.

[183] See John H. Ingham's "Primal Scene and Misreading in Nabokov's *Lolita*" for a catalogue of Nabokov's "misinterpretations" of the primal scene.

[184] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory!,* 20.

[185] Düttman, "Lifeline and Self-Portrait," 31.

[186] Nabokov, *Ada,* 314-15.

[187] Nabokov, *Ada,* 494.

[188] Brian Boyd argues that "although [Lucette's] death and its ramifications steep the book in an unexpectedly infernal hue, she herself after her death turns the story of Van and Ada into something more radiant than any reader could expect: in making possible the renewed and now flawless love of the aging Van and Ada, she also offers us intimations of a harmony even in this life somehow akin to a tenderness from beyond" (Boyd, *Nabokov's* Ada*,* 187). Needless to say, Boyd's conclusions regarding "harmony" between "this life" and the "beyond" run contrary to my own. Boyd, like many Nabokovian scholars, tends to take Nabokov's insistence upon the sovereignty of the tensely-willed imagination and aesthetic bliss rather too much to heart. One wonders, too, if this desire to ignore, or rather, absorb, the "ramifications" of suffering on the part of readers is not Nabokov's ultimate coup in tricking, puzzling and deceiving his readers.

[189] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* ,123.

[190] Much scholarship touches upon incest in Nabokov's fiction. For discussions of incest in *Ada*, see, for example, D. Barton Johnson's "The Labyrinth of Incest in *Ada*" and Bobbie Ann Mason's *Nabokov's Garden: A Guide to Ada*. Boyd takes issue with critics who choose to see incest as "symbolic."

[191] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory!,* 301.

[192] Nabokov, *Ada,* 315.

[193] Nabokov, *Ada,* 20.

[194] Nabokov, *Ada,* 445.

[195] Nabokov, *Ada,* 334.

[196] Nabokov, *Ada,* 452.

[197] Nabokov, *Ada,* 102.

[198] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions,* 69.

[199] Agamben notes that "*studium*" and "stupid" both derive etymologically from "crash, the shock of impact," and concludes "those who study are in the situation of people who have received a shock and are stupefied by what has struck them, unable to grasp it and at the same time powerless to leave hold." One who studies will never have done with it: the "shuttling between bewilderment and lucidity, discovery and loss, between agent and patient, is the rhythm of study." Van's "tensely-willed" recollection is a form of study in which everything "seems to open a new path, immediately left aside at the next encounter." Stupor is an opening at each forking where one turns towards and away from something; it is the passive, receptive, part of the rhythmic play of infinite possibilities inaugurated by "cataclysm." The "rhythm of study," Agamben suggests, resembles Aristotle's definition of potential, which is at once "passivity, a pure and virtually infinite undergoing" and "an unstoppable urge to undertake, an urge to ac." (*Idea of Prose,* 64).

[200] Wood, "Broken Dates," 168-69.

[201] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 200.

[202] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 208.

[203] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 210.

[204] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 209.

[205] Blanchot, *Unavowable Community,* 15.

[206] Blanchot, *Unavowable Community,* 17.

[207] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 165.

[208] Bataille, *Accursed Share* ,166.

[209] Nabokov, *Ada,* 587-88.

[210] Nabokov, *Ada,* 470.

[211] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 203.

[212] Agamben, *Idea of Prose,* 97.

[213] Nabokov, *Transparent Things*, 104.

[214] Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!*, 240.

[215] Bataille, *Look at the Harlequins!,* 241.

[216] Bataille, *Look at the Harlequins!,* 253.

[217] Bataille, *Speak, Memory!,* 310.

[218] Bataille, *Ada,* 341.

[219] However, we must remember that in *The Defense*, propaganda works two ways: some alleged "victims" of Soviet life in that book are, in fact, thoroughly rewarded by their complacency.

[220] Bataille, *Ada,* 581.

[221] Bataille, *Ada,* 580.

[222] Bataille, *Ada,* 582

[223] Bataille, *Accursed Share,* 381.

Chapter Three. The Good Wound: Memory and Community in *The Unconsoled*

Among the initial reviews of *The Unconsoled* (many of which have struck a note of lukewarm perplexity), few have failed to point out the novel's stylistic evocation of Kafka. Ryder, a world-class pianist and self-defined "outsider," has been invited to intercede in the affairs of a city "close to crisis."[1] Apparently beset by an amnesia he barely acknowledges, Ryder narrates with a baldly implausible omniscience the life stories and problems of citizens he has only just met. As he bumbles through the nameless city in which buildings miles apart are somehow adjoined, he fails to meet any number of small demands made of him by strangers whose lives are already entangled with his own. Nor does Ryder deliver the speech and performance that are to inaugurate a new epoch in the city's history: it is not yet time. By the end, unable to reclaim the city or themselves through music, both pianist and citizens fold their most recent failure into the habitual, consoling patter with which they meet all exigencies, private and public; in any case, it is always too late. As in Kafka, the mundane and the fantastic are confounded.

Amit Chaudhuri, however, has detailed what is decidedly unlike Kafka in *The Unconsoled*. For him, Ishiguro's "strangely ahistorical book" lacks "any discernible cultural, social or historical determinants (surely fatal to any novel):" "What is unKafkaesque about Ishiguro's Kafkaesque novel," he charges, "is its refusal to allow its allegory to be engaged, in any lively way, with the social shape of our age."[2] If it is unclear why anyone but Franz Kafka, if even he, is obliged to be Kafkaesque, Chaudhuri nonetheless seems to describe accurately the nearly eviscerated world of Ishiguro's novel. It is not easy, after all, to discern what cultural, social, and historical determinants might have shaped the nebulous malaise

with which the citizens diagnose their anonymous city. "It's too late. We've lost it. . . . Let's just be a cold modern city and be done with it," a drunken citizen suggests in the most precise statement one will find in the novel concerning the nature of the imminent "crisis."[3] Merely and barely descriptive, such a statement resigns itself less to what it cannot change than to what it cannot, or will not, recall. The citizen's post-historical bravado here resonates with the nostalgia it would condemn, for if it calls for the abandonment of a future predicated on the hopes of the past, it is yet unable to disengage itself from the "social shape" of an age oriented, not simply toward a lost origin, but toward the very idea of original loss.

Ishiguro has proposed that writing issues from just such a traumatic rupture, from a "wound" that has come and gone and to which "the best writers" return with the knowledge that it is "too late" in order to create consoling versions of what no longer exists.[4] But if such a poetics of the wound seems to echo the cynical politics of the drunken citizen, there is a distinction to be made between abandoning the present and abandoning oneself to its possibility. In *The Unconsoled*, Ishiguro produces rivaling discourses of the "wound": the wound figures as both traumatic rupture and as the temporal spacing of what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the "limit of community." The limit of community occurs where the myth of total community, either lost or to come, is interrupted. Called to an experience of what lies outside us, we refuse to "make operational" community as work, or a work, which would prescribe fulfillment in some destiny. Through the pianist Ryder and the composer Brodsky, who have been called together to save the city by commencing a new epoch through aesthetic production, Ishiguro opposes the time of melancholic repetition to that of interruption. Like Ryder, the disconsolate city's pursuit of "the very happy community" it had "once" been seeks in the future a return to an immemorial totality believed to be lost to the upheavals of

history.[5] Where Ryder withholds the work of art by simultaneously relegating the time of its happening to a past that has been irretrievably lost and to a future that never arrives, Brodsky attempts to abandon himself and his work at the moment of interruption, at the limit where community "*makes and unmakes* its own figure and example."[6] *The Unconsoled* fitfully interrogates the idea of a founding traumatic rupture by rethinking the relation between the memory and promise that structure any present.

I have attempted to situate Ishiguro in the context of contemporary literary production where he is consistently read as both an accomplished realist as well as a hybrid cosmopolitan writer, and to articulate his resistance to these somewhat incompatible readings. In his own desire to be "cosmopolitan," Ishiguro struggles to achieve a universality that abandons not only national but historical determination in favor of a cultural unity that resides in memory. But in divorcing what he calls *The Unconsoled's* "landscape of the imagination" from any national or historical context, and in substituting for an historical perspective a "cosmopolitan" memory that is at once fantastically outsized and perversely limited, Ishiguro takes to task both his own vision of the universal and those proposed by certain cosmopolitical stances. His privileging of memory and denial of historical authority are, I will suggest, rejoinders to the cultural spokesmanship he has been critically and popularly awarded as well as responses to rather specific national and historical circumstances that in fact do inform his "landscape of the imagination." These circumstances are not so much veiled by than made explicit in the novel's ostensible featurelessness. The fantastic world Ryder creates is isolated and provincial, yet at the same time it is, in its anonymity and seamlessness, much akin to a "global" one. In an era characterized by what David Harvey calls "time–space compression," in which "the time horizons of both private

and public decision-making have shrunk," time, distance, and difference are, to varying degrees, already overcome.[7] As a response to the acceleration of history by which the past is increasingly abandoned, forgotten or lost, Ryder's amnesiac relation to his own past may be, like his eradication of space, less than fantastic. Ryder not only reproduces the homogenizing forces of both an imperial cosmopolitanism and globalization in his elisions of difference and distance, he also reenacts history's acceleration in his disavowal of the past, erecting radical temporal breaks wherever it is felt to be "too late."

Through motivated and synchronized elisions and breaks, Ryder seeks to maintain a stability where all is at once near and distant, the same and different, imminent and belated – he attempts to inhabit, in other words, a zone outside the paroxysms of late modernity. So too, the city that seeks to reclaim its "name" in the world, to reassert its international relevance through a return to the past as well as an appeal to otherness, maintains its tenuous stability in the face of chronically imminent crisis. The crisis-prone city suggests a particular national scene, permeated by a sense of a fall from history and of an eroded national identity and cultural autonomy, where hopes for restoration are ambivalently placed in the mediatorial capacity of those "outside" elements that are believed to have threatened its identity and autonomy in the first place. At the end I return to Ishiguro's motivations for "writing community" in memory and their conflicted expression in the figure of Brodsky, who rages beyond the resentment and nostalgia for an absolute community oriented around original loss. *The Unconsoled* is not simply an allegory of failure, nor is it a failed allegory. It is very much engaged with "the social shape of our age"; the pressure of its informing determinants is felt most keenly at the moment of their deliberate erasure. It is the novel's world, and not the novel itself, that is

strangely – and impossibly – ahistorical, and it is finally not only the narrator's but a larger and equally selective "amnesia" which shapes the singular destiny of the unconsoled.

I. Fabulized memory and unbelonging

> It was very late in the day that I decided to use Germanic names [in *The Unconsoled*]. In a way I could change them all to Scandinavian names, or even French names. You know, I'd have to change a few details, the style of certain houses or whatever, but you could almost set that thing down anywhere. It was by and large a landscape of the imagination.[8]

It seems odd that Kazuo Ishiguro could fail to consider what a surreal society bound in Teutonic nomenclature, a disillusioned people whose hopes for change and the restoration of dignity lie in a culturally obsessed administration, might suggest. Never mind, even, that he is a novelist who has consistently plumbed the turbid shallows surrounding the Second World War. The setting in question is no more and no less than "a landscape of the imagination," one in which we seek to orient ourselves by names to be (mis)recognized for their ethnicity rather than by places to be pointed to on a map. The characters with "Germanic" names are not Germans, for the unnamed city compares itself to Germany with resentful envy; in this, too, they have failed. One may guess at the city's identity, but surely the point is its namelessness, its virtual featurelessness. It is useless to thumb through a Central European atlas: we apparently must accept, as Ishiguro intended, the city's nonidentity. Although the characters and their milieu have tenuous ties to some kind of ethnicity, they do not lay claim to a nation. Emphasis is placed instead on the

portability of their plight, which might be "set . . . down anywhere," the import of which is exchangeable.

Ishiguro, whose *The Remains of the Day* was apparently mistaken for "a documentary work," was "keen to write a book that was so strange that no one would mistake it for anything other than an expression of something I was thinking or feeling."[9] This declaration of committed strangeness caps off previous disavowals of historical determination – and historical consequence. In an interview following his second "Japanese" book, *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ishiguro claims his principal interests lie in "emotional upheaval" and "how one uses memory for one's own purposes." The "solid facts" surrounding historical events, while consulted, are "technically rather irksome" and therefore kept to a minimum: "I had no place for the atomic bomb in this novel." While he accedes to the interviewer's description of the "Japanese texture [his] writing achieves," a stylistic feat he attributes to "pseudotranslation," Ishiguro is (again) "keen that whenever I portray [things in] books that are set in Japan, even if it's not very accurately Japan, that people are seen to be just people." This abjuration of accuracy is not to be understood as a defense against charges of historical inaccuracy. To the contrary, he has, until the publication of *The Unconsoled*, been hailed as a consummate realist, an authority on Japanese culture as well as the uncanny recreator of Britain's interwar political and cultural climate. But while such critical praise of cross-cultural, documentary deftness may be the envy of many another writer, for Ishiguro they are a misguided distraction from the "universal streak" that only fiction allows.[10]

That an author who is an ethnic and racial minority in his country of residence seeks to write of what is "universal" and asks that his characters be "seen as just people,"

and that his readership has for the most part discounted these claims, is, of course, nothing new. Ishiguro has no intention of escaping or even evading race or ethnicity per se; rather, he is discomfited by the spokesmanship that has been thrust upon him from all quarters. If he has felt himself considered "a kind of Japanese foreign correspondent in residence in London,"[11] he has also "found [him]self put in that sort of false territory" when visiting Japan. Regarding him as a writer who "looks very Japanese" but who has "lost his Japaneseness," Ishiguro's Japanese hosts believed he could bring them "messages" and inform them "what the West thought about Japan."[12] This role, or rather roles, differs from other, previous assignments of racial or ethnic representation. He does not share the same predicament as, say, earlier nonwhite writers who passed, or were misconstrued as passing, into whiteness in pursuit of "universal" acceptance in the Western cultural marketplace. Today Ishiguro is himself deemed a locus of cultures, "a mediator to Japanese culture"[13] both for and from a British point of view. An author who was born in Japan but who has by now lived in England for forty-six of his fifty-one years, Ishiguro is, according to critical reception, "a hybrid writer,"[14] a delicate balance of Japanese and English sensibilities. As cultural producer Ishiguro becomes literally more "universal" the more diverse ethnic, racial and, by extension, cultural territories he can be thought to inhabit, or cross. He becomes, in other words, a hybrid, cosmopolitan writer.

One might assume from this appellation of cosmopolitan hybridity some connection to the postcolonial with which it is primarily concerned. If it seems peculiar to situate a son of two first-world, formerly imperialist nations in the context of postcolonialism, Pico Iyer explains that "Ishiguro, though not from a former colony, is a

paradigm of the polycultural order, never once explicitly examining this new cross-cultural mix but incarnating in his every sentence the effects of his mixed upbringing in England and Japan."[15] Iyer seems to suggest that in a single body, and a singular body of work, the immemorial opposition between East and West may be both embodied and transcended. In any case, the possibility of owning a sort of "postcolonial identity" occurred to Ishiguro from the start. When his first book, *A Pale View of Hills*, was well received in 1983, he concluded that "everyone was looking for other Rushdies,"[16] that is, other non-Anglo-Saxon authors who could, as Tomo Hattori puts it, "keep the ideology of 'true' Britishness conceptually intact"[17] and who have since been courted by the British literary world. But while Ishiguro very much wishes to be a cosmopolitan, universal, or international writer – he uses all these terms interchangeably – his placement in a class of "hybrid" writers is not quite valid, Iyer's conferral of honorary postcoloniality notwithstanding.

If there is any "passing" in recent history, it is, according to the theory of cultural hybridity, a matter of passing back and forth between, or rather straddling, two (or more) domains. For Homi Bhabha, a hybrid identity is one borne by those who find themselves in Fanon's "zone of occult instability where the people dwell," that is, in a "third space" of "symbolic interaction" between competing identities and world views that are culturally, that is to say, discursively, constructed. "Unrepresentable in itself," the zone points to a "beyond" where difference, including spatial and temporal difference, is not subjected to hierarchical ordering. One returns from "intimations" glimpsed in the "beyond" to "transform the present into an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment."[18] The "beyond" to which Bhabha refers is, above all, beyond the

nation. Since the widespread critical debunking of traditional cosmopolitanism, new versions have arisen in response to contemporary concerns produced by globalization. Whereas the older, Eurocentric conception of the universal was inherently raced and gendered and its definition of the "international" explicitly imperialist, the radical cosmopolitanism advanced by the theory of cultural hybridity seeks to retain its predecessor's worldliness and mobility while overcoming its centralization of power and effacement of difference. While hybridity theorists had first attacked the universalizing cosmopolitanism of Enlightenment ideology, they have since developed an ostensibly new, *radical* cosmopolitanism in which hybrid identities are sites of continuing cultural contestation that resist the defining forces of nationalism. For radical cosmopolitanisms, the nation-state and nationalism are burdens to be bucked, the sooner the better, in favor of an emancipatory culture of migrancy and un-belonging.[19]

"To fly and to flee: both are ways of seeking freedom,"[20] Rushdie, who has become a cause célèbre of cultural hybridity, proclaims in *Shame*, a book that is a "leavetaking" not only of "the East" but of all national groundedness.[21] For migrants who have "floated upwards from history, from memory, from Time,"[22] mobility is freedom while "[r]oots . . . are a conservative myth, designed to keep us in our place."[23] Rushdie writes of Pakistan at "a slight angle to reality," overlaying it with a fantastic country to which he will not give a name. Narrating as an unreliable author, he claims he cannot write a realistic novel (and in saying so, seems to have it both ways) because his book would have been banned: "it would have done me no good to protest that I was writing universally . . . ."[24] While Rushdie seeks to indict the shame shared "universally" by all regimes that rely upon oppression and violence, the universality *from* which he writes is

not, of course, in (or only in) the traditional vein that has run through the history of his native India. Rather, it is an attempt to approach historical reality from several, competing points of view. But migrants "have come unstuck from more than land," buoyed by hope but equally afloat in the loss of history, memory and time that national identity sustains. There is then the danger of becoming unstuck, like the character Bilquis, from the experiencing and remembering body wherein history, memory and time converge. There is danger of becoming a "shadow hunting the corridors for something it had lost"[25] only to retreat to an incorporeal solipsism where belief "in frontiers and whatever-might-lie-beyond"[26] expires.

Like Rushdie, Ishiguro has rejected realism, but his reason for doing so is, in a telling irony, quite the opposite. He, too, writes at a slight angle to reality, but not from the viewpoint of some cultural authority, hybrid or otherwise. To the contrary, Ishiguro feels he has "had no clear role, no society or country to speak of or write about" to begin with, and so there has been no history from which to fly to an oppositional freedom: "Nobody's history seemed to be my history." Without a clear sense of national or ethnic belonging, and believing himself bereft of any cultural authority whatsoever, he decided "to use history" in order to "write in an international way." As a young writer he "would search through history books in the way a film director might search for locations for a script already written." In using Japanese and English history only to serve his "own personal purposes," Ishiguro believes he became "a kind of writer that didn't actually belong."[27] His motive for adopting an "international" stance seems to be a resistance to the kind of national and ethnic belonging Hattori describes as "containment": "Ethnicity defines identity through containment as a minority within national culture and thus works

against the emancipatory potential of a transnational and transcultural understanding of the human, as opposed to the national community."[28] By constructing "a slightly more fabulous world,"[29] Ishiguro wishes to "prompt" readers to see it "as a reflection of a world that all kinds of people live in."[30] In his novels, history – anyone's in particular – is only so many props for the staging of transnational – "the human" – community.

Rushdie's wish to create a reflection of different, overlapping worlds (rather than of a world) may only incite charges of illegitimacy: "*Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject!*"[31] Whereas he begs the fork-tongued question, "Who commandeered the job of rewriting history?,"[32] Ishiguro has been commended for writing history with almost inarguable authority. The latter's desire for universality ironically has been made more urgent the more it has been fulfilled. In other words, the more Ishiguro has fled from the cultural "expertise" he has been critically and popularly accorded, thus granting him broad (universal) marketing appeal, the higher the stock in his alleged expertise has risen. When he wrote *The Remains of the Day* partly as a test "to find out if my acceptance was conditioned on the fact that I was acting as a mediator to Japanese culture,"[33] the book was praised for its perfect rendering of English culture and mildly criticized for its overly perfected realist techniques. Again there were "favorable reviews that praised me for a book I didn't wish to write."[34] Denying any documentary realism, Ishiguro outstrips his admiring critics in declaring his butler Booker to be an "extra-English novel," a "super-English novel": "*It's more English than English*." He admits his turn toward England as a writer who is not Anglo-Saxon was a "shock tactic," but if he produced shock, he did not successfully convey the "ironic distance" from which he created a "mythical England" that has never, in fact, existed.[35]

Ishiguro, who is so often gotten wrong, does not want to get it right. What he does want is to write about "things that will be of interest to people in fifty years' time, a hundred years' time, and to people in lots of different cultures." This is not a banal statement about the timelessness of great art. Rather, it is a difficult project born not only of a rejection of cultural authority founded on ethnic, racial or national grounds, but also of an anxiety concerning culture per se in an increasingly globalized world. This cultural anxiety is in part the fallout of a predicament in which Ishiguro is more implicated than he acknowledges in the statements quoted above. His commitment to universality, which licenses his commitment to ahistorical strangeness, is a contemporary and specific matter. That is to say, it is an historical and national one. Although it arises in part from a rejection of essentialized identity, it is also a response to a certain dilemma facing the direct heirs of Enlightenment universality – English writers. If Ishiguro disclaims any specific cultural sovereignty, it is partly because that which might have been his has already been uncrowned.

In numerous interviews, Ishiguro has related the moribund state of English letters after the Second World War.[36] As he tells it, English writers, as subjects of a nation at the heart of world politics, could for a long time write only of things British and still be certain to have international relevance. When the Empire shrank, English writers continued in the same national vein and consequently fell into an obscure provincialism. Writers of Ishiguro's own generation, perceiving the gap and the lag, "had a sense they were [themselves] peripheral." He is clear that this marginality is not merely due to economic decline, but is "in some ways the reverse." As citizens of a relatively wealthy and stable country, English writers "are now suffering from a kind of inferiority

complex" because of "a great sense that the front line where the great clashes of ideologies [are] happening [is] elsewhere." And so, deprived of world-historical drama and the authority that comes from participating in it, British writers have had to "make some sort of leap." They have turned away from England, "search[ing] far and wide in their imaginations for mythical settings or historical settings."[37] Realism is a "natural instinct," but one available only to those living in the eye of some great ideological storm, or else to a country like America which, as a dominant economic, military and cultural power, may root around realistically in its own backyard and still claim the world's attention. But for those "stuck on the margins" of world history, realism, Ishiguro seems to suggest, is inadequate to develop "international themes that are of interest to everybody." Wealth and stability alone, then, do not refuse England the international relevance of its realism. It is almost as if the "concrete reality" felt and disclosed by an English writer, who as a realist "wo[uld]n't have the same authority as someone living in Eastern Europe," were somehow, in the end, not his or her own to tell. In the wake of the failure of universal history promised by Enlightenment ideology and the imperialist projects it legitimated, many English writers have turned either to the histories of others or to realms of the imagination: home will not do. It is in this historical impasse that Ishiguro as an *English* writer believes he finds himself. It is, therefore, in the eschewal of historical legitimacy and national identity that he has hoped to found a new kind of universality through an "arealized" realism in which the workings of memory, and not the events of history, are privileged.

In Pheng Cheah's assessment, both Enlightenment and radical cosmopolitanisms situate their projects – in shorthand, for perpetual peace and for perpetual instability,

respectively – in the realm of culture. Each proposes freedom in a cultural realm itself presumed free from "the given," that is, from such material contingencies as politics, economics, and nature. Hybridity theory can be "virulently postnationalist," banking on cosmopolitan mobility and enlisting a "cultural agency" that proposes "endless hybrid self-creation and autonomy from the given" of material constraints. In renouncing the nation and positing a transformative agency primarily, if not solely, at the level of discourse, hybridity theory dematerializes culture and thus evades its fraught relationship with economic and other "given" spheres at both national and global levels. Radical cosmopolitanism, as exemplified in much émigré fiction and in the theoretical writing of Bhabha and James Clifford, seems to require a "physical freedom from being tied to the earth"[38] that is unavailable to those unable "to fly and to flee" to metropoles of opportunity. Cheah's critique of an agency located in a dematerialized concept of culture and his warning against a postnationalist mindset is relevant both to Ishiguro's imaginary landscape in *The Unconsoled* and to his response to his own place in the "hybrid" canon. Ishiguro, who privileges memory over history, also assigns to culture a privileged freedom from the given. While his own role of cosmopolitan artist has been assigned to him by enthusiasts of hybridity as well as devotees of realism (that genre nurtured by universalists of yore), Ishiguro rejects a uniquely situated cultural authority as well as the historical authority of realism.

Ishiguro has said it puzzles him "that serious writers have not to a greater extent tried to rework the [Western] myth" of universal history because "a nation's myth is the way a country dreams. It is part of a country's fabulized memory. . . ." Here he describes national identity in the form of a collective belief in myth, a fabulized identity conceived

by memory. Wondering why writers do not "try to figure out what that myth is and if they should actually rework or undermine" it, he offers that in *The Remains of the Day* he "was trying to do a similar thing with the English myth." It is unclear to which "thing" Ishiguro refers, whether reworking or undermining, but it seems likely that he means the "figuring out" itself, and that he may have remained ambivalent in that novel. His "overall aim," however, "wasn't confined to British lessons for British people because it's a mythical landscape which is supposed to work at a metaphorical level. *The Remains of the Day* is a kind of parable." In Ishiguro's parables, the nation is in fact a metaphor for something else. He struggles "to make a particular setting actually take off into the realm of metaphor so that people don't actually think it is just about Japan or Britain"; we have seen how he succeeds in this regard. It is his hope that what seems merely national – "'Oh, that's what it's like in Japan at a certain time,' or, 'He's saying something about Britain in the 1930s'" – will "take off" into the universal where it will be gathered up into a totality, a kind of "memory-culture" in which its own interests and concerns will resonate. Reworking a national myth means bringing it into identity with the universal; likewise, undermining such a myth involves demonstrating its limited hold, or its ever failing reach. Either way, the nation itself has no sovereignty; it has already withered away. It is only in memory (and not some anticipated historical inevitability) that "universality" – now culturally construed – can be achieved.

If in Ishiguro's account of the recent course of English literature the nation has fallen away from history, memory, however flawed, remains a site of collective belonging. Through the "emotional manipulation" of fiction in which history is only "a piece of orchestration to bring out my themes," Ishiguro seeks to demonstrate "how one

uses memory for one's own purposes," that is, how we all do. In all of Ishiguro's novels except *The Unconsoled,* a narrator recollects the events of the past and attempts to relate them to the circumstances of the present. Three of these five other novels set off chapters and sections with specific dates, and two with place names as well. (*Never Let Me Go* is prefaced, simply, with "England, late 1990s.") The dates and settings offer, doubly, the *illusion* of history: they are a conscious quotation of a realist convention and at the same time fail to establish the time when or place where "history" happens, thus suggesting its absence. In *The Remains of the Day*, which ranges over most of the first half of the twentieth century, Ishiguro divides chapters by the towns Stevens visits on his four-day journey. "Day Three, Morning: Taunton, Somerset" specifies a random setting and a generic day, neither of which has anything to do with the political intrigue of the 1930s with which most of the chapter is concerned. But of course a morning spent in Taunton in the 1950s has everything to do with the covert meetings between the Germans and British that Stevens relates because it locates *Stevens*, who alone recalls, interprets, and thereby constitutes what has taken place. Stevens, like Ishiguro, uses history for his own purposes, that is, to lend narrative coherence and meaning to a life that has been lived on history's margins. All of Ishiguro's unreliable narrators believe they are directly engaged in the great dramas of history when in fact they are ensnared in private masquerades of memory. Each one enlists external circumstances, actors and events to construct both an identity and a selective narrative that can sustain and legitimate that identity. Their blatant unreliability does not, however, mask some historical truth that they or the reader may divine apart from interpretive recollection. By the same token, the first-person narration of Ishiguro's novels is no more meant to concentrate experience exclusively in

the idiosyncratic solipsisms of particular characters than his historical settings are intended to be "documentary." Rather, the *use* we make of the past as we relate it to the present precisely constitutes "history" in Ishiguro's fictional worlds, and it is this interested translation of discrepant histories into self-knowledge that grounds common experience.

Ishiguro seems to subscribe to something like a rapprochement between Pierre Nora's useful if limited opposition of "real" or traditional and historical memories. For Nora, real memory is "spontaneously actualizing, a memory without a past that ceaselessly reinvents tradition," or continuity between past, present and future. Whereas "a memory without a past" is one that has never lost anything to which it could point as "past" – the past as we think of it is instead lived, present – historical memory "is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer." All that remains are *lieux de memoire*, sites of memory divorced from a lived relation to the past. For Ishiguro, memory is alive and well, and history has gone "elsewhere." Traditional memory, with its capacity to disconnect and resurrect, to banish or restore or revise at will, remains a kind of agency all the more powerful in its detachment from history.

In *The Unconsoled* Ishiguro has stripped away all discernible historical and national determinants to lay bare a purely cultural landscape. But in exerting inordinate pressure upon the activity of memory in a realm of culture that remains wholly "mythical," Ishiguro assays his own dream of the universal. As one might expect, this fabulized realm of memory and culture, of cultural memory, is threatened by the very things it labors to exclude. The severance of memory from history is, of course, a properly historical phenomenon. But history does not return as an allegorical signified, for memory is

already riven by the historical time it would supplant. In *The Unconsoled*, "real" memory's capacity to integrate disparate contexts and engender a future is fantastically "accelerated," turned inside out and thereby canceled as distance and difference are opened and sealed in the same breath, as time is forced to stand still even as it disappears. Literally incarnated by a cosmopolitan artist whose defective memory and delusions of cultural potency contract all that seems alien, Ishiguro's landscape of the imagination cannot, finally, wrest an "autonomy from the given."

II. A bigger, broader world

Unlike Ishiguro's other novels, *The Unconsoled's* "landscape of the imagination" is not even nominally circumscribed by time or place. The past tense of Ryder's narration is essentially conventional, although it necessarily belies the sense of spontaneously unfolding action he hopes to convey as we follow the progress he never makes. A globetrotting pianist invited to give (as always) the performance of his life, he simply appears in Hoffman's hotel lobby and is last seen on a bus circling the perimeter of the nameless city. In contrast to the citizens, he has a definite national origin and an inferred ethnicity. He comes from England, is presumably Anglo-Saxon,[39] but claims the world's stage for his "home." However, the "outside" from which his experience and expertise derive remains offstage, little more than a conceptual horizon against which a lived past *inside* the city gradually becomes apparent.

The city to which he arrives has already been preparing for its renewal by resurrecting Brodsky, an alcoholic, has-been conductor who has for decades been the city's laughingstock. From the city's perspective, Ryder's role is to legitimate efforts

underway and to advise plans for the future based on experience he has gathered from similar situations around the world. A childhood friend of Ryder's from England who lives in the city concedes, "I'm prepared to wait and see. Things can't very well get much worse. And if *you* start saying Brodsky's the thing, well who am I to argue."[40] Ryder "[can]not think of what [to] say to this," but he doesn't have to: authority has been vested in him and responsibility relinquished to him before he has said or done anything. His reputation always precedes him and seems to follow him, unharmed, no matter how remiss he is in keeping promises or appointments (he has lost his schedule and does not ask for a copy), no matter how sorry a figure he cuts whenever he is called upon to give counsel or direction. Neither Ryder nor the reader learns the precise nature of the "crisis" or what can be done to head it off as each opportunity for information or understanding, whether it is a missed appointment with a citizens' group or a private conversation with a city leader, passes without issue. Instead, Ryder alternately panics over what he is expected to know or do and consoles himself that all is well and will, in fact, be better, a congenital tendency he shares with nearly every other character in *The Unconsoled*.

An unreliable narrator is easily identified in the perceivable discrepancies between what he or she knows and what the reader, in collusion with the author (implied or otherwise), knows better. But while Ryder obviously lacks the most fundamental kinds of knowledge, his "unreliability" is first apparent in his curiously uninformed *omniscience*. At the beginning of the novel, he is taken to his hotel room by Gustav, a porter whom he has never met before. In the midst of Gustav's tedious explanations of the room, Ryder abruptly informs us that "a certain matter that had been preoccupying [Gustav] throughout the day had again pushed its way to the front of his mind. He was, in

other words, worrying about his daughter and her little boy."[41] Ryder goes on to relate the porter's problems with his daughter in an ostensibly omniscient, third-person digression, and this is the first breach in the narrative contract between the narrator and the reader, who assumes the former will only tell what he believes he knows, either through first-hand experience or speculation. At one point, Ryder relates to us a conversation underway in a house while he is sitting outside in a car; no attempt is made to explain his bionic sense of hearing. In general, omniscient digressions of matters that Ryder could not know as an "outsider" make up the bulk of the novel, although increasingly these are prefaced with a speculative "perhaps" and suggest, perhaps, a waning of Ryder's omniscient confidence. But he is resourceful, and nothing – except, of course, who he is, what he ought to know and what he is to do – escapes his control.

Just as Ryder penetrates the minds of other characters with fantastic facility, passages between distant locations as well as lost rooms and objects from the distant past suddenly materialize. All movement, literal and symbolic, recurs to the same place – or almost does. In literal terms, all roads lead to Hoffman's hotel, or at least to wherever Ryder wishes to be or away from where he does not. In one scene in a cafe, Ryder argues with Christoff, Brodsky's ousted predecessor (and, as it happens, another "outsider"). He successfully evades Christoff's charges that the famous pianist doesn't understand "local conditions" by suggesting Christoff's failure to lead the town is the result of "a megalomania masquerading behind a modest and kindly manner."[42] Like most people, Ryder is never more articulate in describing his own weaknesses and absurdities than when he attributes them to others. When he suddenly realizes that he has left the little boy Boris alone for a long time in another café, he remembers that the two cafes are adjoined, are "in

fact parts of the same building, this being one of those establishments offering contrasting rooms – opening onto separate streets – catering to different kinds of clientele."[43] Boris is waiting on the other side, impatient and a little frightened but otherwise unharmed. In moving effortlessly from one café to the other, Ryder is doubly well-served in finding Boris safe and in preserving his own little victory over Christoff before it can backfire. In a parallel example, after he has told off a group of strangers, he is waylaid (saved, really) by Miss Collins, whom he then fails to convince to take up again with Brodsky even as he accuses her of failing to be convinced by her own arguments. Unnerved by these experiences, Ryder neatly forecasts a small, more manageable obstacle. As he is attempting to leave the party inconspicuously, he worries that he will, as in "numerous scenes from movies," choose the wrong door, and in fact he does open an overfull broom closet.[44] When he is recognized amid the ensuing commotion, he makes a narrow escape through the right door, finding himself returned, of course, to the hotel which ought to be many miles away.

Coincidences in the form of collocations occur frequently, as they do in that twilight between sleeping and waking where the dreamer has some degree of editorial control over what transpires. Such seamlessness across space and time not only spares the dreamer the unpleasant, possibly fatal consequences of nightmarish events but preserves the dream itself: the dreamer need not now awaken. In a childhood memory that Ryder recounts, he informs us that such an operation is a learned strategy. As a boy he had been playing in his room with toy soldiers on a rug whose "torn patch" in the center had always "irritated" him when his parents began to argue downstairs.

> It occurred to me for the first time that this tear could be used as a sort of bush terrain for my soldiers to cross. This discovery–that the blemish that had always threatened to undermine my imaginary world could in fact be incorporated into it–had been one of some excitement for me, and that "bush" was to become a key factor in many of the battles I subsequently orchestrated.

Ryder actually relates this remarkable anecdote about absorbing threats into his "imaginary world" from that very childhood bedroom, that is, from his hotel room which he believes is his "childhood sanctuary" merely remodeled, a realization that produces a "profound feeling of peace" to overcome him.[45] It is in pursuit of this feeling –which is in fact the depthless quiescence of death – that every moment of possible consequence passes behind him as he misses appointments, refuses to intercede, abandons scenes. At the end of the novel, when the concert hall is darkened and everyone is eating breakfast, Ryder asks Stephan if he ought now to say a few words to the citizens. As it turns out, a microphone is handily not handy, and he could never be heard above the din otherwise. Ryder orchestrates impossible situations where everything that can goes awry, afterward consoling himself that all has gone well enough, as chance would have it. If he admits to Miss Collins that "I haven't had a chance to prepare my ground in the usual way,"[46] Mr. Pedersen reminds him, punningly, that "there's no one more adept than yourself at recovering lost ground."[47] The usual way, of course, is covering over difference and distance and dissolving time by collapsing its frames.

Whenever Ryder clicks his heels, everyplace is like home. He converts everything into a domestic arena where he is known and knowing, acknowledging no difference

among the many cities he visits and eliding the most fundamental distance between himself and others; his grasp exceeds his reach. Ryder cannot orient himself amid the "local conditions" that would define him and others as being here or there, this one or that one, because they are immaterial in the global gamut of his experience. Any mention of what he does not know or ought to know regarding the city inspires a feeling of helplessness masquerading as expertise. Whenever confronted by his own doubt, fear, or ignorance, Ryder meets it with the "knowingness" Jonathan Lear describes as "a widespread sense of boredom and irritation."[48] We console ourselves that we "already know" things which we are in fact not empowered to know, or answers to enormously complicated problems we feel are impossible to answer to or change. While change is ostensibly the order of the day, everything is presumed the same – people's needs and desires, their history and their future. At a formal gathering where Ryder the V.I.P. goes unrecognized, he breaks into a gossiping group of strangers with the following reproof.

> Is it any wonder, is it any wonder at all that in this little town of yours, you have all these problems, this *crisis* as some of you choose to term it? That so many of you are miserable and frustrated? Does it puzzle anyone, anyone from outside? . . . Do we, we observers, from a bigger, broader world, do we scratch our head in bewilderment? . . . No! Not for a moment! One arrives and what does one immediately see all around? Exemplified, ladies and gentlemen, by people like you, yes, you here! You *typify* –I'm sorry if I'm being unfair, if there are examples yet more gross and monstrous to be found under the rocks and paving stones of this city –but to my eyes, you, sir, and you, madam, yes, as much as I regret to break it to you, yes, you *exemplify* everything that's so wrong here!

Feeling "deliciously under control" and facetiously allowing that there they may be "examples yet more gross and monstrous to be found" in the city's past, Ryder reduces those before him – whoever they may be – to perfectly typical examples that he, as someone from "outside," can easily identify. Because all the cities he has visited are exchangeable, he is unsurprised and unbewildered by "all these problems" he "immediately sees," recognizes and understands, and he is unmoved as he scorns their right to the word *crisis*. We, of course, still know no more than we did before – that the city suffers from misery and frustration. The importance of his performance seems to mean very little here as he thrusts responsibility for banal suffering back onto the "little town." Leaguing himself with "observers from a bigger, broader world," Ryder evades the question of what is to be done by implying the "crisis" is due to what people *are*, that is, "inane" and "seem[ingly] so happy."[49]

From his own perspective, Ryder's purpose in the city is at once one of paramount, and evidently personal, importance and just another perfunctory performance on his world tour of duty. His reduction of all he encounters to exchangeable types to be found anywhere and everywhere prevents him from either building upon a pre-existing foundation or founding some new order. In this regard, Ryder himself easily typifies the cosmopolitan reviled by many on the left. Bruce Robbins summarizes the ill feeling borne toward cosmopolitanism as

> the assumption that to pass outside the borders of one's nation, whether by physical travel or merely by thoughts and feelings entertained while one stays at home, is to wallow in a privileged and irresponsible detachment. What is assumed is in fact a chain of successive detachments: from true feeling, hence

> from the responsibility that engages a whole person, not a sometime spectator; from responsibility, hence from the constituency to which one would be responsible; from constituency, hence from significant political action. The cosmopolitan is held to be incapable of participating in the making of history, doomed to the mere aesthetic spectatorship that he or she is also held secretly to prefer.[50]

The attributes of the cosmopolitan described here propose self-interest is at the heart of worldly orientation. Otherness recedes to where it need not be touched, as if glassed in by a television screen, thereby precluding attachment, responsibility, and action. The counterpart of the imperialist who seeks to domesticate otherness in his or her own image, this cosmopolitan also remains "at home," in feeling if not in fact, but rejects or avoids historical consequence in favor of a knowing "aesthetic spectatorship." Robbins' caricature bears some relation to both traditional, Eurocentric cosmopolitanism and the radical cosmopolitanism of cultural hybridity and intellectual migrancy. If one effaces or fetishizes difference and the other celebrates and embodies it, each position of "homelessness" – including, perhaps, Ishiguro's own professed stance as a "writer who doesn't belong" – partakes of a seemingly unavoidable tendency toward domestication in the world of *The Unconsoled*. Where "home" is at once forsaken and taken for granted, any relation between self and other is short-circuited, cancelled in the commitment to being at home in a nowhere that is everywhere.

For if Ryder's failure to register difference is characteristic of a cosmopolitanism that proposes to look beyond the nation while failing to look beyond itself, it is also indicative of a peculiar anxiety brought about by the homogenizing forces of

globalization. The compulsive conflation of differences into a uniform vista is a motivated – and paradoxical – response to discontinuities produced by the acceleration of history and by the general disembedding of social and political relationships that have been overtaken and abstracted at a global level. Ryder overcomes various distances through a kind of forced continuity only to reveal a radical discontinuity between past and present and thus the discontinuities of his own life's narrative.

III. Such a small world

As the "last incarnation of memory and history," the memory-nation, as Nora describes it, was open "to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting" things "long dormant and periodically revived." It could thereby selectively integrate its history into a continuous narrative by which enduring values might sow the future. Likewise, the city of the unconsoled lays its hopes in a revival of a past that has been lost and forgotten. When Mr. Pedersen, a civic leader, discusses the background of the approaching "crisis" with Ryder, he relates a memory in which the city's children invented a kind of game. Just before a concert, all the children had to run and pile leaves up to a certain stain on a wall before the adults entered the concert hall. "If we didn't, the whole city was going to explode into a million pieces, some such thing. So there we all were, rushing back and forth, our arms full of wet leaves! It's easy for someone of my age to become nostalgic, Mr. Ryder, but there's no doubt about it, this was a very happy community once."[51] Every character in the novel relates a similar tale of an Eden lost to some lapse or other and hopes to regain it by a return to the past. Pedersen, who takes on part of the blame for Christoff's rise to inadequacy, also rules that Christoff "and everything he has come to

represent must now be put away in some dark corner of our history."[52] The shameful failure to have taken the right action, to have done and therefore to have been enough, launches an endless series of renewed efforts that begin in dark corners of history. From pure memory's perspective, history is where the inchoate future lies. After Christoff has been "put away," the civic leaders return to Brodsky, who had been put away even earlier. "That passion, that fine vision we encountered [listening to Brodsky's old recordings] that evening, it's all been waiting somewhere deep inside and is now steadily awakening."[53]

But when Ryder asks Pedersen about Max Sattler, before whose monument he has been controversially photographed, Pedersen likens the city's conflicted feelings for Sattler and the lost history he embodies to the rueful dreams of old men (old men, for instance, like Pedersen). "Well it can be like that for a town, for a community. Every now and then . . . it looks back at its history and asks itself: 'What if? What might we have become if only . . . .'"[54] Pedersen replies to his own question that nothing would have changed whether Sattler had been followed because "certain things . . . are so deeply embedded." Sattler "was an irrelevance," and therefore "[n]o experience, however crucial, would have changed that for him."[55] For the town to have followed Sattler, or for Sattler or anyone else to have shaped their own destiny, would have amounted neither to tragedy nor glory but to a return of the same. The "embedded" past of cultural tradition determines all, once and for all. Here, the "recovery" of the past is not effortful but altogether pointless, not optimistic but a resignation to the relentless force of a burdensome past that is yet unable to envision a future. We know nothing about Sattler, aside from the obvious allusiveness of his name, except that he embodied a potential

never quite realized, for better or worse depending on one's viewpoint. Pedersen points out to Ryder that Sattler "holds an attraction for certain people *precisely because* he's so distant, a piece of local myth."[56] Sattler, attractive only in his remoteness, is a seeming origin shrouded in a forgotten past where meaning and value is thought to reside but who himself could never have overcome the "deeply embedded things" of the city's *truly* originary history – whatever that may be. Sattler was too late, a fact at once obscured and made evident in his monumentality.

Throughout *The Unconsoled*, a deeply felt belief in the recovery of past potential that need only wait until the right time vies with the conviction that "it's too late." The capacity of traditional memory to reawaken what sleeps but never dies knocks up against a future that is already cold: the temperament of a *lieu de mémoire* is born. And yet the feeling that it's too late reinstates an undying past, one that has irreversibly determined everything – including its own obsolescence. What is lost, then, is transmissibility. As Giorgio Agamben summarizes a certain line of thought, "The interruption of tradition, which is for us now a *fait accompli*, opens an era in which no link is possible between old and new, if not the infinite accumulation of the old in a sort of monstrous archive or the alienation effected by the very means that is supposed to help with the transmission of the old."[57] In his Porter's Dance, Gustav is made to carry the literal baggage of an ever-accumulating history; he collapses beneath its weight in what is the last fantastic gasp of traditional art form. However, the "concrete place" in which tradition is handed over (and therefore always susceptible to betrayal) may have long been vacant, no more than an unstable site of mourning, as Benjamin proposed in his *Trauerspiel* study. But late twentieth century modernity poses a different problem than it did for Baroque allegory,

for now it has become increasingly difficult to assign even an arbitrary, consoling meaning to the ruins of history. The ruins themselves are tidily dispatched in the acceleration of history (ruin is in fact the proviso for production in an accelerated economy); there are few remains to ponder. Only loss itself attains to the concrete.

Wendy Brown, writing of the "wounded attachments" of contemporary Western liberal societies, suggests that "the presumed continuity of history is replaced with a sense of its violent, contingent and ubiquitous *force* – history becomes that which has weight but no trajectory , mass but no coherence, force but no direction: it is war without ends or end."[58] Responsibility and agency give way to a force (re)conceived as fate which cannot, however, alleviate "man's will to find himself guilty, and unredeemably so."[59] What persists is Nietzschean resentment, the inability or refusal to affirm "Thus I willed it" in the face of an oppressive past and the present it has brought about. Pain, Nietzsche reminds us, is "the strongest aid to mnemonics," and it is therefore in umbrage, denial, guilt and nostalgia for both what was and what ought to have been that a relation to the past endures. Pain achieves a kind of continuity, an ironic sort of prosthetic attachment that may summon what is felt to be missing by recalling its absence. Such a form of "transmissibility" amounts only to "reinfecting the wound"; no future emerges. Nietzsche advocates an admittedly difficult "active forgetting" in order to lop off the painful, infected and vestigial, to overcome the melancholic "it was" of time by willing what has never yet been. But Ryder seems to master only numbness by willfully forgetting not only the past but the possibility of a future.

Ryder appears to suffer from amnesia, unable to remember the events leading up to his visit in the strange city. It becomes increasingly evident that Ryder is not the

visiting outsider he claims to be, but is an erstwhile citizen of the city with a wife and son he never recognizes as such. He does not wonder if Sophie and Boris are "in fact" his family, but slides effortlessly into an unspecified but obviously familial relationship fraught with resentment and longing (in an interview, Ishiguro refers to Sophie as Ryder's wife). Although he has supposedly never met them before, he shares common memories with them which, however, do not serve to identify him. He exerts parental authority over Boris without acknowledging their relationship; he denies at once his past as father and the future represented by his son, just as he evades his own sonhood to parents who must never appear.

Ryder tells Boris that he must go away frequently, thus disrupting family life, because it is for the best – everyone's best.

> I have to keep going on these trips because, you see, you can never tell when it's going to come along. I mean the very special one, the very important trip, the one that's very important, not just for me but for everyone, everyone in the whole world. . . .You see, it would be so easy to just miss it. . . . Then only later I'll discover that was the one, the very important one. And you see, once you miss it, there's no going back, it would be too late.[60]

One may only assume these trips share the same anonymously critical tenor as his visit to the city and are equally without consequence. The right trip will have been made, we gradually learn, when Ryder's parents are present at one of his performances, for they have never seen him play as an accomplished adult. He alternately forgets to participate in preparations for their arrival to the city and frets over whether his musical selection will be to their taste. As in the story of the toy soldiers, Ryder has recurrent memories of

a lonely, disturbed childhood, much like Boris's, in which he consoles himself with some activity while his parents remain offstage, distant and powerful. Clearly, Stephan's anxiety over his parents' approval sheds light on Ryder's experience. Stephan plays brilliantly before the city while Ryder plays only in the seclusion of a shack, but neither of their parents witness the achievement of their sons. The right time never comes whether one acts or not.

Ryder recounts to the reader his childhood "training sessions" – experiments that he put himself through in not acting while enduring time and distance. Playing outside in a field one day, "absorbed in some fantasy," he "had suddenly felt a sense of panic and a need for the company of [his] parents." He was overcome by the urge to run home, but resisted. "[F]or some reason – perhaps I associated it in my mind with immaturity – I had forced myself to delay my departure. There had not been any question in my mind that I would, very soon, start to run across the field. It was simply a matter of holding back that moment with an effort . . . ." Repeatedly he held out, pulling back longer each time. "There was no doubting the strange thrill that had accompanied the growing fear and panic of these occasions, a sensation which perhaps accounted for the somewhat compulsive hold my 'training sessions' came to have over me."[61] "I like being lonely," Ryder had then claimed to a disbelieving playmate, apparently attributing this feeling to the masturbatory thrill incited by prolonged delay.[62] The training sessions quite literally illustrate Freud's repetition compulsion as he delays reaching a goal which is also an origin: home. Certainly he wishes to return home in his "own fashion," seizing control of the time in which it takes him to do so. But there is something peculiar to both his training sessions and his erring, protracted passage through the city that does not square

with Freud's classic account. It should be emphasized that these are *training* sessions, which is at once a joke in its literalization of the repetition compulsion and in its presumption of controlling what is allegedly instinctual. Origin and telos are identical in the training sessions, whereas their inevitable and necessary noncoincidence in the Freudian scheme opens difference within repetition, that is, a future. No "decisive external influences" impede young Ryder's progress across the field on his way home; he simply uses time to sustain distance. Likewise, the adult Ryder forever awaits the right time, repeatedly putting off the moment when his parents may witness his mature performance, when the past will come into its own in a future it anticipated, when home shall be abroad and vice versa –when the origin shall double as telos. Delay, however, is only half his procedure, for the "right time" is not only the never-to-be-reached future, but also already past; Ryder, in his own confounding fashion, guarantees belatedness. Ryder's absolute equation of origin with telos precludes Freud's "complicated detours" and results in chronic impasse.[63]

That Ryder can never find his parents in the city, that he is satisfied by vague, third-person accounts of their visit to the city years earlier by people from whom he coaxes a consoling tale, points less to a desire for the missing or imaginary origin than it does to a renunciation of it. Ryder does not wish to regain the origin, but to sustain his distance from it. In *The Unconsoled* ground is never "recovered," only "lost," deliberately, in order to begin again *without beginning*. The desire to break free of the origin is partly a resistance to parental as well as historical and national determination. Ryder does not, as in traditional memory, perform that continual burial that prepares for rebirth. He attempts to outmaneuver death as well as birth, not only because birth is the

equivalent of death (the return to original quiescence), but because it is believed to have determined the inadequacy of the narrative it initiated. Pedersen warns that "the introducing of Max Sattler [into civic discourse] has seriously undermined the possibility of progress."[64] Here a return to a putative origin that is alluring only because it is all but unattainable cannot produce a different, let alone a commonly agreed-upon, future. Ryder's inability to "remember" is partly a difficulty in connecting the past to the present in terms of its significance, relevance and authority, yet it is also an active forgetting of those "deeply embedded" terms that have culminated in the present tendency toward crisis. There might be here the beginnings of a critique of both the myth of origins and of the inevitability of progress were it not for the fact that Ryder does in fact "recall" the past in his "acting out" of the totalizing immanence such myths propose and perpetuate. Discourses on loss such as the unconsoled citizens' not only encrypt a common destiny in some unfathomable past, they also reproduce the nostalgia upon which such myths have been founded.[65] The mourning of community, that which gathers individuals into an immanent totality, posits a transcendence, immanence, or essence now lost. From this perspective, as Jean-Luc Nancy describes it, "the individual is merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community" and as such "another, and symmetrical, figure of immanence: the absolutely detached for-itself, taken as origin and certainty."[66] Ryder, who affirms loss in his will to consolation, substitutes himself as the immanent origin he fails to overcome.

Just as we recognize Ryder's past in the city in his "forgotten" relation to Sophie and Boris, it also becomes apparent that in Boris, Stephan, Hoffman, Gustav and Brodsky, one may discern a Ryder for every season of life: anxiously compliant

childhood, anxiously aspiring youth, middle-aged impasse and wasted age. Each follows Ryder's habitual tendency to console himself even before the inevitable defeat of his goals. Together their stories constitute a fractured *Künstlerroman* in which *Bildung*, in any of its senses, is thwarted at every narrative turn. Each of these characters both doubles as and exceeds Ryder, a point that holds out a certain measure of promise and to which I will return. For now, if regarded as doubles (or as Ryder's projections, which here amounts to the same thing), their "serialization" as separate and seemingly unrelated life narratives ironically allows Ryder to keep his dream-life going forever since each "Ryder" amounts to the same. As an atomized Ryder unloosed from their/his own unfolding history, they may not achieve integration under Ryder's despotic narrative order. But if their narratives are discontinuous they are also simultaneous. Each is founded in a seeming vacuum; each may emerge identically against some universal ground without a determining past or an altering future. They belong neither to the past nor future: they are all *present*. The simultaneity of Ryder's past and future selves is in fact only possible in their discontinuity as unrelated individuals, in the "colossal inability to organize their lives."[67]

Ryder's refraction of himself into multiple, irreconcilable narratives creates the illusion of simultaneous "presents," each a kind of immaculate "origin" unto itself to which he does not return to begin again, each a "telos" with which he will not come to terms. He refuses to alter or influence the destinies of the other characters (or selves) who seek his help just as he ensures his parents' absence. It is too late: the past is radically broken off from anything he can do now. If Ryder is trying to master anything at all, it is living without origins and without the consequences of their ensuing narratives in some

eternal – that is to say, fantastic and self-annihilating – present. For where it is always not yet time and already too late, it is the *relation* between past and future, and not the past per se, that is "lost." Ryder's is above all a disavowal of the lived present, the now of modernity that history produces and which it peremptorily destroys. He ultimately reproduces, then, what Nora calls history's "goal and ambition to annihilate what has in reality taken place" as he compulsively constructs an impossible present with a past that is experienced as a radical break and a future that at every moment lies already buried.

Nancy writes that the "inconsequential atomism" taken to be the fallout of the dissolution of community subscribes to a "metaphysics of the absolute" where "being as ab-solute, as perfectly detached, distinct, and closed" amounts to a "being without relation."

> A simple and redoubtable logic will always imply that within its very separation the absolutely separate encloses, if we can say this, more than what is simply separated. Which is to say that the separation itself must be enclosed, that the closure must not only close around a territory (while still remaining exposed, at its outer edge, to another territory, with which it thereby communicates), but also, in order to complete the absoluteness of the separation, around the enclosure itself.[68]

Ryder's absolute refusal of any relation either to his lived past, to the "small world" of family discord or to the "little town" of imminent crisis is realized in his enclosure of all borders and distinctions. The forced continuity Ryder effects between people and places is the modus operandi of his cosmopolitan knowingness, a claim of omnipotence in the ability to round the globe, to encircle and contain it. But the absoluteness of his individualism secures another – the absolute immanence of a globalized world in which both individual and community have been sublated at a higher level of abstraction.

Ryder's enclosures are an effort to anchor himself in a world grown too large, too diffuse. The city must be all, both as the setting we are limited to and as the model for all other cities. In the world of the novel, it seems that his efforts are in fact redundant, belated. Ryder maintains his outsider status until the end, proclaiming his uniqueness and distance from all he meets and sees, but as we have seen, he is already home, he *is* home, confined to its precinct wherever he may err. He abolishes difference and denies otherness that perhaps no longer exist, at the same time conjuring identity across space and time that is already in place. The city wishes to be like other cities; they already are. Ryder's stance as outsider is partly a bid at singularity in a world where it seem to be disappearing quickly. The splitting of himself into discontinuous, "identical" narratives to achieve stability outside the ebb and flow of history is at once product of and rejoinder to a "society that levels particularity" and that "tends to recognize individuals only as identical and equal."[69] Ryder's declaration of difference and distance is reactive to an interminable replication of identity. It is almost imperial cosmopolitanism in reverse, a fretful attempt to extricate oneself from a world of one's own making. "Home," the origin, is dispersed everywhere. The cosmopolitan promise of a utopic world where there are no others has become absurdly true.

IV. The uncounseled

But the featurelessness of Ryder's imaginary landscape is not absolute. His resistance to familial, national and historical determination cannot achieve the pliant universality to which such indeterminacy aspires. If the city is nameless, it is inhabited by "Europeans": *The Unconsoled*, to the extent that it is an allegory in the traditional sense, is a Western one.[70] The things the city has felt "slipping out of their control" are never

named, but when considered in relation to the national and historical contexts that inform the city's pervasive sense of loss, they suggest a fear of those globalizing tendencies that seem to have eroded national boundaries and historical possibilities.[71] The international irrelevance which Ishiguro understands as a fateful moment in England's literary history was due first of all to the decline of its Empire. But as Anthony Giddens notes, "the declining grip of the West over the rest of the world is not a result of the diminishing impact of its institutions, but a result of their global spread." It is, of course, a *Western* point of view to fear that the rest of the world has become the West reconstituted or diluted whereby the West ceases to be discretely itself. For England, what has slipped out of control is on one level a sense of bearing both in terms of consequence and orientation in a world grown seamless, and on another it is that which returns all too cannily when boundaries have become too fluid, such as the influx of immigrants from former colonies. If the latter concerns a fear of "otherness" while the former expresses the fear that difference is vanishing altogether, they are yet related, if not sometimes strangely intertwined, in their preoccupation with national and cultural autonomy. In England's literary climate of the past two decades, those hailing from Commonwealth countries or former colonies have been welcomed as international artists who might redirect the English literary scene on the world stage. As Ishiguro describes it, the "tremendous interest in literature that suddenly appeared almost overnight" in the eighties was due in part to "an awareness that Britain was a more international place, a more cosmopolitan place, but it wasn't the center of the world."[72] A market for writers from the very centers of long-distance power over which Britain had lost some or all of its hold grew contemporaneously with its own sense of marginality.

In a country now "more cosmopolitan"[73] because increasingly home to immigrants and their descendants, there has been a heightened receptivity to the represented experiences of lives that have been in one way or another Anglicized. For its most vocal proponent, Homi Bhabha, hybridity theory proposes to overcome a fixed horizon of cultural difference by appealing to the "in-between," that Fanonian "zone of occult instability" from which cultural difference, produced by "split minority identities," emerges: culture is enriched, expanded and endangered all at once by differently constructed and constructing voices. In *The Unconsoled*, Bhabha's proposed "expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment" is instead continually subject to contraction and emptying. For the nameless city of the unconsoled, a sense of cultural autonomy has deteriorated, and its restoration is sought in the mediatorial perspective of an "outsider." The prizing of Ryder's cultural authority reflects an attempt to engage with difference, but Ryder is a citizen, an "insider" unclaimed as such either by himself or by others. If hybridity theorists rightly point out that there is no consummate outsider and no fully initiated insider in the flux of cultural construction, in *The Unconsoled* such "hybridity" as is constituted in having a foot in each world (whatever these "worlds" are taken to be) is turned inside out and effectively cancelled. Difference can be pressed into the service of a national identity that seeks to recover its original face in a kind of furtive recentering of power and authority. Those "international" narratives that have disrupted the history of British rule by revealing the alien sources and pilfered resources of its traditional authority might also serve to restore its sovereign image in resupplying the otherness that had originally constituted what Hattori calls "the ideology of 'true' Britishness." When Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* declares that his "small

contribution" is, "whatever the outcome, cause for pride and contentment," Hattori suggests that the novel "illuminates in the embers of its plot a putative subversive nostalgia for the faded but glorious day of loyal subjects and model minorities."[74] What is at issue in the intensified marketing of immigrant and other Anglophone authors is not merely the aesthetic spectatorship of Western readers but the refounding of some prosthetic empire through cultural representation (however unflattering), where a kind of conditional imperial authority can live on in the reauthoring of its histories.

Ishiguro has always been curiously situated in the arena of aesthetic consumption. If he has been drafted into the army of those writing back at a wounded empire, he has also been saluted as a captain of the heritage industry. Although he has contested both of these authorial identities, he confesses that "[p]ublicity for me has to a large extent been fighting the urge to be stereotyped by people."[75] Ishiguro is never more honest in exploring complicity, in foregrounding the purposes for which he "uses" history, than he is in *The Unconsoled*, where "history" is allegedly absent. The novel's "imaginary landscape" is fantastic in a *particular* way, one that implicitly questions its own longing for the otherness of yesterday and tomorrow. If Stevens betrays a nostalgia for the power differential and (thus) the cultural stability of bygone days, one might add that all of Ishiguro's novels betray a nostalgia for history qua history. In Ishiguro's own feeling of a fall from international history and his fear of succumbing to a homogeneous culture where everything is leveled to "the lowest common denominator" in the manner of "international TV,"[76] what is meant by "international" in these statements is rather different: the first holds to a belief in historical possibility *going on elsewhere* while the second sees in globalization its inevitable demise. In *The Unconsoled*, the imaginary

landscape is set not "anywhere" but elsewhere, in fact in a shadowy Eastern Europe where realism is apparently still practicable. The unreal city is committed to its sense of impending crisis, living out, perhaps, its author's embedded fantasy of living through momentous change on "the front line" where "great clashes of ideologies" take place. Moreover, the cultural scene of *The Unconsoled*, filtered through an atrophied, denationalized memory, is not only staged in the relative turmoil of a fantastic *other* Europe, but in a society where mass culture is all but banished. Where high art is championed to the exclusion of all other human endeavors, conditions could not be more ideal for the overhaul of an eager and receptive society through cultural redirection, and yet a vague modern coldness persists. Although Ryder never confronts the enemy of mass culture which would most likely, in reality, marginalize him, it seems to have settled over the city like ash. But if he never meets it, it is perhaps because he is himself not unlike mass culture at its most insidious in his incessant incorporation and stabilization of anything that threatens change and in the instant gratification that his elisions of memory and evasions of history produce.

Ishiguro challenges the ethos of cultural "enrichment" through exchange, as well as his own faith in memory's capacity to found a transnational and transcultural community. What he has looked for in memory is a space where difference is negotiated without being sublated and where commonality is achieved without succumbing to homogeneity. But in *The Unconsoled*, the catapulting of national myth into an international imaginary fails, the nation relapses into its inconsequence and provincial consolations. Waiting for the right time that has already come and that never will arrive reveals the lag between memory and history, never to be closed except where it is

enclosed, elided in a consoling rhetoric that makes a virtue of belatedness. In a review of *The Unconsoled*, Richard Eder claims, "Ryder's long nightmare operates a change in him; he has a ruefully chastened awakening at the end. It is an unexpectedly satisfying end but it needed to come sooner." It is quite impossible to detect when Ryder has an "awakening," let alone a "ruefully chastened" one. (It is rather Sophie who has a rueful awakening as she tells Ryder, "You were always on the outside of our love. . . . On the outside of our grief too.")[77] On the last page, estranged from others and ever a stranger to himself, he consoles himself over the loss of everything he might have possessed with mounds of food on a public bus circling the city. In any case, the end has always already come, too soon, and it is neither satisfying nor unexpected. Ryder does not awaken to the past because it has led him, precisely, here: home. The crisis Eder believes he has located is in fact permeated throughout the novel, discoverable everywhere and nowhere. The crisis of late modernity that has broken off society from nation, memory from history and history from itself as it abolishes its own content has become chronic, low-grade, diffuse; it is a "crisis of universalism."[78]

V. The good wound

Ishiguro, in an interview that took place during the writing of *The Unconsoled*, speaks of the private motivations of writing.

> I know many, many writers, and I would say that most of them are more than averagely sane and responsible people, but I think a lot of them do write out of something that is unresolved somewhere deep down and, in fact, it's probably too late ever to resolve it. Writing is kind of a consolation or

> therapy. Quite often, bad writing comes out of this kind of therapy. The best writers come out of a situation where I think the artist or writer has to some extent come to terms with the fact that it is too late. The wound has come, and it hasn't healed, but it's not going to get any worse; yet the wound is there. It's a kind of consolation that the world isn't quite the way you wanted it but you can somehow reorder it or try and come to terms with it by actually creating your own world and own version of it.[79]

Writing as "therapy" is not curative, but consoling. "Bad" art arises from a refusal to accept that a radical break has occurred, from a persistence in returning to something that is no longer open to resolution. Speaking of his own tendency to revisit again and again the same themes and forms, Ishiguro explains, "I feel like I'm *closing in on some strange, weird territory* that for some reason obsesses me, and I'm not sure what the nature of that territory is, but with every book I'm kind of closing in on this strange territory."[80] "Closing in" would not be a nostalgic return to what has gone but an encroachment upon the mysteries of the wound that remains in its stead. Ishiguro recasts what might appear to be the compulsive and abject wound-licking of a dying animal as a canny pursuit of the unfamiliar, as the proprietary survey of a strange territory whose nature is subject to continuous transformation in the very approach one takes or makes towards it. Ishiguro, then, seems to appeal to a hermeneutics of afterwardsness (*Nachtraglichkeit)* wherein retrospective understanding of an event – forgotten or immemorial – literally constitutes that event which may be said to occur for the first time only in its necessarily belated remembrance. But there is a fundamental contradiction in his speculation on the scene of writing. That the wound may not worsen names a cessation (and not an elsewhere) of

history and envisions a world of ruins. What remains of what has past are precisely its remains, those traces that have survived a more general extinction. Such fragments cannot recall, refer or relate to a prior whole – it is too late. How is return across a radical break to some stubborn immanence possible?

Ryder affirms traumatic loss in his bids at consolation. He finds himself sobbing when Sophie leaves him, but immediately "straighten[s] and recover[s his] composure" when he spies a buttery croissant in the hands of a stranger.[81] Anything may serve as a substitute for a loss he preserves in never "properly" mourning it. At the same time, although he renounces relation to the past, he implicitly exhibits nostalgia for what may have never been his to mourn in the first place. Agamben interprets melancholy (what Freud has deemed "failed" mourning) as

> not so much the regressive reaction to the loss of the love object as the imaginative capacity to make an unobtainable object appear as if lost. If the libido behaves *as if* a loss had occurred although *nothing* has in fact been lost, this is because the libido stages a simulation where what cannot be lost because it has never been possessed appears as lost, and what could never be possessed because it had never existed may be appropriated insofar as it is lost.[82]

The melancholic subject not only internalizes the split between itself and a lost object, thus narcissistically locating in itself the traumatic rupture, it also renders the object *apparent* – "both possessed and lost at the same time."[83] As Rebecca Comay glosses Agamben's point, "the very notion of originary loss ('as such') preceding the loss of any determinate object could function equally as a preemptive denial of loss that would mask the real inaccessibility of its object by determining it in advance as lost – thus

negatively appropriable in its very absence."[84] Such a dexterous maneuver seems to operate on several related levels in *The Unconsoled*. First, Ryder embodies rupture by guaranteeing that an object of desire be lost to the past even as it is spotted on the horizon of a future that is never permitted realization. The object is absent (after all, the city's past is allegedly not his own) but possessed as an imminent possibility (for "everyone"). At the same time he attempts to remain "outside" a shared sense of love and grief in a zone of occult stability where no one dwells, invulnerable to those forces of desire and loss that might threaten it. Certainly the city of the unconsoled imagines an "originary loss," one that reflects the resentment Ishiguro describes as England's postwar inheritance. Ishiguro himself has taken on the burden of England's loss of an "international" history that was allegedly never his to mourn ("No one's history seemed to be my history"), "appropriating" it as a site of creative regeneration outside of history proper. This curious double movement ultimately finds expression in Brodsky's aborted performance. But in the resurrected composer, Ishiguro begins to explore what may lie beyond a poetics of memory with its subjection to loss and its inoperable "blind[ness] to all but the group it binds."[85]

The equation of history with traumatic memory participates in the Western myth of originary loss that renders at once vain and relentless all attempts to recall or refound some organic community. For Nancy, such a "thought of community or the desire for it may be nothing other than a belated invention that tried to respond to the harsh reality of modern experience. . . ."[86] The withdrawal of divine immanence believed to have secured an organic community now lost to the vicissitudes of history has modulated into a humanistic idea of community. In this belated idea, human essence is produced as

either a work or work, as an "operative immortality"[87] by which the deaths of singular beings are "reabsorbed or sublated in a community, yet to come, that would attain immanence."[88] Such "immanentism," however, may only attain to a kind of "totalitarianism."[89] The absoluteness that the "absolute-subject of metaphysics" or the "total State" or, for that matter, the Global Village seem to embody issues from a logic that is "contradictory." To be absolute, one must "be alone being alone." This self-violating logic

> implicates it in a relation [that] tears and forces open, from within and from without at the same time, and from an outside that is nothing other than the rejection of an impossible interiority, the "without relation" from which the absolute would constitute itself. [It is thus that] community comes perforce *to cut into* the subject by virtue of [the] logic of the absolute [that] sets it into relation: but this, obviously, cannot make for a relation between two or several absolutes, no more than it can make an absolute of the relation. It undoes the absoluteness of the absolute. The relation (the community) is, if it *is*, nothing other than what undoes, in its very principle – and at its closure or on its limit –the autarchy of absolute immanence.[90]

The relation between singular beings is a sharing (*partage*) that also divides. Singular beings are exposed to one another and to an outside at the limit drawn by their common finitude. The "'origin' – the origin of community or the originary community – is nothing other than this limit: the origin is the tracing of the borders upon which or along which singular beings are exposed. We are alike because each one of us is exposed to an outside that *we* are *for ourselves*."[91] We are exposed to ("cut" through by) the other's exposure to alterity, which in turn constitutes our own alterity and our "being-in-common" (but not

our common being). The limit that lies between us and that calls us to a community that can be neither lost nor completed constitutes an origin that is a *between*, "the spacing of the experience of the outside."[92] Being is not gathered, it is outside itself, inclined to others just it is inclined to its singular death in an incommensurable relation to an outside it may not grasp, except in community as singular beings who are equally spaced and exposed. Thus community *is* not, it cannot be work or be made into a work, it cannot prescribe the "making operational" of a world.[93]

We have seen how Ryder attempts to constitute himself as an absolute "being without relation." He closes down community at every involuted turn by enclosing all that threatens his assumed self-immanence, namely, the exteriority posed by death. If, as we shall see, he refuses to "make a work," it is because he wishes to erase the limit where such a work – the working and unworking of community – would have to be both abandoned and begun again. Ishiguro thus seems to critique a certain postmodern politics of "process" that sometimes substitutes itself for the myth of progress it fails to interrupt. Interruption does not only entail "annulling its gesture – in fact it entails recommencing it"[94] at the limit where it is abandoned to its finite expression as a history that is "proposed to us without its unfolding being imposed upon us."[95] But interruption entails, too, the risk that a message, rather than communicability itself, will pass over the limit. If Nancy, who follows Heidegger, evades the latter's nostalgia for organic immanence, he must heed this warning of Bataille's:

> The truth is that we can suffer for something we lack [as opposed to something we lost], but even if we have a paradoxical nostalgia for it, we cannot, except by some aberration, long for the religious and royal edifice of the past. The effort to

> which this edifice corresponded was nothing but an immense failure, and if it is true that something essential is missing from the world in which it collapsed, then we can only go further ahead, without imagining for a moment the possibility of turning back.[96]

Brodsky, unlike almost every other character in *The Unconsoled*, does not turn back, but rages onward precisely because it is too late. And yet Ishiguro will acknowledge that "paradoxical nostalgia" is not easily vanquished, and perhaps it ought not to be. Whatever we imagine we have lost is something we have experienced but cannot know, except in its absence, and which we are driven to memorialize in our vain pursuits. But aberration may very well remain our only avenue to understanding the immense failure that derives from faith in some original loss, which we are compelled to learn and forget and learn again. One might say, too, that what haunts us is not only the memory of what we believe we have lost, but the memory of the repeated failure to lose ourselves, to stray from a path that *is* only in its straying, as Heidegger would say. Such would constitute the political efficacy of returning, when it is too late, to what is no longer open to resolution. Such a belated return would recognize the finite nature, and thus the enduring hope, of what has failed in the past. Or, to put it in Benjamin's more positive terms, we might recognize what remains incomplete in the past that calls us to its possibility in the present. Through Brodsky's performance on the night of the recital that is to define a turning point (*krisis*) in the city's history, Ishiguro moves away from originary loss and sets about imagining the "unworking" of community.

Brodsky suffers no illusions about a wholesale revival of the past, wishing only to get an animal (and not beget a child–it is too late) and live uneventfully with his former

wife, Miss Collins, until their death. Having managed with practice to achieve a partial erection, he hopes to "make love to her just once more," or perhaps "just six more times," in a scaled-down version of the manner to which they were accustomed a half century before.[97] When he sees Ryder's Sattler monument photo in the newspaper, he tells himself, "All the way, take it all the way! Hold back nothing! . . . [Miss Collins']ll see me again, she'll see who I really am, who I was all along! The Sattler monument, that's it!"[98] Brodsky envisions his world as one in which a radical break with the past has come and gone, a belief he finds liberating. But there is further to go, he has yet "to go all the way," and in doing so he will show who he "really" is, who he's "been all along." The continuity suggested by such a declaration, however, is not that of traditional memory which seeks to unite past, present, and future, but rather is linked to the very idea of a radical break.

At the recital he conducts a piece called *Verticality.* With the comically sexualized rhythm of *fort/da*, Brodsky teases the audience who panics as he "continue[s] steadily to turn up the intensity, maintaining all the while his exaggeratedly slow tempo. Then he reache[s] the twelfth bar when the notes burst and c[o]me fluttering down. A kind of sigh [goes] around the audience, then almost immediately the music beg[ins]to build again."[99] "[P]erversely ignoring the outer structure of the music," Brodsky

> focused instead on the peculiar life-forms hiding just under the shell. There was a slightly sordid quality about it all, something close to exhibitionism, that suggested Brodsky was himself profoundly embarassed by the nature of what he was uncovering, but could not resist the compulsion to go yet further. The effect was unnerving, but compelling.[100]

Ryder, watching from on high through a cupboard, wonders "what would happen once Brodsky commenced" the third movement with its "perturbed anger."[101] Ryder himself, while playing "Asbestos and Fire" in the shack, did not move beyond the third movement to the fourth, but began the third again. True to the title of his piece, Ryder performed his signature involution. When Brodsky threatens to go beyond the point Ryder had not dared cross, it "suddenly" occurs to him to go look for his parents (who, of course, are absent sources of "perturbed anger"). When he reemerges backstage, he hears in Brodsky's orchestra "something problematic that had not been there before" that causes him "to pause." Now all is alarm and "mutiny:" Brodsky's conducting takes "on a manic quality and the music veer[s] dangerously towards the realms of perversity." Not holding back, he goes astray of common sentiment and loses the consensus he had begun to build. Ryder, who has during this time has been primarily concerned about his own speech, decides that "some other factor altogether was influencing Brodsky's behavior."[102] As Brodsky's body contorts "to some rhythm of its own dictating," Ryder realizes the conductor's face is "distorted with something more than passion," that is, with the pain of his wound.[103] Ryder reworks in his mind the speech he will now have to give to placate the estranged and repulsed audience when something happens "which perhaps had been on the cards for some time."

> Brodsky swung his baton in a large arc, almost simultaneously punching the air with his other hand. As he did so, he appeared to become unstuck. He ascended a few inches into the air then crashed down across the front of the stage, taking the podium rail, the ironing board, the score, the music stand, all with him.[104]

The "cards" have been dealt: Brodsky was never to have finished. His wound drives him onward until he is virtually free of the earth only to drive him reeling downward again. As the title of his own piece, *Verticality*, promises, Brodsky flies up and falls down without, apparently, having advanced an inch.

Brodsky's wound is a literal one: he is missing part of a leg. (He tells Ryder he lost it in Russia long ago, and one cannot help but imagine the German conductor was a member of the S.S. or S.D., caught between the twin horrors of Sattlerism.) The literalness of his wound, to which he attaches a prosthesis, subverts any metaphoric significance the reader would like in turn to attach to the idea of the wound. Meaning is prosthetic, no more than a phantomatic substitute for what is missing. Meaning is the creation of consoling versions of a world, a *present* world toward which we feel the absence of relation. We imaginatively reorder it in conciliation to the painful lessons of history that have taught us we may not found a new one**.** Here Ishiguro attempts to perform the same evasion of historical meaning as the balloon artist of Donald Barthelme's story: he deflates his work and locks it away, enclosing meaning in privacy and blocking all communicative roads between the work of art and its reception. Miss Collins, angered by Brodsky's surrender to the pain of his wound, tells him she and his music have been nothing "more than the mistresses you seek consolation from." For her, his art can have no bearing on collective life because it derives only from private suffering and selfish motivations.[105] Brodsky, for his part, readily admits music is "just a consolation" and that his wound, while it inspires him, is a rather fickle muse.[106] There is obviously a joke in his performance regarding art as mere sublimation where the "outer structure" of the piece is nothing more than "the composer's nod towards tonality and

melody [that] decorate[s] the surface of the work"; what lies beneath are only the suppressed, wholly private desires and fears of the artist.[107]

But Brodsky's torturous performance and its abrupt termination register competing temporal rhythms. On one level, Brodsky's proposal of continuity in terms of a radical break suggests "crisis" is the fulfillment of some original moment and not its undoing: the diffusion of "cold" modernity is the logical fallout of a culture given to crisis and not its precursor. It is therefore in belatedness, in the very moment history consigns the present to the past, that Brodsky seeks to uncover those "deeply embedded" things of an original past. Brodsky had feverishly declared to Ryder that his "mind is full of the future," and here he indeed overtakes the future-oriented logic of modernity: he *is* crisis, closing in on some strange, weird territory where the "peculiar life-forms" of a shared history are made past as soon as they are conceived.[108] The acceleration of history has narrowed the margin in which one endures its ceaseless absorption and annihilation as the distance between any origin and telos grows ever smaller, their difference ever negligible. The form of Brodsky's dervishing performance cannot help but reenact the chronic crisis that characterizes its enabling conditions.

Knowing it is too late, always too late, inaugurates prosthetic worlds from wounds that neither heal nor worsen but seem "to grow again." Brodsky counsels a widow to cherish the original rawness of her wound; it is original rupture, and not unity, that orients our longing. Here Brodsky does not look beyond the boundary of a given aesthetic object, but returns obsessively to what has remained unresolved in its conception. He *is* nostalgic, but he is perversely nostalgic for the very limitations, and not the promise, of possibilities he may now interpret without the impending burden of their fulfillment: here he makes something like Vattimo's post-historical "ironic-

nostalgic inventory of the talismans of progress."[109] Brodsky does not offer a new future, but a new perspective from the far shores of belatedness. The audience of citizens revolt because his interpretation necessarily *preserves* what has made it possible, that is, the inadequacy of what interpretation takes as its object: all the "originating" moments of the city's ruinous past. Such is the continuity, the tenuous license and qualified presence, of a *lieu de memoire*.

Ishiguro has said that he's "interested in the way words hide meaning" and that the "language [he] use[s] tends to be the sort that actually suppresses meaning rather than chase[s] after something just beyond the reach of words."[110] In pursuing an "idea of slowness with things almost stopping,"[111] Ishiguro, like the conductor, maddens his audience with an "exaggeratedly slow tempo." Brodsky's performance, in the reading above, is not slow but a fantastic *acceleration* that grinds everything to a seeming halt. He cannot climax without collapsing; there is no tempo, just a "vertical" remaining in one place. But one can also see in Brodsky's performance a "between" struggling to emerge, one that problematizes the absoluteness of any distinction one might make between "outer structure" and inner meaning, between wound and prosthesis, between society and individual – between memory and history.

Neither Ryder nor Brodsky complete a work of art. Ryder plays only for Brodsky, in the shack, while the latter buries his dog, and does not even begin to make his speech or play his recital piece for the city. There is no reason, however, to believe Ryder's solitary, unfinished performance is not as beautiful as it seems to be–aesthetic pleasure, *desire*, is not absent, however inextricable from pain it may be. We have considered above the reasons for Ryder's withholding, that is, his holding pattern in an untenable, eternal present. But it may be fair to say Brodsky interrupts the myth of

progress that Ryder implicitly holds to in his refusal to go forward. From another perspective, one which has turned its back on "operative immortality," Brodsky does not forego tempo or rhythm in his "perversity," but in fact manifests Ishiguro's aesthetic "of slowness with things almost stopping." Here, Brodsky's "verticality" does not reproduce the historical acceleration attendant upon the myth of progress, but rather interrupts it in its refusal to offer a work as a site of gathering. He exposes himself as exposed, as a being-outside – ec-static. In coming "unstuck," he refuses to incarnate communion, as Ryder does to a fantastic degree, but rather remains suspended at the very limit of exposure and of the thinking of community which *is* only in its unworking.

Agamben traces the etymology of "rhythm" to its Greek double meaning: "it means to hold back, to suspend, and to hand over, to present, to offer."[112] Rhythm "holds, that is, gives and holds back": "it is the original *ecstasy* that opens for man the space of his world, and only by starting from it can he experience freedom and alienation, historical consciousness and loss in time, truth and error."[113] One must start from the limit along which singular beings are exposed; this is all a work may offer. For Nancy the work is not communicable or transmissible as a "message," for "neither a book nor a piece of music nor a people is, as such, the vehicle or the mediator of a message." The work, when it is offered, must be "abandoned on the common limit where singular beings share one another,"[114] at the moment of interruption which

> is each time the voice of one alone, and to the side, who speaks, who recites, who sometimes sings. He speaks of an origin and an end – the end of the origin, in truth – he stages them and puts himself on stage along with them. But he comes to the edge of the stage, to its outer edge, and he speaks at the softest limit of his voice. Or rather, it is we who stand at the furthermost extreme and who barely

> hear him from this limit. . . . You can always make a myth out of it again. But this voice, or another, will always begin interrupting the myth again – sending us back to the limit.[115]

It is thus that the "wound" may be thought of as the limit of community and not as a gathering around its originary loss. Brodsky's "verticality" suggests vertiginous desire, the inclination towards others made manifest in the exposure of its singularity and the withdrawal of its potential exemplarity. Moreover, as desire it suggests a move beyond resentment. It marks only that "zone," as Agamben writes in *The Coming Community*, "in which possibility and reality, potentiality and actuality, become indistinguishable" and whose "imperceptible trembling of the finite that makes its limits indeterminate and allows it to blend, to make itself whatever, is the tiny displacement that everything must accomplish in the messianic world."[116]

But we are, of course, ultimately bound by Ryder's collapsible borders. Before Brodsky collapses, Ryder plans to come on stage with him in order to distract the audience and hopes Brodsky will "have the presence of mind to 'fade out' the music and take bows."[117] He envisions himself falsely "smil[ing] as though *for all the world* Brodsky had delivered something of *indisputable* beauty," and hopes "the memories of the earlier part of [Brodsky's] performance might return sufficiently to bring the audience back to his side."[118] Brodsky does "deliver" by abandoning, by being abandoned at the limit. But what he "hands over" is not "indisputable," and it is only Brodsky who retains a memory of what had *not* transpired as he sings to himself while laying on the floor where he has fallen. The citizens overcome the panic that Brodsky arouses when a civic spokesman afterwards reminds them of the "splendid heritage of this city," of "achievements down the years," and of "all the awful problems other cities

are blighted with [which they themselves] never have to worry about."[119] The implications of Brodsky's performance are absorbed without being digested and the old conductor is swept from the stage. The city closes ranks, finding in its civic memory a collective but exclusive pride and sense of enduring continuity. Here memory is, alas, blind to all but the group it binds, and the city that had longed to be like other cities is now only too happy to estrange itself from the consequences of foreign problems. The failure to have sustained "the splendid heritage" of the city in the first place is, of course, indicative of the failures of history, of memory's autonomy and of the binding power of "national myth." Nevertheless, while worries over its own blighted future are sure to come back, for now they are content enough to "make a myth again" by returning to Christoff's less challenging approach, to a new-old origin that can only lead them again to imminent "crisis."

In "containing" Brodsky, Ryder once again launches the "not yet" of historical possibility even as he ascribes to the dealt hand of fate what he refuses to account for. But in his omniscience, he yet exhibits something akin to what Kaja Silverman calls "heteropathic memory,"[120] the capacity to imagine and therefore to some degree recall the experience of others.[121] If Ryder abolishes the limit at which his and others' singularities are exposed to one another as well as the outside to which we are all oriented in our common finitude, he nevertheless suggests (albeit negatively) difference that is not incommensurable, as so many discourses on loss would have it. Ishiguro's unreliable narrators are not entirely, in the end, so many big-headed silhouettes obstructing our view in some theater of the real who need only be peeled away as easily as adhesive backing to reveal all in its objective clarity. If Ryder's conspicuous unreliability as well as the novel's oneirism reveal his omniscience to be fallacy and his experiences folly, they do

not point to some allegorically obscured knowledge or truth. To read around Ryder to a story that ought to be is to reproduce his knowingness. And who is consoled in knowing Ryder will not save the city? James Wood, who contends that *The Unconsoled* has "invented its own category of badness," suggests that the novel fails because it is

> a composed dream-narrative (that is, one written by Ishiguro) rather than an accidental dream-text (the kind we dream while we sleep), [therefore] its decipherment could only be meaningless, since a dream's significance is that it is not intended, not artistic, not written. (This is why it is almost impossible to write a novel-as-dream.)[122]

Wood's criticism directly contradicts Chaudhuri's, for here the novel cannot engage us "in any lively way" because it is not rooted in a *private* experience – *our* private experience, apparently. Wood's and Chaudhuri's conclusions, however, are the same: the novel fails to connect the intimate with the worldly, the individual with the social, the private with the public. It fails to establish *community*. Ryder's narrative does in fact continually bypass these nodes in its paroxysmal conflation and contraction, in its monstrous fusion of self and world that annihilates the site of community. But this very self-orientation of the world in the figure of Ryder seems to suggest the urgency of worldly (cosmopolitan) responsibility rather than undermine it. *The Unconsoled* is not able to locate this passage in a culture divested of national interest, let alone a society (un)grounded in memory. Ishiguro's last book, *When We Were Orphans*, proposes in contrast that "[p]eople need to feel they belong. To a nation, to a race."[123] The past-tense title of this book has rather a nostalgic inflection, as if it were saddened to have been reclaimed after *The Unconsoled's* failure to establish community based on "anonymity." As we shall see in the conclusion, Ishiguro returns in his sixth book *Never Let Me Go* to

anonymity, literally to the nameless who do not belong even to the human race, much less to a nation – except as sacrifices for national longevity and well-being, for the "operative immortality" of a community.

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[1] Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled*, 99.

[2] Chaudhuri, "Unlike Kafka," 30.

[3] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 107.

[4] Ishiguro, "Stuck," 30-31.

[5] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 97. In "Trauma, Absence, Loss," Dominick LaCapra distinguishes between structural and historical trauma. Structural trauma proposes loss or absence that is transhistorical whereas historical trauma concerns specific events. LaCapra argues that attention must be paid to the differences between absence and loss "in non-binary terms" (713) so that loss is not converted into an absence "constitutive of existence" and absence or lack is not conflated with loss and its attendant blaming or grieving (701). In *The Unconsoled*, loss is both structural and historical, but since temporal difference is always erased, what is properly "historical" can never be articulated and confronted. In the last two sections of this essay I attempt to historicize this allegorized loss and to think about the ways that Brodsky's performance looks beyond nostalgia and resentment in order to envision loss as an absence that, while "constitutive," is not "transhistorical" (701).

[6] Nancy, *Inoperative Community*, 79.

[7] Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 147.

[8] Ishiguro, "Rooted," 151.

[9] Ishiguro, "Rooted," 151.

[10] Ishiguro, "Stuck," 16.

[11] Ishiguro, "Rooted," 149.

[12] Ishiguro, "Stuck," 4-5.

[13] Ishiguro, "Rooted," 150.

[14] Marrouchi, "Fear of the Other, Loathing the Similar," 33.

[15] Quoted in Hattori, "China Man Autoeroticism," 219.

[16] Ishiguro, "Stuck," 8.

[17] Hattori, "Chinaman Autoeroticism," 221.

[18] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 4.

[19] I am paraphrasing Pheng Cheah's summary of radical cosmopolitanism, particularly that put forth by Homi Bhabha and James Clifford, in "Given Culture: Rethinking Cosmopolitical Freedom in Transnationalism," 290-328.

[20] Rushdie, *Shame*, 84.

[21] Rushdie, *Shame*, 22.

[22] Rushdie, *Shame*, 85.

[23] Rushdie, *Shame*, 84.

[24] Rushdie, *Shame*, 67.

[25] Rushdie, *Shame*, 220.

[26] Rushdie, *Shame*, 289.

[27] Ishiguro, "The Novelist in Today's World," 115.

[28] Hattori, "Chinaman Autoeroticism," 228.

[29] Ishiguro, "Stuck," 12.

[30] Ishiguro, "Stuck," 16-17.

[31] Rushdie, *Shame*, 21.

[32] Rushdie, *Shame*, 86. Emphasis in original.

[33] Ishiguro, "Rooted," 149-50.

[34] Ishiguro, "Stuck," 27.

[35] Ishiguro, "Stuck," 14. Emphasis in original.

[36] This tale of national literary demise is not unique to Ishiguro, but is widely recited

[37] José Saramago, who has lived through Portugal's tumultuous twentieth century, has written of placeless, nameless settings (for instance, in *Blindness*). Ishiguro's contention that bourgeois comfort and political stability alone lead to the anonymous and the fantastic is therefore a rather narrow account.

[38] Cheah, "Given Culture," 301.

[39] "Ryder" is easily an allegorical name (Reader/Writer), although some critics have read him as Japanese for obvious reasons (Ryder remarks at one point that he can hardly read Japanese anymore). But Ryder is also a viable English surname, so it seems reasonable to assume it is like many classic realist names, that is, "realistic" and allegorical both.

[40] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 48.

[41] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 13.

[42] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 202.

[43] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 203.

[44] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 278.

[45] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 16-17.

[46] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled* ,301.

[47] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled* ,376.

[48] Lear, *Open Minded*, 36.

[49] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 271.

[50] Robbins, "Introduction," 4.

[51] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 97.

[52] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 100.

[53] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 114.

[54] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 374.

[55] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 374-75.

[56] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 375. Emphasis in original.

[57] Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, 108.

[58] Brown, *States of Injury*, 69. Emphasis in original.

[59] Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 226.

[60] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 217-18.

[61] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 172.

[62] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 171.

[63] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 46.

[64] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled* ,375.

[65] Nancy, *Inoperable Community*, 10.

[66] Nancy, *Inoperable Community*, 3.

[67] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled*, 146.

[68] Nancy, *Inoperable Community*, 4.

[69] Nora, *Realms of Memory*, 12.

[70] In what follows I am focusing on what I take to be the most compelling, and not the only, allegorical reading. Ishiguro has scoffed at a reviewer's suggestion that *The Unconsoled* mourns the (partial) collapse of communism, but the depiction of a society's nostalgia for a figure called Sattler inevitably suggests such a reading. A case could be made, too, for Japanese postwar disaffection. Ishiguro's novel *is* "relevant" to "a wide variety of contexts," but they will always be qualified, historically inflected, and not universal.

[71] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 190.

[72] Ishiguro, "Stuck" 8.

[73] Ishiguro, "Stuck" 8.

[74] Hattori, "Chinaman Autoeroticism," 227-28.

[75] Quoted in Ishiguro, "Stuck," 7.

[76] Ishiguro, "Conversation," 118.

[77] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled* ,532.

[78] Cheah, 292.

[79] Ishiguro, "Stuck," 30-31.

[80] Ishiguro, "Stuck," 29. Emphasis in original.

[81] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 533.

[82] Agamben, *Stanzas*, 20. Emphasis in original.

[83] Agamben, *Stanzas,* 21.

[84] Comay, "Perverse History," 52.

[85] Renan, quoted in Nora.

[86] Nancy, *Inoperable Community*, 10.

[87] Nancy, *Inoperable Community*, 3.

[88] Nancy, *Inoperable Community*, 13.

[89] Nancy, *Inoperable Community*, 3.

[90] Nancy, *Inoperable Community*, 4. Emphasis in original.

[91] Nancy, *Inoperable Community*, 33. Emphasis in original.

[92] Nancy, *Inoperable Community*, 19.

[93] Nancy, *Inoperable Community*, 23.

[94] Nancy, *Inoperable Community*, 68.

[95] Nancy, *Inoperable Community*, 69.

[96] Quoted in Nancy, *Inoperable Community*, 18.

[97] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 310.

[98] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 365.

[99] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 491.

[100] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 492.

[101] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 492-93.

[102] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 494.

[103] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 495.

[104] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 496.

[105] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 499.

[106] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 313.

[107] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 492.

[108] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 362.

[109] Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 85.

[110] Ishiguro, "Stuck," 10.

[111] Ishiguro, "Stuck," 26.

[112] Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, 100.

[113] Agamben, *The Man Without Content,* 100.

[114] Nancy, *Inoperable Community*, 73.

[115] Nancy, *Inoperable Community*, 67-68.

[116] Agamben, *Coming Community,* 56.

[117] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 495.

[118] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 495. Emphasis added.

[119] Ishiguro, *Unconsoled,* 516.

[120] Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*. Dominick LaCapra, who notes Silverman's conception of "heteropathic identification," has argued for "empathic unsettlement" in "the attentive secondary witness" as a way of avoiding the appropriation of others' experiences (LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Lost," 722-23).

[121] In "Very Busy Just Now: Globalization and Harriedness in Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled,*" Robbins writes of Ryder's potential for sympathy in relation to globalization: "Ryder's long-suffering desire to please, though interrupted by fits of hysterical petulance . . . , would not be a reprehensible passivity, a professional deformation resulting from too much time on the road. Rather, it would belong to a stretching of the human sensibility to accommodate the unaccustomed rhythms and ranges of sympathy that are demanded of us all in the oft-described age of global flows. The traveler's strained, fragile politeness would be properly seen as a stressed-out, lugubrious version of what we all feel, travelers or not, to the extent that we are stretched and stressed by the larger and larger circles of our interdependence. It would be a figure for one phase in the long-term project of refashioning ethics to suit our transnational condition" (435).

[122] Wood, "The Unconsoled." Louis Menand, by contrast, writes that "Mr. Ishiguro's indifference to conventional notions of literary excellence is so thorough that it becomes a kind of excellence in itself." For Menand, the citizens "believe – this is the great invention of the book – in a touchingly literal way what many intellectuals and politicians now preach in a wholly abstract way: that social welfare depends on some kind of 'belief' in one's culture" (Menand, "Anxious in Dreamland").

[123] Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans*, 80.

Chapter Four. *Austerlitz* and the Task of Re-collection

When W.G. Sebald died in 2001, eulogists followed earlier reviewers in noting the posthumous character of the late author's work. In assigning the tragic prematurity of his death a kind of aesthetic aptness, they sought to honor him in the very manner in which he had written. Each of Sebald's novels is a deft, almost seamless weaving of disparate elements drawn from the forgotten, the abandoned, the ill-fated. Photographs, biography, testimony, literature, history, notebooks, natural science, oral narrative, travelogues, epitaphs and obituaries are just some of the sources from which he collected the materials he used to construct his digressive fictional collages. In his novels, no one strand seems essential, and yet it cannot be said that any are out of place. In fact, there would seem no more appropriate place for them to be, despite their previous lives in individual memories, history books, photo albums, and newspapers, than in the selected company of the likewise displaced. In amassing various unrelated odds and ends culled from public and private experience, the novels must integrate experiences and objects that are not present and that are no longer explainable by their originating contexts. *Austerlitz* in particular makes present these traces of loss, to be found anywhere but relatable nowhere except in re-collection, as the unclaimable inheritance of the Holocaust.

Austerlitz recounts things that have passed. All writing, of course, does precisely this, never more so than when it dons the present tense and testifies to the irrevocable pastness of writing itself. Sebald's writing is often described as posthumous because it is mournful, because it addresses us with an aggrieved wisdom that has seen all and pronounces everything moribund; it beckons us, the dying, to the inevitable. But in doing so, it resows

the death it gathers, it harvests memories of lives – human, textual – and grows fat. The narrator, upon first meeting Austerlitz, is struck by the way

> Austerlitz put his ideas together as he talked, forming perfectly balanced sentences out of whatever occurred to him, so to speak, and the way in which, in his mind, the passing of knowledge seemed to become a gradual approach to a kind of historical metaphysic, bringing remembered events back to life.[1]

Such a congratulatory encapsulation of Austerlitz's powers of narration seems to propose itself as a sort of metafictional blurb of the novel itself, and indeed Sebald's critics and reviewers have used similar language to describe all of his fiction. And yet, such "perfectly balanced sentences" evade Austerlitz when he attempts to bring his miscellaneous musings to life in writing. We ought to be wary of the narrator's glib description, of his own need to receive sanctification through enlightenment. If *Austerlitz* recollects a past by literally collecting its remains and reordering them into a narrative totality founded on rupture and absence, it also interrogates its own constructivist techniques. Austerlitz, a Jewish man who had been adopted and renamed during the war by a Welsh couple, suffers a breakdown when he searches for his lost Czech past. The "chronic dysfunction and constitutional instability"[2] he identifies everywhere in his studies of the "bourgeois age" not only result in a "single blur" of historical vision, or what Benjamin has called a "mere semblance"[3] of continuity produced by perpetual historical upheaval, but in his own "disintegration of personality."[4] If there is an "historical metaphysic" in *Austerlitz*, it does not "bring remembered events back to life," but indexes them in an unending catalogue of destruction, disorder and death. Austerlitz, in seeking to bring himself into relation with the past and into presence "in the eyes of the dead,"[5] seeks an "unequivocal answer"[6] to long-suppressed questions. Like both

Benjamin's collector and allegorist, he can never have enough of things, ceaselessly amassing historical odds and ends and ordering them into new constellations of allegorical meaning. Austerlitz seeks the allegorist's solution to the scattered questions of the past and hopes to bring all that has been lost, not to life, but to completion in some final collection. Such practices fruitlessly search for a comprehensive allegory that can accommodate all instances of destruction, and risk reducing the Holocaust to one more item in the collector's series. But *Austerlitz*, I will argue, struggles against its preoccupation with death, dislocation and destruction, and seeks to interrupt its own narrative logic which continually runs aground between the ruins of the past and a ruinous future.

In what follows, I consider Sebald's commitment to objectivity – literally, to paying attention to "objects rather than people"[7] – in avoiding "complicity"[8] with the violence he wishes to bear witness to through a "synoptic and artificial view."[9] Such a "view" takes the future as its standpoint, from which one can "supplement" what was not fully experienced, not fully understood. But Austerlitz, who both turns away from the past "in shame and sorrow" and gropes blindly for it in archives, photographs, and footnotes, continually contends that "all times have co-existed simultaneously": the Benjaminian "historical [materialist] metaphysic" of bringing the past to life in a moment of recognition, glimpsed in and exceeded by the practices of the collector and the allegorist, cannot take place where the equation of past and future collapse the present. In using "whatever occurs to him," Austerlitz follows Benjamin's dictum that nothing be left unsaid, that "everything one is thinking at a specific moment in time must at all costs be incorporated into the project at hand."[10] In *Austerlitz* itself, everything can be construed as a narrative, related as story, forced into retelling. This riotous, associative elaboration begs the question that Max Pensky

asks: “does the materialist historian make dialectical images or find them?” Moreover, as Rebecca Comay points out, “Symbolic resurrection [as vision] recalls the dead as objects of consumption: the mourned object is devoured or introjected as host.”[11] The objectivity that the materialist historian assumes of the images that develop gradually, “ad infinitum, until the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apocastasis”[12] is ambiguous at best; the collecting, sifting, discerning and, ultimately, imputing historian himself cannot be bracketed, and apocastasis may be nothing more than the objectification and appropriation of what cannot be properly called *experience*. Austerlitz not only courts the danger of obscuring loss in the novel’s proliferation of fragments and images into a seamless, “gray” totality, he also risks the appropriation of an historical experience he otherwise mourns as lost. Where the collector, like Benjamin’s historical materialist, sees nothing as lost to history, he or she also risks performing capitalism’s strategic circulation of objects, where everything is leveled, made equal and exchangeable. Such exchangeability may be at work not only in the temporal equivalence attained among diverse fragments in their forced collocation, but wherever the forgotten traumatic rupture of Austerlitz’s childhood seems to double for that experienced by postwar Germans estranged from the knowledge of the catastrophic history into which they were born. If Austerlitz’s reluctance to turn toward the past arises from a fear of reinaugurating the myth of German greatness, it also duplicates an entire generation’s disavowal of historical atrocities committed in Germany’s name.

Austerlitz, like the German narrator who recounts his story, feels that he does “not belong” wherever he happens to find himself, “or indeed anywhere else in the world.”[13] Traumatic upheavals have “dislocated time,” severing one from both past and present, from people and nation, from any language that might reinstall oneself in the present. But the

rupture that has separated Austerlitz from his childhood and his name – neither of which he truly recovers but rather experiences as both "foreign and familiar" – is not only temporal. It also marks a limit between potentiality and a potential to not-be. For Giorgio Agamben, where potentiality always "has as its object a certain act," a goal that issues from presupposition and necessitates belonging to a "proper identity" for its enactment, the potential to not-be is fulfilled only in the suspension of actuality; here, "thought returns to itself without object," beholden neither to the restoration of a past nor to redemption in some future. Rather, "being-as-such" takes place in the never-completed passage from potentiality to act, without foundation or debt, and appropriates belonging itself rather than consigning itself to a pregiven class or destiny. In this chapter, I consider Agamben's problematic employment of the potentiality to not-be in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, which finds expression in Austerlitz's "paralysis in the capacity to think and feel"[14] whenever he attempts to confront and relate (to) the past. In *Remnants*, Agamben argues that the *Musselman*, whom Primo Levi has called the "complete witness" because he has undergone complete degradation, is a reduction of the human to the inhuman who nevertheless survives in those humans who must bear witness for him. For Agamben, the *Musselman* is the "ruin of every ethics of dignity and conformity to a norm"[15] since, in his "surviving" degradation, he proves that no norm or property, even dignity, can designate what is human. All "*juridical* responsibility, linked to indebtedness and guilt," is no longer applicable; instead we are consigned to a "responsibility that is infinitely greater than any we could ever assume. At the most we can be faithful to it, that is, assert its unassumability."[16] This is a "new ethics" that Agamben calls, after Levi, a "gray zone," an "*impotentia judicandi*" in which the human and the inhuman can no longer be distinguished, just as

actuality and potentiality cannot be distinguished when beings takes place as-such. The idea of "unassumable responsibility," I will argue, is at the heart of Sebald's own ethical-literary project. Following Jean Améry's injunction that Germans become "sensitized" to the past by acknowledging the "implacable resentment" of the persecuted and the impossibility of any resolution, an impossibility beyond either guilt or atonement, Sebald in *Austerlitz* explores this "gray zone" (in some respects quite literally, as we shall see). Austerlitz's inability to speak or write, his "rending" shame, is not merely an instance of "post-traumatic stress" or "survivor's guilt," but a confrontation with what cannot be assumed, that is, responsibility or a "proper identity." It is in this experience – which amounts to an in-experience, an absence of knowledge, a failure of vision – that Austerlitz glimpses something beyond either the allegorist's solution in the past or the collector's completion in the future, and therefore beyond a belonging oriented to a restoration of the past or redemption in the future.

I. Collecting

Like all of Sebald's novels, *Austerlitz* is a re-collection of the decontextualized fragments of the past, reread and reordered into a seemingly seamless narrative. Sebald, in collecting and recollecting the traces of lives dismembered by the Holocaust, knowingly engages with Benjamin's "constructivist principle" by which the past is brought into the present in an interruptive moment of recognition. The novel in fact conflates the overlapping constructivist activities Benjamin assigned to the allegorist, the collector and the historical materialist. For Benjamin, the seventeenth-century mourning play, in which the world can no longer appear whole in tragic totality, gives birth to the *Grübler* or brooder. Plagued by melancholy, the *Grübler* sifts through fragments that can no longer attain to significance in

tragic fate and instead assigns them arbitrary meanings. "The case of the *Grübler* is that of the man who once had the solution to the Great Problem, but then he forgot it. And now he broods, not so much over the matter as over his past pondering of it. The thought of the *Grübler* thus stands in the sign of memory."[17] Laboring under the assumption that something has been lost or forgotten, the *Grübler* attempts to recall some ultimate order to which the fragments belong and is overwhelmed by the tantalizing but resistant traces of memory that such fragments possess. The "allegorical intention" then arises from brooding: in attempting to reconstruct order out of the past, the *Grübler* becomes the allegorist who sees everywhere potential relations among fragments, holding one piece next to another "to see if they fit together – that meaning with this image or this image with that meaning. The result can never be predicted since there is no natural mediation between the two."[18] Although no "natural mediation" subtends the various juxtapositions that the allegorist forms, his or her "motorial reaction" to the debris of history nevertheless arises, as Max Pensky writes, "at the dialectical crossroads where, in the fallen world, the realm of subject and object meet." Whereas the *Grübler*'s activity succumbs entirely to melancholic inwardness, "allegory corresponds, unwittingly, with the true character of historical time."[19]

Allegory may ultimately assign arbitrary meanings, but in its orientation to the fragmentary nature of reality, it unmasks the myth of static time, proposed by tradition and embalmed in the commodity, and for this reason, Pensky writes, it "bears a critical-redemptive force."[20] The allegorical intention imposes subjective meaning upon objects; as Benjamin charges, "Wherever the allegorical intention prevails, no habits of any kind can be formed. Hardly has a thing been taken up then allegory has dispensed with the situation." Allegory destroys: "no habits can be formed" (tradition cannot take root) and the situation is

"dispensed with" (it becomes "obsolete"). "But to become obsolete means: to grow strange." If allegory "violates" the objects it would penetrate but not perpetuate, the Baudelairean "spleen" with which it dispenses with history also reintroduces historical time: "Spleen lays down centuries between the present moment and the one just lived." Modernity, even that lived yesterday, becomes the "newest antiquity," remote, perhaps lost, but for that very reason recoverable.[21] For Benjamin, Baudelaire's allegorical poetry sought to wrest the eternal from the transitory, to suspend time in the *correspondance*. Allegory limns the possibilities of historical materialism, which seeks to rescue historical objects from the oblivion they suffer in historicism's construal of "empty homogeneous time" and reassign them as "a temporal index by which they are referred to redemption." The "flash" of a memory seized "at a moment of danger" interrupts the appearance of temporal continuity sustained by tradition. "Saving" the past does not mean recovering it "the way it really was," but rather recognizing it as incomplete in a way that liberates the present from its apparent inevitability. Remembering the past is an historical process that re-members its forgotten and neglected fragments into a dialectical image which in turn displays what a redeemed history would look like from the perspective of its fulfillment after the end of time.

Allegory, however, ultimately "betrays" the fragments it rearranges because it subordinates them to intentionality, thereby dissolving the dialectical tension between objectivity and subjectivity. As Pensky glosses it, "The thing is now 'saved' from its fate as a commodity, but only insofar as the allegorist embraces it as a souvenir: that is, as the crystallization of lifeless memory."[22] The "critical-redemptive force" of conjuring the past expires in images that remain as inert as the commodified reality that allegory was to have destroyed. Whereas the allegorist "dislodges things from their context and, from the outset,

relies on his profundity to illuminate their meaning" only to find his own disarticulated subjectivity reflected in fragments, the collector "brings together what belongs together . . ." Waging war "against dispersion," the collector restores the contextual landscape from which things have been torn "by keeping in mind their affinities and their succession in time . . ."[23] That landscape, however, is not a historicist construction in which collected "things allow [a] mediating construction from out of 'large contexts.'" Rather than "making things present" by "represent[ing] ourselves in their space," the collector "represent[s] them in our space": "We don't displace our being into theirs; they step into our life."[24] By "receiving the things into our space," we do not make the mistake of imagining we have grasped things "as they really are," of losing our situated perspective in the claustrophobic diorama of historicism. The weight of the past does not bear down upon us as a remote force; rather, the past is "displaced" from its history where its fate has been sealed (for example, as all-powerful or forgotten) and is made to live again in the present. In "detach[ing] the object from its functional relations," the collector expunges the face of "kitsch" that has secured itself atop "the totemic tree of objects within the thicket of primal history."[25] By removing objects from their circulation in an economy of exchangeability, the collector reestablishes with commodified reality "a relationship that now seems archaic." At the intersection of private interest and "'objective' data," things are assigned new uses and meanings. The collector creates "a whole magic encyclopedia, a world order, whose outline is the *fate* of his object." As "physiognomists of the world of things," collectors become "interpreters of fate"; in handling objects wherein the "world is present" and "ordered," collectors "seem to look through them into their distance, like an augur."[26] Wresting things from their immurement in

commodification, the collector locates a new time where he or she can see into the distance of the past toward a different future.

The collector, for whom "the world is present, and indeed ordered, in each of his objects,"[27] is the polar opposite of the allegorist who attempts to substitute his own order for the ultimate one he believes is lost. However, "in every collector hides an allegorist, and in every allegorist a collector." If the collector determines something is missing from his carefully ordered collection, all dissolves again into a "patchwork, which is what things are from the beginning" for the allegorist.[28] The chaos of fragmentation and ceaseless upheaval not only threatens melancholy but also reinstalls the appearance of homogeneous time. While the collector and the allegorist take things out of circulation, or seek to rescue things that have fallen by the wayside, they cannot bring time to a standstill. As Peter Osborne defines it, Benjamin's historical materialism advocates "a founding interruption (now-time), ground of a futurity which cannot be otherwise thought, except in terms of a narrative completion to history."[29] One cannot interrupt the incessant, as Blanchot has written, without incurring the incessancy of interruption itself. For Benjamin, there must be some final horizon beyond historical time to which any "now," blasted out of empty, homogeneous time, can refer and relate. Because both the collector and the allegorist "can never have enough of things," the "now of a particular recognizability," which demands the recognition of finitude, can emerge for neither.

If both the collector and the allegorist fail to suspend time in the images or constellations they create, the historical materialist also meets with difficulty in achieving "a displacement of an angle of vision" wherein "the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apocastasis."[30] In historical materialism, a dialectical image "attains to legibility

only at a particular time." What remains of memory's interruptive "flash" is only what is developed over time as its "after-image." The crystallized moment of the dialectical image, like the collection, coordinates historical objects into a constellation that can put their different temporalities into play; it can only be read after the fact, in time: image must revert to narrative. While Benjamin insists on the dialectical image's objectivity, it is not clear how that image is not susceptible to the potentially arbitrary imposition of meaning that he identified with the *Grübler* or brooder who seeks a final solution to the fragments of the very puzzle he or she continually brings into being.[31] This persistent problem in Benjamin's thought finds expression in Austerlitz's horror of the arbitrary, almost unmotivated meanings that arise from his attempts at writing up the "bourgeois age," and *Austerlitz* itself has difficulty negotiating the "blind violence" it associates with the collection of knowledge and the construction of meaning.

The novel, itself a collection of heterogeneous material, repeatedly rehearses the problem of "assembl[ing] and recast[ing]"[32] fragmented memories and objects into new relationships. Part of the collection of papers and photographs the narrator receives from Austerlitz are themselves concerned with collecting. Austerlitz's early compilation of notes for an architectural study of law courts, penal institutions, railway stations, opera houses, lunatic asylums and workers' dwellings had sought a "family likeness"[33] among buildings of various designs and functions. If the unfinished study had begun as an effort to trace "the compulsive order and the tendency towards monumentalism evident"[34] in such institutions, it had itself grown enormous in its pursuit of the relations it might establish among them. Austerlitz sits before his photographs, arranging them into different sets based on family likeness or else shuffling them into a new disorder. In attempting to shape his notes into a

work, he discovers he can no longer see connections, either among the notes he had taken in the past or between the sentences he writes now in the hope of bringing his work to completion. Just as the "rational structure" of Breendonk, a Belgian fort that served as a concentration camp, appears to the narrator as the monstrous creation of "some alien and crablike creature," Austerlitz witnesses the gradual degradation of his sentences into words, his words into signs, and those signs into "a blue-gray gleaming silver here and there, excreted and left behind it by some crawling creature."[35] This silvery gleam of excrement denotes not only the indecipherable refuse of all our meaning-making and will to order, but also evokes the countless instances of gray in the novel, to which I will return. Likewise, the collection of living and dead insects, birds and moths housed at the Andromeda Lodge, although it belongs to an admirable man who respects the "sentient life of lesser beings," nevertheless participates in the "imponderable disruptions" to which humans subject their environment.[36] All collections seem like Brussels' Palace of Justice, "the largest accumulation of stone blocks anywhere in Europe": even when the palace is submitted to new, makeshift and illegitimate uses, there is no indication that the "innermost secret of all sanctioned authority" residing in the heart of this "architectural monstrosity" has been disturbed.[37] Rather, authority is somehow evinced and extended by these acts of usurpation.

No collection of parts into a whole, however provisional, is capable of instituting an order that does not ultimately betray, like the plan of Breendonk, "blind violence," or, like the renovated *Bibliothèque Nationale*, "its chronic dysfunction and constitutional instability." As Stuart Taberner points out, *Austerlitz* ponders the "essential history of modernity: destruction, dislocation, and death."[38] Austerlitz himself avers that "the whole history of the architecture and civilization of the bourgeois age, the subject of my research, pointed in the

direction of the catastrophic events already casting their shadows before them in time."[39] An inevitable propensity towards (self-)destruction finds expression in each avenue Austerlitz pursues in preparing his unwieldy history: every effort at defense, security, and containment yields to aggression, fear, and dispersion. Progress, like the ever-expanding rings of fortification surrounding Antwerp, is no more than a repetitious series of hapless gestures whose origin lies in terror and whose inevitable telos is ruin. The "progress" of mankind is not unlike the corpses of moths that various characters collect and that seem to seek out their death by flying into the flame. For Taberner, Austerlitz, by conflating history "with a higher, natural order," "abstracts [events] from historical time, making it impossible to confront them as calculated historical injustices authored by specific individuals . . . ."[40] The Nazis' "obsessional organizational zeal" in discipline and death, in the discipline of death, seems no different from the *Bibliothèque Nationale*'s reorganization of knowledge which results in its disorganization and eventual loss: each follows the natural rhythms of the life cycle of an organism or the ebb and tide of the ocean. Likewise, Richard Crownshaw writes that the Holocaust in *Austerlitz* "takes its place in a historical continuum rather than as something that distinguishes linearity."[41] If the chalk cliffs of England had once boasted "semi-sentient marvels oscillating between the vegetable, animal, and mineral kingdoms," the scene ("destroyed by our passion for collecting")[42] is now one of "separate surfaces of sand and water, sea and land, earth and sky [that can] no longer be distinguished": all is "a single blur" that offers "something like a sense of eternity."[43] Progress is not evolution but a witless expansion and contraction that dissolves all difference, temporal and otherwise.

Modernity's habitual erasure of the past is made the equivalent of Austerlitz's amnesia concerning his own family history. For Austerlitz, world history seems to have

ended in the nineteenth century, in the era of his studies. His shocking admission of possessing little knowledge and less curiosity about the events that led to his exile and adoption seems to derive as much from private trauma as it does from some general historical tendency to disown the past. When Austerlitz is shown a photograph of himself as a small boy in a page's costume, he cannot recall the moment it was taken. There is "the bare, level field where I am standing, although I cannot think where it was; [there is] the blurred, dark area above the horizon . . ."[44] The photograph, depicting a boy in ornate attire who holds in his hand an extravagant heron-feathered hat, obviously recalls two photographs of costumed children that Benjamin wrote about, one of Kafka and one of himself. As Benjamin describes it, Kafka "stands, perhaps six years old, dressed up in a tight, almost humiliating child's suit overloaded with trimmings, in a kind of winter garden landscape" and "holds in his left hand an oversized, broad-brimmed hat, such as Spaniards wear."[45] Of his own photograph, Benjamin writes, "I'm standing bareheaded, my left hand holding a giant sombrero, which I dangle with studied grace. . . . Over to the side, near the curtained doorway, mys mother stands motionless in her tight bodice. As though attending to a tailor's dummy, she scrutinizes my velvet suit . . ."[46] For Benjamin, Kafka "would surely be lost in this setting were it not for the immensely sad eyes, which dominate this landscape predetermined for them."[47] But he writes, regarding his own image "overloaded with trimmings," that "I, however, am distorted by similarity to all that surrounds me here. Thus, like a mollusk in its shell, I had my abode in the nineteenth century, which now lies hollow before me like an empty shell. I hold it to my ear."[48] The young Kafka can "dominate" a "predetermined" landscape that would determine his place in it, that is, that would marginalize him; his "immensely sad eyes" provide an auratic presence, a responsive gaze that contests the

conditions in which he finds himself. The young Benjamin, however, is "distorted" by his "similarity" to the objects arrayed about him; he is absorbed into a collection, fixed there not only by the camera's click but by his mother's fixated gaze. But if he is disfigured by a similarity that is artificially induced, the product of a coordinating intention, he escapes its strictures by outgrowing them; the mollusk's essential identity remains intact. The shell Benjamin holds to his ear is a past century that lies *before* him, and to which he may now listen and respond precisely because he has been displaced from its context. But Austerlitz cannot locate himself, even by studying "every detail [of his image] under a magnifying glass." He is split off from the five-year-old page, whose demand for Austerlitz to "challenge and avert the misfortune lying ahead of" the child instills in the adult a "blind panic."[49] The young Austerlitz is absent *in* the photograph, not because "that was then," never to be revisited, but because, for all he can recall and thereby believe, it never was. He stands on a "bare, level field," contextless. Both the world to which his costume alludes and the world in which the photograph was taken have vanished entirely; the photograph itself, like all the bits and pieces Austerlitz collects, cannot refer to any moment that was not already given to entropy. If there is a *punctum* in the photograph, it does not reside in any of its details but in its failure to deliver a *studium*. For if the *studium* of a photograph, as Barthes contends, allows us to participate in a cultural milieu, Austerlitz's photograph categorically refuses any and all intercourse with the past.

It would seem, then, that the novel, in its fruitless forays into the past and in its numerous admissions of melancholic impasse, cannot develop whatever "flashes" of memory its carefully arranged images are meant to spark. Because time, as Austerlitz at several points suggests, may "not exist at all," then how could the images ever "attain to legibility" at "a

particular time"? His collection of notes grows to unmanageable proportions without resolving into a coherent discourse. His writing is frustrated by "the endless possibilities of language" – and not the possibilities of being, or understanding – which become "malignant enticements to [him] to cast [him]self into the depths."[50] Faced with "inane phrases"[51] that lead, like "urban sprawl," to no definitive conclusion, he finds even "arranging assorted objects in a drawer" to be "beyond one's power."[52] As a collector looking through things "into their distance," Austerlitz does not predict a future, but rather feels "a dreadful sense of torpor that heralds the disintegration of personality . . ."[53] But if, as he says, "all my life had been a constant process of obliteration, a turning away from myself and the world," he is also filled with "feelings of shame and horror" by the sense he tries to make of his notes.[54] The "decrepit state of [the] once magnificent buildings" he studies "precisely reflect[s his] own state of mind."[55] In turning away from the world and from himself, he turns away from the same thing: his "disintegration of personality" is figured in the heap of fragments he collects and fails to reconstitute into some kind of order. It is here that the allegorist hiding in the collector emerges. All reverts to "a patchwork" when submitted to an ordering intentionality, and the resulting disintegration becomes an allegory, writ small, for the way of the world.

"Allegories fill out and deny the void in which they are represented," Benjamin writes.[56] *Austerlitz*, it might be said, collects allegories of modernity as "destruction, dislocation, death." It makes of death a ceaseless work. Just as, in baroque allegory, the corpse is at once the site where "all arbitrary meanings are finally exhausted" and an "image of the absolute materiality of the subject [that] springs under the weight of this matter into its other and becomes an image of eternal life,"[57] the novel dwells in its "sense of eternity" by endlessly reworking the death to which all of its images testify. For Benjamin, "the relic

derives from the corpse; the souvenir from deceased experience [*Erfahrung*] which calls itself euphemistically [*Erlebnis*]."[58] For Austerlitz, as we have seen, both kinds of experience are "deceased" insofar as all his researches into the past of the bourgeois age and of his own life lead to blindness and paralysis.

For Sebald and for the narrator, such a recovery is fraught with the danger of appropriating a specifically Jewish experience. Born in Germany in 1944, Sebald belongs to that generation which grew up in the unspeakable and (largely) unspoken aftermath of the Third Reich. In writing the memories and experiences of survivors in the context of innumerable other discourses on power, loss and suffering, he seeks to overcome the silencing of Germany's past as well as to relate its exceptional history to both the unexceptional and barbaric histories of culture and nature. In giving voice to the experiences of survivors, both those suffered in the camps and those endured afterward, Sebald's novels bear witness to the lingering, material force of historical trauma. Part of the popular and critical interest in Sebald is precisely that, as a younger German, his authority is limited if not contestable. But "writing" the Holocaust has been, at least since Adorno's famous statement, a troubling endeavor. For some, representation necessarily tends towards rationalization (and, implicitly, legitimation), while for others the Holocaust must be submitted to the same processes of reason with which one approaches anything that is to be understood if it is not to happen again. Sebald began publishing in the nineties, after the Historians' Debate and its competing arguments of "what was to be done" about the Holocaust and Nazism and their suppression in German memory.[59] He intervenes, then, not only into the problem of what is memorable and knowable, but in the disagreement over what may be remembered and thus given form.

In *On the Natural History of Destruction*, Sebald asserts that the memoirs written by the survivor Jean Améry "could not, of course, be a narrative in any traditional sense, and they therefore dispense with any kind of literary stylization which might encourage a sense of complicity between the writer and his readers."[60] Améry 's "pervasive strategy of understatement," Sebald argues, "prohibits both pity and self-pity." Sebald's own narrative strategy involves "aton[ing] for that frivolity"[61] fiction indulges in whenever "it pretends to know more than is actually possible."[62] Atonement is made through the "faithful" and "meticulous" attention paid to "objects rather than people." Complicity arises from a kind of excessive relation – pity or self-pity – that confuses the experiences of subjects. But in "imagin[ing] what the mulberry tree might have meant to [another], or a certain arrangement of another kind or a certain *intérieur*," one might "make up for [one's] lapses, as it were, of reliability, that might otherwise be present."[63] Sebald's ethical-aesthetic theory is problematic. To bring oneself into relation with another by constructing a common context somehow evades complicity and guarantees objectivity. But to do so is to arrange oneself in a kind of collection of family likenesses with others, one that, as we have seen, entails a compulsive will to order. Moreover, his reliance on the "reliability" of objects invites the same criticism that Adorno leveled at Benjamin. As Comay elaborates, Benjamin's notion of the aura suggests "the object's ability to return our gaze" and threatens an "idealizing revival of the dead which inevitably accrues to the profit of survivors [that is, victors] in their triumphant march through the continuum of time."[64] When we "receive" the auratic power of rescued objects "into our space," there is a danger of stamping them with our intentions rather than letting them speak to us. "The phantasmagoric gaze of the object becomes one more prosthetic extension designed to confirm the eidetic powers of the subject, whose

ocular anxieties betray themselves in obsessive fantasies of uncanny reciprocity and nonsimultaneity." If Dominick LaCapra argues for an "empathic unsettlement" in listening to the testimonies of others, Comay warns that any "empathic identification" resulting from "rescuing the dead as objects" may "add to a triumphant nationalism that occludes the persistence of inherited power relations through an appeal to presumed continuities of race and caste."[65]

Critics of Sebald have addressed his negotiation of empathy. For Mark M. Anderson, "Sebald's response was to identify with the victims of history – not just of German history, but with all those isolated and idiosyncratic figures who have been broken by some catastrophic historical or personal event and who continue to live in the gray zone between life and death."[66] Although Sebald presents "unbalanced relationship[s]" between protagonists and narrators, none of whom are "truly native," his narrators are nonetheless "the secret center, the thread that holds these narrations together in an implicit gesture of solidarity and identification that is all the more effective for being unstated." Where Anderson praises this covert narratorial centeredness, which seems to resemble the dexterous mobility of something like migrant cosmopolitanism, others, like Susanne Fink, have called Sebald "the fifth exile" of *The Emigrants*. Taberner, who notes Sebald's self-imposed exile in England, suggests the exile's "role of spokesperson for all humanity has echoes of a sentimental, redemptive reading of Jewish fate" and warns of the "problematic transformation of [Sebald's] status as an outsider of mythic proportions." And yet, for him, only Austerlitz, and not the narrator, is "entitled to draw on the past to heal trauma" since "any peace of mind is reserved for the Jew, not the German." Such a reading seems to reinforce the "mythic proportions" of an "outsider status" which is only matched, perhaps, by

what Comay calls the "ego's fantasy of immanence [in terms of objects returning our gaze] that would elide the temporal gap of nonidentity at work in all experience."[67] The non-Jewish writer (or reader) is entirely cast outside the possibilities of experience, relevance, and redemption, or else he or she imitates, elides and transgresses.

In "The Angel's Enigmatic Eyes, or The Gothic Beauty of Catastrophic History in W. G. Sebald's 'Air War and Literature,'" Julia Hell suggests Sebald performs in *On the Natural History of Destruction* a "scopic fantasy" that is "driven by the wish of *Nachgeborene*, the one born after the Nazi regime, to be present at the cataclysmic events that formed his or her very subjectivity."[68] As I mentioned in the Introduction, Sebald only learned of the Holocaust belatedly, as a teenager, and the disturbing and unnatural silence that surrounded the events of the Third Reich led to his emigration to England; later, his peculiar essayistic novels would revisit what had been neither experienced nor understood: "when I see photographs or documentary films dating from the war I feel as if I were its child, so to speak, as if those horrors I did not experience cast a shadow over me, and one from which I shall never entirely emerge."[69] For Sebald as for Austerlitz, for whom the history of the bourgeois age "pointed in the direction of the catastrophic events already casting their shadows before them in time," all history is naturally and inherently a tale of destruction. Sebald writes in his lectures on "Air War and Literature" that Alexander Kluge, in his account of an air raid on his native Halberstadt, looks down, "both literally and metaphorically, from a vantage point above the destruction." Rather than seeing "a chain of events, [Kluge] sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage," just as Benjamin's Angel of History sees. Sebald, too, attempts to outrun the shadow cast by a concatenation of events by assuming a vantage point above and beyond them. If those who escaped the Allied bombings

"inevitably" experienced a "paralysis of the capacity to think and feel" in their "qualified" eyewitness accounts, their testimony must be "supplemented by what a synoptic and artificial view reveals."[70] In "Air War and Literature," Sebald offers that belated overview, supplying horrific details that, he contends, postwar German writers have often neglected or glossed over.

Hell suggests that in *On the Natural History of Destruction*, the "desire to see and the desire to gain mastery is difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle."[71] For Hell, Sebald's attempt to tell the history of the air raids on Germany results in a "collision between diverging desires: *the desire to represent* what an artificial and synoptic view would reveal of a particular forgotten or repressed moment and *the desire to relive* a past that determines the postwar subject."[72] The first desire is exemplified by Benjamin's historical materialism, which draws on the language of photography, while the second is embodied in Michelet's approach, wherein the historian aspires, symbolically and imaginatively, to participate in events of the past. For Hell, Benjamin's Angel of History is "caught between the desire to stay with the dead and the momentous force of 'progress'"[73]; she believes, with Yves de Maesseneer, that the Angel's seeming paralysis "implies 'the end of politics, either in resignation, or in (state) terror.'"[74] Where "the redemptive potential of violence no longer exists" in postwar Germany, Benjamin's Angel offers only "the unproductive choice between powerless witnessing and apocalyptic terror."[75] If representation here results in impasse, in a historical situation in which one can not move forward but can only gaze upon ruins, there is then the danger that Sebald himself discerns in writing that forsakes "objectivity . . .in the face of total destruction" and whose "construction of aesthetic or pseudo-aesthetic effects from the ruins of an annihilated world is a process depriving literature's of its right to

exist."[76] Hell determines that Sebald wishes to narrate with "deadened, ruined eyes that look upon the world without pleasure," not from a desire to give the dead "their voice," but from the "polemical, even angry desire to make them visible, to shock the reader into seeing and remembering them."[77] And yet that process of making visible, of forcing the reader to participate and relive, is "suffused by a euphoric sense of discovery, a barely contained excitement about the relics of destruction and about the complex political and aesthetic project of making them visible."[78] However, I would argue that in *Austerlitz*, although it rehearses repeatedly the Angel's fixed stare upon the ruins of the past and seems to give itself over to resignation before a moribund world that cannot be redeemed, Sebald negotiates the desires to live through and to represent. He hopes to renounce both the desire for redemption *and* the belief in the total destruction, the *completedness*, of the world whose remains he collects. In the Angel's impossible position between a past that lies in ruins and the storm of progress that compels one forward, one may locate a moment of decision in which one chooses neither the vain attempt to make the past whole nor the resignation to a future that will lay waste to that moment.

In *Austerlitz*, Sebald struggles, through artifice, to create a "synoptic" view, not of the Holocaust, whose horrific details never coalesce into a single, comprehensible event, but of the very act of seeing.[79] Sebald, whose seamless weaving of memories, experiences and voices often threatens to confuse the narrator and Austerlitz, is ever conscious of language as "a kind of unhealthy growth issuing from our ignorance," a "certain stylistic facility" that can produce "entirely arbitrary" meanings.[80] It would be hasty to dismiss these embedded ruminations as a mere metafictional critique of the unreliability of representation, language and memory. For one thing, it is not a turning inward but a turning away – in sorrow and

shame – that constitutes whatever relation may be made between past and present, self and other. "Turning away" registers different meanings in the novel, not the least of which is the "collective amnesia" of which Sebald frequently accused postwar Germany. It means, too, the "constant process of obliteration" that dissolves not only the puzzles Austerlitz discerns everywhere in the materials he collects but also the time necessary to bring them to completion. But turning away, in sorrow and in shame, is, as Agamben writes in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, a process of "both subjectification and desubjectification." Shame, as that which both constitutes and disarticulates subjectivity, opens up the possibility of a noncoincidence and nonsimultaneity that cannot, finally, "confirm the eidetic powers of the subject." In *Austerlitz*, shame names a "fracture" within the self that allows for a simultaneous being and nonbeing, presence and absence. Through shame, the novel attempts to discover in the interstices of its allegorical warp of destruction, dislocation and death a measure of finitude, a moment in which to overcome the melancholic certainty cast by the shadows of the past.

II. Shame

In turning away from the past, Austerlitz seems to experience time's disappearance. Following Kant, Heidegger says that time is a " 'pure auto-affection' that has the singular form of a 'moving from itself toward . . .'" that is at the same time a 'looking back.'"[81] Agamben relates this "moving toward" and "looking back" to the "double movement" of shame experienced by both the witness and the *Musselmann*. Drawing on Levinas's idea that "shame is grounded on our being's incapacity to move away from itself," its incapacity to resist "our intimacy, that is, our presence to ourselves,"[82] Agamben suggests that "to be ashamed means to be consigned to something that cannot be assumed."

> It is as if our consciousness collapsed and, seeking to flee in all directions, were summoned by an irrefutable order to be present at its own defacement, at the expropriation of what is most its own. In shame, the subject has no other content than its own desubjectification; it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as subject.[83]

Shame calls one to a self-presence to which he or she cannot testify. It produces a "reciprocity of active and passive vision" in which a "passive subject must be active with respect to its own passivity."[84] For Heidegger, time "forms the very essence of what can be defined as seeing oneself in general," and this self, in being "seen by something is, in essence, the finite subject." We can only discover the finitude of our subjectivity, our thrownness in time, when we see ourselves as other and are thereby "delivered over to receiving"[85]: we are "moved by [our] own passivity."[86] Agamben discusses the ultimate passivity of the *Musselmänner*, those living-dead of the camps who seemed to have resigned themselves to their fate even before their executioners could order it and who, "finishing" in the gas chambers, were, as Primo Levi wrote, the "complete witnesses" of the Nazi genocide. Beyond both life and death, beyond a will for either life or death, the *Musselmann* constitutes a "third realm"[87] that "marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman."[88] The *Musselmann* sees but cannot speak, for what he has seen and known is "the impossibility of knowing and seeing." It is, for Agamben, "precisely this inhuman impossibility of seeing [that] calls and addresses the human, the apostrophe from which human beings cannot turn away – this and nothing else is testimony."[89] The *Musselmann* cannot, in Heidegger's parlance, "appropriate" his death as his "ownmost," he cannot experience a "freedom toward death" in anticipating the "possibility of the impossibility of existence in general,"[90] for there

is, in his utter degradation, no longer any distinction between dying and death, between anticipating the impossibility of existing and no longer existing as such. As Heidegger himself notoriously commented, the Holocaust "fabricated corpses" and not men and women who could experience freedom to die – or to survive. Where for Heidegger death is "non-relational" (death is only one's "ownmost possibility), for Agamben (following Levinas), we can only know of our death, our finitude, in experiencing the deaths of others. When survivors such as Levi "bear witness" for the *Musselmänner*, they bear witness to the inhuman. When a survivor testifies, "it is in some way the *Musselmann* who bears witness," for "the one who truly bears witness in the human is the inhuman": the survivor becomes the "agent of the inhuman." No one is "a 'witness' by right": "To speak, to bear witness, is thus to enter into a vertiginous movement in which something sinks to the bottom, wholly desubjectified and silenced, and something subjectified speaks without truly having anything of its own to say ('I tell of things . . . that I did not actually experience')."[91]

The passivity that one experiences as "auto-affection" becomes, for Agamben, "constitutively fractured into a purely receptive pole (the *Musselman*) and an actively passive role (the witness), but in such a way that this fracture never leaves itself, fully separating into two poles."[92] Rather, in "making oneself passive," in responding to one's own desubjectification, one discovers a noncoincidence of self that "allows for testimony" which is the "non-place of articulation."[93] Agamben describes this "non-place" by referring to the Japanese psychiatrist Kimura Bin's delineation of the melancholic, the schizophrenic and the epileptic.[94] The melancholic is imprisoned in the past, defeated by a sense of belatedness, dwelling in a *post festum* temporality in which he has always missed his "celebration." The schizophrenic, on the other hand, is oriented to the "future in the form of projection and

anticipation"; *ante festum* temporality defines "the problem of one's own possibility of becoming oneself, the problem of the certainty of becoming oneself, and therefore, the risk of possibly being alienated from oneself," of "not being present at [one's] celebration."[95] But the *intra festum* temporality of the epileptic, who loses himself in "a kind of ecstatic excess over presence," names the impossibility of participating in one's own celebration due to an "incapacity to tolerate presence": he misses himself (literally, he loses consciousness).[96] Agamben suggests the schizophrenic and the melancholic coincide in an *intra festum* temporality, in this "disjunction" of the "I" that constitutes time as such. Such a disjunction can "be mastered only in the epileptic excess or the moment of authentic decision" which makes free choices of possibilities. But in having made dying, and not death, an inhuman impossibility, "Auschwitz marks the irrecoverable crisis of authentic temporality, of the very possibility of 'deciding' on the disjunction." The future and the past are cancelled where there is no "temporal foundation of a singular position in space, of a *Da*."[97] The non-place of articulation cannot unite the human being and the speaking being; rather, their "non-relation" takes the form of shame, of a simultaneous subjectification and desubjectification. But just as the "I" cannot be "assumed" and instead "stands suspended in this disjunction,"[98] the witness and the *Musselman*, the human and the inhuman, cannot be distinguished. The inhuman survives in the human, and the human survives the inhuman. For Agamben this means that "something always *remains*. *The witness is this remnant*."[99] In bearing witness to desubjectification, the survivor, the one who speaks, bears witness to the impossibility of speaking which, as we have seen above, *also* constitutes subjectivity (we are sovereign subjects, we are subjected). In the "irreducible disjunction" between the human and the inhuman, "each term [can step] forth in the place of a remnant, can bear witness." What they

bear witness to is neither the future nor the past but "a remaining time," and the witnesses themselves are neither "the drowned nor the saved" but "what remains between them."[100]

In "Approaching Limit Events: Siting Agamben," Dominick LaCapra has rigorously laid out the problems Agamben's book both produces and neglects. For LaCapra, there are two principal stances on the Holocaust: "One affirms a notion of redemption as absolute recovery with no essential loss," while the other holds "a view of redemption in general as unavailable, absent, or repeatedly and aporetically in question,"[101] perspectives LaCapra identifies here as elsewhere with Freud's theory of working through and acting out as well as with different versions of a traumatic sublime. Where the first stance seeks something like an immanent sublime, in which violence or sacrifice restores, or in which suffering is transfigured and sacralized, the second "has the appeal of counteracting the lure of the immanent sublime" [102] because it rejects the idea of sacrifice altogether. Although the transcendent sublime is preferable to the immanent since it dispenses with the latter's "totalizing logic," it also "remains fixated on the absolute in its very . . .unrepresentability."[103] Neither sublime allows for a "transitional 'space' between absolutes" in which "limited knowledge" can be produced, tested and agreed upon in order to deal with trauma without either (fully) redeeming it or compulsively repeating it. LaCapra cites Agamben's eschewal of the rhetoric of full-scale redemption and the "intimations of a transitional 'space'"[104] in his work before *Remnants*. But LaCapra also sees in Agamben's postulation of the *Musselmann* "as the limit of abjection" a dangerous absolutization and transhistoricization of his or her unique, historically situated plight, a problem also noted by Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg. Similarly, when Agamben asserts that a "state of

exception," in which all legal norms are suspended, has now become the rule, he thereby suggests that ours is a "post-apocalyptic Auschwitz-now-everywhere"[105] world.

What LaCapra finds most problematic is Agamben's use of Levi's idea of the "gray zone." For Levi in *The Drowned and the Saved*, the gray zone is where a "hybrid class of prisoner-functionary constitutes its armature and at the same time its most disquieting feature."[106] Using examples of Jews who were forced into uneasy complicity with the Nazis – the *Sonderkommando* who worked the crematoria and Chaim Rumkowski, president of the Lodz ghetto who governed and policed other Jews with a perversely grandiose sense of authority – Levi describes a gray zone that confounds our ability to judge such "collaborators," that produces an *impotentia judicandi* in which we cannot appeal to established norms to differentiate oppressors from victims. Agamben reformulates Levi's *impotentia judicandi* as a "zone of irresponsibility" that does away with the concept of responsibility insofar as it is *juridical* responsibility, linked to indebtedness and guilt.[107] Ethics, unlike the law, presents a "confrontation with a responsibility that is infinitely greater than any we could ever assume. At the most we can be faithful to it, that is, assert its unassumability."[108] The threshold of indistinction between human and inhuman that the *Musselmann* signifies indicates a zone of irresponsibility outside (or, as Agamben stresses, *before* and not *beyond*) the law.

> . . . Auschwitz marks the end and the ruin of every ethics of dignity and conformity to a norm. The bare life to which human beings were reduced neither demands nor conforms to anything. It itself is the only norm; it is absolutely immanent. [Robert Antelme's notion of an] 'ultimate sense of belonging to the species' cannot in any sense be a kind of dignity. . . . [T]he atrocious news that the survivors carry from the

> camp to the land of human beings is precisely that it is possible to lose dignity and decency beyond imagination, and that there is still life in the most extreme degradation. And this new knowledge becomes the touchstone by which to judge and measure all morality and all dignity. The *Musselmann*, who is its most extreme expression, is the guard on the threshold of a new ethics, an ethics of a form of life that begins where dignity ends.[109]

LaCapra takes exception not only to Agamben's generalization of "Auschwitz" (already problematic as a shorthand for the Holocaust)[110] as our contemporary condition but also to Agamben's "synecdochic *use* of the *Musselmann* as a theoretical cipher to disprove human dignity and to discredit all preexisting (perhaps all presently conceivable) forms of ethics."[111] The "gray zone," in other words, should not be understood as a space where ethical norms can never be appealed to for judgment.

I agree with LaCapra that *Remnants of Auschwitz* indulges in sometimes provocative, sometimes facile, sometimes dangerous hyperbole in its insistence that the state of exception of "Auschwitz" persists in what Agamben sees everywhere as modern states of exception, and in its claim that the *Musselmann* has become a transhistorical figure for some general state of human abjection. (Sebald, too, as we have seen, generalizes history's tendency toward destruction, dislocation and death from its particular instances. Not only the Holocaust, but any and all examples of barbarity and oppression the world over confirm this Sebaldian view, as evidenced in *Rings of Saturn* and *Vertigo*.) But while Agamben's rejection of norms make it quite difficult to envision a "new" ethics, an ethics that Agamben calls for but does not, alas, elaborate, he does attempt to describe the site at which thinking about a new ethics must begin if it is to avoid violent exclusions. LaCapra says that

Agamben's insistence upon Auschwitz as a "limit situation" wherein "the exception becomes the rule is in a sense to write *in extremis* as if each moment were the moment of death."[112] But such a moment would be precisely where ethics and temporality meet. A "moment of death" *is* inscribed in any moment wherein a decision must be made, a decision that entails a responsibility we can never, finally and completely, assume. Just as shame for Agamben effects a double movement in which one is consigned to – placed into relation with – something that cannot be assumed, namely, one's capacity to not-be, "limit situations" situate us at a threshold that effects "the experience of the limit itself, the experience of being-*within* an outside." This "outside" would not constitute the completion of history or the fulfillment of a goal, but rather an openness that holds the "totality of its possibilities." To be "within" an outside is to reject the idea of "outside" as a predetermined futurity or destined actuality; the totality of possibilities must remain a *passage* between actuality and potentiality in which potentiality cannot be exhausted or absorbed. In bordering this outside, in being within it – that is, being determined only in relation to it – a singular being is both "finite" and "indeterminate."[113]

In other words, as Agamben writes in *The Coming Community*, the potentiality to not-be is unlike the potentiality to be, which "has as its object a certain act" and "can only mean passing to a determinate activity."[114] Rather, the potentiality to not-be would have "as its object potentiality itself, a *potentia potentiae*."[115] As pure act that seeks no goal, the potentiality to not-be seeks its own taking-place, that is, *a present*. Agamben says that ethics has "no essence" and "no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize," since "if humans were or had to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible – there would be only tasks to be done."[116] We do not decide upon being

or not-being, upon one destiny or another. Agamben defends against charges of nihilism by countering that in fact there *is* "something that humans are and have to be, but this something is not an essence nor properly a thing." Because what they are and have to be is "being one's own possibility or potentiality," a possibility that also entails the possibility to not-be, this "something" is "devoid of foundation."[117] Because we are not "in possession" of our "proper being," which is only a "being potential," humans have felt themselves "always already in debt," already guilty of an original sin that precedes any act. "Morality, on the other hand, refers [the older theological doctrine of original sin] to a blameworthy act humans have committed and, in this way, shackles their potentiality, turning it back toward the past." Agamben rejects ethical norms that are founded on responsibility as guilt and debt because they are oriented to a past that has always already preempted "the experience of being (one's own) potentiality, of being (one's own) possibility."[118] Rather, we are consigned neither to a destiny nor to nothingness but to our own "being-thus," to our being "whatever." Agamben's idea of "whatever" is not a quality or an attribute that assigns singular beings to a class or a group or an identity; "whatever" is indifferent to both the common (a class to which singularities belong) and the proper (singularity as defined by certain attributes).

> The passage from potentiality to act, from language to the world, from the common to the proper, comes about every time as a shuttling in both directions along a line of sparkling alternation on which common nature and singularity, potentiality and act change roles and interpenetrate. The being that is engendered on this line is whatever being, and the manner in which it passes from the common to the proper and from the proper to the common is called usage – or rather, *ethos*.[119]

To think possibility as only the possibility to be, a possibility or potentiality that must enact a destiny or terminate in a goal, is to think of our potentiality as a matter of already belonging to a destiny or class. Where "ethos" means custom or character, belonging based on shared practices (a sense that survives in the word *sodalis*, or community), it designates a commonality that characterizes and determines itself. By thinking of the "passage" from potentiality to act as an engendering, as a "taking-place," being is "reclaimed not for another class nor for the generic absence of any belonging, but for being-as-*such*, for belonging itself."[120] When "whatever" being appropriates belonging itself, it is neither oriented to a past indebtedness or guilt nor to a future where it will be absorbed into a universal class or state that determines in advance *how* it should belong.

Insofar as people have sought, and never found, a "proper identity" in the discourses of "universal history" that prescribed what is good and true, proper and authentic, there arises now the possibility that humans might "succeed in belonging to impropriety as such, in making of the proper being-thus not an identity or an individuality but a singularity without identity, a common and absolutely exposed singularity . . ."[121] In "enter[ing] into a community without presuppositions and without subjects," humans would found only "an absolutely unrepresentable community"[122] that, like limbo, is "beyond perdition and salvation." Although those in limbo cannot be saved, they are not lost, because they "have always already forgotten God": "Like letters with no addressee, these uprisen beings remain without a destination."[123] As Zafer Aracagök notes in "Whatever Image," "time is only relevant for those who have a destination to reach, who have committed an act to be punished, or for those who have something to redeem." Without God as a "first principle" to which our actions refer and to whose community we are bidden to return, limbo is "marked

by a temporality that is a not-yet taking place." [124] Like limbo, the unrepresentable community is also a coming community in which "whatever," as that which remains "unthought" in transcendental terms such as "one, true, good, or perfect" but nevertheless "conditions the meaning" of each, engenders a "potentiality to not-think"[125]: "thought can turn back to itself (as pure potentiality) and be, at its apex, the thought of thought. What it thinks here, however, is not an object [but rather] its own pure potentiality (to not think). . . . In the potentiality that thinks itself, action and passion coincide . . . ."[126] A new ethics for Agamben would be without presupposition (such as "original sin") and without goal (such as redemption or restoration). It would be neither indebted to the past nor absorbed in a sense of belonging to a prescribed identity. Where potentiality is conceived as a taking-place, as pure act without object or objective, and therefore as the potentiality to both be and not-be, thought returns to itself without image or representation. It takes place as a relationship to a future that has not yet come about because we can never assume our potential to not-be. This also means that the potential to not-be can only realize itself when it

> can pass over into actuality only at the point at which it sets aside its own potential to not-be (its *adynamia*). To set im-potentiality aside is not to destroy it but, on the contrary, to fulfill it, to turn potentiality back on itself in order to give itself to itself.. . .Being founds itself sovereignly, which is to say, without anything preceding or determining it . . . other than its own ability to not be. And an act is sovereign when it realizes itself by simply taking away its own potentiality not to be, letting itself be, giving itself to itself.[127]

For Agamben, "evil consists instead in the decision to remain in a deficit of existence, to appropriate the power to not-be as a substance and a foundation beyond existence (and this is

the destiny of morality), to regard potentiality itself . . . as a fault that must always be suppressed."[128]

The *Musselmann* is "the most extreme expression" of a "new" ethics that cannot appeal to laws and established norms that determine conditions of belonging and exclusion; rather, he embodies both the potentiality to be and to not-be in the indifference between the human and the inhuman. The *Musselmann* defies the law that would set him outside humanity since his "inhumanity" survives in the "human" witness. And because the inhuman survives in the witness, because the *Musselmann's* inability to speak is part of the simultaneous subjectification and desubjectification that the witness experiences in becoming a speaking being, nothing awaits redemption in some future: the human and the inhuman already *are*, they already take place *together*. Whatever the excesses and elisions of Agamben's arguments in *Remnants*, I would like to focus on his idea that the "passage from potentiality to act, from language to the world, from the common to the proper, comes about every time as a shuttling in both directions," that is, without deriving from presupposition and without arriving at the fulfillment of some destiny. Such a movement would disarm both the brooding intentionality of the allegorist in his search for a final solution and the frenzied grasping of the collector who rescues things from the past and brings them into alignment according to some underlying rationale. It would resist the idea of a destiny as either redemption in which the past is restored (the collector's dream) or complete ruin (the allegorist's fear).

In *Austerlitz*, Sebald fears dreams of redemption based on belonging, such as the Nazi-era Germans' "recreati[on of] themselves in" a "perverse form" in league with a "notion that the promise of their greatness was about to be fulfilled."[129] That promise,

spawned in a mythical past, always leads to ruin, to a future of complete destruction. Like Agamben, Sebald sees everywhere a state of exception that has become the norm, and rejects a community based on belonging to a predetermined notion of greatness. In fact, the criticism levied against Agamben has also been levied against Sebald: a tendency to transhistoricize the state-sponsored violence of the Holocaust and a preoccupation with victimhood, a tendency that informs each writer's ideas of responsibility. Where Agamben sees in the *Musselmann's* utter abjection the possibility of a new ethics that demands a "confrontation with a responsibility that is infinitely greater than any we could ever assume," Austerlitz's abjection (as I will elaborate in Section IV) more properly reflects German guilt, in the face of which the only ethical response possible is total "objectivity in the face of total destruction." But Agamben's idea of unassumable responsibility in fact yields more possibility than Sebald's commitment to objectivity, which, as we have seen in *Austerlitz*, results in an abject fascination with objects from the past that can incur a compulsive will to order. If a new ethics based on a rejection of preexisting norms seems untenable, Agamben's focus on what remains unthought – the "whatever" that attends transcendental notions of the good and true (or transhistorical notions of the abject and false) – mitigates the "all-or-nothing logic" with which LaCapra charges Agamben. In the potentiality to not-be**,** thought returns to itself without object and therefore does not make us "prisoners of representation," of propositions based on presuppositions. This does not have to lead, as Leland de la Durantaye notes in "Agamben's Potential," to aporetic impasse. Just as for Benjamin "remembrance can make the incomplete (happiness) complete, and the complete (pain) incomplete,"[130] the shuttling in both directions that Agamben identifies with the passage from potentiality to act and that renders indistinct their difference interrupts a single-minded

orientation to either the past or the future; what is "redeemed" is only what has not yet been thought or completed. Below, I will examine Austerlitz's recourse to a gray zone in which a confrontation with unassumable responsibility presents a situation where thought might return to itself without object. As we shall see, a "moral daydream" plays out in the gray zone where, at the crossroads between ethics and temporality, an *impotentia judicandi* seems to promise deliverance from destiny founded on guilt or glory.

III. The gray zone

In *On the Natural History of Destruction*, Sebald describes how, for the victim of torture, "the thread of chronological time is broken, the victim's logical means of support in his existence are suspended. The experience of terror also dislocates time, that most abstract of all humanity's homes." Sebald says of Améry's efforts at making his memories "accessible" that the "paradox of searching for a time which, to the author's own distress, cannot in the last resort be forgotten entails the quest for a form of language in which experiences paralyzing the power of articulation could be expressed." [131] We have seen above that Améry's "form of language" – essayistic memoirs – had to "dispense with any kind of literary stylization which might encourage a sense of complicity between the writer and his readers." We have seen, too, how Sebald's own avoidance of complicity involves constructing common contexts and paying attention to objects, and how such a procedure invites a dangerous will to order that Benjamin associated with both the allegorist and the collector. Austerlitz sees this will to order everywhere, in humans' tyranny over one another and over nature; it is also evident in his own brooding allegorical intention as he tries to gather and order all instances of a "will to order," which leads to paralysis. In his

"disintegration of personality" through which language no longer signifies, Austerlitz figures as something like Agamben's *Musselmann*. In the shame and paralysis he feels before a past that eludes him, in his *mortification*, the novel attempts to transform its pervasive "sense of eternity" into the kind of "cessation of happening" that attends the dialectical image. His "mortification," not unproblematically, allows him to "remain with the dead" who are "outside of time." It is here that Austerlitz seeks a sort of "gray zone," a "border between life and death," where he can experience both the potential to be and to not-be and therefore overcome the will to order that derives from his obsessive collecting and melancholic brooding. Austerlitz's "disintegration of personality" and his failure to make sense of his studies or his past make him resemble Agamben's *Musselmann*, whose inability to see or speak grounds the possibility of the survivor's speaking and seeing.[132] Such a suggestion is dangerous on several grounds. Most troubling, of course, would be the arrogation to a fictional character (and, by extension, to a non-Jewish German author) of a privilege – as witness, as spokesperson, etc. – that Levi does not grant even to actual survivors. To assign Austerlitz a conditional *Musselmann* status is also to accuse him, perhaps, of an empathic identification bordering on hysteria, such as that which has been associated with other non-Jewish characters and personae (and authors) who have filtered their experiences through the imagery of the Holocaust. Although I make the suggestion only within the parameters of Agamben's statement that "testimony can exist only through a relation to an impossibility of speech – that is, only as *contingency*, as a capacity not to be," dangers concerning appropriation do not disappear. However, it is precisely where subjects become confused that another kind of belonging can be glimpsed.

What makes Austerlitz's "testimony" different from a survivor's is not simply that he has not experienced the camps, that he has seen and known nothing and therefore has nothing to which to testify. Also, although he bears all the signs of guilt often experienced by the children of survivors, I would locate the novel's central concern elsewhere. That Austerlitz is in fact a Jewish man who has lost his family and his past to the Holocaust does not relieve him, in Sebald's novel, of the imperative to assume responsibility through objectivity, which for the German citizen as well as for the Jewish survivor is a matter of submitting oneself to what Sebald calls in *On the Natural History of Destruction* "an almost pathological hypermnesia in a past otherwise emptied of content."[133] Both confront what Améry has called a postwar society "'already' rehabilitated by time"[134] in which atrocities have been minimized or forgotten. For Sebald, it is not only the survivor for whom "a diffuse ability to forget goes hand in hand with the recurrent resurgence of images that cannot be banished from memory,"[135] but the German citizen who, like himself, feels "as if those horrors I did not experience cast a shadow over me, and from which I shall never entirely emerge."[136] But it is only the survivor who is entitled to Améry's "implacable resentment," which "demands that the irreversible be turned around, that the event be undone."[137] Améry's demand for a right to resentment, and not for revenge, is, for Sebald, evidence of "the validity of resistance even to the point of absurdity."[138] Neither revenge nor atonement can reverse the event: "The issue, then, is not to resolve but to reveal the conflict."[139] Améry imagines in *At the Mind's Limits* (whose original title is *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*, or "Beyond Guilt and Atonement") that a Flemish SS man who had hit him might also have wished, at the moment of his own execution before a firing squad, that he could "turn back time." Such a fantasy would not, of course, transform persecutor into victim or even, simply, the criminal into a

judged and sentenced man, but the "antiman" into "a fellow man."[140] The persecutor, in becoming "sensitized" to what cannot be resolved, would belong, with his victims, not to a country, a faction, or an ethnicity, but to a common humanity. Améry's "extravagant moral daydream"[141] is only conceivable if non-Jewish Germans themselves – including persecutors, bystanders and, one imagines, those born after the events of the Holocaust – were to demand the right of *others* to a resentment that cannot be appeased, precisely by making visible the very impossibility of appeasement.

The daydream in which antimen become fellow men and in which the distinction between persecutor and victim – a distinction formerly based on the grotesque exclusion of the latter's humanity – can become, momentarily, a matter of indifference is, in this regard, similar to Agamben's zone of irresponsibility. Agamben's reconstrual of Levy's *impotentia judicandi*, as we have seen above, is related to his larger project in *The Coming Community* of imagining an "unrepresentable community" that is no longer oriented toward past guilt or a redemptive future. Certainly Agamben does not conceive of Levy's gray zone, in which victims have been forced into the role of perpetrators, as a site where something like the guilt of the SS man who struck Améry cannot be judged. LaCapra warns that the abstractness of Agamben's use of the gray zone, which does not sufficiently take into account social, political and economic conditions, may invite just such a confusion of perpetrators and victims. But Agamben's focus is on the unassumability of responsibility, not of guilt. Where guilt or indebtedness ground juridical responsibility and the norms that define it, Agamben rejects normativity: only "bare life," no longer separable from the "human life" that is "assigned to subjects as a property," can be counted as a "norm." We must be careful here to distinguish guilt deriving from brutal acts and the "guilt" that "shackles potentiality, turning

it back toward the past"; for instance, the Nazi fantasy of reinstalling a mythically pure Germany sought to realize itself through legal norms that excluded and put to death bare life. Agamben's *impotentia judicandi* does away with all norms that prescribe and proscribe belonging according to having this or that property and that (inevitably, for him) invoke violence in the name of this or that destiny. Instead we are called to an ethics in which responsibility cannot appeal to norms and therefore can never be assumed as a matter of belonging to or possessing something beforehand. The *Musselmann*'s survival in the witness means that even human "dignity" cannot be a property that, in the final analysis, can never be destroyed and therefore designated an essential property of the human. Bare life, for Agamben, should never have to appeal to or rely upon any "normative" property for its safety, for its right to be (whatever).[142]

When, as Sebald suggests in his musings on Améry, one can reveal only what can neither be resolved nor atoned for, one confronts an unassumable responsibility. One must somehow find a "language in which experiences paralyzing the power of articulation could be expressed," that is, one must speak precisely where one cannot speak. When Améry finds a language in which to mitigate the unhappiness of exile, it is a language that belies his efforts: "The consciousness of unhappiness is a malady too grave to figure in an arithmetic of agonies or in the registers of the Incurable."[143] This unhappiness is incommunicable because there exist two worlds, one in which one dies only once and the other in which one never ceases to die. According to Sebald, this division between those who continue to experience death – a critical moment that decides nothing – and those for whom death ends everything means that for those who belong to the former group, "the act of writing becomes both liberation and the annulment of *délivrance*, the moment in which a man who has escaped

death must recognize that he is no longer alive. Existence prolonged beyond the experience of death has its affective center in a sense of guilt, the guilt of the survivor . . ."[144] Writing, or expression, cannot deliver one from the guilt of survival which endures in a (Blanchotian) death-in-life, in a deathless life. What survives cannot speak without always marking the disjunction of the "I" that speaks: at once "no longer alive" and "never ceasing to die," the "I" experiences an *intra festum* temporality in which it both misses and exceeds the event of subjectivity. Writing testifies to "experiences paralyzing the power of articulation" only because testimony, in Agamben's terms, "is a potentiality that becomes actual through an impotentiality of speech," because it is "an impossibility that gives itself existence through a possibility of speaking."[145]

Austerlitz puts into play these overlapping, and sometimes rivaling, connotations of a "gray zone." Austerlitz experiences paralyzing shame in the face of missed events, both that of his forgotten childhood and of the unacknowledged history that severed him from it. Like Sebald, he feels the shadow of the horrors he did not experience cast over him, and like a survivor such as Améry, he feels that the shadow takes the form of time's oblivion, which is not the mercy of all things but their ruin. But *as an historian* who actively resists learning of the events that lead to his own orphanhood, namely, the events leading up to and culminating in the Third Reich, Austerlitz begins to resemble less survivors' children or postwar children who were kept in the dark about Germany's violent history than he does those who have suppressed that history with their silence and omissions. Sebald, as we have seen, is in step with Améry's demand that non-Jewish Germans become sensitized to the past by refusing to allow "biological healing" to scab over what remain persistent political, historical and psychic wounds. By turning back the "moral clock" to bear witness to what cannot be

resolved in order to confront a responsibility that cannot, finally, be assumed, thought can return to itself without object, that is, without an objective that would propose (a false) redemption. Where antimen become fellow men or, more importantly for those who live at the end of the twentieth century, removed in time from the crimes of the Third Reich, where the heirs of "antimen" can confront and reveal a dark and lingering past, there is no "proper identity" to assume. Turning back the clock seeks to erase time's erasure, to force a confrontation with unassumable responsibility; belonging together as "fellow men" takes place at the limit between being and not-being. Again, this does not mean that wrongful acts (or acts of omission) can be atoned for, or that victims and non-victims should be confused.

But some confusion does linger, not least of all in the peculiar circumstances of Austerlitz's plight. Not only does he turn away from the past, much like the wartime generation, and thereby become tacitly complicit in their silence, he also participates in the "organizational zeal" associated with the most barbaric of the histories that he does, eventually, study. Moreover, although the German narrator is, in fact, Austerlitz's narratee and therefore performs the role of listener that Germans (and others)[146] failed to do for so long, his experiences, memories and voice often become confused with Austerlitz's own. While critics have been careful to hold Austerlitz and the unnamed narrator apart ("peace of mind is reserved for the Jew, not for the German"), the overlapping of their identities is equally important. Certainly, peace of mind exists for neither, because each experiences a sense of homelessness and profound depression; the fact that exile has been imposed upon one and chosen by the other signifies not only divergent historical circumstances but also a shared sense of unbelonging. That Austerlitz searches for the "home" to which he belongs but does not find it has as much to do with historical violence as it does with the novel's

underlying belief that a true homeland does not and cannot exist wherever a collective experience of terror and violence has "dislocated time, that most abstract of humanity's homes."

In what follows, I will discuss rivaling accounts of time in the novel that play out in its "gray zones." There are numerous references to the color gray (*grau*) in the novel which concern vision and time. Gerald's uncle Alphonso paints nature scenes while wearing "glasses with gray tissue instead of lenses in the frames, so that the landscape appeared through a fine veil that muted its colors, and the weight of the world dissolved before your eyes."[147] "All forms and colors [are] dissolved in a pearl-gray haze," however, when Austerlitz regards the flattened world with his own eyes, sensing nothing but "a single blur."[148] The five-year-old Austerlitz in the photograph waits "in the gray light of dawn," and the Liverpool Street Waiting Room is bathed in an "icy gray light." Grayness, for Austerlitz, can be the color of historical monotony, of the co-existence of times. Grayness is the empty background of the photograph of himself as a page and the blank tabletop that remains when he clears his collection of photographs from its surface. But grayness is also, as Anderson has remarked, "the gray zone between life and death." Anderson does not relate his remark to Levi's description of the gray zone, nor do I hazard to conjecture that Sebald, although he was familiar with *The Drowned and the Saved*, had Levi's particular account of an *impotentia judicandi* in mind when he chose to make gray a dominant motif in *Austerlitz*. While Levy's text is no doubt one of the many sources lurking behind the novel, it is not necessary to draw a direct link between the Italian-Jewish survivor and the German novelist. The fact that gray is continually enlisted to describe both experiences of anomie and (willful) oblivion and experiences in which the dead and the bygone interrupt that sense of oblivion

grounds my decision to situate *Austerlitz* in the framework that I have elaborated above. The *impotentia judicandi* that Agamben adapts from Levi and that I have related to Sebald's reading of Améry is a matter of relocating oneself in time. To do so is to appropriate belonging as-such, without presupposition and without destiny; it is also to (re)confront an unassumable responsibility that cannot be atoned for by appeals to a restoration of the past or redemption in the future. In the terms I have used above to describe Austerlitz's overlapping activities of collecting and allegorizing, what is engendered on the limit between potentiality and act would no longer look for an (allegorist's) solution in the past or a (collector's) completion in the future. The futile search for an overarching allegory that can accommodate all instances of ruin and destruction, and that would inevitably reduce the Holocaust to another item in the collector's series, would be interrupted. The belonging that would take place at such a moment would resist "proper" ethnic and national identities and the violent exclusions their naming-such make possible.

IV. The name

Austerlitz's monumental task of ordering that which betrays a "tendency towards monumentalism" is inspired by "the dangerous and incomprehensible currents of emotion" elicited by Parisian railway stations. As "places marked by both blissful happiness and profound misfortune,"[149] railway stations are traversed by fateful departures and returns. But the waiting room of Antwerp's Centraal Station and the defunct Ladies' Waiting Room of the Liverpool Street Station, which figure as scenes of loss and potential recovery for Austerlitz, seem to exile their inhabitants from both time and place, and therefore from the anticipation of arriving from or departing for any destination. The clock of Antwerp's Station, standing

"as governor of a new omnipotence," compels the activities of travelers who, having followed "the course time [has] prescribed," find themselves "hasten[ing] through the gigantic spaces separating us from each other." The speeding up of time collapses borders and demolishes its own frames, so that we can "never feel quite sure if we have really been abroad." [150] But as the world shrinks and time ensnares us in its seeming stasis, we shrink as well; to the narrator, the people waiting in the Centraal Station seem like "the last members of a diminutive race which had perished or had been expelled from its homeland."[151]

In Liverpool's waiting room, however, which sits atop an old asylum and long-desecrated cemetery and which is in the process of undergoing yet another renovation, we do not obey clock time but rather "a slight inner adjustment of which we are barely conscious."[152] When Austerlitz passes through it on one of his half-mad nocturnal meanderings, clock time gives way to visionary time. Again, he is made to feel small, as the ceiling "seem[s] to float at a vertiginous height," and "as if the room where [he] stood were expanding, going on forever and ever in an improbably foreshortened perspective, at the same time turning back into itself in a way possible only in a deranged universe."[153] He cannot decide, "in the middle of this vision of imprisonment and liberation," if he has entered "a ruin or a building under construction."[154] On this site where various histories have played out, where "pain and suffering have accumulated" and perhaps have never "ebbed away," time stands still.[155] "[T]he waiting room where I stood as if dazzled contained all the hours of my life, all the suppressed and extinguished fears and wishes I have ever entertained, as if the black and white diamond pattern on the stone slabs beneath my feet were the board on which the endgame would be played, and it covered the entire plane of time."[156] Overdetermined, traversed by fear and desire, the site "blasts a specific life out of the era[s]" that have overlain

it. Here, where the exiled dead pass "to and fro" across "the entire plane of time," Austerlitz sees a vision of a small boy with a rucksack being met by an Welsh couple. The boy is himself, newly arrived on a *Kindertransport* and received by the Eliases who will adopt him, change his name, and raise him in the Calvinist tradition. Upon encountering this vision of himself, Austerlitz says, "I felt something rending within me, a sense of shame and sorrow, or perhaps something quite different, something inexpressible because we have no words for it . . ."[157] If this "dialectical image" that appears before Austerlitz is to herald, as Benjamin would say, "a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past," Austerlitz can only respond by feeling that he "had never really been alive, or was now only being born, almost on the eve of my death."[158] The time between being born and dying has contracted: from this "perilous moment upon which all reading is founded"[159] and which holds the possibilities of both imprisonment and liberation, Austerlitz must construct a narrative from the ruins of the past.

As a teenager, Austerlitz learns that the name he has known himself by, Dafydd Elias, was given to him in his "second life" as an adoptee. His original name is Jacques Austerlitz, a name he calls himself from then on without ever really identifying with it. When he has the vision described above, he admits he "it never occurred to [him] to wonder about [his] true origins" although he had always felt "isolated . . . among the Welsh as much as among the English and French."[160] The memory of himself arriving on a *Kindertransport* is confirmed and made more precise when he overhears a radio broadcast about children arriving in England during the war on a ferry called *Prague*. Thus begins his search for his origins, which leads him to Prague and any number of tantalizing dead ends. Realizing he "had constantly been preoccupied by that accumulation of knowledge which [he] had pursued for

decades, and which served as a substitute or compensatory memory,"[161] Austerlitz now pursues the history of his past with all the academic diligence he had employed in his studies of "the bourgeois age." His comments about never really belonging among the Welsh, English and French seem to suggest that "belonging" is a matter of ethnic or national cohesion. And yet there is no guarantee here that what he will discover about himself, his parents and his homeland will not also be a "substitute memory."

In trying to reconcile himself to his (earliest) given name, Austerlitz attempts to awaken himself to presence "in the eyes of the dead."[162] Austerlitz's researches into his past yield various facts: his Jewish parents' names, their address in Prague, his father's escape to Paris, his mother's deportation. He learns of his childhood habits from Vera, a woman who had helped take care of him in Prague, and memories and even the Czech language begin to return to him. But he has almost as much difficulty believing himself the subject of those memories as he does learning the exact details of his mother's death and his father's whereabouts, and tries to discover a wider context for his name. He can never find another Austerlitz in the phone book, but he finds uncanny significance in the fact that "Austerlitz" is the name of a Moravian town where Napoleon defeated the Russians and Austrians: "I remember once again the idea I developed at the time of being linked in some mysterious way to the glorious past of the people of France."[163] He learns that Fred Astaire's real surname was Austerlitz, that Kafka mentions a "small, bow-legged" Austerlitz in his diaries, and that a woman named Laura Austerlitz testified about a crime in Trieste in 1944. These other Austerlitzes, though it is unlikely that they are his relatives, become, like the name of the town, mysterious "likenesses" that he might link together and to himself.

He researches his mother's fate by visiting Terezín, the site of a concentration camp where she had been interned and that had perversely been advertised as a resort. In the nineties, the town is empty, forsaken, and yields no sign of the terror that had reigned there. Austerlitz finds "uncanny" the "gates and doorways of Terezín, all of them, as [he] thought [he] sensed, obstructing access to a darkness never yet penetrated . . ."[164] At this point of the novel, the text is suddenly interspersed with five photographs of closed doors and windows, including two images on facing pages that disrupt the text entirely and that form the only such instance in the layout of the book (elsewhere, facing pages are used only to accommodate a single large image).[165] Because the images in *Austerlitz* are practically always referred to in the text (unlike in Sebald's other novels where images are often only obliquely related to the writing), the eruption of so many images at once, whose collective purpose is to show, precisely, nothing, is striking. It is as if the novel were suddenly overcome by its exhaustive descriptions and confesses its inability to bring the concealed to light: *das Unheimliche* must speak for itself. Austerlitz's recourse to the idea of the uncanny here as elsewhere seems, however, to be a sort of manipulation of astonishment or shock as a defense against the shock of the arbitrary. Where he cannot "penetrate" meaning, he nevertheless attempts to point to meaning's concealed immanence.

Immanence, as discussed above, can be assigned to objects that return our gaze. When Austerlitz gazes in the window of the Antikos Bazar in Terezín, he finds himself "staring at the hundreds of different objects . . . as if one of them or their relationship with each other must provide an unequivocal answer to the many questions I found it impossible to ask in my mind."[166] Here again is an instance of Sebald's "atonement" for fiction's pretense of knowing more than is actually possible, his painstaking attention to objects

(rather than to people) that will absolve him of complicity. Relationship, however, must be "unequivocal"; it must know, or answer, all that is possible. And yet, when Austerlitz returns from Bohemia and has "learnt by heart the names and dates of birth and death of those buried" in an English cemetery that he visits daily because it "soothes" him, he finds himself again "plagued by the most frightful anxiety attacks" at night.

> It was obviously of little use that I had discovered the sources of my distress and, looking back over all the past years, could now see myself with the utmost clarity as that child suddenly cast out of his familiar surroundings: reason was powerless against the sense of rejection and annihilation which I had always suppressed, and which was now breaking through the walls of its confinement.[167]

He may learn the names of strangers by heart, soothed for the moment by the "neat and tidy order we impose"[168] upon the dead, but the reason with which he can name the sources of his distress cannot make him overcome the sense of rejection and annihilation that arises precisely from his sudden and clear recollection of himself as the subject of his Liverpool Street Station vision.

In *The Gift of Language: Memory and Promise in Adorno, Benjamin, Heidegger and Rosenzweig*, Alexander García Düttman describes the denominative power of naming as that which "can be no more than a coming-to-be-called, a letting-itself-decide."[169] In "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," Benjamin alleges that, after the Fall, before which word and name were one, the ensuing ignorance and arbitrariness of language was expressed in "over-determination" and "over-naming": "The word must communicate something (other than itself). That is really the Fall of language-mind."[170] Because "things

have no proper name except in God" wherein "knowledge and creation are identical," they remain unnamed and await translation. As García Düttman explains,

> the unnamed, as the thing has been named by God, is in some way anterior to the name. However, it does not precede it. It passes through the name to be what it is. . . . The name . . . allows that which has no name to appear [and therefore] the name cannot be a name without being what it is not, what does not appear without it. The name must erase itself. That is why denomination is always over-naming. What is over-naming if not the erasing of the name? To name is to experience what is nameless, and this experience, according to Benjamin, is translation.[171]

Fallen language, language that translates the thing and over-names it, "appears as the meaning of a means of communication." But language is also always "the expression of what is never said" because the "spiritual essence" of the thing remains exterior to language, "communicat[ing] itself *in* language and not *through* language." Therefore, translation "translates language as language, that is to say, as the expression of the spirit which expresses only expression. Since language is not the representation of a 'speaking subject,' translation represents nothing"[172] but communicability itself. Proper names, because they are "words that are singular and without signification, words that do nothing but indicate language's taking-place,"[173] are like dialectical images whose brief illumination hints at redemption but which themselves cannot be held: "If the name were given before naming, we could never experience the name."[174]

García Düttman relates naming and over-naming to melancholy. For Heidegger, those who create the *polis*, "the historical place," are also "at the same time *apolis*, without city and place, lonely, strange, alien and uncanny (*Unheimliche*), without issue among the beings as a

whole, without statute or limit, without structure or order, because they themselves *as* creators must first create all this."[175] Such creators violently impose structure and order but are themselves "without issue." As "*pre*-eminent,"[176] they precede the traditions and community that they bring into being; as "uncanny," they return to what has not yet come to pass. Their melancholy "already marks a gap in relation to what has been created" and "remains attached to what it detaches itself from."[177] It is not unlike that of the allegorist who seeks to rescue what was lost but who grants himself the status of creator, only to disown in despair what he has created (and not found). For Benjamin, however, melancholy resides in nature, not in man. Nature is mute, and "would begin to lament if endowed with language": "that which mourns feels itself thoroughly known by the unknowable. To be named – even when the one who names is godlike and blissful – perhaps always remains an intimation of mournful sadness."[178] When something is named, it loses its mutism and mourns. But, as mute, it was already melancholy. To be named, to be "known by the unknowable," is to have, and to lament, a name given by God even before man's over-naming. García Düttman concludes, therefore, that "*all* naming is over-naming," and yet "over-naming must keep the trace of a name which is not already indebted or which has settled its account, otherwise there would be no naming"[179] (and no task for the translator). Denomination as over-naming cannot, finally, fix identity because the elemental sadness of things defends against any translating, allegorizing intention.

> Man's melancholy invests things with meaning: man betrays the world but he also betrays things. However, this melancholy, at its extreme, touches the thing itself. It saves mortified things, it hears their lament, their breath . . . .Melancholic man reaches the limit of his humanity, if his *humanitas* consists in the task of

> denomination. Thus, the analysis of the thing's sadness allows this limit upon which denomination always suspends itself to appear: "Melancholy betrays the world for the sake of knowledge. But in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplation, in order to redeem them."[180]

The knowledge for which man betrays the world is a matter of judgment, of abstracting things in language and divorcing them from names "that carry memory."[181] But because over-naming is always also naming, because it preserves the name that is beyond judgment and that carries memory as the "possibility of survival, of another memory and promise," it also touches upon the limit of humanity, upon a potential to be called into being. "As soon as we start to be, to be named, we hide, we try to escape from the revelatory force, the memory, the truth of the name." As García Düttman points out, something in the name remains "unreadable" if the name is to appear as a gift. For something to be a gift that does not terminate in the indebtedness of another, the "giver must interrupt the relation to the other the very instant he establishes it by giving the gift."[182] The gift of the name that holds both memory and promise, the memory of a promise, must include forgetting; it "obliges us to be unfaithful." *Andenken*, or memory, is also *An-denken*, or against thought.[183] Thought reduces or mortifies the other because it forgets it, but in forgetting it, thought allows it to return "as something else."[184] As Adorno claims, "Nothing can be rescued unchanged, nothing that has not passed through the portal or the gateway of its death."[185]

When the survivor speaks for the *Musselmann*, when the inhuman survives in the human and bears witness to what cannot be thought, to what was never seen nor heard, there is a remnant, a memory of experience or in-experience that survives and promises a remaining time. "A promise," García Düttman writes, "is, by definition, directed towards a

finite being" because a promise cannot anticipate, it cannot decide. The "chain of will" that Nietzsche says carries the "will's memory" in order to anticipate and effect a future is broken in naming. Rather, because the name as gift cannot terminate in a single name because it would cease to be able to give and give again, "memory and promise must escape a thought which wants to secure both the past and the future of will, in other words, will itself."[186] The disjunction in identity effected by the "vertiginous movement" of shame is like the disjunction of the name which "is late in relation to itself." For Austerlitz, for whom "certain moments [have] no beginning and no end and seem like a blank point without duration," it would seem that the finitude of the present moment is impossible. But in his very reluctance to turn toward the past, he is already, one might say, thinking the other of thought: *An-denken*. He forgets the child, Jacques Austerlitz, whom he must call into being, but as something else.

V. Historical metaphysic

In writing up his collected notes for his study of the bourgeois age, Austerlitz tries to "assemble and recast anything that still passed muster in order to recreate before my own eyes, as if in the pages of an album, the picture of the landscape, now almost immersed in oblivion, through which my journey had taken me."[187] The "aversion and distaste" he feels in regarding his tentative reconstructions, which yield nothing but "the endless possibilities of language," is anything but consoling. The paralysis and mortification Austerlitz feels when he attempts to engage with the past is partly a resistance to those possibilities which follow the erratic trajectory of "progress." Progress does not move "constantly forward but moves in eddies, is marked by episodes of congestion and irruption, recurs in ever-changing form, and

evolves in no one knows what direction." Progress is governed by the notion of linear time, but for Austerlitz "it is still possible to be outside time. . . . The dead are outside time, the dying and all the sick at home or in hospitals, and they are not the only ones, for a certain degree of personal misfortune is enough to cut us off from the past and the future" (X). Austerlitz, of course, has suffered by degrees "personal misfortune" and feels "outside of time," *apolis*, or rather, as he says,

> I keep myself apart from so-called current events in the hope . . . that time will not pass away, has not passed away, that I can turn back and go behind it, and there I shall find everything as it once was, or more precisely I shall find that all moments of time have co-existed simultaneously, in which case none of what history tells us would be true, past events have not occurred but are waiting to do so at the moment we think of them, although that, of course, opens up the bleak prospect of everlasting misery and neverending anguish.[188]

Curiously, this seemingly Benjaminian description of one's ability to discover, in a moment of recognition, the incompleteness of the past, ends in a very unBenjaminian conclusion that such a moment cannot be a "blasting" of time but its perpetuation in the form of everlasting misery. To be outside of time is identical to time as infinite recurrence, to "empty, homogeneous time." Austerlitz staves off the "currency" of history (the present that will bring about the future), and fears turning back because turning back will also bring about the future as "bleak prospect." Austerlitz here does not understand recognition of the past as a recognition of difference and alterity: moments co-exist simultaneously. Similarly, while envisioning "windowless police cars racing through a city frozen with terror" during the 1941 *grand rafle* in which thousands of French Jews were rounded up and deported by

collaborating gendarmes, Austerlitz imagines that his father Maximilian is still in Paris, where he had fled to during the war, and wonders if he is "just waiting, so to speak, for a good opportunity to reveal himself." For Austerlitz, such ideas "infallibly" occur to him when he finds himself

> in places which have more of the past about them than the present. For instance, if I am walking . . . where nothing has changed for decades, I feel, almost physically, the current of time slowing down in the gravitational force of oblivion. It seems to me then as if all the moments of our life occupy the same space, as if future events already existed and were only waiting for us to find our way to them at last, just as when we have accepted an invitation we duly arrive at a certain house at a given time. And might it not be . . . that we also have appointments to keep in the past, in what has gone before and is for the most part extinguished, and must go there in search of places and people who have some connection with us on the far side of time, so to speak?[189]

Austerlitz feels the current of time slowing down in places in which the past has been the least disturbed and which resist the fulfillment of the present. Here again is a description of the overlapping of spaces, the oblivion of time: anticipation is only an obligation to fulfill an inevitable destiny. But unlike the passage about everlasting misery and neverending anguish, here there is a chance that his father will "reveal himself" when a "good opportunity" arises. Here time is slowing, moving slowly toward oblivion (the end of history), which is only glimpsed in the recognition of the virtual extinction of the past. Austerlitz fantasizes that his father, "calm and upright among all those frightened people" being dragged to their deaths, will reveal himself not to his would-be murderers but to his son. But if this is a desperate

fantasy, where choosing between liberation and imprisonment signifies nothing, the "gravitational force of oblivion" brings him to the threshold of forgetting and remembering, to a confrontation with a past that is both "frozen" in space and always just about to occur. The idea of finding one's way at last suggests the individuating detours that Freud says an organism takes in making its own way toward death, that is, in returning to oblivion. Moreover, Austerlitz's belief that he might "find everything as it once was" and that this "once" has not yet occurred marks a threshold, a hesitation before happening that keeps the future in abeyance as possibility.

While discussing the photograph of himself as a page, given to him by Vera, he mentions a dream in which he returns to his childhood home in Prague. His young parents "take no notice" of him and seem to be on the point of leaving him once again. For Austerlitz,

> It does not seem . . . that we understand the laws governing the return of the past, but I feel more and more as if time did not exist at all, only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry, between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like, and . . . it seems to me that we who are still alive are unreal in the eyes of the dead, that only occasionally, in certain lights and atmospheric conditions, do we appear in their field of vision. As far as I can remember, . . . I have always felt as if I had no place in reality, as if I were not there at all, and I never had this impression more strongly than on that evening when the Rose Queen's page looked through me.[190]

If the past "returns" in the dream, if the dream repeats the past in staging another leave-taking, it does so only in the absence of time, or in the phantasmagoric overlapping of

different "spaces." One does not confront the past except as a witness who remains unseen, unreal, absent, much like the dead themselves, who seem to refuse to bear witness themselves.

Austerlitz must think of what has passed, of the dead who are not outside of time, but untimely. To do so he must not surmount death but think the possibility of the impossibility of existing, not as anticipation, but as the limit between what is immemorial and "what is definitive, insurmountable, unsurpassable in death."[191] His paralyzing shame in having neither averted the misfortune lying ahead of him nor having ever really "lived" cancels the present as a site of recognition. Mortified, he wants to become real "in the eyes of the dead," to receive the attestation of the finished in order to become himself what Rosenzweig calls "the completed creature in death."[192] Unable to recall the past, to be recalled by the past, Austerlitz seeks its immanence in objects. When he passes through Pilsen, where he must have passed on the *Kindertransport* in 1939, he sees a column that touches "some chord of recognition" in him. It is as if "this cast-iron column, which with its scaly surface seemed almost to approach the nature of a living being, might remember me and was, if I may so put it, said Austerlitz, a witness to what I could no longer recollect for myself."[193] He seeks everywhere a passage, a "border between life and death" which, as he says, "is less impermeable than we commonly think."[194] He wants to be recalled, called to presence, but to do so he must make a leap precisely where he is blinded by uncertainty, by the impossibility of seeing and therefore the possibility of responding to his own passivity, his own potential to not-be.

In the Antikos Bazar, Austerlitz regards figurines in frozen attitudes, including one that depicts a horseman extending his arm to save a girl whose "cruel fate [is] not revealed to

the observer": the figures are "all as timeless as that moment of rescue, perpetuated but forever just occurring . . ."[195] Here, it is not time that is endless but the "moment of rescue." A decision must be made, an action taken whose purpose and outcome are unrevealed. Austerlitz says that past events that have not occurred are "waiting to do so at the moment we think of them." There is a moment of decision that never, decisively, ceases, and that moment is dependent upon thinking as the disjunction between what can and cannot be recalled or called into being. In "Ornament Constellation, Flurries," Bettine Menke discusses this sort of moment of decision in terms of the (reading) gaze. In Benjamin's theory of the "quiet turmoil of the ornament,"[196] the "mimesis of objects" in works of art is not really a matter of representing something, but is rather a "mimesis of activities," such as, for instance, the movements and gestures a dancer makes in space that form an ornamental trace. A "mimesis of activities," Menke writes, is "a (remembering) relation of relations, of gestures, and not a re-presentation of something pregiven in these activities. . . . The gesture is a movement, a reference, not to something that it does not reach, but rather a demarcation in the space it occupies."[197] It is only the situated, reading gaze that organizes the "'configuration' (in) the surface."[198] The constellation that is formed in reading is a matter of distinguishing figure or ornament from ground, of deciding upon what to exclude when arranging elements from a background whose own outline emerges, anew, at this critical moment. The moment of reading is then itself a constellation, "a suspension that lifts up [the figure or image] from its background."[199] Readability is only possible because it excludes other, potential readabilities: "the *un-readabilities* accompany and condition each readability, each suspension and each interruption."[200] These (un)readabilities begin to oscillate, interrupting the linear sequence we habitually associate with reading. For Benjamin, "[e]ven

a sentence becomes . . . a face" which "looks like that of the opposed sentence . . . In this manner, every truth becomes a living being, it lives only in the rhythm in which *Satz und Gegensatz*, sentence and opposition, are displaced in order to think themselves."[201] As Menke elaborates, "Reading is devoted to dispersion to the extent that it perceives (which is to say, reads) the nonfinal functioning of the text and realizes it *as constellation* . . ."[202]

The excluded readabilities that (literally) ground a particular readability are like the "whatever" that, for Agamben, conditions the meaning of the good, the true, the one, etc. For Austerlitz, such (un)readabilities must be mastered, that is, they must be all collected and arrayed in some final, allegorical truth. Such a bid at mastery founders during his movement backward in time, as it were, while trying to recover his past. When he awakens from a dream in which he was able to peer into the barracks of Terezín, he says, "I still remember how, in my half-conscious state, I tried to hold fast to my powdery-gray dream image, which sometimes quivered in a slight breath of air, and to discover what it concealed, but it only dissolved the more it was overlaid by the memory, surfacing in my mind at the same time, of the shining glass in the display windows of the ANTIKOS BAZAR . . ."[203] Austerlitz's dream of penetrating the darkness of Terezín must compete with the recollection of a collection of "junk." Here, the dream that promises vision as enlightenment vies with an arbitrary assortment of objects that seem to hold "an unequivocal answer to the many questions" Austerlitz has but that do not lay bare their "secret." Here, the "immanence" of truth he seeks in objects is there only to the extent that each object or image both conditions and displaces every other one. As Menke writes, "In their suspended, blank, and unread interrelations, . . . these dispersed elements are read *differently*."[204] None is identical with itself, and the "particular identity" that emerges in any given constellation of reading or

perceiving is only visible because of the continually shifting and unread intervals that ground and unground it.

This conditioned and conditional process of reading occurs for the narrator. While observing the "smooth gray floor" of the pit at Breendonk, an obvious site of torture for those interrogated at the camp and from which still arises a nauseating smell of soap, the narrator recalls the "bizarre German word for scrubbing brush, *Wurzelbürste.*" As "black striations beg[i]n to quiver before [his] eyes," the narrator feels faint and "guesses" at the cruelty perpetrated at the fort, which he learns only later after reading the testimonies of Jean Améry and others.[205] Similarly, the narrator experiences trouble with his vision while looking at a group of photographs: "all my right eye could see was a row of dark shapes curiously distorted above and below – the figures and landscapes familiar to me in every detail having resolved indiscriminately into a black and menacing cross-hatching." However, he feels "as if [he] could see as clearly as ever on the edge of [his] field of vision, and had only to look sideways to rid [him]self of what [he] took at first for a merely hysterical weakness in [his] eyesight." This difficulty in seeing fills him with a "vision of release in which [he sees himself], free of the constant compulsion to read and write . . ."[206] Not seeing reduces everything to equivalent terms, and harbingers the menace of uncertainty. When he tries to reconcile his memory of passing through the stations of Breendonk with its "crab-like" plan, neither sheds light on the other. But a failure of vision or looking away also holds the possibility of seeing something else. The narrator can see clearly if he offers something his peripheral attention, if he withholds his desire to take everything in at once. The cross-hatching that disturbs his vision when looking at the photograph is like the black striations that form when he thinks of a German word on a site of Nazi atrocities. In the latter situation,

his inability to comprehend fully what he sees before him by relating it to an abstraction (the "crab-like" plan) allows him to guess at an experience that is not his own, that he has not known about. Here, too, are uncertainty and menace, but they are related to an intuitive glimpse of a lived past rather than to its representation.

The permeability of "gray zone" between the living and the dead threatens to equate them whenever Austerlitz reduces all to "a single blur." But the photograph of himself in the gray dawn includes a "blurred, dark area" above the horizon, a smudge that is not part of the actual scene but a blemish that happened later when the picture was developed – an accidental, belated bruising of an otherwise perfect and perfectly staged image – and that recalls the black striations and cross-hatching that the narrator sees when he cannot, really, see.[207] The grayness of Austerlitz's visions, too, resists an "overseeing" vision and disturbs the idea of the empty homogeneity of time. If the gray zone or border between life and death is less impermeable than we think, it does not mean that the living and the dead are contemporaneous but that they are equally suspended in the disjunction of the "I" that constitutes time. In this non-place of articulation, they are each a remnant of the other, untimely; they cannot be coordinated in a family of likenesses without recalling their non-relation. Like the "blue-gray" excrement to which Austerlitz compares his ever-devolving writing, this border is riven by the forces of meaning and nonmeaning, relation and non-relation.

Austerlitz recounts to the narrator an experience he'd had years before in France, in which he and his girlfriend Marie, all too significantly, "wandered through the half-deserted area between the tracks of the gare d'Austerlitz and the quai d'Austerlitz on the left bank of the Seine." Marie experiences *déjà vu* when she sees a child trip and fall as she had once

done and which at the time had "seemed to her shameful and aroused in her the first premonitions of death."[208] Agamben alludes to an incident Robert Antelme describes in which a young Bolognese student turns pink when an SS officer singles him out on a death march and says, "*Du komme hier*!"[209] The officer shoots the student, ostensibly to make of him an example and a warning. The young man's blush betrays an unbearable intimacy in being called to death; his shame betrays "a limit that was reached, as if something like a new ethical material were touched upon his living being."[210] Agamben says that this meaningless death – the meaninglessness of the choice the officer makes in selecting one victim and not another – is the meaninglessness of death in the camp where "no one can truly die or survive in his own place."[211] Shame survives death, just as the inhuman survives the human. The "new ethical material" Agamben writes of is "something like a genuine ethos of poetry" that begins when one "survive[s] his own depersonalization, [and] returns to a self who both is and is no longer the first subject."[212] When Marie feels shame in touching upon her mortality, she experiences contingency as a capacity not to be. In surviving her fall, she returns to herself as one who is divided by a potential to not-be, as one who must bear witness to her own potential "oblivion as subject." In seeing another child fall, she must respond, again, to her own passivity.

This aside about shame as a premonition of death prepares the way for a description of a circus performance that Austerlitz and Marie see. The performers, none of whom, Austerlitz is certain, can read musical notation, have with them a "snow-white goose" on stage and play a strange music that reminds him of both "a long-forgotten Welsh hymn" and of "a funeral march."

> I still do not understand, said Austerlitz, what was happening within me as I listened to this extraordinarily foreign nocturnal music conjured out of thin air, so to speak, by the circus performers with their slightly out-of-tune instruments, nor could I have said at the time whether my heart was contracting in pain or expanding in happiness for the first time in my life. . . . [B]ut today, looking back, it seems to me as if the mystery which touched me was summed up in the image of the snow-white goose standing motionless and steadfast among the musicians as long as they played. Neck craning forward slightly, pale eyelids slightly lowered, it listened there in the tent beneath that shimmering firmament of painted stars until the last notes had died away, as if it knew its own future and the fate of its present companions.[213]

His experience listening to the music is unlike almost any other in the novel, which compulsively banishes the very idea of happiness from its somber contemplations. The music is imperfect, out-of-tune, and arises from something like intuition rather than from a deliberating competence. Both foreign and maddeningly familiar, evoking both the long-forgotten and the funereal, the music is undecidable as a source of pain or happiness. Austerlitz cannot decide on these rivaling feelings, and so he "sums up" the mystery of his experience by referring it to the image of the goose. With its head and eyes cast down, the goose does not entirely see nor, one assumes, can it really listen to the music. Nevertheless, in its muteness, it bears witness to the future and to fate, in other words, to death. The image, preceding as it does a description of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* and its inevitable coincidence "with its chronic dysfunction and constitutional instability," confirms the inevitability of things falling apart. But this inevitability is not founded on the systematicity and order that seeks to substitute itself for the past it buries. Knowledge here is partially

blind, oriented to a barely recalled past and an intimation of the future wherein pleasure and pain are indistinguishable. Here thought returns without object: the image of the snow-white goose refers only to the "mysterious" division of presence and absence. García Düttman notes that the semiotic, which had been "pure communicability" before the fall into "post-Adamic languages," now "appears as the meaning of a means of communication"; it is therefore "inseparable from the 'mimetic'" as a "non-representative relation of language to another language." Together the semiotic and the mimetic "constitute the economy of profane languages."

> If correspondence is communication, a sort of translation which creates the [Benjaminian collector's] 'magical community' of things, denomination is the translation which transforms this community of 'sensible correspondences' into a community or 'archive' of 'non-sensible correspondences.' In other words: the translation which is operational in denomination is a 'mimetic' transformation of whose goal is the recognition of communicability – of the spirit. The 'mimetic' is not present in the 'semiotic': it appears as a flash, it is the fire, the flame which burns the 'semiotic' . . . [T]he moment translation allows the name to show through, language becomes enflamed, it illuminates itself, it strikes the one who seeks 'content' with blindness.[214]

The translating moment, in which what remains unreadable in the name appears not as "content" but as communicability itself, is like the "apparition" that Adorno ascribed to art: "Artworks become appearances, in the pregnant sense of the term – that is, as the appearance of an other – when the accent falls on the unreality of their own reality. Artworks have the immanent character of being an act, even if they are carved in stone, and this endows them

with the quality of being momentary and sudden."[215] The appearance of art is analogous to the configuring gaze in which unreadabilities both accompany and condition readabilities that are themselves interruptions and suspensions. The "appearance of an other" in the artwork is an interruption, or as García Düttman glosses, "a sudden and unforeseen irruption" that is "catastrophic" because "we will already have forgotten the other and we will never have sufficiently forgotten." It is "an interruption which allows (nothing) to appear," a "gift of a language which remains indecipherable even as it demands deciphering."[216] When Austerlitz feels his heart contracting and expanding at once, he is unable to assume either pleasure or pain but stands suspended between them beneath an artificial constellation of "painted stars." But what cannot be assumed is abstracted in and later substituted by an image of mute testimony that must, in turn, testify for him. This abstraction "sums up" the mystery of being initiated into the knowledge of death, of confronting the potential to not-be. Does it also, then, overwrite and negate this mystery?

Austerlitz collects allegories; the entire novel seems to be committed to the allegorical construction of construction as meaningless destruction. Each quasi-dialectical moment that arises, in which the gray, seamless co-existence of times seems to bear the potential of differentiation, is followed by more collected images, more allegories of the chronic dysfunction and constitutional instability of modernity. Just as Austerlitz moves from his experience of being suspended between happiness and pain, an experience related to a premonition of death and which he later "sums up" in a mediating image, the novel proceeds with its lugubrious divagations. *Austerlitz* continues to assemble forgotten fragments into constellations, sifting through the debris of the past, stalking a significance ("destruction, dislocation, death") which it always seem to have predetermined and to

which it fitfully returns. It threatens to reproduce, by dint of accumulation, the very randomness and opacity its "dialectical moments" would interrupt. It forgets what it has learned, or rather, reason remains powerless to account for the persistence of its mourning. It can assume neither the past which is awaiting recognition and fulfillment nor the future that is death: Austerlitz continues his search for Austerlitz after the book, ostensibly, ends. He determines from a photograph of a room in which files are kept in a fortress in Terezín that this room "all along" ought to have been his "true place of work" in finding out about his mother. Never mind that he discovers this photograph in the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, the "official manifestation of the increasingly important urge to break with everything which still has some living connection to the past."[217] He leaves his notes and photograph collection with the narrator because, as he says, he has had "a premonition that he was coming closer to his father"[218] while changing trains at the gare d'Austerlitz. The novel closes with yet another canny return to the vanished site of historical trauma as the narrator revisits Breendonk, history book in hand.

But Austerlitz's ultimate failure to "blast" a moment of recognition out of the continuum of time is not simple. If Austerlitz attempts to erase differences by dissolving – and resolving – them in grayness whenever he reduces everything to a single blur, he can never finally construct a theoretical edifice of destruction, a "relic" of eternal life-in-death. Like Ryder in *The Unconsoled*, he tries to preempt any moment of decision by assigning to everything a fate that has already passed. And yet, in turning back to confront what cannot be assumed – his responsibility to the dead, his name – he also interrupts an indebtedness to the past and an enthrallment to the future which otherwise coincide in his zealous organization of the ruins of progress. Comay writes that Adorno repudiates Benjamin's moment of

recognition as a "stereoscopic glance [that] would entrench both the unrealized past and a regressive present within a shared horizon of reconciliation."[219] This shared horizon would effectively transform the present into the past's fulfillment and redemption: "to form any image of the future is inevitably to reify the present and thus give the present its apologia."[220] Insofar as Austerlitz does not "find" his parents, he holds out the possibility of finding them in the future, of finding a future. The unresolved mystery of his parents' fate is undecidable. Either the novel withholds recovery and enlightenment (redemption) because, despite the "historical metaphysic" it gradually approaches in seeming to "bring remembered events back to life," it is still fundamentally subjected to the idea of *Bilderverbot*, or else it abstains from bringing the past and future into alignment according to an "unacknowledged hubris of a rationality intent on mastering the very nature that it would redeem" and "mask[ing] its own domination over the object it would let claim speak."[221] Comay suggests, however, that "the fantasy of a premature reconciliation [may be] a necessary one"[222] since the "impatience of prematurity is founded in the radical nonsynchronicity of every time."[223] There is a premature reconciliation in Austerlitz's repeated declarations that times co-exist, and yet his would-be stereoscopic glance always falters and gives way to epileptic excess (or "hysterical epilepsy," as Austerlitz calls it) and blindness, to both "consecutive images and distressing blind spots."[224] In giving the narrator his notes and photographs, Austerlitz passes on a history that still demands, and awaits, its inscription.

In passing on what cannot yet be written, Austerlitz passes on "blind spots," unreadabilities that continually re-ground new constellations of meaning that cannot be secured. In listening to Austerlitz's narratives, the narrator in turn presents a narrative in which a confrontation with the past takes shape only as a limit, much like Dan Jacobson's

description of diamond mines in *Heshel's Kingdom* that the narrator reads: "it was terrifying to see such emptiness open up a foot away from firm ground, to realize that there was no transition, only this dividing line, with ordinary life on one side and its impossible opposite on the other."[225] There is no image that might reconcile the present with what is lost or with a future where the present will find its fulfillment – or its apologia. Neither Austerlitz nor the narrator outrun the shadow of the catastrophes whose remains they collect: nothing is seen from "a vantage point above the destruction" except a "synoptic and artificial view" that always invokes its *Gegensatz* (or *Gegenbilder*). But it is the very experience of this "dividing line" that produces a confrontation with the past in the form of an unassumable responsibility; the conflict is revealed, not resolved. Because this experience entails a moment of decision that never ceases, that marks only a division between what has always already been decided and what can never finally be decided, between what has been said and what cannot (yet) be said, it marks also the division between what is "no longer alive" and what "never ceases to die." If Sebald in *On the Natural History of Destruction* calls for the synoptic supplementation of historical vision for those in the past who have succumbed to a "paralysis in the capacity to think and feel," Austerlitz's very incapacity to speak of what he has not experienced opens a movement between potentiality and act that unworks any abstraction that would offer to comprehend, that is, to thoroughly apprehend this movement and assign it a property. If on one hand *Austerlitz* carries out ceaseless mourning and exile, it does not finally perpetrate upon the objects it seeks to rescue the sly maneuver that Agamben identifies in melancholia, in which the "libido stages a simulation where what cannot be lost because it has never been possessed appears as lost, and what could never be possessed because it had never existed may be appropriated insofar as it is lost."[226] Austerlitz fails to

enlighten the narrator with a testimony that might bring remembered events back to life, and thus their redemption; the narrator in turn cannot appropriate this "failure," which takes the form of a potential to not-be that cannot, finally, be projected as "a foundation beyond existence." Rather, each man belongs only to an "unrepresentable community" insofar as each is beyond either perdition or salvation, each one's "testimony" given only as contingency, as the simultaneously suspending and shifting ground of the other's bid at meaning.

There is, too, an epileptic excess of the name, "Austerlitz." Austerlitz makes arbitrary semiotic connections in relation to his name, which appears everywhere as signpost and false omen; perhaps, in the last instance, he no longer *relates* his name, but embodies it as limit. In his mortification, everything "arouse[s] in [him] a sense of disjunction, of having no ground beneath [his] feet."[227] If his name keeps giving in the excess of its signification, if it never terminates in a single name, it is because something in it remains unreadable, something that perhaps bears witness to "an impotentiality of speech." Where Austerlitz cannot assume full presence, he projects the impossibility of existing as such onto a future that lies outside of time, that is kept and watched over by the dead. He continually desires to be seen by the dead, to elicit their attestation and thus be called to presence in the interval between life and death. But the dead do not appear in his reconstructions of their shattered lives; as Benjamin writes, "'reconstruction' in empathy is one-dimensional"[228] since it fails to destroy (that is, to recognize) the discontinuity between past and present. The call cannot be in the form of a vision which, as Comay writes, "sees a face: the specular return-to-self as the viewing subject narcissistically reconstructs itself through a consoling encounter with the transfigured other."[229] Rather, the call must obey the temporality of "allegorical resuscitation," which

does not aim at an "exaltation" of the dead but rather recalls them as an "indigestible remainder and untimely reminder."[230] In seeing himself as a child in Liverpool Station's waiting room, Austerlitz feels "something rending within [him], and a sense of shame and sorrow, or perhaps something quite different, something inexpressible because we have no words for it . . ."[231] In turning away, in forgetting himself, Austerlitz experiences a "rending," a division between what he might have been (on the eve of his death) and what he might yet be (as if he were only now just born). He appears to himself only because the vertiginous movement of shame has separated him from himself, has given him the potential to not-be, and thus the possibility of being "something quite different" which is, as yet, "inexpressible."

But what this presence, riven by absence, might mean for a "remaining time" is by no means clear. Sebald was all too aware of what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has described as a "'new mythology' [that] has not ceased to haunt German thought" and which seeks out the "promise of history beginning (again)."[232] There is no moment of rescue that does not risk invoking a mythic German past such as that depicted in a film of a Nazi Party rally that Austerlitz's father Maximilian sees: "as day broke the Germans emerged singly, in couples, or in small groups, forming a silent procession and pressing ever closer together as they all went in the same direction, following, so it seemed, some higher bidding, on their way to the Promised Land at last after long years in the wilderness."[233] For Maximilian, the Germans "had entirely re-created themselves in this perverse form, engendered by every individual's wishful thinking and bound up with false family sentiment, and had then brought forth, as symbolic exponents of their innermost desires, so to speak, the Nazi grandees . . ." This perverse re-creation *also* signifies the potential of passing through the portal of one's death (the "wilderness") in order to become "something else" that nevertheless keeps the memory

of a promise – the Germans' "notion that the promise of their greatness was about to be fulfilled."[234] "It is good to give materialist investigations a truncated ending," Benjamin declares provocatively, almost as if to withhold that next moment in which what is "rescued" is "irretrievably lost" – or, perhaps, is made to reaffirm the continuity of tradition. [235]

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[1] Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 12-13.

[2] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 281.

[3] Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 486.

[4] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 123.

[5] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 185.

[6] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 195.

[7] Sebald, "Interview," 93.

[8] Sebald, *ONHD*, 151.

[9] Sebald, *ONHD,* 26.

[10] Benjamin, *Arcades Project* 456.

[11] Comay, "Materialist Mutations of the *Bilderverbot,*" 357.

[12] Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 459.

[13] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 254.

[14] Sebald, *ONHD,* 25.

[15] Quoted in Agamben, *Remnants,* 69.

[16] Agamben, *Remnants,* 21.

[17] Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 367.

[18] Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 368.

[19] Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, 166.

[20] Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, 168.

[21] *Arcades Project,* 336.

[22] Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, 181.

[23] Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 211.

[24] Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 206.

[25] Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 212.

[26] Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 207.

[27] Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 207.

[28] Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 211.

[29] Osborne, *Politics of Time,* 180.

[30] Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 459.

[31] Benjamin acknowledges that what is "decisive is that the dialectician cannot look on history as anything other than a constellation of dangers which he is always, as he follows its development in his thought, on the point of averting."

[32] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 121.

[33] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 32.

[34] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 33.

[35] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 124.

[36] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 90.

[37] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 29.

[38] Taberner, "German Nostalgia?," 192.

[39] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 140.

[40] Taberner, "German Nostalgia?," 194.

[41] Crownshaw, "Reconsidering Postmemory," 223. Crownshaw touches upon some of the same points that I discuss here, such as Austerlitz's Benjaminian brooding, and argues, as I do, that Austerlitz's passing on of his collection signifies a future "that holds no promises beyond its own coming" (230). His examination of the complex ethics of Sebald's novel (its resistance to a "colonizing impulse" (235)) focuses, however, on the temporality of postmemory produced by archival photographs whose referents remain absent, whereas I am concerned with the unassumable responsibility instigated by shame and its implications for resisting a "redemptive" and synoptic vision.

[42] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 90.

[43] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 93.

[44] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 184.

[45] Benjamin, "A Little History of Photography," 510.

[46] Benjamin, *A Berlin Childhood*, 132.

[47] Benjamin, "A Little History of Photography," 511.

[48] Benjamin, *A Berlin Childhood,* 132.

[49] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 184.

[50] Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 122

[51] Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 123

[52] Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 124

[53] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 123.

[54] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 123

[55] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 212.

[56] Benjamin, quoted in Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, 131.

[57] Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, 131.

[58] Benjamin, quoted in Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, 181.

[59] See *The Third Reich and the Holocaust in German Historiography: Toward the Historikerstreit of the mid-1980s* for a comparative overview of the Historians' Debate.

[60] Sebald, *ONHD,* 151.

[61] Sebald, "Interview," 93.

[62] Sebald, "Interview," 92.

[63] Sebald, "Interview," 93.

[64] Comay, "Materialist Mutations," 355.

[65] Comay, "Materialist Mutations," 355.

[66] Anderson, "The Edge of Darkness," 107.

[67] Comay "Materialist Mutations," 353.

[68] Hell, "The Angel's Enigmatic Eyes," 374.

[69] Sebald, *ONHD,* 71

[70] Sebald, *ONHD,* 25-26

[71] Hell, "The Angel's Enigmatic Eyes," 372.

[72] Hell, "The Angel's Enigmatic Eyes," 374.

[73] Hell, "The Angel's Enigmatic Eyes," 363.

[74] Yves de Maesseneer, quoted in Hell, "The Angel's Enigmatic Eyes," 364.

[75] Hell, "The Angel's Enigmatic Eyes," 365.

[76] Sebald, *ONHD,* 53

[77] Hell, "The Angel's Enigmatic Eyes," 372.

[78] Hell, "The Angel's Enigmatic Eyes," 378.

[79] See Todd Samuel Presner's "Extreme History and Sebald's Realism" for a discussion of Sebald's "artificial and synoptic view." Presner argues that Sebald employs what Barthes has called a "reality effect" in order to create a "Modernist presentation of war."

[80] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 124.

[81] Agamben, *Remnants,* 110.

[82] Quoted in Agamben, *Remnants,* 104-5.

[83] Agamben, *Remnants,* 106.

[84] Agamben, *Remnants,* 111.

[85] Heidegger, quoted in Agamben, *Remnants,* 110.

[86] Agamben, *Remnants,* 110.

[87] Wolfgang Sofky's phrase, quoted in Agamben, *Remnants,* 48.

[88] Agamben, *Remnants,* 55.

[89] Agamben, *Remnants,* 54.

[90] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 242.

[91] Agamben, *Remnants,* 120. The parenthetical quote is Levi's.

[92] Agamben, *Remnants,*-.

[93] Agamben, *Remnants,* 130.

[94] Kimura Bin derives his schematic from Heidegger.

[95] Kimura Bin, quoted in Agamben, *Remnants,* 126.

[96] Agamben, *Remnants,* 127.

[97] Agamben, *Remnants,* 128.

[98] Agamben, *Remnants,* 130.

[99] Agamben, *Remnants,* 134.

[100] Agamben, *Remnants,* 159.

[101] LaCapra, "Approaching Limit Events," 262.

[102] LaCapra, "Approaching Limit Events," 265.

[103] LaCapra, "Approaching Limit Events," 265.

[104] LaCapra, "Approaching Limit Events," 270.

[105] "Approaching Limit Events," 285.

[106] Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 42.

[107] Agamben traces "responsibility" to the Latin *spondeo*, which means "to become a guarantor of something for someone (or for oneself) with respect to someone" (*Remnants,* 21). Responsibility in this sense involves obligation or debt that is strictly legal, juridical, and not ethical.

[108] Agamben, *Remnants,* 21.

[109] Agamben, *Remnants,* 69 Agamben is quoting "ultimate sense of belonging to the species" from Robert Antelme's *The Human Race*.

[110] The term "Holocaust" is itself problematic, and Agamben does not use it. For one thing, "Holocaust" means sacrifice and therefore carries troubling associations of divine punishment. See LaCapra for a synopsis of arguments surrounding the genesis and use of this word for the Nazi genocide.

[111]LaCapra, "Approaching Limit Events," 286.

[112] LaCapra, "Approaching Limit Events," 296.

[113] Agamben, *Coming Community*, 67.

[114] Agamben, *Coming Community*, 35.

[115] Agamben, *Coming Community*, 36.

[116] Agamben, *Coming Community*, 43.

[117] Agamben, *Coming Community*, 43.

[118] Agamben, *Coming Community*, 44.

[119] Agamben, *Coming Community*, 20.

[120] Agamben, *Coming Community*, 1-2.

[121] Agamben, *Coming Community*, 65.

[122] Agamben, *Coming Community*, 25.

[123] Agamben, *Coming Community*, 6.

[124] Aracagök, "Whatever Image."

[125] "The coming being is whatever being. In the Scholastic enumeration of transcendentals *(quodlibet ens est unum, verum, bonum seu perfectum* – whatever entity is one, true, good, or perfect), the term that, remaining unthought in each, conditions the meaning of all the others is the adjective *quodlibet*" (Agamben, *Coming Community*, 1).

[126] Agamben, *Coming Community*, 37.

[127] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 46.

[128] Agamben, *Coming Community*, 44.

[129] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 167.

[130] Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 471.

[131] Sebald, *ONHD,* 150.

[132] In "The Emigrant as Witness: W.G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten,*" Katja Garloff notes that "Sebald's literary texts are more attuned to [Agamben's] idea of impossible return and irretrievable speech than to the psychoanalyst's notion of emigration and return as a form of working through" (87).

[133] Sebald, *ONHD,* 149.

[134] Quoted in Sebald, *ONHD,* 158.

[135] Sebald, *ONHD,* 150.

[136] Sebald, *ONHD,* 71.

[137] Sebald, *ONHD,* 156.

[138] Sebald, *ONHD,* 155.

[139] Sebald, *ONHD* ,158.

[140] Quoted in Sebald, *ONHD,* 157.

[141] Quoted in Sebald, *ONHD,* 158.

[142] For Agamben, the survival of the inhuman in the human, of the *Musselmann* in the witness, is critical because, as "coextensive and, at the same time, non-coincident[,] they are divided and nevertheless inseparable." Their inseparability, which is only possible because they are noncoincident and therefore together constitute a temporal disjunction (a now in relation to a future which has not yet arrived, a remaining time), forestalls what, for Agamben, is biopower's "supreme ambition . . . to produce, in a human body, the absolute separation of the living being and the speaking being, *zoē* and *bios*, the human and the inhuman – survival" (*Remnants,* 156). In contrast to Foucault's description of (an older sovereign) biopolitical power "*to make die* or *to make live*," Agamben asserts that biopower since Auschwitz seeks "*to make survive*." In making the *Musselmanner* survive, the Nazis ensured that "a bare, unassignable and unwitnessable life" could make visible the effects of their power while preserving its secrecy (*Remnants,* 155-56). Améry's implacable resentment wishes to turn back time in order to bear witness: "The moral person demands annulment of time – in the particular case under question, by nailing the criminal to his deed" (quoted in *ONHD*). Time brings about "biological healing" and desensitization; the "annulment of time" would return the persecutor to the scene of the crime so that he might "join his victim as a fellow human being," as a witness himself to what he can never atone for. But time proceeds and the criminal escapes under a "social pressure" that demands, instead, "forgiving and forgetting."

[143] "*La conscience du malheur est une maladie trop grave pour figurer dans une arithmétique des agonies ou dans les regristres de l'Incurable*." Quoted in Sebald, *ONHD,* 162.

[144] Sebald, *ONHD,* 163.

[145] Agamben, *Remnants,* 146.

[146] See Tony Judt's *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* for a recent account of many, if not most, European countries' belatedness in coming to terms with their own complicity with Hitler's Germany. Incidentally, Judt notes that Levi initially had difficulty publishing *Se questo é un uomo* in Italy because his testimony would have rent holes in his country's national myth of (total) resistance.

[147] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 88.

[148] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 95.

[149] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 34.

[150] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 12.

[151] Sebald, *Austerlitz, 7.*

[152] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 124.

[153] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 135

[154] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 135-6.

[155] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 129-30.

[156] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 136.

[157] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 137.

[158] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 137.

[159] Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 463.

[160] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 125.

[161] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 140.

[162] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 185.

[163] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 72.

[164] Sebald, *Austerlitz* ,190.

[165] For studies of Sebald's use of photography, see J.J. Long, "History, Narrative and Photography in *Die Ausgewanderten*"; Stefanie Harris, "The Return of the Dead: Memory and Photography in *Die Ausgewanderten*"; Frances L. Restuccia, "Sebald's *Punctum*: Awakening to Holocaust Trauma"; and Crownshaw's article.

[166] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 195.

[167] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 228.

[168] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 228.

[169] García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 45.

[170] Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," 71.

[171] García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 37.

[172] García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 40.

[173] García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 44.

[174] García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 45.

[175] Heidegger, quoted in García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 51.

[176] Heidegger, quoted in García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 50. Emphasis added.

[177] García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 51.

[178] Benjamin, quoted in García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 55.

[179] García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 57.

[180] García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 71.

[181] García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 74.

[182] García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 74.

[183] García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 106.

[184] García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 107.

[185] Theodor Adorno, quoted in García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 107.

[186] García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 90.

[187] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 121.

[188] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 101.

[189] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 257

[190] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 185

[191] García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*,

[192] Rosenzweig, quoted in García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 27.

[193] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 221.

[194] Sebald, *Austerlitz*

[195] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 197.

[196] Benjamin, quoted in Menke, "Ornament," 271-72.

[197] Menke, "Ornament," 263 –64.

[198] Menke, "Ornament," 264.

[199] Menke, "Ornament," 267.

[200] Menke, "Ornament," 268.

[201] Benjamin, quoted in Menke, "Ornament," 272.

[202] Menke, "Ornament," 276.

[203] Sebald, *Austerlitz* ,194.

[204] Menke, "Ornament," 276.

[205] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 25.

[206] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 35.

[207] The scratched area over the child's head in the photograph is clearly visible on the cover of the Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag edition, but has been entirely erased from the cover art of the Random House edition (it is partially visible in the small reproduction on page 183 of the latter).

[208] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 272.

[209] Quoted in Agamben, *Remnants,* 103.

[210] Agamben, *Remnants,* 104.

[211] Agamben, *Remnants,* 104.

[212] Agamben, *Remnants,* 104.

[213] *Austerlitz,* 274-75.

[214] García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 44.

[215] Quoted in García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 88.

[216] García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 88.

[217] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 286.

[218] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 291.

[219] Comay, "Materialist Mutations," 363.

[220] Comay, "Materialist Mutations," 348.

[221] Comay, "Materialist Mutations," 367.

[222] Comay, "Materialist Mutations," 371.

[223] Comay, "Materialist Mutations," 372.

[224] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 268.

[225] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 297.

[226] Agamben, *Stanzas*, 20.

[227] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 109.

[228] *Arcades Project* 470.

[229] Comay, "Materialist Mutations," 356.

[230] Comay, "Materialist Mutations," 357.

[231] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 137

[232] Quoted in García Düttman, *The Gift of Language*, 82-3. However, as Peter Osborne notes (following Philippe Lacoue-Labarthes), Heidegger's call for the restoration of a lost German heritage at odds with contemporary society implied that "the 'repetition' which he sought was actually the *creation* of the organic unity of the German people. Hence the modernism of his project, despite itself" (*Politics of Time,* 174). There is, then, latent in Heidegger's ideas of origin and repetition a dimension that proposes the radically new, the as-yet unthought.

[233] Sebald, *Austerlitz,* 169.

[234] Sebald, *Austerlitz* ,167.

[235] Benjamin, *Arcades Project,* 473.

Chapter Five. Conclusion: the Posthumous

"All of history," Derrida asserts, "has shown that each time an event has been produced, for example in philosophy or in poetry, it took the form of the unacceptable, or even the intolerable, of the incomprehensible, that is, of a certain monstrosity."[1] Before an "eventful" work is "assimilated" and "acculturated," it provokes resistance; it must await the future for its reception, that is, for its realization and acceptance. Andrew Bennett, summing up aesthetic aspirations for posterity that have run from Horace to Hegel, points out that for the work to be "*eternally* the work of genius," it must resist, in turn, cultural accommodation.

> Crucial to the discourse of the aesthetic is the tearing or splitting of the present from the future, a lapse of history, the possibility that what is produced now will only come into being, can only be received, in the future – crucially, in the future in which the artist him- or herself is absent in the most fundamental sense: dead. The aesthetic, then, is the realm of mortality, indeed it is the signature or guarantee of mortality – just as the guarantee of the aesthetic is the work's full realization in a time after death, a time which can, in that very quality of the posthumous, transcend both mortality and temporality itself.[2]

Bennett's focus in the passage above is confined to the the artist's "personal survival," to a Romantic ideology that called for "the dissolution of personal identity into its ideal of the writer": "Posterity validates the artist, but does so in the future perfect tense: the artist is one who will have been."[3] Here, however, is the Derridean future anterior, whose legitimacy depends upon the successful completion of the past, a completion that effects

an eternality. Throughout this dissertation, we have seen in the novels of Nabokov, Ishiguro and Sebald varying expressions of the relationship between mortality, or finitude, and temporality. While *Ada* and *The Unconsoled* do concern themselves with the "properly" aesthetic, laboring under notions of "genius" as they withhold any completed work that might escape a founding intentionality, all three novels are, like the philosophies of interruption alongside which I have read them, concerned above all with establishing a present that would be neither a transition to a destined future nor the restoration of a past. At the same time, each novel projects the future it would resist as a site of cultural accommodation or national redemption, a future at once beholden to a past that in each case is presumably lost or abjured and unloosed from time itself; each novel exceeds any interruptive moment that would limn the present. The future, ultimately, is no longer the "open," the "outside," where singular beings are exposed in their common finitude, where they "compear" or belong only in their "being-thus." Rather, it seems a terrifying rehearsal for a death that never arrives, or that is surpassed in a beyond unmoored from any sense of community, fusional or otherwise.

For Bataille, Blanchot, Nancy and Agamben, the unworking or interrupting of community withdraws the "operative immortality" of the work. One does not absent oneself to inaugurate a "time after death"; rather, the recognition of another's finitude calls one "into question most radically," and this proximity to another's absence allows one to be "beside oneself." Any "negative community" arising from such a recognition is "always already lost, it has no use, it creates no work and does not glorify itself in that loss." The practical, political difficulties that these philosophical positions fail to overcome in their refusal of the very idea of overcoming – their inability to address a

future that is not merely *coming* but rather arrives with that punctuality characteristic of an operative logic that is always discovering new ways of glorifying loss – are well-illustrated in the staged ecstasy of a 2006 photograph, in which Iranians extend outstretched hands toward two men who raise test tubes of enriched uranium, presumably toward the heavens implied by the sky-blue backdrop, against which doves obligingly hold aloft an Iranian flag tied to their talons. Of course, the photograph is meant to contest Western accusations of Iran's ambition for nuclear weaponry by demonstrating its peaceful intentions in building uranium-enriching centrifuges. But the image also presents a promiscuous gathering of the traditions, beliefs, identities and communities that Agamben in *The Coming Community* alleged are being "unhinged" in "contemporary politics": here is divine-sanctioned Progress, seconded by the religious State. Here, too, is the promise of international consequence – a bid for national stability and cohesion via world-class industrial competitiveness, inevitably attended by the spectre of violence.

These difficulties are also borne out with disturbing clarity in Ishiguro's latest novel, *Never Let Me Go* (2005). In both *The Unconsoled* and *When We Were Orphans*, Ishiguro experimented with ways we might understand ourselves outside of a sense of national, ethnic and familial belonging. *Never Let Me Go* returns, quite literally, to the trope of orphanhood, and despite its contemporary English setting, it is more successful than *The Unconsoled* in sloughing off nationhood. Its narrator Kathy H. is a clone whose "birth" is entirely bound to the inevitability of a useful and premature death: she is in effect a fabricated corpse, a body created to donate organs to English citizens until she "completes."[4] Clones do not, apparently, belong to the human race, much less to a nation

whose well-being and longevity they make possible. There is no "crisis" in this novel; death itself is made to live on in a world where murder is legitimated and normalized.

Never Let Me Go reinflects rather than departs from Ishiguro's habitual preoccupation with memory and loss. Kathy, unlike Ryder or Stevens, is thoroughly reliable, and her deliberate and unflinching efforts to come to terms with the past and accept the future that make Ishiguro's latest novel his most disquieting work. Ishiguro is less concerned here with the ways memory haunts us than he is in examining how we come to know things, and therefore remember and believe them, in the first place. That is, the novel is as much concerned with how the world shapes us as it is with our interpretation of it, and the fact that Kathy's memory is for the most part reliable and, moreover, *consoling* makes her failure to define or challenge her place in the world all the more disturbing. Although Kathy has regrets, we can believe that nothing she might have done otherwise would have shaped a different future, since the future is no longer a matter of anticipation *or* resistance. Unlike *The Unconsoled*, *Never Let Me Go* never holds us in that weird place between exulting in a bird's-eye view and feeling that we've just fallen through the rabbit hole; it is as unerring as a flatline. If *The Unconsoled* continually absorbed "the real" in its feverish attempts to supplant it with its own delusions of potency and possibility, *Never Let Me Go* consigns itself to the given at every turn, withdrawing its right to make good on loss with the consolations of fiction. Resignation to what can only be called fate in the novel's purview is sober, measured, dignified – and incontestable. It refuses to let our imaginations, even "a little fantasy thing" of connecting to others, go "beyond" a present that withholds the future of desire.[5]

In withholding even the future of desire, *Never Let Me Go* harbors a fear darker than death – that of surviving. The clones do not fear "completing" per se as much as they do the possibility that they might be somehow conscious while the very last of their organs are being harvested after they have, technically, "died." The title may suggest, in addition to a command that reveals a persistent desire for communion, another register that reveals terror and that recalls Blanchot's conception of insomnia as a desubjectified survival beyond death. *Never Let Me Go* is not a quasi-science-fictional nightmare but another inquiry into our increasing estrangement from a sense of agency and large-scale commitment. But here, "belonging" to one another only in the finitude that shares and divides us is not only divorced from the myth of origins and rebirth, but also from any agency that might re-envision community, mythic or otherwise.

But although – or perhaps because – those myths of origins and rebirth do continue to play out in the fantasies of national unbelonging of *Ada*, *The Unconsoled* and *Austerlitz*, each novel also continues to orient itself to a responsibility to others, however unbearable, however unassumable. For Blanchot, what "calls me into question most radically . . .[is n]ot my relation to myself as finite or as the consciousness of being before death or for death, but my presence for another who absents himself by dying." As Geoffrey Hartman comments on Blanchot's literary space, "writing is the perpetuity of a *malheur*; even literary impersonality, which dis-identifies the self, cannot get beyond a *moi-sans moi*; yet that destituted self remains submitted to the *regard* of the Other and continues to feel a responsibility impossible to bear."[6] All three novels offer a similar curious relationship: in each, the narrator shares a strange narrative space with his narratee, with whom he is ever in danger of being conflated. Van is Ada's antiphonal

mate, Ryder is stratified among a cast of Ryderesque "doubles," and Austerlitz is virtually identical with the German narrator to whom he relates his story. The desperate disidentification with the past that each narrator enacts is matched, as it were, by a *near* elision of identity with those with whom he would resist a redemptive future. Whatever future lies in wait, in waiting, it cannot finally sunder what was never, quite, a "fusional community." If Van laments that we cannot take our friends – or foes – into the hereafter, we do not lose what was never ours to begin with. Where death (the end) never arrives, there is no "full realization in a time after death"; mortality and temporality are not transcended. For if in each instance the limit of community is exceeded, that limit itself survives as a trace, as an uncertainty that attends the one who is himself exceeded by the other as "anterior relation." Still called into question by the other who is absent in a future that cannot be anticipated, the self is called upon to assume an infinite responsibility.

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[1] Quoted in Bennett, "On Posterity," 140.

[2] Bennett, "On Posterity," 132.

[3] Bennett, "On Posterity," 132.

[4] The novel's use of the word "completed" is far more disturbing than the word "died" precisely because it fails to describe what ought to be a *natural* process. See Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz* for a discussion of the way in which the Holocaust, in Heidegger's phrase, "fabricated corpses" and thus rendered impossible Heidegger's own idea of "Being-towards-death": anticipation and decision in regard to death make no sense in the context of genocide. The manufacture and harvesting of clones has, of course, no relation to the Holocaust, neither in its motives, scale, nor consequences, but it does bear relation to Agamben's ideas about bare life and power outlined in *Homo Sacer* and touched upon in *Remnants*. In *Remnants* Agamben relates Levi's *Musselmann* to this quote by Xavier Bichat on the physiology of life and death: "If it were possible to imagine a man whose death, affecting only internal functions . . ., permitted the subsistence of the set of functions of animal life, this man would view the end of his organic life with indifference. For he would feel that the worth of his existence did not depend on organic functions, and that even after their 'death' he would be capable of feeling and experiencing everything that until then made him happy" (155).

[5] Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go,* 286-87. Ishiguro often invents weird "discourses" of creativity: in *An Artist of the Floating World*, Masuki Ono ponders issues of loyalty and treachery lurking in Ukiyo-e; in *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens wishes to learn the art of "bantering" as a way to master diplomacy; and, most explicitly, Ryder frets over exactly what direction music ought to take to save the city of the unconsoled. In *Never Let Me Go*, creativity, again, seems sometimes a matter of life or death and other times entirely

insignificant. At the "orphanage" where they are brought up, the clones make artwork that is collected for a mysterious "Gallery." Kathy's friend Tommy works on his art long after it is required of him, creating "scaled-down versions" of the kind of pictures of animals that children make. His drawings are diminutive, detailed, their subjects only coming into focus when looked at from a distance. The relationship of creativity to organ donation is curious. Clones are not the offspring of unions but the sterile products of individuals, and their purpose in the world of *Never Let Me Go* is to give up parts of themselves until they "complete." Tommy brings his animals to life by thinking "about how they'd protect themselves, how they'd reach things." Art is a way of coping with the world, of investing oneself in it; it is even, perhaps, a way of immortalizing oneself. But it is a risky undertaking. Ishiguro, as I discussed in Chapter Three, has said that art arises from "wounds" that never quite heal, and this last novel implies, again, that the act of creating (or donating) something for the world exacts some terrible, hidden cost even as it fails to connect us to it.

[6] Hartman, "Maurice Blanchot: Fighting Spirit," 226.

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