

**Ghosts, Zombies, and Angels:
An Exploration of Metaphysics and the Possibility of
Redemption in W.G. Sebald's Prose Narratives**

By

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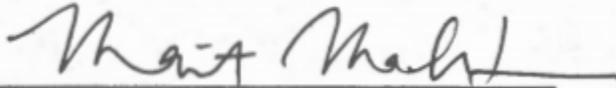
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by their supervisory committee:

Name of committee chair: _____



Dr. Carol Dell'Amico

Name of committee member: _____



Dr. Marit MacArthur

*Dear Friend, what is the use of speech:
I now asking of you questions you can no longer reach—
Yes as you drift off to the snow-hole of your hills I hear
You say 'they are ever returning to us, the dead'—
Max, I am listening...*

-Stephen Watts, "For My Friend, Max Sebald"

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Introduction

Melancholy, enigmatic, haunting, spectral. These are words often used to describe W.G. Sebald's prose style. Critics and lay readers who find themselves enmeshed in Sebald's enchanting, dark web of words sometimes find his work difficult to categorize, yet strangely alluring. W.G. Sebald, a German-born professor who spent most of his adult life living and teaching in England, challenged old notions of what a novel should look like and be about. His four "prose-narratives," published between 1990 and 2002, explore intense themes such as trauma, loss, identity, time, sexuality, psychosis, war, and amnesia. Sebald strongly emphasizes the unspeakable horror of the holocaust and its aftermath, while incorporating non-traditional elements in his creative works such as photography, old postcards and scribbled notes, antiquated words, verbosity, and quite a few digressions.

Ghosts abound in these "prose narratives." They demand to be heard and to be recognized. These and other "supernatural" phenomena repeatedly appear in historical spaces of trauma and repression. "Hauntings" occur out of society's failure to adequately process past traumas and/or to mourn its dead. Even if society persists in denial and ignorance, the trauma is eventually expressed through art and literature. When linear approaches such as logic and science fail to account for genocide, mass exploitation, torture, and other horrors of modern life, the language of haunting arises. Ghostly protests, confusion, and unspeakable pain permeate Sebald's pages. On the surface, Sebald's works appear to contain little action, yet they contain a violent struggle between the souls of the dead and the memories of oppression and violence repeated cyclically throughout history. Morbid yes, but Sebald demands that they be heard.

One of the students in Sebald's creative writing courses noted in his journal that Sebald, in his writing, "seeks a kind of verisimilitude of the nether world [...] if the dead were to write

themselves, they would write like Sebald” (Williams 150). Indeed, Sebald has taken on the role of speaker for the dead, not only so that we will finally recognize them, but also to release them from their limbo and to release their hold on us. For Sebald, this is not simply an aesthetic choice (though aesthetically his spectrality is strongly compelling) but an ethical one that reflects his need to address the trauma of the past and to show respect for the dead.

Sebald has mentioned his interest in metaphysics in interviews, such as the often-quoted one with Joseph Cuomo, in which Sebald laments the modern loss of metaphysics: “I’ve always thought it very regrettable, and, in a sense, also foolish, that the philosophers decided somewhere in the nineteenth century that metaphysics wasn’t a respectable discipline [...]” (Sebald/Cuomo 115). Throughout Sebald’s works the metaphysical presence is understated, often hidden, and then briefly revealed only to disappear as quickly as it is found. Yet he weaves this strand into his works—this acknowledgement of the dead, this reverence for mystery, this non-religious penance, this empathy and love for the soul—purposefully and strategically.

Theodor W. Adorno, a German philosopher W.G. Sebald deeply respected and admired, stated in an essay he penned in 1949 that “to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric” (179). Decades later, in a collection of his lectures entitled *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, he qualified this statement, claiming that “it could equally be said, on the other hand, that one *must* write poems, in keeping with Hegel’s statement in his *Aesthetics* that as long as there is an awareness of suffering among human beings there must also be art as the objective form of that awareness” (110). Beyond the question of whether the creation of poetry or any other art form is appropriate in the wake of an indescribably horrific genocide, though, is the ever-pressing question of “whether one can *live* after Auschwitz.” Adorno then notes his recurring dream in

which he “has the feeling that [he] is no longer alive, but am just the emanation of a wish of some victim of Auschwitz” (110).

He concludes this lecture with a reference to a Sartre play in which “a young resistance fighter who is subjected to torture, [...] asks whether or why one should live in a world in which one is beaten until one’s bones are smashed” (111). Adorno asserts that this question is essentially metaphysical in nature; and because “it concerns the possibility of any affirmation of life,” the “question cannot be evaded.” Furthermore, he claims that for a thought to truly be a thought, it ought to similarly engage in such questions regarding the “possibility of any affirmation of life” (111). Sebald actively engages this question in all of his works. Furthermore, his works are an example of literature created after Auschwitz that is far from barbaric; instead, he strives through his writing to deal with the consequences of the holocaust and other human as well as natural catastrophes in an ethical manner. Through his novels, Sebald provides the crucially necessary “art as the objective form of that awareness” of human suffering that Adorno speaks of.

For Sebald, ethics and metaphysics are undeniably yoked together, and the only way to responsibly create art in the wake of a long string of disasters throughout history is to address the kinds of questions that Adorno poses. Why live in a world dominated by violence and suffering? Are we truly even alive at all, and can we be? Furthermore, can the human soul achieve transcendence when it appears to be so chained to a seemingly endless cycle of dominance and submission, of trauma and ignorance?

Throughout his four prose narratives, Sebald demonstrates his ethical concern with metaphysics primarily in three ways: his portrayal of various forms of death and haunting and his willingness to himself be, in a way, haunted; his portrayal of the undead or those who seem to

walk a tightrope between death and life; and lastly, his symbolic expressions of hope for the redemption and/or transcendence of the human soul.

Literature Review

Although metaphysical concerns play an important role in Sebald's prose narratives, as of yet they have neither been deeply nor comprehensively explored. This is not to say that the topic has been completely ignored; quite a few scholars have dipped into this water and offer some compelling insights. Sebald scholar Mark McCullough, in particular, has noted the metaphysical trend in Sebald's works.

Mark McCullough explores Sebaldian metaphysics in his article *Destruction and Transcendence in W.G. Sebald*. He begins by noting the pessimism inherent in the very nature of Sebald's work. After all, the question remains, (to echo Adorno) why pursue the creation of art at all when everything ends in destruction? Despite this rather melancholy outlook, McCullough provides ample evidence of Sebald's interest in metaphysics. McCullough argues that although Sebald's writing is influenced by some materialist thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, he does not necessarily share such a pessimistic perspective (*Destruction* 396). Through his careful analysis of Sebald's comments and notes in his interviews, academic work, and "fiction," McCullough concludes that both melancholic and sublime moments in Sebald "are part of the same spiritual quest being undertaken by the author in his writing, and by his narrators in theirs" (*Destruction* 403).

McCullough has also examined this topic and offers poignant observations at various points throughout his text *Understanding W.G. Sebald*, yet only briefly, as this work is holistic, covering many introductory aspects of Sebald's work. For instance, he describes Sebald's novel *The Emigrants* as a "fictionalized pilgrimage," and has noted Sebald's intention to share the

“often obscured or suppressed tales” of the ghosts that haunt us (*Understanding* 2). McCullough also hints at Sebald’s symbols of transcendence when he touches on Sebald’s butterfly and moth motif: “This youthful version of the butterfly man embodies an enviable lightness of being, and a soul directed outward, fixed not on itself but on the search for intricately beautiful objects of nature [...] Nabokov—he is the ebullient alter ego to ever melancholy exile” (*Understanding* 49). McCullough revisits this motif in his analysis of Sebald’s *Austerlitz*, noting that “Austerlitz learns that even moths and butterflies have conscious lives, even fears and joys. What Sebald suggests with such passages is simultaneously the need for our empathy with all beings as well as the interrelated oneness of nature” (*Understanding* 118). These winged representations of the soul are crucial to understanding the interworking of metaphysics in Sebald’s prose narratives.

Scholar Uwe Schutte has analyzed Sebald’s own literary criticism—his academic work written primarily before his more creative work—and has noted that Sebald’s appreciation for metaphysics is revealed there as well. He observes Sebald’s concern “with the recuperation of a transcendent moment in an otherwise immanent present, a form of magical thinking [...]” (176). Using specific examples from Sebald’s critical essays, Schutte argues that Sebald defied the constraints of traditional literary criticism in order to explore the metaphysical realm, to enhance the beauty of the world using the written word, to explore the possibility of redemption, and to pay his respects to dead scholars for whom he has an affinity.

Schutte observes that Sebald’s interest in redemption manifested quite early; Sebald had stated in his master’s thesis “that [the quality of redemption] is the mark of all true art” (178). Schutte concludes his essay on Sebald with the assertion that “The desire to achieve such secular redemption through the word and by means of literature was, without doubt, one of the central motives behind W.G. Sebald’s writings” (178). Schutte is one of few Sebald scholars to analyze

Sebald's critical essays, and his analysis provides useful insight into Sebald's worldview. The knowledge that Sebald's concern with metaphysics and redemption extends beyond his creative works and bleeds into his professional life as well proves that he considered these concepts to be of critical importance.

Anne Whitehead, author of *Trauma Fiction*, also emphasizes metaphysical concepts. She notes that silk-worms and weaving serve as metaphors for the process of writing; writers are like the fates, weaving patterns with seemingly unrelated strands of silken thread, (which seems to be an optimistic and healing process that recognizes a reassuring, though mysterious, order in the world). However, they can never fully understand the nature of the very patterns they are representing and/or creating. This observation lends to a metaphysical reading of Sebald. Furthermore, this interpretation of silk-worms suggests the possibility of—if not quite transcendence or redemption—transformation and positive creation through writing.

Anita G. Sherman, Assistant Professor of Literature at American University in Washington, D. C., delves deeper still into the nature of Sebald's metaphysics. Sherman has published a fascinating article that examines Sebald's metaphysical view of death and mourning. To accomplish this, she applies Levi Strauss's theories regarding mourning rituals to Sebald's novel *The Rings of Saturn*. She explains how Sebald uses the "adoption ritual," in which he takes on the persona of Shakespeare in order to insure Shakespeare's safe and thorough transport into the afterlife. The final goal of this adoption ritual is to exorcise his ghost from the land of the living. According to Sherman, Sebald achieves this through both direct and indirect allusions to *King Lear*.

This is the specific example that Sherman uses to illuminate Sebald's method, yet she also notes that Sebald performs similar rites with many other writers and authors: "It is as though

he were performing commemorative rites for his favorite authors, bringing the past into the present by an act of literary mimesis” (Sherman 1). Sebald does this not only with his “own artistic forbears,” as Sherman describes them; he also performs these rites with the ghosts of the Holocaust and other historical acts of cruelty and destruction.

Eric L. Santner, Philip and Ida Romberg Professor in Modern Germanic Studies, takes a somewhat different direction. His recent work *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* is an innovative resource; his focus on Sebald’s ethical engagement with the suffering of others brings to light various connections between Sebald’s writing and newly burgeoning philosophical topics. In particular, Santner’s exploration of “the dimension of *undeadness*, the space between real and symbolic death [...] the ultimate domain of creaturely life” (xx) is both revealing and creative.

Santner is primarily concerned with Sebald’s literary re-construction of the “creaturely” world: a world in which people are driven to mindless repetition of trauma due to various historical events that make it difficult to find symbolic meaning. Santner is particularly interested in the way that Sebald represents the “undead,” as that limbo space is “the ultimate domain of creaturely life” (xx). According to Santner, it is necessary to both immerse oneself in melancholic explorations of the creaturely world—to acknowledge our own creatureliness as well as that of our neighbor—and simultaneously learn to love our neighbor despite his/her creatureliness (91).

Santer, while somewhat skeptical that Sebald’s works allow any ultimate escape from the creaturely cycle, nevertheless explores Sebald’s presentation of metaphysics and ethics as a potential solution to (at least temporarily) overcome creaturely impulses. At the very least, if the impulses cannot be overcome, ideally they would receive recognition as a driving force in human

life. In this case, the Christian idea of neighborly love is inextricably linked with redemption and returning from the dead; the suggestion is that only through recognizing the creatureliness of one's neighbor and connecting with him/her compassionately does one awake from the undead state of the creaturely.

The contributions of these scholars to this topic have begun to open up a much-needed conversation among Sebald scholars and potentially the academic community at large. Even at this moment, other scholars are also working on projects that involve researching Sebald's metaphysical bent; this seems to be an area that is gradually gaining momentum and blossoming into being. Moving now from the specific to the more general, there are other scholars that are working with broader issues such as the sociological, psychological, and ethical aspects of the phenomenon of haunting—a metaphysical phenomenon that plays a significant role in Sebald's works. In order to gain a firmer grasp on the function of haunting in Sebald's work, it has been necessary to research the function of haunting in other literary works and on a larger scale.

Avery F. Gordon, renowned sociologist and author of *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, comprises a large portion of my background studies. These readings, while they do not directly relate to Sebald's writing, nevertheless aid in comprehending and breaking down the role that metaphysical phenomenon play in his novels from a sociological perspective. Gordon has studied and written at length on haunting as a sociological phenomenon, and seeks to explain it as the expression of that which has been repressed, hidden, subverted, and suppressed. She argues that to gain any full understanding of the histories of the marginalized, we need to seek out non-traditional sources of "truth," such as literature and old photographs. These unorthodox sources often reveal more from their missing elements rather than their actual visual representations.

Gordon's theory can be applied to all of Sebald's novels, throughout which ghosts and hauntings abound. Sebald is using the haunting phenomenon to give voice to the marginalized and the oppressed—in his case, to Holocaust victims, to homosexual men, and even to old buildings and whole towns. His willingness to become, in a way, haunted himself by these tortured ghosts and wisps of history, reflects his own sense of ethics and responsibility to represent the unrepresentable. For Gordon also, confronting these ghosts is a necessary and worthy undertaking, albeit fraught with its own problems:

To be haunted and to write from that location, to take on the condition of what you study [...] produces its own insights and blindnesses. Following the ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located. It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible[...] It is sometimes about writing ghost stories, stories that not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a counter-memory, for the future (Gordon 22).

Sebald seems to be cognizant of the blindnesses that arise out of his willingness to be haunted and from his historical ghost hunts. Yet that does not stop him from seeking out ghosts, from visiting houses and towns that are haunted, and from thoroughly examining the workings and contradictions of memory.

Chapter One: The Haunting of Sebald

German Studies scholar Laurence Rickels (author of *Aberrations of Mourning: Writing on German Crypts*) observes that since ancient times, ghosts are believed to manifest due to improper burial or a failure to offer the dead the proper “mourning rituals and presentation of sacrificial offerings” (4). Rickels further notes how Freud determined that melancholia was a

form of mourning, yet failed to connect his theory of ghosts to his theory of mourning (4). If melancholia is a form of mourning, then it is a way to properly process death. The repression and/or denial of melancholic symptoms could therefore potentially result in haunting. What then is to be done about these ghosts?

Postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida claims (in the introduction to his treatise *Specters of Marx*) that spirits must be reckoned with. He passionately asserts that justice and interaction with ghosts are inseparably yoked. In order to truly live, it is necessary first to come to terms with the death of one's self and death of the "other". In order to contemplate a possible future, one must first acknowledge the ghosts of the past. This requires communication with such ghosts, even if, paradoxically, the spectral realm is in actuality nonexistent.

Gabriele Schwab, a new voice in trauma theory, seems to agree with the necessity of dealing with ghosts. She claims that "The exhumation of the buried ghosts of the past is [...] indispensable for trying to avoid the repetition of traumatic history or its displacement onto other people" (80-81). While focusing on transgenerational trauma as a result of the holocaust and Germany's failure to mourn its dual role as victim and perpetrator, Schwab emphasizes the importance of the "integration of historical trauma." In order to integrate historical trauma into their identity (rather than displacing it), the second and third generation survivors must break painful silences, dig up old secrets, and face disquieting feelings such as guilt and shame—all of which had previously been locked away in a metaphorical "crypt" (a term Schwab borrows from trauma theorist Nicolas Abraham).

The "crypt" is an escape device; "designed to circumvent mourning, a crypt buries a lost person or object or even a disavowed part of oneself or one's history, while keeping it psychically alive" (Schwab 2). This may temporarily postpone the painful work of mourning the

dead, yet this postponement, as Schwab points out, cannot erase the dead. The dead simply come back as ghosts to haunt each generation that refuses to acknowledge their source. Thus they must be faced and responsibly dealt with.

Sebald, who is himself a second-generation trauma survivor/perpetrator, (his father served in the German military during the Holocaust) seeks to accomplish acknowledgement of and communication with the dead in an attempt to exorcise them through his prose-narratives. Out of his attempt to properly mourn the dead, these works are deeply melancholic. They often feature recollections of visits to various historical sites, most of which were at one time sites of war, torture, burial, or of wealth and activity that have since been abandoned and left to rot.

One of the narrator's visits is to the Battle of Waterloo memorial site, which features a disturbing war scene complete with "blood-stained sand" and wax soldiers with "eyes rolling in pain or already extinguished" (*Rings* 124). Upon reflection of this experience, the narrator asks, "Whatever became of the corpses and the mortal remains? Are they buried under the memorial? Are we standing on a mountain of death? Is that our ultimate vantage point? Does one really have the much-vaunted historical overview from such a position?" (125). It might appear at first as if Sebald is primarily concerned in this passage with what has happened to the physical remains of the fallen soldiers. While this is a valid concern, beneath this concern is a deeper one; whatever became of the souls of the soldiers? Is such a garish "historical" display respectful to them or at all helpful for us? In this passage, as well as various others, Sebald displays concern for our society's relationship with death—how do we represent it historically, how do we deal with it, how do we mourn the fallen?

As an alternative to the violent, sometimes disrespectful display of the imagined dead masses that exists at some memorial sites, Sebald allows himself to be haunted by the individual.

He seems to seek out such haunting, as if cordially inviting the dead into his study for a cup of tea. In one interview, he is asked if he would describe himself as a ghost hunter, and he answers in the affirmative, and explains that the dead:

[...] have an odd presence for me, simply through the fact that I may get interested in them. And when you get interested in someone, you invest a considerable amount of emotional energy and you begin to occupy that person's territory, in a fashion. You establish a presence in another life through emotional identification" (Wachtel 42).

While Sebald could have kept his interest in the dead locked away within his own private world, he instead chose to share what he found in his "ghost hunts"--stories of certain deceased individuals that might otherwise be lost to time. In doing so, he (metaphorically speaking) loosens their grip upon us so that someday the haunting might stop and their souls might be set free. The "haunting" (which is more of a figurative term in this case) occurs because society is reluctant to face the violent acts it has committed, their many consequences, and the countless individuals whose lives these acts have decimated.

Avery F. Gordon manages to transform the frightening, negative idea of haunting as conceived of in popular imagination into something surprisingly constructive and even positive. According to Gordon, haunting as a sociological occurrence is a necessary outlet which gives a voice to those minorities whose voices are missing from history and popular representation. Gordon claims that our sciences do not give us adequate tools to understand "how social institutions and people are haunted, for capturing enchantment in a disenchanted world". She adds that "Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition" (Gordon 8). The concept of transformative recognition, as

opposed to “cold knowledge,” suggests the possibility of action and change. Reading about minority repression in a college textbook gives us “cold knowledge”; reading a compelling novel in which haunting occurs as an expression of such minority repression, on the other hand, provides a more affective reading experience. This has the potential to reach the reader on a deeper level and to transform his/her experience of and reaction to social reality.

Sebald is frequently tied to German philosopher and critical theorist Walter Benjamin, and he appears to allude to Benjamin’s works in his own. Gordon also refers to Benjamin often in her attempts to wrestle with the many societal aspects of haunting. For instance, Gordon interprets Benjamin’s historical materialism as a call to “protect the dead from the dangers of the present.” In this model, time is non-linear (another idea which Sebald often alludes to). By reaching out to the dead of the past (referred to by Benjamin as the “oppressed past”) and allowing ourselves to encounter the often painfully real, painfully present events of the past, perhaps we can alter the direction of the future. However, this comes with a stipulation: that which has been repressed by cruel and violent forces needs to be recognized, re-animated, and released before we can hope to alter the course of the future (Gordon 65-66).

This encounter with the dead and the events of the past is more involved than it initially appears. Gordon describes Benjamin’s use of “blasting” in order to have these animating encounters as:

a method of dialectics that reconstructs a lifework by following the scrambled trail the ghost leaves, picking up its pieces, setting them down elsewhere. Blasting might be conceived as entering through a different door, the door of the uncanny, the door of the fragment, the door of the shocking parallel...it blasts through the rational, linearly

temporal, and discrete spatiality of our conventional notions of cause and effect, past and present, conscious and unconscious (Gordon 66).

Despite the fact that Gordon never actually mentions Sebald in *Ghostly Matters*, Gordon's explication of Benjamin's term "blasting" also serves as a perfect description, in many ways, of Sebald's writing. This is how Sebald, a ghost-hunter of sorts, provides his reader with the kind of encounter Benjamin encouraged. Sebald's narrators follow paths in a seemingly random order, allowing themselves to be guided by disconnected historical and personal anecdotes. They slip back and forth between the past/present and conscious/unconscious almost seamlessly, leaving the reader little clue as to when one has ended and when one has begun.

Though her study is technically a work of social theory, Gordon uses various examples from classic works of fiction to support her case. While acknowledging the usefulness of the normal rules, terms, restrictions, and methodology of traditional sociological study, Gordon points out that literature is useful to study something like haunting precisely because it lacks these things. Haunting as a sociological subject deals with concepts such as invisibility, repression, and taboos; these are concepts that cannot fully be explored with facts and statistics alone. Haunting deals more with absence than presence. The study of hauntings calls for an imaginative and compelling perspective. Through the study of hauntings in fiction, it is possible to expand upon the current understanding of this phenomenon and its various expressions in society. (Gordon 25-27).

Like the authors Gordon refers to in *Ghostly Matters*, Sebald and his narrators are also haunted and portray instances of haunting. They are haunted by places, memories, symbolic objects, and various cataclysms and societal traumas. While some writers use ghosts to scare or intrigue their readers, Sebald dredges up ghosts of history in order to pay homage to them and to

release them. He simultaneously re-enchants a world increasingly devoid of enchantment through his evocation of this ephemeral beyond...this fleeting metaphysical encounter. His literary ventures go beyond pure aesthetics (though he is arguably quite concerned with aesthetic and artistic appeal) and delve into deeply ethical, philosophical concerns, such as the link between trauma and haunting.

In *Austerlitz*, the last prose-narrative published before Sebald's death, the narrator reflects upon the nature of trauma upon memory. He attempts to recall the various stations of the historical Breedonk fortress, which was built just before WWI, but finds this to be difficult:

the darkness does not lift but becomes yet heavier as I think how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on (*Austerlitz* 24).

The mood of the above passage seems frantic and fearful. Sebald seems to scramble to describe places and objects in order to permanently ingrain them in memory. By sharing such descriptions with his readers, he can ensure that they will not be forgotten. In a way, writing these strange prose-narratives is Sebald's way of staving off that darkness and of dealing with trauma. From this perspective, haunting can be interpreted as a positive phenomenon; it signifies that life is not simply "extinguished," and that places and objects do not have to lapse "into oblivion"—at least not immediately.

Sebald seems to realize that his task of being haunted by these people, places, and objects that he fears the final disappearance of is likely a futile attempt. Despite this sense of futility, the act is necessary and therapeutic. This process allows him (and the reader, vicariously) to

communicate with and mourn for the dead, thereby relegating them to their proper place in the past so that the living can move forward into the future.

Santner uses examples from Rainer Maria Rilke's novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Briggs* (published in 1910) to illustrate the link between trauma and haunting in fiction. According to Santner, this novel bears a striking resemblance to Sebald's own writings (he goes so far as to call it a "crucial precursor text to all of Sebald's fiction" [48]). Santner notes how the experience of "traces of life that are no longer there," which are "spectral," is traumatic because they have gained a "disturbing quality of 'thereness'" (50). As the character Malte gazes upon a scene of urban decay, he experiences the same sort of horror that Sebald's narrators often experience. Malte is overwhelmed by the thought of all the human lives lived in a now deserted town ruin; though they are no longer there, it is as if he can smell them. He can sense the odor of their very human lives, from the smell of their cooking to the smell of their sweat. Malte is, in a sense, haunted by them. The dead exist for him in a manifest, sensory fashion; they seem painfully real and inerasable, despite the fact that they are no longer alive in the technical sense. This illusion tortures him. It traumatizes his psyche.

Santner further links Malte's experience to the medium of photography, claiming that he "becomes [...] a *medium* in a double sense: photographic apparatus and locus of communion with the dead". He further claims that this represents a sort of "spectral materialism," which Sebald became the "true master" of (52). Of course, as Santner duly notes, Rilke's novel was written before the Holocaust and Sebald's works were written decades afterwards; Sebald's use of spectral materialism had to stretch the method to its limits. Sebald had to address levels of human suffering and torture unknown to Rilke and to the character of Malte (53). According to Santner, Sebald's own practice of spectral materialism "involves, among other things, a capacity

to register the persistence of past suffering that has in some sense been absorbed into the substance of lived space into the ‘setting’ of human history” (57). The Sebaldian narrator is as much a medium as Malte is. Due to the extreme nature of the demise of those poor ghosts Sebald’s narrator (and arguably himself as well) is haunted by, he is placed under extreme mental and emotional pressure. He is forced to re-live traumas that are not directly his own.

Horkheimer and Adorno had their own “theory of ghosts,” briefly explored in their keystone work of critical theory, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. Their theory is that we cannot conceive of absolute annihilation, and therefore we believe that the deceased continue to exist in another state—that of the ghost. We feel abandoned by them, and at the same time jealous that they have escaped the hardships (major and minor traumas) of everyday life. Horkheimer and Adorno claim that our relationship to the dead is “disturbed,” and that mourning has been “disfigured” (178-179).

Indeed, our relationship with the dead is complex—so much so that it is sometimes unclear who is haunting whom. For example, in *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator has a dream in which he is playing dominoes with Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald died a long time ago, so logically he should be the ghost, yet the narrator explains that “in the dream I was unable to see myself and was thus like a ghost” (208). In the dream, the roles are reversed. In another instance, the narrator has a haunting effect upon the owner of a bed and breakfast where he wishes to lodge: “Catherine stood there in her faded red summer dress, with an odd stiffness that suggested she had been arrested in mid-movement by the sight of this unannounced stranger. She gazed at me wide-eyed, or rather, she looked right through me” (209). In this case, neither party is technically dead, yet Catherine has spent so much time with no company besides that of her sisters that she finds this initial encounter with another human being uncanny. Two different

spheres of existence collide, resulting in a moment of shock much like that produced by a haunting.

In *Austerlitz* and *The Emigrants*, the narrator is primarily haunted by others. In *The Emigrants*, the narrator is haunted by the ghosts of his uncle Ambrose and Ambrose's companion Cosmos, German emigrants who were possibly involved in a homoerotic relationship. Not long after the outbreak of the First World War, Cosmos begins to go mad, and Ambrose is forced to institutionalize him in Ithaca, where he dies shortly after. Ambrose is never the same after Cosmos's nervous breakdown and death; he retained nothing of himself except "his shell of decorum" (99). While researching their lives, the narrator imagines that he catches glimpses of the tragic pair: "Now and then I thought I saw them disappear into an entry or a lift or turn a street corner [...] They were silent, as the dead usually are when they appear in our dreams, and seemed somewhat downcast and dejected" (*Emigrants* 122).

Later, Ambrose and Cosmo visit the narrator in his dream, and the dream seems to be focused on the conjectured nature of their relationship. He notes that his dreams were "filled with constant whisperings of the rumours that were in circulation concerning Cosmo and Ambros" and notes how in one dream they were eating lobster, and "Ambros was steadily taking the lobster apart, with great skill, placing little morsels before Cosmo, who ate them like a well brought up child" (124). Social theorist Gordon claims that we are haunted by those who have been marginalized and/or whose voices have been suppressed. Ambrose and Cosmo may have been marginalized due to the nature of their relationship, which is never fully disclosed.

According to Santner, in order to understand another human being (in "Sebald's universe") one needs to enter the space of his/her "hauntedness," which essentially constitutes the "blind spots" of that person's "point of view", and to "unpack the stresses" of these "blind

spots” (58). As Santner explains, this is not quite the same as empathy. Perhaps the Sebaldian narrator is attempting to enter the space of Cosmos and Ambrose’s “hauntedness”—attempting to understand their point of view and the stresses that they may have faced in their situation. Yet he cannot know for certain just what their point of view was, hence the inherent difficulty in attempted authentic interaction with the dead.

Trauma also plays a significant role in this haunting; Cosmos in particular is traumatized by the events of WWI, and struggles to express his horror: “Wildly agitated, he would string out words that bore some relation to fighting, and as he uttered these words of war he would apparently beat his forehead with his hand, as if he were vexed at his own incomprehension [...]” (95). The multitudinous horrors of war defy verbal expression; Cosmos finds himself mute in their wake, and frustrated at the way they have rendered him helpless and incapable of understanding.

At times it is unclear whether Sebald’s ghosts are actually dead or not. When the narrator of *The Emigrants* goes for walks on Sundays, he spends time in what had once been Jewish districts but have since been demolished, leaving behind nothing but “wind blowing through smashed windows and doors”. He notes that “When night fell upon these vast spaces, [...] which I came to think of as the Elysian Fields, fires would begin to flicker here and there and children would stand around them or skip about, restless shadowy figures” (*Emigrants* 157-158). In Greek mythology, the Elysian Fields were a happy place for those of virtue to reside after death. The narrator’s characterization of this forlorn place seems ironic; perhaps the souls of the children are (metaphorically) stuck there due to the trauma they experienced, and a happier heaven is denied them until the trauma can be released.

Sebald's narrators are also haunted by their *doppelgangers*, or doubles. The concept of the doppelganger has a long and somewhat complex history in German literature. Thought to portend death in various cultures, the doppelganger as it appears in modern literature can have any number of meanings. For instance, according to one scholar, the double in Kafka's novels is rooted in psychoanalysis: "The psyche can only ever be imperfectly reflected in the physical stuff of experience, analysis, and narrative, where it takes on the traumatic form of a double" (Webber 326). Thus the double, in some cases, is an imperfect reflection of one's own soul.

In *Austerlitz*, the narrator, while traveling by train, is overwhelmed by the feeling that he has a twin brother "who had been with me on that long journey, sitting motionless [...] whenever I thought of him I was tormented by the notion that towards the end of the journey he had died of consumption and was stowed in the baggage net with the rest of our belongings" (*Austerlitz* 224-225). While he continues to live in the physical realm, he feels as if some essential part of him has died. It is a feeling he cannot shake; he is haunted.

In *Vertigo*, Dr. K goes to the cinema, and the narrator imagines him watching a movie in which "Balduin, the finest swordsman in all Prague, confronts his own image in the mirror, and presently, to his horror, that unreal figure steps out of the frame, and henceforth follows him as the ghostly shadow of his own restlessness". In the end Balduin shoots the image and ends up killing himself. Dr. K believed the following long operatic wail of death to be "an expression of our, so to speak, natural misfortune, since after all, as he remarks elsewhere, we lie prostrate on the boards, dying, our whole lives long" (*Vertigo* 151-152). These passages illustrate the haunting of the characters by their *own* souls. Haunting remains linked to trauma--yet in these cases, the haunting is reflexive.

The doppelganger can also be considered a form of repetition, as it constitutes the uncanny repetition of one's self. Anne Whitehead, a prominent trauma theorist, addresses the role of repetition in Sebald's prose narratives. While placing careful emphasis on Freud's death instinct theory as a driving force in Sebald's novels, Whitehead also recognizes that the repetitions throughout Sebald's writing are not all fraught with negative, pained connotations, but that "coincidence may also gesture towards an incomprehensible pattern which is at work in our lives and represents a source of mystery and wonder" (121). Though she cautions against an overly hopeful reading of Sebald, she conjectures that "[by] positing an order or coherence beyond what we can know or understand, he explores the possibility that the dead are linked to us in ways which make possible meaningful connections" (134). By analyzing these connections, we can potentially gain a better understanding of the dead and our relationship to them.

While some may consider Sebald's fascination with the dead a morbid obsession, he considers death to be a natural interest. In an interview after the publication of *The Emigrants*, Eleanor Wachtel asks Sebald about his preoccupation with death, and he relates it to his childhood in the Alps. In the wintertime, the dead could not be buried for a while because the ground was frozen, and therefore would sit around in a shed for quite a while until the ground thawed enough to dig the graves. Therefore, he "grew up with this knowledge that death is around you [...]". He adds, "I have always had at the back of my mind this notion that of course people aren't really gone, they just hover somewhere at the perimeter of our lives and keep coming in on brief visits" (Schwartz 39). Sebald's life experience with and attitude towards the dead pervades his writing.

Sebald is frequently visited by the dead, and he uses various mediums in his works to allow the dead to express themselves. Photography is one of the mediums that Sebald uses to evoke a sense of hauntedness. In the same interview with Wachtel, Sebald notes the haunting quality of photographs: “And photographs are for me, as it were, one of the emanations of the dead, especially these older photographs of people no longer with us. Nevertheless, through these pictures, they do have what seems to me some sort of a spectral presence.” (Sebald/Wachtel 39-40) The well-known intellectual Roland Barthes in his *Camera Lucida* noted that the photograph renders the subject as an object; at that point the subject experiences “a micro-version of death” and becomes a “specter”. Barthes claims that he seeks death in photographs of himself (14-25). Perhaps the fact that photographs of one’s self are also doppelgangers is haunting as well. A photograph of one’s self is at once the person and *not* the person; it is an imperfect reflection; it is a moment in time that the person must return to each time he/she looks upon it. This encounter with death (in the form of becoming an object according to Barthes) is traumatic in and of itself.

Another way that Sebald evokes this sense of death and haunting is through his description of landscapes, which are more vivid and just as compelling (if not more so) than the photographs he includes. According to Greg Bond, in an essay exploring Sebald’s landscapes, Sebald’s frequent description of landscapes that are dark and gloomy is indicative of “a very deliberate technique whereby landscape, and particularly the journey through it, invoke not merely alienation or disorientation, but death” (35). Bond’s use of the word “invoke” hints at the ritualistic nature of Sebald’s narrative prose. Before Sebald can transcend death—before he can perform his narrative ritual of transmigration—he must first invoke death. As Bond notes, one of the ways that Sebald ushers death into his novels is through describing landscapes and the journey of his subjects through them.

One way to aesthetically represent death is through darkness. The visual interplay of light and dark is a compelling metaphor for the ongoing struggle between life and death, between presence and absence. Thus Sebald makes use of chiaroscuro throughout his landscapes; this is as much a symbolic choice as it is a stylistic one. He refutes the Western obsession with purity, with whiteness, with fire, with light—perhaps even with life, if only to make the claim that death deserves just as much respect. In an interview with Piet de Moor, Sebald noted that “We have organized our society in such a way that we threaten to burn ourselves. The topos of fire in the novel [*Vertigo*] fits in with the way in which people use fire [...] Fire is the most terrifying thing. Usually you don’t see the process of combustion” (Moor 351). In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald devotes several passages to discuss the physical and metaphorical implications of fire, cynically reflecting upon how “Our spread over the earth was fuelled by reducing the higher species of vegetation to charcoal”. According to Sebald,

Combustion is the hidden principle behind every artifact we create [...] Like our bodies and like our desires, the machines we have devised are possessed of a heart which is slowly reduced to embers. From the earliest times, human civilization has been no more than a strange luminescence growing more intense by the hour [...] (170).

The comparison of human civilization to fire seems to foreshadow its demise; as fire must eventually run out of fuel and die out, so too, it would seem, must civilization. Sebald seems to suggest in the above passage that our technology and our societies are unsustainable. Despite this stark reality, civilization remains, like fire, insatiable, and continues to expand in the face of its own potential extinction—devouring anything in its path. Fire has an extremely negative connotation in this instance. Accordingly, darkness often overcomes light in Sebald’s landscapes. The following passage exemplifies the power of darkness over light in Sebald’s cosmos:

The shadow of night is drawn like a black veil across the earth, and since all creatures, [...] lie down after the sun has set, so, [...] one might, in following the setting sun, see on our globe nothing but prone bodies, [...] as if leveled by the scythe of Saturn—an endless graveyard for a humanity struck by falling sickness (*Rings* 78-79).

This passage is at once stunning and grotesque. Of course this image provides merely the illusion of death, as these residents of Earth are merely sleeping as night falls. Yet metaphorically this is a powerful image, and Sebald invokes the Saturn mythos purposefully. This foreshadows the various deaths that occur throughout the rest of the novel.

Sebald's use of chiaroscuro likely stems from his appreciation of German cinema. In *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, Lotte Eisner, a renowned film critic, notes that chiaroscuro is a classic element of German film. She makes the rather sweeping statement that "The German soul instinctively prefers twilight to daylight," and lists off various examples of the characteristically German love of mist, gloom, and solitude (55). Sebald has noted his own interest in such melancholy weather characteristics in an interview on *Austerlitz*, in response to the interviewer's assertion that the prose in that work is "ghostly [...] Dust laden, mist laden, penetrated by odd and misdirecting lights...as if the attempt here is really to become lost in a fog". Sebald replies, "[...] these kinds of natural phenomena like fog, like mist, which render the environment and one's ability to see it almost impossible, have always interested me greatly". Sebald refers, with admiration, to the use of fog in *Bleak House*, saying that "This ability to make of one natural phenomenon a thread that runs through a whole text and then kind of upholds this extended metaphor is something that I find very, very attractive in a writer" (Sebald/Silverblatt 82).

Eisner also quotes from Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, which claims that brown is the "colour of the soul, it becomes the symbol of the transcendental, the infinite [...]" (51). According to Eisner, Spengler (whom Eisner calls "the theorist of mysticism") claimed that this preference for darkness stemmed from the view that "Night dissolved bodies, daylight dissolved souls" (55). Sebald, in his deep concern for the human soul, notes that a metaphorical daylight is indeed "dissolving" souls. This daylight is representative of many things, including the Enlightenment movement, dogmatic thinking, and increasing technological advancement. Any historical epoch or group that made a claim to absolute knowledge/absolute right/absolute power represents, for Sebald, a blinding daylight that denies souls their passage from this world to the next.

In his literary attempt to interrupt the seemingly endless cycle of the creaturely, and to do his part putting restless ghosts to rest, Sebald uses various tools. According to Anita Gilman Sherman, one of these tools is the adoption rite, as explained by Claude Levi Strauss. In this rite, the mourner takes on the identity of the deceased in an attempt to transform a potentially dangerous ghost into a harmless, protective ancestor (Sherman 2-3). In Sebald's case, I imagine that he was more concerned with helping the restless souls of the dead (as well as possibly invoking the aesthetic of this adoption ritual for his form of authorial "play") than with avoiding danger and/or protecting himself.

Sherman describes, in her article, the ways in which Sebald performs this adoption rite for Shakespeare. According to Sherman, Sebald uses three specific scenes from Shakespeare's *King Lear* throughout *The Rings of Saturn* in order to set the bard to rest, beginning with the infamous, "vertiginous" cliff scene. Sherman explains how the Sebaldian narrator takes the place of the son Edgar, and Shakespeare (the literary forefather) takes the place of Edgar's blind father

Gloucester. As Edgar can imagine his father's death as he leads him to the purported edge of a cliff, Sebald similarly can imagine Shakespeare's death. Ironically, rather than seeing a corpse when he peers over the edge of the cliff, Sebald's narrator sees two people fornicating and recoils in horror. Sherman explains the reason for his extreme reaction: "The creature whose death our narrator fantasizes is the barnacle-encrusted literary ancestor who spawns even in extremis" (8). Shakespeare becomes the "monster" in *The Tempest*, as well as a symbol of creation and birth.

Next, Sebald's narrator has a dream in which the play's final scene (Lear holding his dying daughter) is "miniaturized" using an "aerial vantage point". Through the process of miniaturization, Sebald is able to reduce the "stature" of this work, and thereby the stature of Shakespeare himself (Sherman 12). Sebald's final act of "diminution" is to put a *Lear* quote in the mouth of an at once humorous and tragic character, Mr. Squirrel, who "works for an undertaker and wears mourning clothes, but has no memory" (Sherman 15). As Sherman explains, "by the time the Shakespearean piece has been identified, its power is muted and its echoes have faded [...] the mourning rite is complete" (17).

This process has a mythic quality; it is reminiscent of Persephone's abduction to the Grecian underworld, Dante's journey through the nine circles of hell, the journey of a father and son into the Egyptian land of the dead, and others. While the landscapes of the underworld/land of death/hell are described with varying levels of visual detail, they nevertheless remain metaphorical. These myths share a common quality: death is not inescapable, and fate can change. While most who arrive in the hereafter are obliged to stay, there are a few who escape, bargain their way out, or were not meant to be there quite yet. Likewise, Sebald's living, breathing characters often appear ghostly.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are those who are dead (various artists and writers mentioned throughout Sebald's novels) yet seem to live on through memory and representation. Sebald blurs the line between death and life; he questions both the finality of death and the potency of life. The result is that the majority of Sebald's characters spend much of their time in a kind of limbo—they walk a tightrope (a Sebaldian motif) on which they continue to teeter perilously between the depths of death and depression and the highs of transcendence and redemption.

Chapter Two: Walking the Tightrope between Life and Death

Sebald confounds the boundaries of life and death. Many of his characters resemble zombies; they live as though they have already passed on. They live in a constant state of dreamlike stagnancy, haunting the places they dwell. Other kinds of hauntings abound throughout Sebald's writing as well—the haunting of memory, of time, of history. Souls live on, only passing from one plane of existence to another. As the caterpillar transforms into a butterfly, so too do Sebald's souls transform.

Many of Sebald's characters experience what Gabriele Schwab refers to as “death-in-life.” Schwab claims that some forms of trauma are so intense that they “annihilate a shared sense of time” and render the victim/perpetrator/survivor unable to properly mourn their loss. This simultaneously prevents the loss from ever becoming real, while at the same time permanently tying the survivor to it. Thus shackled, the survivor of “catastrophic trauma” “fall into a melancholia that embraces death-in-life” (3). The survivor becomes “undead”.

According to Santner, the state of being “undead” is essentially the same as that of being “creaturely,” which arises out of a human failure to find or make symbolic meaningfulness during certain historical events or eras. Here Santner links Sebald's writings to Walter

Benjamin's view "that at some level we truly encounter the radical otherness of the 'natural' world only where it appears in the guise of historical remnant" (Santner xv). In other words, humans are essentially unable to process trauma until after the fact...often a generation or two after the trauma has occurred. Despite the fact that sites of historical trauma are often violently resistant to attempts at meaning-making, human beings feel intense pressure to find meaning among the ruins of these events regardless, resulting in painful internal struggle. Santner argues that these are the sites at which Sebald is most active in his literary endeavors.

Santner attempts to trace various conceptions of creatureliness, starting with its appearance in the poetry of Rilke, where it is still tied to the "metaphysical tradition." From there he traces the idea to its re-imagining by writers rooted in what Santner terms the "German-Jewish" tradition, (such as Kafka, Rosenzweig, Scholem, Benjamin, Celan, and Freud) who had since moved away from the more romantic conception of the creature as depicted by Rilke:

For these writers, however, creaturely life—the peculiar proximity of the human to the animal at the very point of their radical difference—is a product not simply of man's thrownness into the (enigmatic) 'openness of Being' but of his exposure to a traumatic dimension of political power and social bonds whose structures have undergone radical transformations in modernity (12).

This traumatic exposure leads humans to lead a sort of double life, in which they are constantly pulled in opposite directions. They struggle to find balance in spite of such overwhelming societal obstacles; they must take on the figurative role of tightrope walkers.

The writer and artist characters in Sebald's prose narratives are perhaps the most prominent tightrope walkers. It could be surmised that they must be able to visit both worlds (that of the living and of the dead) in order to properly represent either. In some ways, this dual

visitation could be viewed as a success; these characters are able to break away from their own creatureliness and occasionally even help others to do the same. Yet Sebald ironically represents the world of the writer, glorified by popular culture and the media, as a form of suffering.

In *Austerlitz*, the character Austerlitz tells the narrator of his melancholy daydreams in the reading room of a garishly new, highly automated library. He is beset by a disturbing vision, in which he finds:

circus acrobats climbing the cables [...] placing one foot in front of the other as they made their way upwards with the ends of their balancing poles quivering [...] And several times [...] birds which had lost their way in the library forest flew into the mirror images of trees in the reading room windows, struck the glass with a dull thud, and fell lifeless to the ground (281).

He proceeds to reflect upon how in all of our projects, the larger and more complex that they are and the more perfect that we intend for them to be, the more likely they are to become dysfunctional. The smallest thing, “the fall of a single creature when diverted from its natural path,” can disrupt the whole grand plan.

This conundrum is faced not just by the people who design libraries, but also by the people who write books. This act of creation is a continual balancing act. Small mistakes can potentially harm innocent beings if the art, like the overly clean windows in the new library, attempts to stand in for reality. Perhaps it is this perceived responsibility that leads the creative types in Sebald’s novels to suffer. Perhaps such melancholic suffering is necessary in order for empathy, compassion, and remembrance to occur. In any case, Sebald presents suffering as the unavoidable human condition, concluding that the interpretation of suffering is what most counts.

One such suffering writer is Algernon Charles Swinburne, a Victorian poet. Sebald explains that Swinburne was so sensitive as a young man that his bouts of creativity and bursts of artistic appreciation sent him into “quasi-epileptic fits,” after which “he often lay prostrate for weeks, and soon, unfitted for general society, he could bear only the company of those who were close to him” (*Rings* 160). His creative sensitivity pushed him outside of the realm of society at large, thereby setting him off in his own realm from the beginning. This prompted a strange, isolated existence, at times more reminiscent of death than of life.

According to Sebald, Swinburne’s original intention was to join a cavalry regiment and sacrifice his life in battle, “and only when all hope of dying a hero’s death was gone, thanks to his underdeveloped body, did he devote himself unreservedly to literature and thus, perhaps, to a no less radical form of self-destruction” (163). For Swinburne, the act of writing is a slow suicide.

Towards the end of *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald shares what appears (Sebald often blurs the lines between fact and fiction, leaving some question as to the authenticity of his sources) to be an excerpt from the Vicomte de Chateaubriand’s memoirs. The Vicomte, having just recollected a painful scene between himself and a woman he once gave up to focus on his writing, is despondent. He laments that writing simultaneously helps and harms him; it helps him to cope with painful memories while estranging him from others. The excerpt ends on a melancholy note: “And today I do not raise my eyes from my work. I have become almost invisible, to some extent like a dead man. Perhaps that is why it appears to me that this world which I have nearly left behind is shrouded in some peculiar mystery” (*Rings* 255). In the Vicomte’s case, though he is technically still living and breathing, he is not quite part of the rest of the living world anymore. When he chose writing over love, he in some way decided to give

up life—just as Swinburne chose the “self-destruction” of writing when a heroic death in battle proved to be impossible.

The Vicomte, imagining what his life would have been like had he stayed with his young love in the English countryside, speculates that he likely wouldn't have written anything there. He is plagued by unanswerable questions: “How great would France's loss have been, he asks, if I had vanished into thin air like that? And would it not, in the end, have been a better life? Is it not wrong to squander one's chance of happiness in order to indulge a talent? Will what I have written survive beyond the grave?” (253). For the Vicomte, perhaps even more than for Swinburne, choosing the life of a writer was a great sacrifice.

The Vicomte cannot rest easy with his choice because he can never be sure that it was the right choice. He is plagued by doubts, unsure whether his sacrifice will actually mean anything to anyone once he is gone. This makes him a tightrope-walker in another way as well; in addition to walking between the world of life and death, he also walks between the present and the past. He is constantly drawn by memories of another world that technically no longer exists, but remains inexplicably real for him.

Sebald dwells on time and its connection to this sort of zombified existence in other works as well. For instance, in *Austerlitz*, the narrator recounts a meeting he had with the character Austerlitz (a man who, tellingly, claims to have never owned any sort of time-telling device) during which Austerlitz descants about time. Austerlitz claims that it was once commonplace to live “outside of time,” and that even in a city seemingly controlled by time, it remains possible to escape its grasp. For example, he says “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.” (*Austerlitz* 101) In this

case, trauma is the catalyst that transports the living into the land of the dead where time has no place. Perhaps this is why the writers and various other creative types in Sebald's prose narratives are able to connect with the dead and the past so well; they have each experienced trauma and the timelessness it manifests.

Sebald himself, a writer and a "ghost hunter," has also experienced trauma, which is evident from his interviews and biographical material. His grandfather's death in particular, which occurred when Sebald was just twelve, deeply affected him. In one conversation with Arthur Lubow, Sebald associates his fascination with death to the passing of this man (among other factors) with whom he was incredibly close, and notes that he "broke out in a skin disease right after his death, which lasted for years" (Lubow 171). Time, trauma, life, and death are, for Sebald, cycling endlessly, rendering it nearly impossible to actively "live" a "normal" life in the present.

At another meeting, Austerlitz muses that time might not exist at all, which would explain (for him) why the boundary between the living and the dead is so permeable. He conjectures that time is simply comprised of:

various spaces interlocking [...], between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like, [...] 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 back as I can remember [...] I have always felt as if I had no place in reality, as if I were not there at all, [...] (185).

This contemplation seems to echo Sebald's own. In one interview, Sebald is reported to have said (with regards to the Corsican tradition of communicating with dead ancestors before enacting any serious decisions) that "These borders between the dead and the living are not

hermetically sealed, [...] There is some form of travel or gray zone. If there is a feeling, especially among unhappy people, that there is such a thing as a living death, then it is possible that the *revers* is true” (Lubow 160).

If it is possible (according to Sebald) for the dead to live, one wonders if the dead aren’t perhaps even more real for him than the living. His descriptions of those who have passed are vivid, detailed, and deeply empathetic. His few depictions of those still living, on the other hand, remain vague and apathetic—or disparaging. They seem to be devoid of life and of feeling. *Vertigo* features a particularly disturbing description of the living: “Holiday makers were everywhere [...] Their sunburnt, painted faces swaying over the solid mass of their bodies were those of the wandering dead. Unhappy they seemed, every one of them, condemned to haunt these streets night after night” (*Vertigo* 93). In this passage, the narrator is struck with horror to learn that a group of these people is from his own home town. Rather than relating to them, or taking comfort in the familiar dialect, the narrator recoils further into his own isolation and writing.

Another character, Austerlitz’s “nursery maid” Vera, also experiences a living death after a traumatic experience. After her failure to locate Austerlitz or his father in the wake of their flight from home during the Holocaust, Vera becomes numb: “[...] almost all her feelings had been extinguished, and she had not truly breathed since that time. Only in the books written in earlier times did she sometimes think she found some faint idea of what it might be like to be alive” (*Austerlitz* 205). While not active in the writing process itself, unlike many of Sebald’s other characters, Vera finds solace in what has been written in the past. By vicariously living through the dead, who lived pre-Holocaust, she can grasp—however feebly—at life. It is as though, after the trauma of the Holocaust, no one can truly live. Instead, they must look to the

lives of those who never experienced such horror to learn how truly living would feel. Characters like Vera, the narrator of *Vertigo*, Austerlitz, and surmisably even Sebald himself (all either directly or indirectly affected by the events of the Holocaust) are trapped in this limbo between life and death in the wake of that unspeakable destruction.

Austerlitz is perhaps the most visibly and detrimentally affected by what happened. Forced to immigrate to England as a small child to escape potential internment, Austerlitz was adopted and raised by people to whom he could not relate. They did not speak his language, and they sadly failed to inform him of his Jewish identity. Later in life he struggles to discover his true past, as well as the past of his blood ancestors. In one passage, while waiting in a train station, Austerlitz is overcome by a visionary flashback recounting his arrival to England. The vision is accompanied by a painful realization:

[...] when I saw the boy sitting on the bench I became aware, through my dull bemusement, of the destructive effect on me of my desolation through all those past years, and a terrible weariness overcame me at the idea that I had never really been alive, or was only now being born, almost on the eve of my death (*Austerlitz* 137).

He is only just now born because he is only just now beginning to uncover the truth of his identity. This painful yet life-giving process meant regaining an identity through building relationships with dead family members, most of whom he could hardly be expected to remember. In some ways, unlike most of Sebald's characters, Austerlitz is able to escape the living death that had consumed his existence. Coming to terms with his past meant the liberation of a life spent in a numb cocoon and the discovery of a truth both beautiful and terrifying.

Chapter Three: Symbols and Tools of Redemption and Transcendence

In one of his many interviews, Sebald is asked about his circular writing—or the way he circumnavigates the actual subject of concentration camps, often alluding to them yet never addressing them directly. Addressing this concern, he uses an example from Virginia Woolf's writing (a description of a moth dying) to explain his method:

[...] it's written somewhere, chronologically speaking, between the battlefields of the Somme and the concentration camps erected by my compatriots. There's no reference made to the battlefields of the Somme in this passage, but one knows, as a reader of Virginia Woolf, that she was greatly perturbed by the First World War, by its aftermath, by the damage it did to people's souls, the souls of those who got away, and naturally of those who perished (Sebald/Silverblatt 81).

Sebald's interest in this particular passage comes as no surprise given his preoccupation with moth symbolism in his own writing. In this interview he links the suffering of a moth to the suffering of people's souls as a result of World War I. He makes a pointedly similar comparison in his own work, linking moth symbolism to the human soul. Yet as much as it serves as a symbol for the soul's suffering, it and other flying creatures such as butterflies, birds, and angels serve as moving symbols of the potential for the soul's redemption.

There is a particularly lengthy and moving description of moths in *Austerlitz* spanning four pages. In these pages, the narrator relays an intimate knowledge of moths shared with him by Austerlitz, who claimed that "their lineage is among the most ancient and most remarkable in the whole history of nature" (90). Austerlitz described how every so often a moth from his garden would end up in his house:

they know they have lost their way, since if you do not put them out again carefully they will stay where they are, never moving, until the last breath is out of their bodies, and indeed they will remain in the place where they came to grief even after death [...]

Sometimes, seeing one of these moths that have met their end in my house, I wonder what kind of fear and pain they feel while they are lost” (94).

Maintaining the assumption that the moth is a metaphor for the human soul, we can conclude that Sebald’s moths are his ghosts--souls stuck in purgatory because they died in the wrong place at the wrong time with no escape in sight. As he explains it, this is what happens “if you do not put them out again carefully”. This is precisely what Sebald attempts to do through his writing. He attempts to put lost souls out again carefully—to help them find their way out. Sebald begins his grave task with a simple act of empathy; he ponders what “kind of fear and pain” the lost soul must feel.

The silk worm metaphor is multi-faceted. Sebald also applies the metaphor to scholars, perhaps due to the silk worm’s ability to spin a cocoon that, uninterrupted, inevitably leads to transformation. Likewise, a devoted scholar possesses the ability to spin patterns with writing that contain the potential to transform. Sebald directly compares the scholar Algernon Charles Swinburne to the silkworm because his light and slow eating habits resemble those of the worm, but he makes the comparison mainly because Swinburne, after sleep, “abruptly awoke to new life, convulsed with electric energy, and, flapping his hands flitted about his library, like a startled moth, clambering up and down the stands and ladders to fetch one or other treasure from the shelves” (*Rings* 165). One wonders if the sleep that Swinburne finds himself cocooned in, previous to his waking transformation, is as replete with the same labyrinthine trauma-infused

dreams that haunt Sebald's narrator. Does that anxious state between life and death represent the silken cocoon threads that offer the hope of transformation?

Like a moth, Swinburne is also delicate...a fragile, ephemeral being. Sebald's description of his frenzied excitement upon waking is reminiscent of a moth's behavior in the presence of candlelight: the moth, drawn inexorably towards the light, flits around until it is inescapably drawn into the flame itself where it must inevitably combust. It is hopelessly drawn towards the very agent of its destruction. Sebald's narrator likens the study of literature, in similar fashion, to a form of self-destruction, explaining, "only when all hope of dying a hero's death was gone, thanks to his underdeveloped body, did he [Swinburne] devote himself unreservedly to literature and thus, perhaps, to a no less radical form of self-destruction" (163). Sebald's narrator also notes that Swinburne found himself subject to quasi-epileptic fits and moments of fearful paralysis after particularly enthusiastic bouts of writing or conversation (159-160). Thus the constant dance between trauma and transcendence or the moth and the flame is played out.

The most striking (and disturbing) use of the moth metaphor occurs towards the end of the novel, in Sebald's description of the German Reich's endorsement of sericulture in the classroom:

[Silkworms] could be used to illustrate the structure and distinctive features of insect anatomy, insect domestication, retrogressive mutations, and the essential measures which are taken by breeders to monitor productivity and selection, including extermination to preempt racial degeneration (*Rings* 294).

In this case, the silk worm is a metaphor for the Jewish people and other disenfranchised groups that were exploited and used as laborers and in experiments only to be exterminated. The

German Reich was in the practice of holding silk worms over boiling pots of water in order to kill them once the silk threads had been extracted, a particularly cruel practice compared to other less violent methods used by other cultures throughout history. Of course this meant that these silk worms, killed before their time, would never experience metamorphosis. It could be argued that the victims of genocide, also taken before their time, were denied that same privilege. Perhaps these unfortunate souls still haunt the living in a state of perpetual limbo, as they have never been properly mourned (according to Sebald).

Thus it is left up to scholarly writers to spin the cocoons for them. Writers such as Sebald have the power to incorporate elements into their writing that could potentially aid in the release of these souls from the labyrinth nightmare of trauma they have been trapped in. Sebald uses various tools (including but not limited to history, mythology, psychoanalysis, and the words of his literary and historical forbears) in order to properly mourn the dead and thereby release them. (This could, in a bizarre fashion, be branded “literary therapy”). As they are released—slowly, agonizingly, over a period of time threatening the infinite—so are the primary, secondary, and tertiary witnesses gradually released from the stains of trauma.

The spinning of these “cocoons” is by no means a perfect process, as the self-doubting, ever-skeptical narrator elucidates, “It is difficult to imagine the depths of despair into which those can be driven who [...] are engrossed in their intricate designs and who are pursued, into their dreams, by the feeling that they have got hold of the wrong thread” (Sebald 283). Here Sebald uses the metaphor of the loom to express the difficulties inherent in attempts at trauma incorporation. In order to exorcise the ghosts of trauma, the survivor must find a way to weave that trauma into his/her identity rather than resorting to continual displacement, and for Sebald this task is fraught with potential pitfalls.

Sebald also uses moths to present an alternative state of being to the frenzied, manic urge to produce, consume, and maintain efficient functionality espoused by the Enlightenment period. In *Austerlitz*, a wise naturalist Austerlitz encounters as a child notes that moths have a body temperature (thirty-six degrees Celsius) that “has always proved the best natural level, a kind of magical threshold [...] all mankind’s misfortunes were connected with its departure at some point from that norm, and with the slightly feverish, overheated condition in which we constantly found ourselves” (134-135). Moths serve as a symbol of magical simplicity—a pre-technological existence to which mankind can never return.

The butterfly, like the moth, also serves as a symbol of the rejection of Enlightenment ideals, though for different reasons. In an article noting the connections between Nabokov’s writing and Sebald’s, Adrian Curtin and Maxim D. Shrayer note that one of the reasons that Nabokov had such a great love of butterflies was because their beauty transcended any kind of functional or evolutionary necessity. According to Curtin and Shrayer, “The butterfly functions as a symbol of artistic perfection, a harbinger of joy and of the eternal that the human subject may strive for, and sometimes attain” (272). Butterflies are living art—the perfect marriage of art and nature. For Nabokov, art is the key to immortality. Curtin and Shrayer propose that “it is perhaps in art rather than in transient human memory that the dead can continue to live,” though they recognize the inherent limitations of art when it comes to the representation of traumatic historical events such as the Holocaust (268).

When Nabokov appears in Sebald’s *The Emigrants* as “The Butterfly Man,” he is a symbol of hope, the promise of something beautiful defying all logic much like the idea of the immortal human soul. According to Curtin and Shrayer, the butterfly man partially signifies “the careful exchange between Sebald and Nabokov in this text: the tribute of one author to another

that is also something of a sidestepping of the earlier author's influence". Curtin and Shroyer continue, explaining that Sebald's world is much less idealistic and far more imperfect and ambiguous than that of Nabokov. They argue that while Nabokov's world facilitates escape to the "otherworld" through art, Sebald's world of art primarily leads to frustration for his characters because they realize their permanent entrapment (272-275). This view, however, fails to take into account Sebald's positive representation of moths and butterflies throughout the rest of his works.

Instead, there is a possibility that the butterfly man (in addition to representing a head-nod to one of Sebald's literary influences) is a Charonic figure. This explains Ambrose's "enigmatic remark" in *The Emmigrants* (as relayed by his physician): "When I asked why he had not appeared at the appointed time, he replied (I remember his words exactly): It must have slipped my mind whilst I was waiting for the butterfly man" (115). That same day, Ambrose dies; the butterfly man acts as an intermediary between the world of the living and that of the dead.

In another case, a man with a butterfly net and an "unplaceable" English accent appears to the character Max Ferber just as he is considering taking a potentially lethal leap off of a mountain top into Lake Geneva. This mysterious man convinces Ferber to start the descent down the mountain in order to make it back in time for dinner. Tellingly, Ferber has no memory of the journey back, or several days after that. It takes him almost a year to complete a portrait entitled "Man with a Butterfly Net"—a portrait that has no face (174). This time the butterfly man saves a character from possible death, whereas in the other instance he is death's awaited guide to the afterworld. In both cases, the butterfly man acts as a guide between worlds. In both cases, the butterfly man acts as a guide or boatman traversing, not unlike Charon, two worlds.

The butterfly man makes his final appearance in *The Emmigrants* not as a man, but as a boy. Ferber hands over the memoirs of Luisa Lanzberg, his mother, to the narrator. Luisa describes in these pages her childhood, her courtships, and the effect of the war upon her life. When describing the day that her first serious suitor proposed to her, she says that she was reminded of another day when she saw a Russian boy with a butterfly net. She “saw him as a messenger of joy, returning from that distant summer day to open his specimen box and release the most beautiful admirals, peacock butterflies, brimstones and tortoiseshells to signal my final liberation” (214). This is clearly a joyful, optimistic moment. In each instance, the butterfly man signals some sort of transition from one aspect of life to another, be it from life to death, from near-death to life, or from friendship to love. Given these many examples, the butterfly man is the logical choice to carry out this weighty task considering the miraculous transition of the butterfly from nondescript helpless caterpillar to winged beauty.

In a classic work by C. Daly King, *The Butterfly: A Symbol of Conscious Evolution*, (originally published in 1927 under the title *Beyond Behaviorism: The Future of Psychology*) the worm that will become a butterfly is described, when cocooned in its chrysalis, to be in “a state that is both life and death” (King 40). King notes the astonishing manner with which the worm completely disintegrates, leaving nothing but a liquid substance behind. Furthermore, before this liquid has begun to form into a butterfly, a wing pattern has already appeared within the inside of the chrysalis shell. King notes that upon this miraculous observation, “We feel, somehow, that here we approach the very heart of the mystery” (40). King ties this information in with the fact that the ancient Greeks chose the butterfly to symbolize the human soul (known to them as Psyche) (41).

In addition, King explores the reasoning behind this choice of symbolism, and what this could mean for humankind. King proposes the theory that the radical metamorphosis of the butterfly parallels the kind of transformation that a person needs to undergo, concluding that, “the escape for man from his automatism may be in the form of some drastic change in himself” (78). An exploration of Sebald’s works provides clues to just what this drastic change might represent.

In the last few pages of *Austerlitz*, the narrator describes a book that Austerlitz had given to him. Sebald ends *Austerlitz* with this reference to the book: “sitting by the moat of the fortress of Breendonk, I read to the end of the fifteenth chapter of *Heshel’s Kingdom*, and then set out on my way back to Mechelen, reaching the town as evening began to fall.” (*Austerlitz* 298) All Sebald’s works are richly intertextual, and while it would be impractical to try to read everything that he alludes to, this particular lure proved irresistible.

Dan Jacobson’s *Heshel’s Kingdom* bears a striking resemblance to Sebald’s *Austerlitz*. Both works address the search for one’s identity in relation to the past, and both deal with the multi-generational effects of the Holocaust. Chapter fifteen of Dan Jacobson’s *Heshel’s Kingdom* describes the narrator’s experience of visiting Fort IX, a building that “has enclosed within itself as much evildoing as any place on earth” (158). Jacobson delves into the horrific history of Fort IX (including the digging up and burning of the bodies of previously exterminated Jews by other Jewish slaves) who were then themselves exterminated upon completion of this order.

Yet the chapter ends on a surprising note, describing how one group that had been ordered to complete this task “managed to plan and execute an extraordinarily elaborate break-out” which “involved fabricated keys, bars, chains and steel doors sawn through with stolen files, the excavation of forgotten tunnels and the digging of new ones”. The narrator is taken through

one of these tunnels, featuring paraphernalia of the escape, including a post-war picture of the group in which only ten of the sixty survivors can be seen. The last sentence of this chapter is telling: “There were no escapees from any of the squads that had preceded them or from the squads that took their place” (167). This sentence speaks to the miraculous singularity of the event, simultaneously celebrating the escape while bemoaning the fact that it was the only one.

In some ways digging up Sebald’s references manufactures more questions than answers. Is this a hopeful passage because a small handful of Jews managed to escape? Or is it just as dark and brooding as the rest because their escape represents only a vaguely palpable victory particularly when considering the great human loss that both precedes and follows that singular mercy? Furthermore, the fact that only ten of the sixty survivors appeared at the post-war reunion begs the question what happened to the other fifty? In Sebald’s *The Emigrants*, various Holocaust survivors commit suicide. Surviving the Holocaust with one’s life meant a death of another kind. It meant condemnation, an existence haunted by the memories of those who did not survive, an existence dominated by countless horrors that can never be unseen, an existence unalleviated by the steady forward march of time always dominated by the incessant influence of the past.

And yet, the creativity and tenacity of the surviving squad despite what must have been indescribably brutal is itself a knell of hope rather than one of despair. Where they summoned up the courage, the strength, and the wit to pull off such an involved and complex escape remains both a mystery and a revelation; it reveals something within the human spirit that cannot be crushed, a glimmer of light that refuses to be snuffed out. We, inexorably, continue to do what we must in an attempt to escape, be it physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. We discover forgotten tunnels and dig out new ones. We deftly forge and even steal tools from our captors

that suit our purposes. We weave our webs, though we may become lost or entangled in them. This is perhaps our only hope to interrupt the throes of creatureliness, the un-life of the automaton, the limited choice of role between victim and perpetrator.

The moth is not the only symbol of redemption/transcendence in Sebald's works; the angel symbol has also captivated the imaginations of Sebald critics, who have analyzed its significance at length in articles such as Julia Hell's "The Angel's Enigmatic Eyes, or The Gothic Beauty of Catastrophic History in W.G. Sebald's 'Air War and Literature,'" and David Kaufmann's "Angels Visit the Scene of Disgrace." Pontification abounds on this melancholic figure, but I would like to offer a slightly different perspective, bringing attention to a particular Walter Benjamin passage that links up beautifully with one of Sebald's:

Where we see a single chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wing with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned [...] (Benjamin 260)

Critics who interpret the angel of history as a terrifying and destructive force seem to miss the fact that the angel desperately wishes to rectify the situation—even as she is violently thrust into the future by "progress" she casts its eyes onto the past. Even the once powerful domain of the spiritual/metaphysical cannot match the exponential "advancements" of a violent and isolating technology (that which is referred to as "progress") thrust into existence by the Enlightenment. The angel of history is just as much a victim as the herring, the transcendent butterfly, the silk moth, and the immortal human soul.

In their capacity to ferry the souls of the dead to their respective afterlives (through various research and writing projects and other acts of both mourning and commemoration) writers themselves can also take on an angelic role. Sebald claimed in one of his public lectures that “There are many forms of writing; only in literature, however, can there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts, and over and above scholarship.” According to one of his university students, this meant that through literature it is possible to give “back a lost memory through writing, thereby creating a memorial to those ‘to whom the greatest injustice was done’”. This was for Sebald “perhaps even the primary duty, of literature” (Radvan 159).

Furthermore, writing itself offers readers brief moments in which they can escape the confines of ordinary existence while reaching for transcendence. In *Rings of Saturn*, Sebald describes the way in which, at times, Thomas Browne’s writing achieves this effect: “[...]when he does succeed in rising higher and higher through the circles of his spiraling prose, borne aloft like a glider on warm currents of air, even today the reader is overcome by a sense of levitation” (19). At his best, Sebald achieves a similar effect.

In *The Rings of Saturn*, W.G. Sebald presents us with a more benign personification of the angel of history: the scholarly friend of the narrator, Janine Dakyns. Upon contemplating her death which occurred shortly after the sudden death of their mutual friend Michael Parkinson, (one of many chains of death throughout the novel) the narrator reflects on a particular memory he has of her in which he compares her to this angel: “Once when I remarked that sitting there amidst her papers she resembled the angel in Durer’s *Melancholia*, steadfast among the instruments of destruction, her response was that the apparent chaos surrounding her represented in reality a kind of perfect order...” (Sebald 9) As a scholar, Janine is trying to sort through the

wreckage (which appears in the form of “a virtual paper landscape” consisting of “lecture notes, letters and other documents” mainly relating to Gustave Flaubert) in an attempt to invoke the dead Flaubert and to make whole again something that has been fragmented. Perhaps for her these fragments are like the sand, a symbol carrying great significance in Flaubert’s work.

Janine is not allowed to stay and continue her work and is instead taken by disease (although it can be surmised that this had much to do with the death of her dear friend Michael). Like Benjamin’s angel of history, she too is rendered weak and overcome, losing that which she was so deeply invested in. On the other hand, does this angelic character not transcend her earthly bonds? Is she not to be joined in death with the two dead scholars whom she so deeply admired? Does she not return to the dust (similar in form and theme to Flaubert’s sand) of the world, free to haunt the living like so many histories lost and found in the past by authors like Sebald?

There is another angel that finds his way into this work, if only through hints and brief allusions: the archangel Michael. At least three “Michaels” appear in *The Rings of Saturn*, (one time Michael simply appears as a middle name) and each time the “Michael” character seems to carry inexplicable significance. The Archangel Michael’s duties included rescuing “the souls of the faithful from the power of the enemy, especially at the hour of death,” to be the “champion of the Jewish people,” and “to call away from Earth and bring men’s souls to judgment.” He is also attributed with hiding the tomb of Moses from the devil, and with guarding the body of Eve (Holweck). The biblical figure of Michael is clearly associated with death and one dogmatic interpretation of the soul’s journey to the afterlife, as well as the protection of the dead. Sebald’s pointed reference to this figure reveals his contemplative fascination with the possibility, if not necessity, of metaphysical redemption.

Angels also figure prominently in Sebald's first work of narrative prose, *Vertigo*.

While traveling through Italy, the narrator spends some time studying the frescoes in an old chapel. His observations evoke powerful emotions:

I was overwhelmed by the silent lament of the angels, who have kept their station above our endless calamities for nigh on seven centuries. Their lament resounded in the very silence of the chapel and their eyebrows were drawn so far together in their grief that one might have supposed them blindfolded. And are not their white wings, I thought, with those few bright green touches of Veronese earth, the most wondrous of all the things we have ever conceived of?(*Vertigo* 84)

Three pictures of the pained angels accompany this passage. While it might initially seem that the angels serve no pragmatic purpose, and are simply another broken vestige of a decaying religious tradition, in actuality they successfully do what Sebald thinks humans have failed to do. They mourn and they grieve.

This moment in the chapel, though clearly significant and emotionally charged, is brief, and the narrator continues on his travels. After losing his way in the city, attempting to outrun possible thugs, and trying to explain why he needs a new passport, he experiences a sort of existential crisis. Shortly after receiving his new passport, he experiences a frightening lapse in memory, and cannot remember where he is. He even entertains the possibility that this memory loss may have been caused by his own death: "I was unable even to determine whether I was in the land of the living or already in another place" (115). Fits of vertigo overtake him. A dark shadow seems to fall upon the city of Milan, and people walking look "as though they were hastening toward their doom" (116). The mood of this passage is parallel with the narrator's affective experience of trauma: suffocating and ominous.

Recovering himself, the narrator takes a train back to Verona, where he stays at a comforting Inn and is treated courteously. No one asks for his passport here, and he registers under a pseudonym. He is finally able to rest: “That night under the roof of the Golden Dove, I felt safe as if under the wing of a bird whose plumage I saw in the finest shades of brown and brick-red, a well-nigh miraculous reprieve [...]” (*Vertigo* 117). His identity (or lack thereof) seems not to matter; he is treated kindly despite his visitor status. In this example, the inn takes on the protective, angelic qualities often attributed to visions of heaven. This brief interaction illustrates the theme of redemption through small, interpersonal acts of human kindness, or “neighborly love”.

Neighborly love is at once the most subtle and the most powerful redemptive hope in Sebald’s works. While the Sebaldian narrator spends much of his time either alone, among people he dislikes, or engaging with the dead, he occasionally makes meaningful connections with living people. During one such encounter, the narrator so enjoys the company of a fellow human being that he wishes the moment would go on forever: “So we spent the quarter of an hour to Harleston sitting side by side in the cab of his truck, and I wished that the short drive through the country would never come to an end, that we could go on and on, all the way to Jerusalem” (*Rings* 249). Although Sebald’s narrators often remain disconnected from other people, in this instance the Sebaldian narrator experiences a deep, meaningful connection with another person. This connection is based on a mutual appreciation of art and the promise of a realm beyond the mundane.

Santner suggests that neighborly love could be the solution to the endless cycle of patriarchal violent succession. Santner’s analysis of Walter Benjamin suggests that the only way to foster creativity in the areas of social interaction, politics, and ethics is to interrupt this cycle

(86). According to Santner, neighborly love has the power to interrupt the state of creatureliness that often traps the human spirit. For Santner, the “saturnine gaze” (the act of empathetic witnessing) is not enough, though it is a necessary component to interrupt human creatureliness. Melancholy contemplation must be matched with action. Santner refers to this required action as “ethicopolitical intervention” and “awakening to the neighbor, to acts of neighbor love” (91). Neighborly love has the power to release humans from their undead state, a state in which they, constrained by the “juridicopolitical order,” act like lifeless loveless automatons (120).

Neighborly love, if it is to be effective, must be enacted upon on an individual basis rather than on a massive level. Santner turns to Franz Rosenzweig, a Jewish philosopher and theologian, to explain the fundamentals of this phenomenon: “Rosenzweig has characterized such an intervention as the *Beeslung*, or “ensoulment,” of the creature by acts of neighbor-love—small miracles, as it were, performed *one by one*, moving from one neighbor to the next (rather than by way of a love directed immediately to *all* humankind)” (206-207). The person who has lost his or her soul to the machine, so to speak, regains it through individual acts and meaningful encounters with other individuals. These interactions are deemed “miracles”. The American Heritage Dictionary defines “miracle” as “An event that appears inexplicable by the laws of nature, held to be supernatural in origin or an act of God.” Therefore, the use of the word “miracle” has metaphysical implications; these interpersonal interactions become divine interventions loosening the grip of creatureliness.

If social theorist Avery F. Gordon is correct and haunting is a phenomenon born of social injustice and repression, then perhaps Santner’s solution to the entrapment of creatureliness could be applied with effect to hauntings. The Santner formula, melancholy witnessing and acts of neighborly love, could lay ghosts to rest and prevent future hauntings. This first requires

giving ghosts their due recognition and a voice that has previously been denied them for various political and social reasons. The solution further requires active engagement among human beings cognizant and defiant of the ways their behaviors are constrained and manipulated by the juridicopolitical system. They must also find ways to forge meaningful connections with others despite every obstructive hindrance.

Santner describes Sebald's web-like writing as "learned play". I hesitate to call it "play," because he approaches his task with a grave countenance and deep sense of responsibility. Yet Santner's observation that his prose "may be our best hope of advancing this project" of disrupting or suspending the "dimension of law that [...] renders him or her [the subject] creaturely" (95) points again to the idea of redemption and of the re-instilling, or perhaps reimagining, some form of hope for humanity in the post-Holocaust world.

Conclusion

The *Rings of Saturn* ends with this passage:

And Sir Thomas Browne [...] remarks [...] that in the Holland of his time it was customary, in a home where there had been a death, to drape black mourning ribbons over all the mirrors and all canvasses depicting landscapes or people or the fruits of the field, so that the soul, as it left the body, would not be distracted on its final journey, either by a reflection of itself or by a last glimpse of the land now being lost forever (296).

Sebald's works have been described in many different ways as scholars ponder how to classify them. Perhaps they are so difficult to classify not simply because they defy the traditional limits of genre, but because they fulfill a function that has long been neglected. They are the mourning ribbons.

The despair experienced by scholars and artists like Sebald is no surprise given the gravity of their task. Sebald—a modern-day Charon—rows the metaphorical boat back and forth between this world and the next, constantly performing a dance juxtaposing trauma and transcendence. He is haunted; he speaks with ghosts; he is a harbinger of mourning and of redemption. Sebald continues to weave these texts (just as the artists in his prose narratives create paintings, or build miniature Jerusalem temples) in spite of the melancholy and paralysis that threaten at times to overwhelm him, in spite of a dispassionate future that will surely devour all trace of his work (As Sebald expert Mark R. McCulloh points out, Sebald “pursues his art in spite of a terminal prospect that will ultimately confront our planet and solar system” [*Destruction* 395]). Sebald’s primary mission, his commitment, is to engender a more complete, comprehensive remembrance and mourning of those who have been taken violently before their time. If this hopeful redemption can be found in Sebald’s creative works, it will be through the plodding work of his self-doubting saturnine pilgrims: his narrators and the other artists and scholars he portrays.

Despite my desire to wrap this analysis up in a neat and tidy package, there can be no complete finality. I echo Sebald’s sentiments and readily acknowledge that we simply cannot know everything, and that it would be foolish to try. There is no way of knowing with any certainty what Sebald truly intended or believed, just as Sebald had to accept not knowing if anything exists beyond death, or whether or not redemption and transcendence are truly possible. Instead, we are challenged to follow Malachio, a philosophical Venetian boatman the narrator of *Vertigo* meets in a bar:

Malachio told me that he had been giving a great deal of thought to the resurrection, and was pondering what the Book of Ezekiel could mean by saying that our bones and flesh

would be carried into the domain of the prophet. He had no answers, but believed the questions were quite sufficient for him (62).

In the end, Sebald leaves scholars to contemplate puzzles that cannot be solved and questions perhaps best asked rather than answered. The Sebaldian scholar is left to dream, to mourn, to haphazardly follow seemingly connected strands of webbed thoughts and earthbound histories Sebald could neither name nor define. The answers to these questions matter less than the asking of the questions and the lively conversation that such questions provoke. Sebald has reintroduced metaphysics in literature as a topic worthy of scholarly discussion, simultaneously challenging and incorporating ethics, history, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and various other disciplines.

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