ON FOOT – A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF GAO XINGJIAN'S *SOUL MOUNTAIN* AND W. G. SEBALD'S *THE RINGS OF SATURN*

by

XIAOYAN LIU

(Under the Direction of Thomas Cerbu)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores contemporary walking narratives – formally organized around and guided by journeys on foot – in order to consider the deeply-rooted literary, aesthetic, and ethical relationships among practices of walking, thinking, and writing. By contemplating the ways in which contemporary authors re-imagine the walking narrative as a physically embodied and historically embedded site of spatial and social practices, this project endeavors to probe into walking as the most obvious way in which we encounter the world. Walking narratives challenge readers to reflect upon the intimacies and intricacies of perspective, pace, paths, and purpose, thereby destabilizing familiar conceptualizations of geographic, perceptual, and historical knowledge. This project examines how the chosen texts – Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* and W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* – engage with interdisciplinary questions of movement, space, personal identity, and the philosophy of history. Situating these two works within the emerging critical field of walking studies, I argue that contemporary walking narratives become textual testing grounds for practices of wandering and wondering, open new routes through which to encounter landscape and literature, and illuminate new points of entry into past and present, world and word.

INDEX WORDS: Gao Xingjian, *Soul Mountain*, W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, Walking, Space, Identity, Memory

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M.A., University of Georgia, 2015

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2023

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the immense support and guidance of my major advisor, Dr. Thomas Cerbu. Along my PhD journey, Dr. Cerbu has encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone and set a clear path for me toward embracing a wider world of wonder. Throughout the process of writing my dissertation, the tremendous help that he offered me – from general advice on understanding my source materials to meticulous corrections by hand on my drafts, and from innovative ideas that provoked my thinking to timely rescue when my writing practice became derailed – exceeded my expectations on many levels. Dr. Cerbu's unsurpassed intellect and uncompromising integrity – rare qualities often lost in today's world – have been and will always be a beacon of light in my life.

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to my committee members, Drs. Joel Black and Hyangsoon Yi, for their continuous support and encouragement during my PhD study. I have benefited significantly from Dr. Black's expertise in Western literature and insightful comments on my work. Dr. Yi has offered me thoughtful, thorough, and immediate support on so many occasions that I can barely count. I must express my appreciation as well to Dr. Chung-min Tu at the University of Delaware, whose wit and kindness have enriched my life, both personal and professional. My special thanks goes to my editor, Dr. Connor Fisher, who has graciously tolerated my procrastination and given me valuable suggestions for improving my writing and research. I am particularly grateful for my friends in this department – Becky Sexton, Chuan-haur Liu, Meltem Şafak, Tuan Jung Chang, Xuan Wang, and Zhiwen Hu – with whom I have shared these years of study and research. I am also appreciative of Qianru Li at the University of

California, Irvine, who is as dear to me as a sister. All the moments that we have shared – dreams and wishes, laughter and tears – helped me get through the toughest phase of my life.

I have been very blessed with my wonderful parents, Jian Liu and Ping Yan. Everything that I have achieved so far would not have happened without their boundless love and unconditional support. As a sent-down youth who was exiled to the countryside and worked hard manual labor from 1968-1976, my father has exemplified incredible fortitude and resilience upon the unfair twist of fate that life thrust upon him. As a parent, not only has he striven in every possible way to provide me with all that a child could have ever hoped for, but he also ignited my passion for literature and music: a treasure house that has served as the greatest source of inspiration and empowerment for me. My mother, having a rare combination of beauty and kindness, has made enormous sacrifices to ensure my comfort and happiness. By her actions instead of words, she has also shown me how to live a life of independence and positivity as a woman. I have also been particularly fortunate for having my uncle and aunt, Jiacheng Zhou and Qi Liu, who have provided me a loving home in the States so that I have not felt one moment of loneliness as many international students did. They have cared for me so much as if I were still the sniveling four-year-old who bid them farewell upon their departure from China to pursue their American dream over three decades ago. Their endurance in challenging times and excellence in their achievements have constantly motivated me to go forward.

Last but not least, I owe a heartfelt appreciation to my husband, Mingming Gao. During our fifteen years together, you have never failed to be my source of strength. I cannot thank you enough for always listening, for tolerating my immaturity, and for making great sacrifices to support the family, particularly while we were living far apart in the past five years. The picture

of us walking by the moonlit Xuanwu lake when we first met is still fresh in my mind, and I look forward to walking with you toward the next chapter of our life together.

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# Introduction

## A Preamble

### I. A Personal Matter

Paradoxically, the moment I set my foot on this dissertation journey with the topic of walking literature coincided with the home confinement during the nationwide coronavirus lockdown. Rewinding time to March 2020, I remember that I spent most of my time sitting alone at my desk, fingers poised over the keyboard, and waiting desperately for one more line to appear on the screen. The boredom and agony lasted for months, until a spontaneous walk unexpectedly changed everything and became a breeding ground for my thoughts, which eventually gave form to this study. One late afternoon, I took a short stroll along a footpath near a quiet wood behind my apartment building. The formerly mundane landscape struck me as so extraordinary that it mended my broken pandemic brain. Walking on and on, I breathed in deeply, feeling utterly in tune with nature. And this was when things began to change and shift.

After a while, the shadows became longer, and night started to fall. The wood turned dark and darker, and came alive – but in a disconcerting way that contrasted its idyllic, lushly green self in the daytime. As I kept walking deeper in the wood, I felt an enormous sense of alienation from my environment and started trying to locate myself within this new and entirely unfamiliar territory. My eyes sought to penetrate the unbroken darkness but failed to keep a sense of perspective. My ears, along with a seemingly enhanced sense of hearing, attempted to make sense of every little noise they encountered. The serene, immense nature that I had thought I should willingly embrace left me feeling nothing but uncertain and unfamiliar. Only then did I

realize that my previous romanticized notion of being one with nature had been challenged and turned into a much more complex one. To me, the wood acquired a new meaning that night. It was transformed into a place of inexplicable shadows and noises; it had energized my senses and exhilarated my thoughts and imagination, forcing me to question that which I had considered unquestionable.

## II. Walking, Thinking, and Writing

In this way, my improvisational walk through the wood during the pandemic brought one of the most underexplored activities, walking, to my attention. As a means to move through and encounter the world, walking has not been regarded as an important object of scrutiny.[1] The British novelist Geoff Nicholson remarks that walking is generally understood as the "most ordinary, natural, ubiquitous activity."[2] The cultural historian Joseph A. Amato echoes this characterization in his chronicle of the history of walking, "walking is taken to be mundane, ordinary, pedestrian, […] and thus in all ways worthy of being overlooked."[3] Not only does walking as a physical movement remain less observed in our daily life, its associated reflection

[1] The notion of walking has been explored by a number of authors over the last three decades, with various focuses. The existing scholarship fundamentally falls into three types of approaches. First, literary studies of walking, which initiated the scholarly interest in this theme in the 1990s, have mainly focused on a poetics of writing as part of a "Romantic tradition," from William Wordsworth to the twentieth century. See especially Jeffrey C. Robinson, *The Walk: Notes on a Romantic Image* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989). Roger Gilbert, *Walks in the World: Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). Anne D. Wallace, *Walking, Literature, and English Culture: The Origins and Uses of Peripatetic in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Robin Jarvis, *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1997). Second, cultural studies of walking rose to prominence in the 2000s, through books with a broader focus on the history and imagination of the act of walking. See especially Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Viking Press, 2000). Joseph A. Amato, *On Foot: A History of Walking* (New York: New York University Press, 2004). Geoff Nicholson, *The Lost Art of Walking: The History, Science, Philosophy, and Literature of Pedestrianism* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008). Frédéric Gros, *A Philosophy of Walking*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 2014). Third, a collection of influential essays that have considered the topic from a more theoretical or philosophical perspective. See especially Walter Benjamin, "The Flâneur," *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1973), 35-66. Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 91-110.

[2] Nicholson, *The Lost Art of Walking*, 61.

[3] Amato, *On Foot*, 3.

and representation, as the literary scholar Anne D. Wallace points out, also vanish from the reader's scope of attention "because it is too common to notice."[4] She continues, "[t]he extended meanings of 'pedestrian' – boring, commonplace, unimportant – [which] express the famous contempt bred of familiarity" shed some light on the effacement of walking as a suitable subject for critical contemplation and study. While the relevance of the pedestrian action to a metaphorical and narrative structure has been acknowledged (such as how walking contributes to the exploration of the walker's surroundings, the recovery of their memories, and the enhancement of their creative expression), it is still unclear as to why walking, as a form of movement, stimulates one's perception, cognition, and the corresponding written narration.

To tackle the lack of thorough attention to walking, Rebecca Solnit offers an inspiring, thought-provoking study, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2000), that posits walking as an extraordinary act in need of critical reflection, artistic documentation, and even memorialization. Solnit commences her book by stating that walking – as both a physical and cultural activity – is "[t]he most obvious and the most obscure thing in the world."[5] The very quality of walking as straddling the boundary between everydayness and evasiveness stems from what Solnit calls "an odd consonance between internal and external passage,"[6] a way of representing walking and thinking as linked, even interdependent, phenomena. For Solnit, "[t]he rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking," a cerebral and sensual experience suggesting that "the mind is also a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it."[7] By use of perceptual and spatial metaphors, Solnit links the movement of the walking body (and the paths that feet may follow or help create) to the topography of the thinking mind in order to consider

[4] Wallace, *Walking, Literature, and English Culture*, 3.
[5] Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 3.
[6] Ibid., 5.
[7] Ibid., 5-6.

walking's "peculiar utility" for thinking and, more crucially, how the history of walking enables the history of thinking to be more "concrete – for the motions of the mind cannot be traced, but those of the feet can."[8] In such a manner, as a walker's "passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts," "the mind, the body, and the world are aligned" as if they were "three characters finally in conversation together" or "three notes suddenly making a chord."[9] Every walker thus becomes a potential thinker, and the practice of walking is thereby converted from a mundane activity to one of the most complicated, constructed, and extraordinary tools for thinking.

To further illuminate this inadequately examined subject, the following discussion aims to establish several distinguishing features of walking, not only in general terms as a mode of encountering the world but, more specifically, as "a form of consciousness-in-motion."[10] First and foremost, a walker's experience of his surroundings is a "*participatory* rather than *disinterested* one."[11] It has been broadly recognized that the utilization of modern mechanical methods of transportation would interpose a filter between the individual and the world he is moving through, diluting sounds, smells, and sensations of touch. The enhanced kinesthesia of the pedestrian experience, on the other hand, compensates for this impoverishment of sense, for the walker remains "in constant sensuous contact with the environment and [is] entirely responsible via voluntary movements of the limbs for what [he] perceive[s] of the surroundings."[12] More importantly, the continual motion and various levels of physical exertion required during a walk enables a pedestrian to achieve a view that is of "a slowly but

[8] Ibid., 6.
[9] Ibid., 5.
[10] Jarvis, *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel*, 67.
[11] Ibid., 69 (Italics original).
[12] Ibid.

continuously changing field of appearances."[13] Eric Leed describes this continuation in a mathematical register as a "perceptual envelope" inhabited by the passenger, in which the only invariants in such a "flowing perceptual array" are the "aiming point" toward which the walker is heading (and from which objects of viewing emerge and grow in size as he approaches), and the "vanishing point" into which things dwindle in size and eventually disappear.[14] Given that most walks are undertaken at a moderate, steady pace, which provides the walker considerable freedom to stop, linger, look backward, and restart, the walker can observe and perceive the same landscape from various heights, distances, and perspectives as if they are experiencing an immense "perceptual envelope."[15]

Apart from keeping the walker attentive to the multiplicity and particularity of their actual surroundings, walking as a habitual movement requires a minimal occupation of the mind except the basic reflex movements of feet on the ground. The repetitive and rhythmic movements ideally allow the walker to purge his mind of the everyday clutter and achieve a state of mindfulness. Solnit remarks that "[w]alking itself is the intentional act closest to the unwilled rhythms of the body, to breathing and the beating of the heart. It strikes a delicate balance between working and idling, being and doing. It is a bodily labor that produces nothing but thoughts, experiences, arrivals."[16] Jarvis similarly proposes that on a long-distance walk, the "regular, alternating rhythm of right leg, left leg, can induce a hypnotically self-absorbed state, […] which one typically moves into and out of, and which can take the form of an irregular

[13] Ibid., 68.

[14] Eric Leed, *The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 75.

[15] For a walker, seeing an object from various perspectives avoids overlooking what is "equal" to them. Jarvis notes that walking is perhaps "the only kind of locomotion that puts us on equal terms with the world about us," for travelers on foot can re-adjust their sense of proportion between humanity and their wider surroundings. Unlike modern methods of transportation that tend to "make us lose sight of our relative importance," walking precludes our "illusion of the personal mastery of space" (Jarvis, 69).

[16] Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 5.

mental play – the wandering of reverie, or the re-presentation to consciousness of what has been seen and felt – as well as more abstruse forms of introspection and concentrated creative thought."[17] In Gilbert's words, a walk can thus be undertaken "as much for meditation as for observation; the rhythm of the walk ideally produces an easy and harmonious alternation between thought and perception, self-consciousness and the consciousness of a world beyond the self."[18]

Interestingly, while a walker's steady pace with rhythmic strides proves conducive to prompting a mental departure – whether meditation, imagination, or even reverie – a walker's thinking can precede his walk as much as it proceeds from it. To be specific, the walker's immediate physical experience is invariably mediated by a variety of prior mentalities and representations of walking. As Robinson states, the walker, who "often encounter[s] everything fresh, is an innocent"; yet, he concurrently "comes to experience not innocently but full of knowledge and opinions, as a maker of judgments."[19] For Robinson, in an attempt to "[reach] out to the world in time" along with his movement through space, the walker's thoughts generated "belong to me in my solitude but also to me as part of an historical community."[20] In furtherance of Robinson's regard for the "historical, time-rich" dimension in one's receptivity to landscape, Solnit, in a reference to the history of Christianity, claims that "to move through the same space the same way is a means of becoming the same person, thinking the same thoughts."[21] For Solnit, "A path is a prior interpretation of the best way to traverse a landscape, and to follow a route is to accept an interpretation, or to stalk your predecessors on it as scholars and trackers

[17] Jarvis, *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel*, 68.
[18] Gilbert, *Walks in the World*, 10.
[19] Robinson, *The Walk*, 5.
[20] Ibid., 4, 5.
[21] Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 68.

and pilgrims do."[22] In this light, walking on an established route enables the walker to enter into a close proximity – spatial and psychological – to his predecessors, who are bound to him by their shared endeavor of walking. Seen in this light, walking challenges the stable boundary of the self and the dualism of past and present in favor of a thorough understanding of the (re)configuration of the self and the world. It should not escape our notice that retracing a route does not necessarily denote accepting a prior interpretation, but rather indicates an engagement with, or intervention in, a rich history of cultural meanings and sensibilities embedded in the space.

It is of critical importance to understand that to view walking primarily as a catalyst for mental excitation threatens to impoverish our understanding of the complex relation between these two thoroughly entwined acts, as the walker's "mental effects of passage […] are inseparable from the physical conditions of movement through space."[23] Gilbert underscores the point of "coordinating thinking with the real-time action of the walk": thinking "always takes place within the *context* of the walk. The particulars of time, place, weather, and landscape *continually* inform the walker's consciousness, stimulating thoughts and associations which might not otherwise have arisen. A kind of fluid oscillation between external objects and inward

[22] Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 68. In the fifth chapter of her book *Wanderlust*, "Labyrinths and Cadillacs: Walking into the Realm of the Symbolic," Solnit references a memorizing skill, "memory palace" or "method of loci," which was adopted in ancient Roman and Greek rhetorical training. Citing the historian Frances Yates' *The Art of Memory*, Solnit relates that to practice this memorization technique, the first step is to imprint on one's memory the layout of a certain space that contains several discrete loci. When attempting to remember a set of items, one "walks" through those loci in their mind and commits an item to each locus by forming an image between the item and any feature of that locus. Afterward, the items can be retrieved by walking through loci in actual space, activating the memory associated with the desired items. See Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge, 1966), 18. Solnit calls walking a strategy of memorialization by illuminating their mutually-constitutive relationship: "Memory, like the mind and time, is unimaginable without physical dimensions; to imagine it as a physical place is to make it into a landscape in which its contents are located, and what has location can be approached. […] [I]f memory is imagined as a real space – a place, theater, library – then the act of remembering is imagined as a real act, that is, as a physical act: as walking" (Solnit, 76-8). In this light, the place can function as an immense archive whose contents can be consulted, ordered, and composed into a memorial narrative through the strategic traversal of its physical spaces.

[23] Leed, *The Mind of the Traveler*, 72.

ideas and images may ensue, one whose very rapidity blurs the borderline between physical and mental experience."[24] In this sense, he proceeds, "[t]hinking is […] not a mastering of experience but a product of it, circumscribed by the temporal and spatial limitations of the [walking] body itself."[25] Without maintaining a temporal dimension to one's cognition, the specificity of thoughts emerging as the walker moves across space would be overlooked, and the disruptive potential of the unmediated experience would be flattened or neutralized. As Jarvis asserts, only by having the intellectual process grounded through the material practice of walking is the walker capable of "fostering resistance to any idealising aesthetic tendencies" he may start out with, and of "countering the generalising and abstracting mentality."[26]

While one's walk allows substantial flexibility in perspective, pace, and paths, guiding one to explore infinite cognitive possibilities, the walk itself as a physical activity must include a destination that marks its finiteness. However much a walker's mind may strive to summarize a collection of his encounters and experiences while on foot, the full shape of a walk cannot be categorized or conceptualized as a final image but as gesturing toward a "progressional ordering of reality."[27] A fascinating analogy to the particular sequence of the places that the walker traverses can be found in the Australian Aboriginal group's cultural tradition investigated by Bruce Chatwin (1940-1989) in his travelogue *The Songlines* (1987). Chatwin discovers that the

[24] Gilbert, *Walks in the World*, 11 (Italics mine).

[25] Ibid.

[26] Jarvis, *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel*, 69. Remarkably, the walker's tendency to divide bodily action and mental process while on foot is also common among readers of walking literature. In her discussion of the readership of walking literature in the Romantic period, Wallace comments on their "failing up" of overlooking "material practices of place and embodied engagement" – that is, "moving immediately from the material terms of the text into the immaterial, the ideological or psychological or whatever, and then staying in abstraction without closely examining the image or plot movement or other material representation which generated that extended meaning" (Wallace, 3). Coupled with such a displacement from physical experience to imagined reality, the walking itself would thus have been "dephysicalized into analogy and its material components separated from the intellectual and spiritual growth it 'stands for'" (Wallace, 61).

[27] Leed, *The Mind of the Traveler*, 73.

Aboriginals "could not imagine territory as a block of land hemmed in by frontiers: but rather as an interlocking network of 'lines' or 'ways through.'"[28] Identical to the songs by which their ancestors sung the world into existence in the Dreamtime, these lines must be ritually re-performed – "[a]lways in the correct sequence" – to prevent the land from dying.[29] For the Aboriginals, their destination suggests an elongated pedestrian itinerary. For the foot traveler in broader terms, they eventually arrive at a settled, bounded location at the end of their journey; yet, their mentality is governed by a complex, irreducible sequence of lines, which discourages the search for unity and completeness. Hence, "an acceptance, rather than transcendence, of change and difference" is most likely the purpose of the committed walker.[30]

In addition to demonstrating the dynamic and dialogic interchange between the journeying body and the thinking mind, the instance of songlines of Australia's aboriginal peoples is also of great value in illuminating the way in which landscape and narrative, walking and writing, are conflated. Whether traversing the hustle and bustle of a city or the tranquility of a countryside, walking tends to inscribe the body's passage onto place, leaving behind a graphic trail that can be followed and read after this body's passing. In his oft-cited essay, "Walking in the City," Michel de Certeau describes the cityscape (by extension, perhaps all types of landscape) "as a space of enunciation," in which the "art of 'turning' phrases finds an equivalent in an art of composing a path."[31] Seen from this perspective, walking becomes a kind of utterance, a proclamation of one's spatial practice that, if catalogued and transcribed, would comprise a literary engagement: a textual space that allows the self to be figured through a

[28] Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (New York: Viking, 1987), 62.
[29] Ibid., 64.
[30] Jarvis, *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel*, 70.
[31] Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 98, 100.

representation of the sites it traverses. Those fleeting moments of the walker's experience in the physical world can thus be captured and perpetuated in words.

## III. A Short Route through the Literature of Walking

Before proceeding further to the historical lineage of the subject of this dissertation, it is worth addressing the terminological confusion between walking narrative and travel literature in order to substantiate my choice of texts. Having extensively used the term "walking narrative," rather than "travel literature," in my previous discussion when introducing the framework for this study, one might wonder whether these two terms are interchangeable and if general scholarly familiarity with travel literature can throw light on the interpretation of the walking narrative, which has been studied with limited breadth and depth so far (especially in China). Travel literature, indeed, provides a major body of works that includes walking narratives, and so leads most readers and scholars to form an impression that these two categories are interchangeable. In my dissertation, I will refrain from using the term "travel literature" because literary works thematized by travel and by walking demand different standards for categorization and manners of appreciation.

The most important quality that separates walking narrative from travel literature is a spirit of freedom. Unlike the preset destination and itineraries implicit in travel, walking – whether a short stroll or a long excursion – liberates one from the pursuit of speed, terminus, and any facilitation when in progress.[32] Removed from the ordinary "telos" of walking, the walker experiences a temporary disconnection from their everyday life and even derives joy from transgressing established guidelines. For example, a walker may opt to follow an untrodden path or to linger at the crossroads of the known and the unknown, of excitement and fear. Moreover,

[32] In modern times the walker tends to utilize several means of transportation, for instance: train, bus, or bike. But the essential part of their spatial practice is still the act of walking.

walking does not necessarily mean being alone, but most walkers – at least the chosen writers in this study – seem to acquiesce that being alone is to avoid noise and the distraction of others in an effort not to compromise one's being.[33] Hence, the simplicity and purity of the act of walking brings about a disentanglement from society, which leaves the unoccupied mind of the walker open to whatever sights meet their eyes and provoke consequent mediations upon themselves and the world.

The walking narrative, in distinction from travel literature, develops its own unique and independent qualities. The spirit of freedom illuminates the pathways that the walkers embark upon, activates their thoughts and reflections, and inspires them to remember and write their life stories. It should be noted that walking narrative is deeply-rooted in both the Western and Eastern literary traditions, rather than being a transient literary flash in the pan. People's wonder toward the complex nature of the self and the world never diminishes, and their untiring walks never stop searching for answers. Motivated by the extant scholarship concerning walking and writing in postmodern literature, I attempt to reach far back to the origin of the walking narrative, to mark the course of its development, and to map a literary-historical landscape in order to better position and evaluate my chosen writers who come from different socio-cultural backgrounds

In line with the nature of walking, the cultural history of walking narratives remains incomplete and digressive in the West. Most scholars focus upon the Romantic period and leave the prior periods underexplored. A notable study of walking, Joseph Amato's *On Foot*, incorporates the research of his predecessors and provides a relatively complete picture of the cultural history of walking, including the epic heroes of early civilizations, medieval pilgrims,

[33] Walking alone does not mean being completely alone. There could be a few companions, on the condition that the walker can still retain his own pace, rhythm, and mind without adjusting himself to keep pace with the others.

Grand Tours of the Age of Enlightenment, Romantic Walkers, urban pedestrians of nineteenth-century European cities, and twentieth-century tourists. Such a broad survey accounts for the importance many scholars attach to the eighteenth century, in which walking is for the first time performed as a self-conscious cultural act.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the father of Continental Romanticism, acknowledges in *The Confessions* that his daily walks give structure and form to his thoughts. His *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* further substantiate this connection between walking and reflection by self-consciously associating memory and self-expression with his walking body through the traversal of place. In other words, Rousseau can be considered a figure at the beginning of recognizing and practicing walking as a conscious effort to stimulate the mind in engaging the landscape.[34] The intimacy or interpenetration of the external landscape and Rousseau's internal state situates his peripatetic wanderings on the threshold between the legacy of the Enlightenment, which emphasizes reasoning and philosophizing, and the Romantic ideal which is characterized by imagination and dream-like reveries.

As Romanticism progresses, this kind of passage "from outer to inner travelling" comes to instantiate a vital transformation or "watershed in the history of Romanticism [wherein the] imagination of the Hero had finally doubled back on itself," and the visions ultimately turn into "a purely internal landscape, or moonscape, the world of dreams."[35] When travelling on foot as an indispensable poetic mode of movement, the Romantic followers head toward a "sense of communion" with mother nature, an "elevated state of mind," and "a true way to experience self, nature, and truth as one."[36] Put another way, this perambulatory act serves to open up a portal

[34] Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 17.
[35] Richard Holmes, *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (New York: Viking Press, 1985), 236.
[36] Amato, *On Foot*, 103-4.

through which the past, a "simpler and more basic time" implicit in Rousseauian nostalgia,[37] can be evoked, encountered, and experienced. For instance, both William Wordsworth's crossing of widespread plains, mountains, and rivers in *The Prelude* and Thomas De Quincey's repetitive excursions through London's streets and alleys in his *Confessions of an Opium Eater* substantiate the point that walking is "a cultivating labour capable of renovating both the individual and his society by recollecting and expressing past value."[38] Across the Atlantic, Henry David Thoreau joins the European walkers and extols the value of the peripatetic that gives rise to self-transcendence or a rebirth of the self. Notably, although it has much in common with the European vision of walking, American walking is defined by an exuberant spirit of "undying adventure,"[39] a thirst for discovery, which deviates from what the European walkers long for: a recovery.

Whether returning with a healing soul or a renewed spirit, the Romantic walkers are able to cast their last glance to pre-industrial society, a utopian nature laden with longings for serenity and happiness. In the late nineteenth century, with the growth of industrial economy and the maturity of urban society, the dark and gloomy figure of the Benjaminian *flâneur* emerges. Somber and watchful, this figure is concerned less with the past than the here-and-now; the *flâneur* no longer watches the natural landscape but joins in the city spectacle. As a tribute to the Romantic pedestrians (Rousseau in particular), a *flâneur* is described as a man who "goes botanizing on the asphalt."[40] In spite of this shared mobility, the urban walker, no longer in solitude, roams about "in the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, the fleeting and infinite."[41]

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[37] Ibid, 123.
[38] Wallace, *Walking, Literature, and English Culture*, 11.
[39] Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," in *Collected Essays and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell (New York: Literary Classics, 2001), 235.
[40] Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Verso Books, 1997), 35.
[41] Ibid, 37.

In this sense, unlike the healing and uplifting force inherent within nature that leads one backwards to a simpler and purer state of living, the cityscape thrusts the urban walker into a gigantic and complex social web in the moment.

Considering the historical milieu of the time, the *flâneur* uses his critical eye to scrutinize the cityscape, and his walking body therefore bears a subversive potential in resisting the consumer capitalism which materializes and homogenizes people. In an effort to destabilize this dominant system that holds sway over people, the urban walker is motivated to free his mind from any fixed destinations and routes, to embrace every chance encounter and unexpected occurrence, and to move wherever his moving feet may lead. As a result, he may enter into a region that is unknown even to himself, in which his repressed thoughts can be evoked in this exchange between the external and internal. The co-existence of consciousness and subconsciousness, of reality and unreality in the urban walker, which is elicited by the subversive potential inherent in the walking body, calls forth their individual experiences and alternative representations of shared cultural experiences in which one can capture the moments of a dynamic and diverse city and gain freedom from their confined pigeonholes.

The discovery of the urban walkers' dreamy state, as discussed above, which they utilize to challenge their cultural and economic *status quo,* functions as an echo to the literary heritage of the Romantic tradition. However, it is hard to miss the fact that the *flâneur* hardly takes a firm stance against consumerist society. As with the urban walker himself, who is never "anchored in a place" and does not "hav[e] a defined social alliance,"[42] the exact connotation of *flâneur* remains fluid and elusive. Solnit perceives that the *flâneur* is an ambiguous figure who "visually consum[es] goods and women while resisting the speed of industrialization and the pressure to

[42] Amato, *On Foot*, 174.

produce."[43] Simultaneously resistant to and seduced by commercial culture, the *flâneur* finds his objects of observing alternately alluring and appalling. That is, the *flâneur* himself is at once attracted to and alienated from the spectacle of commercial culture. Such an ambivalent point of view, "a distinct optics of perception,"[44] paves new ways for the walker to dwell, discover, and describe within a city. Hence, the figure of the *flâneur* not only epitomizes modern urbanity and consumerist culture, but, more importantly, throws new light upon the aesthetic maneuvers that convert a physical space to a textual space and change a literal walk to a literary one. Although those urban walks seem to be tangential to the subject of this study, they are in fact at its center, for the figure of the *flâneur* contributes to refreshing and revolutionizing the mode of literary representation in terms of walking narratives. In this case, the practice of writing, as with the act of walking, functions "as operations on places."[45] Walker-writers "traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories," topographical and textual at once.[46] This invigorating kind of textual production not only thrives during the time of Benjamin but still remains in the literary engagements of the postmodern era.

Remarkably distinct from its western counterpart, the linked practice of walking and writing has a long pedigree in Chinese literature. For instance, among the ten major motifs classified in the Chinese poetic tradition, more than half associate thinking and reflection with space (historical ruins, hometown scenery, and natural landscape) as well as a body traversing real and unreal landscapes and past and present temporalities to retrieve them. Such an intimacy of walking body and thinking mind is entrenched in Chinese cultural beliefs – whether

[43] Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 200.
[44] Amato, *On Foot*, 174-5.
[45] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 94.
[46] Ibid, 88.

Confucianism, Taoism, or Buddhism – which urge the Chinese people to engage in a lifelong quest for harmony between human beings and the universe (by extension, heaven, earth, and nature).[47]

The other quality that characterizes the walking narrative in China is that the walker's engagement or resistance to his surroundings is energized by the distinction between the collective and the individual, instead of the dualism of reason and emotion embodied in the Western canon. When elaborating upon nostalgia in Chinese literature, Kafalas contrasts *Huaigu* with *Sixiang*, two major motifs of Chinese poetry, in order to argue that the former reflects a collective sentiment whereas the latter reflects an individual one.[48] In spite of the disputable nature of such a clear-cut dichotomy,[49] I value his effort to bring into the spotlight a dilemma between collective and individual which Chinese intellectuals struggle with. Specifically, the collective functions as a double-edged sword by providing inclusive security for the individuals within it but excluding individuals if their voice is deemed discordant. This also accounts for the lukewarm scholarly consideration of the significance of walking narratives in China, since freedom – as the core spirit of walking – is fundamentally at odds with the doctrines espoused by Confucianism (at all times) and Communism (after the civil war). Therefore, in this dissertation, I attempt to construct a lineage of the walking narrative in China in the hopes of bringing it out of the shadows.

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[47] The ten major motifs are *Xishi*惜时 (to cherish time), *Xiangsi*相思 (lovesickness), *Beiqiu*悲秋 (autumnal sadness), *Huaigu*怀古 (to mediate upon the ancient times), *Chuchu*出处 (involvement with or withdrawal from the society), *Chunhen*春恨 (spring grief), *Youxian*游仙 (to wander in the immortal dreamland), *Sixiang*思乡 (to long for one's home), *Shuli*黍离 (to cherish the memory of conquered motherland), and *Shengsi*生死 (life and death). See Wang Li, *Zhongguo gudai wenxue shi da zhuti – yuanxing yu liubian* 中國古代文學十大主題: 原型與流變 (Ten Major Themes and Variations in Classical Chinese Literature) (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, 1990).

[48] Philip Kafalas, *In Limpid Dream: Nostalgia and Zhang Dai's Reminiscences of the Ming* (Manchester: Camphor Press, 2007), 144.

[49] Taking inspiration but distinct from Kafalas' interpretation, I argue that both *Huaigu* and *Sixiang* register the collective significance.

Since the Six Dynasties period (220-589), the natural landscape has been introduced into the private sphere and employed as "a vast spatiotemporal edifice, imbued with moral/aesthetic overtones" that enriches manners of personal expression.[50] Tao Qian 陶潛, a major poet of his time, known as the literary precedent of *Tianyuan shi* 田園詩 (Fields and Gardens poetry), withdrew from the civil service and spent much of his life in the countryside, farming, reading, and writing in reclusion. Longing for a return to a pure state of living, Tao's poetry admires the simplicity and spontaneity embedded in nature and refutes any artificial restrictions that comprise one's being and writing. Xie Lingyun 謝靈運, Tao's contemporary, initiated another influential poetry movement, *Shanshui shi* 山水詩 (Mountains and Rivers poetry). After resigning from his post and returning to his family estate, Xie spent considerable time going on exploratory expeditions to the previously undeveloped South Mountain. When back in office, Xie was again enmeshed in factional intrigues, demoted, exiled again, and finally sentenced to death on the pretext of overthrowing the emperor. Xie's enthusiasm with which he traversed mountains and rivers, in a stark contrast to his lukewarm attitude to his duty at his post, betrays his desire for a social milieu as pure and harmonious as nature, cleansed of political battles, in which his value and talent can be recognized.

For both Tao and Xie, a conflict between the collective social reality and the realization of individual value fueled their persistent searches. Entangled with a complex dilemma between involvement with or withdrawal from society, an increasing number of official-writers in the Tang and Song dynasties (618-1279, collectively) tended to fixate their yearning gaze upon nature, in which one's self can stay intact and remain apart from the corrupted society. For

[50] Tuan Yi-fu, *Passing Strange and Wonderful: Aesthetics, Nature, and Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993), 174.

instance, a group of prose writers known as *Tangsong badajia* 唐宋八大家 (Eight Masters of the Tang and Song) set about their excursions and trips on foot with a heightened consciousness of their surroundings onto which they projected a wishful image for a utopian society.

Another point that merits our immediate attention is that the "personal" aspect of writing in my discussion of walking narratives of the Six, Tang, and Song dynasties differs in focus from what I intend by the "personal" aspect in this study. Specifically, the former is defined in accordance with Confucian values that stress the social aspects – ethical or moral – of a person. In contrast, the latter refers to the natural state of an individual, a self-governed existence that is independent of any collective values. The earliest stirrings in terms of such an individualized expression occur at the end of Song dynasty, but the theme only achieves full maturity four centuries later in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Ascribed to the declining appeal of the pursuit of holding government office and the growing interest in personal leisure along with a booming economy, the Ming walker-writers fled from the world of politics and returned to the personal domain by tracing the footsteps of their literary predecessors. More importantly, they represented their objects of writing in a highly personalized fashion. Represented by the *Gongan* 公安school founded by the Yuan brothers,[51] writers at the time held firm beliefs in *xingling* 性靈 (the innate sensibility) and *xin* 心 (heart-mind), an individual's most genuine and spontaneous nature, in order to disentangle themselves from established conventions and collective values. Motivated by such an espousal of spontaneity, creativity, and individuality, the walker-writers of the *Gongan* school engaged with urban and natural landscapes for self-discovery instead of repeating the tradition of the cultural collective.

[51] The Yuan brothers are Yuan Zongdao 袁宗道, Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道, and Yuan Zhongdao 袁中道.

After a period of silence due to cultural repression and literary censorship during the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), the walking narrative experiences a remarkable revival at the dawn of the twentieth century. Specifically, the genre is energized by a literary revolution inspired by the May Fourth Movement. In addition to inheriting the quintessential features of the late Ming legacy – that is, a highly individualized representation of space free of collective significance – the physical walk is developed into an aesthetic imperative, namely, a textual form of wandering. In Zhou Zuoren's 周作人essays, for instance, it seems as if he is fascinated with the local culture and landscape in his memorial writings; however, he dispenses with any explicit points of departure, destination, and routes in his textual wanderings, and instead weaves a tapestry of his life in a digressive and associative fashion. With no sequence or causality written into the narrative, this kind of textual space allows individuals to form a system of meaning in their own right. Hence, the practice of walking, in topographical and textual spaces, embodies a palpable desire for freedom. This spirit is carried forward and exerts a salutary influence upon writers during times of crisis, especially during those political upheavals and social changes after the civil war.

IV. A Comparatist Walk

Whether browsing the history of walking narratives in general or examining those milestone works that mark the course of its development, one could hardly miss the similarities, differences, and developments across Eastern and Western cultures, and from premodern to postmodern times. First, in both the West and China, the practice of walking allows the writer a chance for freedom in pursuing a full realization of their individuality. However, the connotation of freedom varies according to different cultural milieus. In the West, freedom in the Romantic period refers to one's liberated subjectivity, for instance, the heightened concern for the

components of an individual's personality that are emotional, irrational, imaginative, and spontaneous. The effort of espousing freedom thus seeks to oppose the dominant culture from the age of Enlightenment, which prefers reason to emotion and feelings.

In distinction to the waxing and waning concern for one's subjectivity in Western culture, emotion and feelings are always the center of attention in Chinese literature. Due to the historically controlled manner of emotional demonstration advocated by authoritative doctrines, however, it is only until the period of late Ming,[52] with thriving new schools of thought and the decline of Confucianism, that writers have the chance to give free rein to their individual voices independent of the cultural collective. The cult of *qing* 情 (affection), the celebration of obsession, and an appreciation of strangeness to a pathological level are all cases in point. In this light, the potential freedom that walker-writers acquire via their literal and literary walks disengages them from the moral principles and ethical norms set by the authority of their time (be it Confucianism or Communism), which establishes itself at the cost of the development of one's individuality to the fullest. This subversive potential of walking also accounts for the lack of scholarly attention to walking narratives in China even today, because it may pose a threat to collective-oriented values and tradition-directed conformity.

During the twentieth century, both the West and China experience a return to an earlier time, namely, the Romantic period in the West and the late Ming period of China.[53] Within this cyclic reversal of "ricorso," Giambattista Vico denies the progressive and linear development of human history and civilization and reorients us to a point from which we can discern the world

[52] The period of late Ming usually refers to a range from the late sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century.

[53] The Romantic period in the West ranges from the late eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. As for China, literary critics have yet to reach an agreement in terms of the periodization of the Romantic period since the Romantic spirit runs through Chinese literature from the start. Be that as it may, the literary works embodying a Romantic spirit only reach a peak, reflected by breakthroughs of both quality and quantity, in the late Ming period.

differently.[54] In the literary field, the legacy of Romanticism to which the writers usually resort – such as its attention to and appreciation of space, emphasis on individual subjectivity, and refusal of singularity and totalization – is inherited by and developed in postmodern walking narratives. In both periods, the walking narrative comes to be a physically embodied, emotionally charged, and historically embedded testing ground of spatial and social practices, in which readers and scholars are encouraged to break free of their fixed perspectives and to see this world anew.

Notably, however, apart from the similarities that are shared by postmodern and Romantic walker-writers, the twentieth-century return comes with a difference. Across the centuries, walking is conceived of as a treatment for the walkers who are frustrated by reality in order to attend to their confused and wounded selves in times of crisis. However, the significance of walking practice varies dramatically from time to time. In the early modern period, the landscape often provides the walker with a solution to their inner turmoil: specifically, a restorative force and nourishing power that brings about a transformed self. The topographical features – specific characteristics of the landscape in particular – are mostly preserved in their walking narratives.

With the multiplied means of transportation and the consequently expanding space of human activity, the topographical features in the postmodern era surprisingly appear far less distinct and more homogeneous. During their labyrinthine walks, walkers tend to focus instead upon their own inner thoughts, rather than the outer world. Therefore, the landscape in their walking narratives is converted into an ever-changing entity subject to the narrator's individualized experience. Figuratively speaking, the landscape becomes an empty vessel suffused with the writers' experience of loss, displacement, and trauma. No longer serving to

[54] Giambattista Vico, "*The New Science*," in *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, ed. Thomas G. Bergin and Max H. Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1948).

ameliorate the sense of loss or to direct one's footsteps home, as walking did in the early modern period, the postmodern walk becomes a conscious endeavor to "resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen wounds of loss."[55] This Freudian death drive represents a firm stance that those postmodern walkers take in resisting the oblivion of past trauma and in refusing to reconcile with those held responsible for that suffering. In broad terms, the Romantic walkers tend to reconcile themselves to the reality in their walking narratives through dream-like reminiscences or reveries; on the contrary, the postmodern walkers choose to fight the traumas of their reality head-on.

V. Chapters Summary

This dissertation offers a comparative study of two contemporary walking narratives: Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* and W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*. Gao Xingjian's novel *Soul Mountain* was written in the aftermath of the repressive social and cultural milieu of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).[56] When the revolution came to an end, Gao experienced a succession of setbacks in his professional and personal life: his published works came under political persecution, his writing career grew stagnant after having been categorized as that of a "root-seeking" writer,[57] and he received a false diagnosis of lung cancer. It is under these circumstances that Gao was driven to escape the modern city and see the world anew. Gao described the route of his journey by stating, "I made three trips to the Yangtze River during 1983 and 1984. […] I have wandered along the Yangtze, from the giant panda reserve that is the

[55] Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), xi.

[56] After Mao's death and the arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976, the Cultural Revolution came to an end. However, its impact still lingered during the 1980s and 1990s. In addition to the deaths and killings, the revolution caused irremediable damage to Chinese culture and people's mentality.

[57] The literary school of "root-seeking" in the 1980s gains inspiration from the cultural heritage of China (mostly Confucianism). Gao does not favor this ideal that the once glorious civilization can provide a solution to people's mental crisis after the Cultural Revolution, and so looks for a breakthrough in his writing.

home of the Qiang people right down to where it meets the China Sea, and from folk customs and practices I have returned to urban life."[58] *Soul Mountain* thus assumes an autobiographical dimension, for it was based on the experience of the writer's trek, which began in the forests of Sichuan province and continued along the Yangtze River to China's eastern coast. Unlike sightseeing tourists, who generally cast their eyes on well-known places of interest, the curious narrator in Gao's novel advanced to geographically remote and culturally marginalized regions in order to investigate cultural customs and practices that had been threatened with extinction.

In Gao's walking narrative, journeys in quest of Soul Mountain – a mysterious place sought both literally and metaphorically – are undertaken by two agents, indicated by the alternating pronouns "I" and "you." Chapter one provides a thorough examination of the I-narrator's ethnographic investigation in hopes of salvaging remnants of vanishing cultures, as he visits primitive forests, minority ethnic communities, rural fringes of Han Chinese people, religious sanctuaries, and historical sites. The pedestrian perspective allows Gao's narrator not only to encounter cultural traditions and customs on the brink of extinction due to political oppression and economic force, but also to maintain an ongoing interaction with the space he traverses, which opens for him a multitude of pathways to understand the world. Unlike the I-narrator, who trudges through the real world, the you-character wanders around in an extraordinary dreamscape. Chapter two in turn focuses on discussing the you-character's nostalgic ramblings in search of his childhood home and a succession of allegorical adventures across the dark forest, the "River of Forgetting," and the icy mountain (alluding respectively to political oppression in reality, an imagined life beyond death, and a settlement in a foreign country). These uncanny moments shed light on the you-character's internal existential state,

[58] Gao Xingjian, "Literature and Metaphysics: About Soul Mountain," *The Case for Literature*, trans. Mabel Lee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 103.

which would otherwise be untraceable and undefinable. The subject under scrutiny in chapter three is Gao's metafictional technique in *Soul Mountain*. Given the journey's ethnographic nature, the you-character and his female walking companion, the she-character, retrieve and retell a mass of folklore, cultural myths, historical legends, and personal anecdotes throughout the novel. Despite their engagement in exchanging stories and experiences, neither of them offers a coherent and conclusive account at the end. It can be seen that Gao attempts to contend with the conventional view of storytelling, which requires stories to be told in accordance with cultural and historical significance, and celebrates the value of each individual's free will and their distinct voice, although these voices may be competing, discordant, and sometimes contradictory. Chapter four tackles the most prominent feature of the novel – the writer replaces a single protagonist with varied pronouns "I," "you," "he," and "she," each of which is characteristic of their own history and experiences. Speaking either in soliloquies or dialogues, the dynamic among pronouns prompts refreshing points of view that allow readers to scrutinize diverse dimensions of human subjectivity. Importantly, Gao's innovative use of pronouns as protagonists moves beyond the simple focus on the differentiation of multiple dimensions of personhood through self-splitting. Rather, it offers considerable flexibility in investigating the ambiguity, fluidity, and relativity of human subjectivity in negotiating and struggling with society.

Based on the profound influence – either of sensibilities, such as the "self-obsession and self-celebration,"[59] prevailing in premodern China or of the quest motif of European traditions – readers are tempted to regard Gao's *Soul Mountain* as a contemporary revival of traditional walking accounts. However, Soul Mountain itself, which sets the trips of Gao's protagonist in

[59] Mabel Lee, "Gao Xingjian's Fiction in the Context of Chinese Intellectual and Literary History," *Literary & Aesthetics*, Vol. 16, Issue. 1 (July 2006), 11.

motion, seems to remain unattainable in the end. The unattainable pinnacle contrasts both the pure nature in Rousseau's *Reveries*, which is uncontaminated by industrialization, and also the cultural community of like-minded people longed for by the late-Ming intellectuals during socio-political turmoil. As will be elaborated in the following chapters, the object of desire keeps eluding the desiring subject whenever the latter comes near in both the protagonist's geographical and psychological adventures. Notably, this elusion takes place at the same time that the walker's footsteps are led in a multiplicity of pathways. In this light, Soul Mountain does not necessarily denote an actual place of belonging or a readily graspable idea. Rather, it may exist vacillating between an elusive sense of fulfillment and unrealized longing. Such a wandering, nomadic quality of Gao's walk – and the non-unitary vision of the self and the world generated thereby – resonates strikingly with the Deleuzian concept of "nomadology" – a generative process of becoming which emerges as a productive, paradoxical engagement of territorializing and deterritorializing assemblages that gives rise to new expanses of thinking.[60] Walking, thinking, and writing with this in mind, Gao not only takes a firm stance against both the Communist legacy in the post-Mao period and deep-rooted Confucian values, but also unremittingly opens himself to "new possibilities with new interchanges and connectedness," by which he is empowered to preserve his individuality to the fullest and, hopefully, to reach the fabled and far-flung Soul Mountain.[61]

W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* depicts a walking tour through the coastal region of East Anglia in England. Walking and writing in the shadow of his Romantic predecessors,[62] who

[60] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Nomadology: The War Machine*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Semiotext, 1986), 351.

[61] Gao, Xingjian, *Cold Literature*, trans. Gilbert C. F. Fong and Mabel Lee (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2005), xl.

[62] Sebald's sympathy with the Romantic tradition can be traced in his own writing. In his essay on Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Sebald records his visit to Rousseau's island that is conceived of by Rousseau as a restorative paradise.

delighted in the solitude of, and intimacy with, landscapes as a temporary diversion from reality, Sebald's walker, however, roams across slowly decaying towns. In a manner reminiscent of Gao's efforts to collect folksongs and stories of bygone times in *Soul Mountain,* Sebald's walker takes upon himself a mission to salvage the material ruins of history – monuments, relics, and other objects – that constitute the obverse of modernity and its history of 'progress.' The empty, desolate landscape that Sebald's walker traverses guides him from a literal walk to a figurative one, during which past and present, reality and imagination, and self and world are interwoven into a web of connections across physical, historical, and psychological spaces. Thus, the meandering and dislocated narrative of Sebald's walk reads like "intricately digressive travelogues grounded in impressionistic memories and associations […] part dream sequence, part travelogue, part photo album, part memoir, part cultural-historical fantasy."[63]

Sebald's walker-narrator bears a striking resemblance to Walter Benjamin's "Angel of History," another backwards-turned figure. Caught between the past and the present, the angel is confronted with piles of wreckage at his feet and expects to "make whole what has been smashed" before turning away to the future.[64] Likewise, Sebald's walker attempts to make sense of the traces of endless destruction that he encounters during his walk in hopes of discerning the historical truth. Further, similar to the mixed expressions displayed on the angel's face – intense compassion and paralyzing estrangement – the mind of Sebald's walker experiences frequent vacillation between an "unaccustomed sense of freedom" and "paralyzing horror" due to his awareness of the "black and impenetrable maze" of the past (*RS,* 31).[65] Bearing this in mind,

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See W. G. Sebald, *A Place in the Country: On Gottfried Keller, Johann Peter Hebel, Robert Walser and Others*, trans. Jo Catling (London: Penguin Books), 2013.

[63] Mark Richard McCulloh, *Understanding W. G. Sebald* (Columbia, S. C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), xv, xix.

[64] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 257.

[65] Ibid.

Sebald dismantles the traditional mode of comprehending history in accordance with temporal order and a cause-effect principle, and, as will be seen in the chapters devoted to the discussion of *Rings*, reads and represents history as constellational and conversational. As past and present, living and dead are brought into contact, Sebald's walker-writer is thus empowered to "blast open the continuum of history" and replenish the "homogeneous empty time" through his imaginative and associative constructions of memory.[66]

The discussion of Sebald's *Rings* in this dissertation also comprises four chapters (chapters 5-8). Chapter five discusses the narrator's experiences as he visits national museums and historic landmarks. In his tours, the narrator notes that institutionalized art is at once a way of knowing the world and a way of effacing the reality of the world. In order to maintain epistemological distance from a limited perspective, which provides a falsely historical account, Sebald suggests the importance of maintaining a critical discomfort in the practices of remembering and representing history. Chapter six seeks to examine nostalgic reveries, uncanny affinities, and fantasies and illusions in *Rings*, for our understanding of history is by no means determined in a completely objective manner. Importantly, Sebald emphasizes the porosity and permeability of the boundary between real and unreal, waking and dreaming. It is the generative encounters at the intersection of the two dimensions that waken repressed feelings and hidden memories from one's deepest unconscious mind. Chapter seven investigates Sebald's non-conventional employment of visual material as meta-commentary to his novel. In *Rings*, the visual material does not follow the adjacent narrative but frequently breaks from its surrounding text and acquires its meaning from multiple entry points into the textual narrative. In addition, the uncaptioned, grainy nature of the photographs that Sebald includes in the novel challenges

[66] Ibid., 261.

the photograph's status as a documentary form of witnessing. By foregrounding such indeterminacy, Sebald seeks to keep histories of irreducible complexity open to future remembrance. The subject of discussion in the last chapter is Sebald's intertextual engagement in *Rings*. Sebald constitutes his narrative subjectivity through a multiplicity of literary accounts (mainly written reminiscences) to keep them alive in his own textual space. However, none of his attempts to redeem those memories seems to succeed. The deliberate 'failure' that Sebald creates highlights how the writer's unstable subjectivities determine the adequacy and accuracy of his practices of remembering and writing. Paradoxically, only repeating this kind of 'failure' can offer a stylistic antidote to the ultimate impossibility of historical understanding.

Not unlike the elusive destination in Gao's *Soul Mountain*, Sebald's walker, who strives to "make whole" a history of death and destruction in his persistent walks, seems to be lost in a labyrinth of mental and textual wanderings. Beneath the novel's discursive, ambiguous narrative and its infinitely deferred closure is Sebald's concern with the limitation of our knowledge and curiosity regarding what qualifies as an ethical representation of history. In his essay, "Air War and Literature," Sebald asserts that "[t]he accounts of individual eyewitnesses […] are of only qualified value, and need to be supplemented by what a synoptic and artificial view reveals."[67] Had a writer neglected its significance, his recollection and representation of history is to suffer some "ideological inflexibility" and, in turn, to "make the real horrors of the time disappear through the artifice of abstraction and metaphysical fraudulence."[68] Todd Samuel Presner remarks on this "synoptic" view in Sebald's writing that "[e]ven while it is ultimately incomplete, it offers a "synoptic view" (and there may be many synoptic views) of the totality of

[67] W. G. Sebald, "Air War and Literature," *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2003), 26.
[68] Ibid., 50-1.

the destruction through the multiplicity and simultaneity of its many contingent perspectives. […] It is an imaginary, artificially constructed view of a real historical event."[69] It is precisely for this reason that Sebald's narrator's attempts to retrieve memories through a wealth of historic signifiers – whether cultural artifacts, visual materials, or written reminiscences – which are constantly brought into question and supplemented by a synoptic viewpoint. For Sebald, given that it is impossible to "see it all together," only such a pattern can accommodate both the visible and the invisible – that is, the unknowable or unspeakable of the past – and makes visible the ethical pathway to understanding history (*RS*, 83).

[69] Todd Samuel Presner, "'What a Synoptic and Artificial View Reveals': Extreme History and the Modernism of W. G. Sebald's Realism," *Criticism*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Summer 2004), 356-7.

## Chapter One

### The Ethnographic Adventure

Assuming that *Soul Mountain* contains an autobiographical dimension, the "I"-journey traces Gao's personal experience of a five-month trek that began in the forests of Sichuan province and continued along the Yangtze River to China's eastern coast. Gao described the route of this journey by stating, "I made three trips to the Yangtze River during 1983 and 1984. […] I have wandered along the Yangtze, from the giant panda reserve that is the home of the Qiang people right down to where it meets the China Sea, and from folk customs and practices I have returned to urban life."[1] In *Soul Mountain*, in an attempt to escape modern society and to see the world anew, Gao's insatiably curious narrator visits a geographically distant and culturally marginal region of Southern China, which includes primitive forest, minority ethnic communities, rural fringes, religious retreats, and historical sites. More importantly, in distinction from practices of superficial sightseeing tourists, the narrator mainly travels alone on foot. Such a pedestrian perspective allows him an ongoing interaction with the space he traverses and opens for him a multitude of pathways to understand the world.

I. Nature Reserves

To start with, *Soul Mountain* features unmistakable traces of a preoccupation with nature, which likely springs from both the tradition of China (particularly that of late Ming literati) and the West (namely Rousseau, alongside subsequent Romantic writers) for whom

[1] Gao Xingjian, "Literature and Metaphysics: About Soul Mountain," *The Case for Literature*, trans. Mabel Lee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 103.

nature played a reassuring role in physical and mental recovery. Whereas the theme of nature dominates only the first few chapters of the novel, it sets the tone for and introduces the primary concern of the entire work: a quest for spiritual transcendence to remold one's own life. The "I"-journey starts with "my" urge to flee from "those contaminated surroundings" in the city and return to nature to seek for "a wonderful freshness" and "authentic life" (12). In visiting nature reserves and primitive forests, "I" lament the human-caused environmental destruction and admire the picturesque landscape that remains unspoiled by modern civilization and human activities. In this light, nature seems to have proffered the sought-after peace and harmony to "me" against the excessive intellectualization and rationalization that "I" have suffered.

At the beginning of "my" journey, "I" visit an observation compound for the giant panda, a rare species on the verge of extinction, in the interests of observing the ecological condition of their habitat and their living habits (c. 6). A starving panda, Beibei, comes to search for food one night and stirs up excitement among the reserve workers, who have been waiting days for its appearance. People flock outside in a hurry to feed, touch, and madly photograph the panda. The panda, unresponsive to people's demonstration of affection, is "completely engrossed in eating and doesn't look up even once" and then saunters away toward the clumps of Cold Arrow Bamboo. Such a brief encounter with Beibei, interestingly, prompts the workers to "[rave] on endlessly about it" in minute details (39). From their earnest discussion, "I" learn that the other panda, Hanhan, was killed by a local poacher. By tracking the signals still transmitted by its neckband, the workers discover Hanhan's carcass under a fresh mound of earth and its rolled-up skin hanging outside the poacher's house. Close to daybreak, "I" hear multiple gunshots from elsewhere in the compound and realized that Hanhan was by no means the last instance of victimized wildlife that fell prey to human greed.

In addition to indicating the continued human impact on the decline of wildlife, the lingering reverberation of gunshots in the valley provokes "my" further thoughts on human activities in a broader sense, which refer not merely to the profit-driven hunting of wildlife that threatens their survival but likewise to those protective and remedial measures that people undertake to salvage wildlife. At this point, "I" am reminded of the experience of a journalist who attempted to snap a picture of himself holding the panda in order to persuade people against the killing of such docile and adorable creatures. The unfortunate man had his genitals torn off and was sent to emergency care. The import of this ironic anecdote keeps in accordance with "my" contemplation that "[t]his world belongs to wild animals but human beings persist in interfering with it" (38). The panda should neither be maltreated as an inferior species subjugated to the use of humans nor regarded as their "sweetheart" or household pet, as demonstrated by its poor understanding of people's display of affection and protection. Despite everything, the panda, as a wild animal, supposedly lives a perilous life of "being spied upon, stalked, about to be ambushed" in the enclosing darkness with anxiety and restlessness lurking around (38).[2]

In stark contrast to the giant panda beloved as national treasure, living traces of cold arrow bamboo, the panda's primary food source, could barely be found. In fact, the entire primitive ecology has been threatened with extinction due to excessive deforestation and water pollution. Worse yet, the project of the Three Gorges Dam, planned to be constructed on a geological fault and to block the Yangtze river, is bound to destroy the river ecosystem and put people's lives at serious risk were any natural disaster to be triggered. In this light, the extensive effort of conserving the giant panda for its scientific value, an old botanist discloses to "me," is

[2] In briefly relating the story of another panda, Lili, "I" mention, "[t]here was no way of knowing whether it had been attacked by a leopard" or a local poacher, indicating that multiple factors should be taken into account in considering the panda's endangerment (40).

but a symbolic gesture, a self-deception in which people accept false beliefs due to their desire to ameliorate or compensate for ecological damage (c. 8). The botanist continues to remark on such an absurdity inherent in human behavior: on the one hand, people are preoccupied with saving an endangered species already incapable of survival; and yet, on the other, they are "charging ahead and destroying the very environment for the survival of the human species itself" (48). Frustrated at human intervention in nature mainly for its self-serving purposes, the botanist points out that both natural species and human beings should be treated equally due to their similar life cycles, and asserts the significance of a harmonious coexistence between them, a state in which "[m]an follows earth, earth follows sky, sky follows the way, the way follows nature" (48).

In the company of a local guide, "I" eventually advance into the last stretch of primitive forest mentioned by the botanist and stand in awe of nature's splendor (c. 10). Feeling humbled and dwarfed by the majestic immensity of the natural world, "I" am reduced to a state of "inner silence" and "[my] lust to express which keeps tormenting me […] is stripped of words" (59). Human existence appears so insignificant that "[m]y passing through here at this moment, even my very existence, is ephemeral to the point of meaninglessness" (60). When the trilling of mountain birds keeps "me" from a "sense of loneliness" in a conifer belt, "my" attention is drawn to some round alpine azaleas covered in masses of moist red flowers in between the soaring trees. As if the azaleas are "unable to cope with this abundance of beauty," their branches bow with the weight and scatter huge petals below (59). Such "unadorned splendor" displayed in quietness and remaining undiscovered by most of the world fills "me" with a sort of "indescribable sadness" (59). At a distance, "I" also notice a white azalea bush swathed in blooms; even its fallen petals are "so charged with life that they exude a lust to exhibit themselves" (61). The pristine natural beauty "I" contemplate is "irrepressible, seeks no reward,

and is without goal, a beauty derived neither from symbolism nor metaphor and needing neither analogies nor associations" (61). In deeply breathing the fresh air, "I feel the very depths of my soul being cleansed. The air penetrates to the soles of my feet, and my body and mind seem to enter nature's grand cycle. I achieve a sense of joyful freedom such as I have never before experienced" (61).

As the white azalea bushes dispersed across the forest continue to lead "me" toward it, a cuckoo, though out of "my" sight, keeps circling around "me" and captivates "my" soul through its tireless calling. It seems to be calling out "[b]rother wait for me" and immediately reminds "me" of a folktale, in which a stepmother attempted to rid herself of her stepson, but fate rebounded upon her birth son.[3] "My" thoughts wander further to a story, told by a reserve worker, of two university graduates who entered the forest with only a compass and a bag of biscuits, became disoriented, and nearly died of starvation. Along with "a feeling of disquiet" arising in "me," a drifting mist emerges, spreads out, brushes past "me" and "everything in sight becomes blurred" (61). When "I" escape from it, "I" suddenly discover a deep ravine right below, with "dark forest and jagged rocks, utterly devoid of anything from the human world" (62). Having been separated from "my" guide at this point, who appeared unfriendly and impatient from the start, "my" earlier sense of bewilderment amidst a hazy blur converts instantly into a spine-chilling terror. Meanwhile, "I" am overpowered by a feeling of loneliness, which contrasts with the lack of "my" "sense of loneliness" in the beginning, for receiving no response to "my" shout for help now. Hearing "my own muffled trembling voice immediately

[3] The source of this old-time folktale is unspecified in the novel. To summarize the main plot of the story: a stepmother asked two brothers (the older is her stepson, the younger her birth son) to sow sesame seeds in the forest and warned them that whoever cannot grow seeds is forbidden to return home. The seeds she gave her stepson were cooked and could not grow, although he was not aware of this. On their way to the forest, the younger brother asked to switch seeds with the older brother and ate half of them since he found them tasty. The rest of the seeds that he planted could not grow. In fear of the scolding mother, the younger brother died of hunger in the forest.

vanish without even echoing," "I" fear that "nature is toying with me, […] this unbelieving, unfearing, supercilious, insignificant being" (62-3).

In fact, it is not nature but "I," a human being, who "toys" with or, more precisely, inflicts anxiety and agony upon "myself." The old botanist warned "me" in advance that "[i]t's people and not animals (or nature) that are frightening" (49)! In the instances previously discussed – whether the wicked stepmother plotting against her stepson, the two students feeling overconfident in their power over nature, or "my" lacking trust in "my" guide – nature is not blameworthy here,[4] despite its occasionally "intimidating" appearance. Mankind itself is at fault, and it has proved to be flawed, limited, and finite. As Thomas Moran states, nature should be regarded as a self-contained and self-sustaining being rather than a receptacle that merely assumes "general philosophies."[5] It is important to keep nature far removed from anything "not inherent in nature" and that purely belongs to humanity, such as "a sense of joyful freedom," "another sort of indescribable sadness," a "sense of loneliness," or a song "emerging from the depths of my soul" (59-62). Namely, nature should be subject to neither "symbolism nor metaphor and need[s] neither analogies nor associations" (61).

II. Ethnic Communities

Aside from "my" adventures in nature, the center stage of *Soul Mountain* is occupied by "my" vigorous exploration of a kaleidoscope of subcultures within minority groups along the Yangtze River in the South. The area is known for its wealth of folk cultures and religious practices.[6] Given Gao's particular interest in the diversity of cultures on his journey into rural

[4] Given the socio-cultural milieu at the time, "my" lack of trust in "my" guide is likely a post-traumatic stress caused by political turmoil.

[5] Thomas Moran, "Lost in the Woods: Nature in *Soul Mountain*," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Fall 2002), 205.

[6] The Yellow River (north) and Yangtze River (south) are both great rivers that run through China proper. The narrator selects the Yangtze River as his object of inquiry instead of the Yellow River (which flows through the central plains), which was under the domination of Confucian orthodoxy bolstered by feudal rulers.

China and the fact that *Soul Mountain* was drafted in the 1980s, during which the literary trend was dominated by *xungen wenxue*尋根文學 (Root-searching Literary Movement),[7] Gao was categorized as one of those "root-searching" writers, who acted upon a utopian impulse to search for alternative roots in various aspects of geography, history, and culture.[8] Since its inception in the late 1980s, the root-searching movement was premised on the necessity to restore Chinese identity and tradition, which was gravely damaged during the Cultural Revolution, by means of recovering and appreciating rural, primitive, and ethnic cultures. Although Gao declined to be grouped with any specific literary school, a few critics were still tempted to see *Soul Mountain* as a representative work of root-searching literature. For instance, in juxtaposing Gao's journey to the South and Qu Yuan屈原 (340-278 BC)'s exile in a similar region,[9] Jeffrey Kinkley identifies common predilections of the two writers living thousands of years apart, such as interweaving their place-based narrative with philosophical and religious musings, historical reflections, and personal memories, and argues that Gao's *Soul Mountain*, steeped in this specific Chinese cultural tradition, pays a tribute to Qu Yuan's poems in substance and aesthetics.[10] Not only that, Kinkley corroborates his argument by drawing an analogy between the lifetime experience of Gao and his literary predecessor, specifically their victimization in political factions as dissidents and dismissal from their posts in the capital, which precipitated an exile – forced or voluntary –

[7] The leading figures of this literary and cultural movement were Han Shaogong韓少功 (1953-), Mo Yan莫言 (1955-), and Jia Pingwa 賈平凹 (1952-). The literary school of "root-searching" in the 1980s gained inspiration from the cultural heritage of China. Gao doubted that the erstwhile glory of civilization could provide a solution to people's mental crisis after the Cultural Revolution, and so looked for a breakthrough in his writing.

[8] Kam Louie, "In Search of the Chinese Soul in the Mountains of the South," *The China Journal*, No. 45 (Jan 2001), 145-9.

[9] Qu Yuan was a Chinese poet and politician who lived during the Warring States period and was known for his patriotism and highly original and imaginative verse. Banished from court, Qu wandered about the southern region and observed folk rites and legends that greatly influenced his works. He eventually drowned himself in despair in the Miluo River, a tributary of the Yangtze River.

[10] Jeffrey C. Kinkley, "Gao Xingjian in the 'Chinese' Perspective of Qu Yuan and Shen Congwen," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Fall 2002), 132-5.

along the Yangtze River and, in an allegorical sense, a spiritual journey in pursuit of a utopian world.

Romantic and unfettered in spirit, spontaneous and imaginative in expression, Qu's works inscribe a poetic gaze fixating on the remote South in hopes of the realization of his political ideals. The question emerges: does the notion of the South as a spatial metaphor – of mysticism, primitivism, and ethnic exoticism – in Qu's poems hold true for Gao's quest for an idealistic space by which to restore a cultural origin for the Han Chinese? Another critic, Jian Ming, confirms the existence of this cultural heritage in Gao's novel but, of the same time, turns it into an unfavorable trait that keeps a writer's stance from being objective. Jian argues that, in alliance with the root-searching writers, Gao resorted to primitivizing the ethnic minorities as natural and spontaneous creatures in order to alleviate his existential anxiety, rather than taking a genuine interest in them. The local inhabitants of ethnic groups are therefore "unmistakably controlled by the gaze of a dominant Han Chinese intellectual who demonstrates intentionally or unintentionally throughout the novel the latent superiority complex of an intellectual towards common people."[11] This "superiority complex," suggests Jian, creates an unbridgeable gap between intellectual elites and rural subaltern masses, resulting in a cultural appropriation by the former of those peripheral ethnic groups.

As with other root-searching writers, Gao indeed manifests an undeniable interest in the rural landscape and original culture of ethnic minorities. A closer examination of *Soul Mountain*, however, calls such a classification of Gao's text into question. In chapter 20, "I" visit several Yi camps in the mountains, accompanied by a local guide (a Yi singer), and meet with a Bimo (a Yi priest), who demonstrates a funeral dirge for "me": a ritual practice intended to provide guidance

[11] Ming Jian, "Life's Unattainable Goal and Actualized Meaning: Existential Anxiety and Zen Tranquility in Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain*," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews*, Vol. 31 (Dec 2009), 112.

for the spirit of the deceased to return to their ancestral land. The Bimo's eyes, bright and clear, are fixed on "me," whereas from his eyes "I" seem to capture the sight of "some other forest or a spiritual world" (119). When the Bimo starts to sing, his resounding voice "instantly transports one to the flat embankments of the highlands" and as his voice rises to a crescendo, a spectacular scene emerges before "me": a funeral procession thronging with musicians and paper offerings and burning pyres at the grave site, around which people dance, beat drums and gongs, and fire rifles. "I" thus contemplate, "[p]eople come weeping and wailing into the world. That they should make a big commotion before leaving, actually, is in keeping with their innate nature" (119-20).

Following "my" line of thought, "I" recall that such ritual practices, not exclusive to the Yi stockades, could still be sighted across the Han habitat, except that "they have become vulgarized and have lost the original meaning of this great commotion" (120). In Fengdu (known as the City of Ghosts), "I" encountered one of those funerals: a formality devoid of emotional substance. Whereas the courtyard is crowded with sacrificial items, people offering condolences, and musicians playing through the night, the grieving relatives and friends neither sing the dirges nor perform the funeral dances; instead, they "played poker at the card tables which filled the courtyard" (120). More evidence adds to "my" growing belief in the common cultural heritage between the peoples of Han and Yi: for instance, the tiger totem. By foregrounding traces suggestive of their shared root, from a Han Dynasty brick engraved with an image of the Queen Mother of the West as a human-faced tigress, and Han children's hats embroidered with red tiger heads similar in style to those among the Yi stockades, to the Han people's retained fear of tigresses likely rooted in prehistoric worship of the tiger, "I" unveil the alluring appearance of the Yi community as a false perception occasioned by the desiring eye of Han people.

The stereotyping mystification of the Yi community as a cultural "other" is further broken down by a forthright conversation between "me" and a Yi cadre, of the strict hierarchical system of Yi society. In answer to "my" curious inquiries of whether Yi people faced the death sentence due, for instance, to a romantic relationship across social classes, and whether cruel punishments such as finger-chopping or eye-gouging indeed existed, the Yi cadre admits the truth of all those things and wonders about "my" surprised reaction, for "they aren't much different from what happened" in the Han society (123). By virtue of such an analogy between two societies, the Yi cadre's acknowledgement of the displeasing qualities within the Yi community indicates a refusal to be contained by the consuming gaze of a Han intellectual ("I"), who regarded the Yi society as a flawless and pristine paradise cleansed of conflicts and violence. Moreover, this cultural other even forces the gaze of the privileged observer "I" to turn inward and recognize that the Han society may have a higher level of ruthlessness, by telling "me" a story of an enslaved Han military officer, who would rather stay in the mountains than return to the city.

At the end of "my" visit to the Yi stockades, intriguingly, "I" withdraw "myself" from "my" implicit claim of a shared origin between the peoples of Han and Yi, because "[h]istory is bewildering: it is only the singing of the *bimo* which is loud and clear" (121). Preoccupied with "my" inconclusive thought, "I" arrive at the Miao district in expectation of a dragon boat festival, which has not been held for decades (c. 39). Other than the gliding boats, dashing rowers, and festive decorations by the riverside, the resounding beat of the drums and squealing sound of the sacrificial animals, mixed with bursts of firecrackers, all "[heighten] the drama and excitement" (225-6). By sunset, however, the dragon boats show no sign of assembling for the race and the event is announced as rescheduled for a different time and place. "My" chance

encounter with a canceled event is far more significant than simply being another inadvertent interlude of "my" journey, especially considering that "I" describe at greater length "my" experience prior to the event than the event itself. Unlike "my" preceding adventures, mostly in solitude or with a few local friends, this time "I" am mistaken for an influential writer from the capital and attend the event with "senior provincial and autonomous district officials" (223). Except for the large number of police "bark[ing] orders and directions endlessly" to help clear the road, "this mighty contingent" is warmly received by young Miao women in festival attire (school girls selected and trained to welcome visiting officials), who present them with refreshments and a musical performance (224). After luncheon, they are escorted to their seats on a viewing platform on high pylons by the river, with police present to maintain order.

Reluctant to sit with the leaders on the viewing platform, "I go down to join the bustling crowds by the river" and am delighted by "a lively din of bargaining, flirtatious laughter, and children" scurrying about (225). This changed perspective allows "me" to grasp the import of an earlier scene, where the police-escorted group of leaders and Miao commoners "stare[d] curiously" at each other in a crowded narrow lane. Such a division suggests the alienation between social classes within Miao community. The presence of privilege and oppression also becomes palpable when the leaders on the platform, waiting impatiently, attempt to hasten the start of the race by offering the participants a handsome reward. Looking down from their elevated perspective, literally and metaphorically, the dragon boat festival is but an exemplary performance for cultural restoration, which can be maneuvered by power and monetary incentives. The leaders' objectifying view and treatment of the dragon boat races, "I" imply, deviates from the substance of the dragon boat race (a folk activity that celebrates vitality and spontaneity) and departs even more dramatically from the race's original purpose of

commemorating the death of Qu Yuan and his unbending patriotism and lifelong devotion to social idealism.[12]

Seeing off the leaders' procession of vehicles, "I" relish the feeling of liberation in a world where no one can communicate with "me" in Chinese. "I" then come upon the real highlight of the night: the love song festival of Miao communities. At the sight of young women on the riverbank who exert themselves to sing in order to attract their lovers, "I" am overpowered by the utter sincerity of their voice, which "come[s] from deep within so that body and heart respond" (228). Drawn to their melodious singing, devoid of embarrassment and full of vitality, young men boldly approach the women, initiate a conversation, and walk off with the ones they like. Affected by the pervading passion in such a vast singing stadium, "I" lament that "the human search for love must originally have been like this" (228). The so-called civilization of later ages merely proves the sheer stupidity of human beings, who have separated sexual impulse from love and burdened it with social concepts of "status, wealth, religion, ethics and cultural responsibility" (228).

Before "my" thoughts wander further, a Miao girl comes close and calls "me" "old brother" in a clear voice. The girl's expectant eyes in the darkness, "unblinking and fixed on me," awake "my" forgotten memory of "the long-lost trembling of my passionate youth" (229). However much "I" have dreamed about this style of love and know with certainty that the girl would come with "me" if "I" gave the slightest sign, "I" could barely cope with it and hurry away, "not daring to look back" (229). Such an unbearable encounter compels "me" to admit that "my" inability to "return to those pure passions" is not ascribed to differences in age, class, and ethnicity, but to "the fact that my heart is old and I can no longer ignore all else and fall in love,

[12] After Qu Yuan drowned himself in the river, the local people drove their boat in a hurry to recover his body from being eaten by fish. Over the years, it became an annual boat race that pays tribute to the poet.

body and heart, with a young woman" (229). In reflecting on "my" constant struggle between a carnal desire for momentary satisfaction and a quest for the wholeness of love, "I" walk past those lovers who embrace under parasols and are immersed in their own worlds, and am saddened that "their worlds are remote from me, just like an ancient legend" (230).

The "ancient legend" that lies beyond "my" reach is later translated into an idealistic dream, by which "I" address "my" grievances with frustrating reality. Leaving the singing festival, "I" seem to catch the glimpse of a Miao girl by the highway. Her black gown eclipses those decorated with colorful embroideries; abundant silver ornaments indicate her high status, and her radiant eyes and luscious lips accentuate her extraordinary beauty. Rather than singing on the riverbank to attract a lover, she simply needs to make a slight move, and the most remarkable young men of every stockade would come to bow to her. In addition to her stunning appearance, the girl understands nothing of jealousy or malice but is simply invested in a budding romance with a young man, whom she would sneak barefoot into the garden at night to meet. Both the female figure (strikingly attractive and genuinely affectionate) and the dreamlike setting (overflowing with spontaneity and sensuality) seem to correspond flawlessly to those portrayed in Qu Yuan's poetic fantasies. However, the end of this chapter betrays the illusory nature of such a romantic scene, when "I" awake to the chilling night breeze and the howling of a wolf – its forlorn and intermittent call for a mate.

"My" indulgence in the sensuous fantasy, disillusioned by the wolf's desperate call for a mate, parallels "my" desire for unrestrained affection at the singing festival, which ended unexpectedly in "my" escape from the girl's advances for fear that "my" animal lust would have corrupted her affection. Given the socio-cultural milieu at the time, "my" constant frustration with engaging wholeheartedly in romance of any kind could be ascribed to the long-lasting

political turbulence that cripples the faculties of the human mind and leaves only animal instinct. Seen through a wider metaphorical lens, “my” agony of defeated affection may also suggest “my” struggle to consent to or condemn a cultural appropriation by a privileged viewer (in this case, the Han Chinese) that perpetuates the stereotype of ethnic minorities. In essence, the cultural inequality between Han Chinese and ethnic minorities remarkably resembles the division of social class within the Miao community as in the dragon boat race, where the participants are reduced to objects for display and manipulation in the eyes of the authorities. Therefore, both “my” yearning for the uncontrived intimacy at the singing festival and “my” fantasy of the Miao girl are nurtured by the exoticizing gaze of the Han Chinese that fixates itself on a peripheral cultural other. It is the painful moments of escaping, or awakening, that alert “me” to the cultural independence of ethnic minorities and thus remove “me” from “my” fanciful thoughts.

Disenchanted, “I” recount another ancestral sacrifice performed by the only surviving master among the Miao stockades before his death (c. 41). On New Year’s Eve, the dying master struggles to chant the elegiac “Swan Song” with his rasping voice. For the time being, all memories from the “magnificent time” – in which he would lead a large-scale ritual troupe, arranging food offerings, chanting eulogy, and slaughtering sacrificial animals – come pouring back. The dying master bewails that today no more young people care to offer sacrifices to their ancestors and no more suitable trees could be found for the sacrifices, let alone that the Han Chinese are everywhere, poaching fish for profit whenever feasible. The master’s muffled sobs and indistinct chants draw the attention of the neighbors, who bring him dishes from their “shortened and simplified” New Year’s Eve dinner (237). “To forget one’s ancestors is a crime,” he mumbles, as it would precipitate a loss of wisdom, sever emotional ties, and cause faith in the human race to falter (243). In refusing to be carried inside the house, the master exerts himself to

shout out in indignation, “I want to die right here,” as an expression of his will to fight against what can be understood as the territorial expansion and cultural encroachment by the Han Chinese (244). The vivid delineation of such a sorrowful scene undergoes an unexpected turn in the end, for the story turns out to be “my” pure imagination inspired by the copy of “Drum Sacrifice Songs” from a Miao acquaintance. In reality, the master’s death “takes place two years before I come here” and not a single witness is present during his performance on the desolate riverbank (237). Thus, “my” adorned recreation of the master’s last ritual performance, including his nostalgic memories of former splendor, only bases itself on quicksand.

In “my” explorations among ethnic minorities, “I” foreground the experiential presence of the here-and-now as being synchronized with “my” travelling body. For this reason, Gao distinguishes himself from the “root-searching” writers, who largely concerned themselves with seeking an alternative cultural identity among the ethnic minorities as a substitute for Han society, and often resorted to stereotypes in their narratives at the expense of immediate experience. Additionally, this difference casts analytic light on the fact that the narrator in most root-searching narratives tends to fade into the background or be obliquely alluded to at best, whereas the narrator in *Soul Mountain* overtly and invariably intrudes throughout his text with an array of observations, reflections, and feelings. Undeniably, Gao manifests a constant interest in the cultural traditions of ethnic minorities during his exploratory visits. It is possible that Gao was initially on the lookout for a sacred refuge or a different culture to calm his troubled mind, as were many frustrated intellectuals at the time. His own footsteps and inquisitive nature, however, led him away from his initial destination – a limited and isolated existence of a certain kind – into other possible directions. In his essay “Belated Modernism and Today’s Chinese Literature,” Gao asserts that the root of Chinese culture requires no search headed toward a

predestined goal but lies in the solid and vast land beneath Chinese writers' feet and every moment when they walk on it.[13]

III. Cultural Origins of the Han Chinese

After "my" ethnographic explorations across various ethnic communities, "I" shift "my" attention to the cultural heritage of the Han Chinese. During "my" visit to Shennongjia 神农架 Forestry District, a local friend who collects handwritten copies of mountain folksongs performs for "me" the prelude of *Record of Darkness,* a Han filial song sung at funerals to redeem the scattered spirits of the deceased (c. 59). Historically "rejected by Confucius and dumped in the wilderness," this folk song, as "I" rave, has survived contamination by Confucian ethical teachings and thus preserved an essence so genuine and natural as if it were "gushing straight out of the soul" (360, 358). Additionally, the language and aesthetic form of the song remain entirely untouched by the literati's vandalism, such as "the five-word and seven-word prosody of the so-called folk song genre" (358). Enraptured by the singer's chanting, "I" begin to "see the people, hear their voices, the sound of a gong and the beat of a drum," and "a tragic ancient sound" rising in the darkness, whereas "outside the window is only the sound of the mountain wind and the lapping of water" (359).

Nonetheless, no sooner have "I" allayed "my" excitement than the song collector informs "me" that the last master singer who could sing the *Record* in its entirety has already died. His possession of a complete set of the *Record,* supposedly performed for three days and nights, was also confiscated as reactionary and superstitious works during the Cultural Revolution. Upon learning the master's fate and the *Record*'s failure to be handed down, "I" cry out in indignation

[13] Gao Xingjian, "Chidao de xiandai zhuyi yu dangjin zhongguo wenxue" 遲到了的現代主義與當今中國文學 (Belated Modernism and Today's Chinese Literature), *Meiyou zhuyi* 沒有主義 (Without Isms) (Taipei: Linking Publishing Press, 2001), 105.

for the irremediable loss of such cultural and historical significance: “Where else can reverence of the soul be found? Where else can we find these songs which one should listen to while seated in quiet reverence or even while prostrated be found? What should be revered isn’t revered and instead only all sorts of [unworthy] things are worshipped” (361, modification mine)! It is precisely this destruction of the Han heritage, “I” declare, that creates a race of people “who have lost their souls” or whose desolate souls have been emptied of pulsating vitality – the same force with which the song collector’s (a grass-roots cadre) “façade of timidity totally vanishes” when he performs, as if he had never been crushed by life (358). It is significant that the *Record*, marginalized and neglected for its nonconformism to Confucian ideology, survived ancient China but, ironically, has been threatened with extinction by the spiritual regulation and cultural oppression of modern political frenzy. The folk culture, once bristling with creativity, diversity, and naturalness, has been uprooted and expelled so abruptly that the forthcoming generations are left with nearly no traces to follow.

“My” bold criticism of the government for having devastated the cultural vestiges preserved in the *Record* draws the attention of local cadres in the forest reserve, who mistake “me” for a leader who came from the capital to conduct an investigation in this town and is in a position to apply for funding on their behalf. Invited to an administrative meeting, “I” feel ashamed for having no authority to make promises to support ecological protection, let alone venture to point out that one of the major causes of environmental problems may be some state-sponsored project, such as the Three Gorges Dam that has turned the Yangtze into “a brown river bringing down mud and silt” (364). As the meeting digresses into another subject, the Wild Man, a rare species of wildlife sought for scientific investigation, “I” reflect upon the purpose of such a discussion: when the world (and human behavior) has become increasingly incomprehensible,

"why are they looking for the Wild Man? So apart from the Wild Man what else is there to talk about" (364)? "My" concern is instantly validated by the ensuing discussion on searching for traces of the Wild Man, which converts scientific research into an ironical farce. The cadres share rumors and jokes relevant to the Wild Man (such as it striking people, chasing women for sex, and its flesh being eaten by the villagers) so earnestly that "I" am compelled to doubt whether it is the same group of people who spared no effort in wiping out the last cultural vestiges in the case of the *Record of Darkness.*

Apart from the political relevance of the Wild Man story, the abundance of historical materials discussed at the meeting concerning this creature (scientific chronicles, news reports, magazine articles, and documented oral accounts) prompts "me" to scrutinize the reliability of written records in a broad sense. In a chat with a local section chief, both he and "I" have known of a recently established Wild Man Study Association, which published a book compiling materials about the Wild Man that ranged from Chinese ancient texts to foreign accounts and organized an exhibition that displayed enlarged photographs of the Wild Man's footprints. By referencing a picture in a local newspaper that shows the Man's cut-off foot as a bear's paw, "I" argue that it could possibly be a bear. The section chief, perhaps informed by the local annals of the Qing dynasty, inclines toward the notion that the Wild Man is an Ape Man that failed to evolve into a human. Despite their divided opinion on this matter, interestingly, both the section chief and "I" manifest a common belief in that which has been written ("typeset" or "printed") as opposed to their own immediate and unaffected experience of reality. On this account, the artist's drawings of the Wild Man published by the association, which "I" saw ("with gangling arms,

[…] who giggles at people"), allegedly based on scientifically-assessed eyewitness accounts, is but another unsubstantiated "impression" (368).[14]

"My" doubt about the dependability of written records (except for official documents and scientific reports) applies even more strongly to fiction writing. In another "happy" story of the Wild Man related by "my" childhood friend, a mining exploration team captures a Wild Man in the mountains – stark naked and with a pair of worn glasses tied to its head – who proves to be a political fugitive from the city (c. 61). Branded as a rightist for criticizing the authorities, this former scholar of oracle scripts escaped from a labor camp and hid in the mountains for two decades, as his family feared they would be implicated if the man lived at his home. Both "my" childhood friend and "I" were heartily amused at first, before the storyteller assumes a somber look quite different from his usual jovial manner, for they both have experienced the same adversity as that fugitive. In particular, "my" friend was investigated during political turmoil by the very group that captures the Wild Man and nearly died at their hands. In this case, the significance of the Wild Man diverges from providing evidence for wildlife conservation and becomes a means of instantiating human cruelty toward others. To complete the story, "my" friend hesitates to tack on a "superfluous" conclusion, that is, the scholar was overwhelmed with appreciation for the people who rescued him, but withdraws this idea instantly as it runs counter to his real-life experience (384). Thus, it is no wonder that such a story, along with other fiction manuscripts he submitted to magazine editors, would certainly not be considered for publication because of its alleged nonconformity with "the criteria of the present literary world," which actually discourages "creative freedom" and "portray[ing] the truth" (384).

[14] As to the existence of the Wild Man in reality, Gao provides the clue to this mystery in his play *Wild Man* (1985), which details people's efforts for ecological restoration and ends in a scene in which the Wild Man only makes its appearance in a child's dream.

Upon entering the natural reserve, "I" behold the unpromising condition of environmental protection due to a financial quandary – the primary focus of the meeting "I" attended. The local villagers have been left with no other alternatives to meet basic needs other than excessive deforestation and overhunting of wildlife. Also, the workers in the reserve could barely afford to upgrade their facilities. Critically, as I learn from a young journalist in front of the administrative office, knowledge related to a newly established "Old People's Sports Committee" on the reserve is entirely missing from the discussion (and the supporting materials) of that meeting. Chaired by a former district party leader, this committee will be receiving a million *yuan* from the local government to ensure a large sum of sports subsidy for those "revolutionary cadres" over sixty, while the oldest cadre in the area is only fifty-five. Although the journalist decides to report such an abuse of government funds, "I" doubt whether he, with no inside connections, can reach out to his intended people and inform the outside world with his words. In a fit of frustration, "I" am reminded of a Daoist aphorism by Zhuangzi莊子 (369-286 BC) that "useful timber dies prematurely by the axe and only useless timber enjoys good fortune," which conflicts with the Huxleian concept of evolution.[15] It should be noted that this kind of devolution alludes not simply to the decline of humanity but also throws a critical light on the trustworthiness of anything preserved and handed down, for one, in words (366).

During the last night of "my" visit to the natural reserve, "I" encounter an acrobatic group performing on the square, with a huge crowd of villagers cheering and clapping. The show concludes with a contortionist act by a young girl, whose breathtaking movements of splitting and bending incite wild excitement among audiences. "I," on the contrary, find the girl nearly

[15] In fact, this is not the original quote from Zhuangzi but it provides the gist of his essay *Xiaoyao you*逍遥游 (Enjoyment in Untroubled Ease).

identical to “a grotesque humanoid spider scrutinizing the audience,” staring at the front with her sad-looking eyes as if this is an alien world (369). Teeth clenched, abdomen heaving, and face shining with excess sweat, the girl’s body, in “my” empathizing eye, appears “contorted beyond human semblance. Only her thin lips and black eyes reveal her pain and it is this pain which inflames the human lust for cruelty” (370). After the merrymaking crowd returns home, “I” face alone the empty square enveloped by limpid moonlight and can barely believe that “just now, below this majestic, austere, deep mountain, people have just enacted these scenes of grossly unnatural human distortion and I wonder if it has all been a dream” (370). The bizarre spectacle of human distortion – that of the contortionist’s act and the audience’s reactions – provokes “me” to reflect on the unsuitability of such a scene to “count as a poem” and raises a larger question regarding the discrepancy between the presented and unpresentable and between written forms and immediate reality (368).

In view of these interlinked events – from the vanishing folk song *Record of Darkness*, to a quasi-farcical meeting intended to benefit the local economy and ecology, and to a muddle-headed crowd taking pleasure in others’ suffering – it may be argued that “I” deplore the people of the present age and perceive them as bereft of any sensitivity and sensibility, since everything presumably meant to be “sung or shouted” has either suffered exhaustion or simply been stifled to silence (367). Seen from a broader perspective, it might also be possible that “I” entertain serious doubts about the dependability and efficiency of writing as a form in general. In a seemingly inconsequential episode before “I” am introduced to the *Record* by the song collector (c. 59), “I” encounter trouble concentrating while reading a stenciled manuscript of farm-work songs, *Gongs and Drums to Accompany Weeding*. Meanwhile, an indistinct sound in “an elusive tune without words” appeals to “me” through its “slow outpouring of irrepressible grief” (354).

Tracing the origin of this sound, drifting in the air like a strand of silk but "without form, intangible," "I" catch sight of a few quarry workers at a distance, who are singing in imitation of a woman's high-pitched wailing and keeping time to the metallic sound of sledge hammer or rock drill (354). Later, "I" learn from the song collector that the quarry workers are known as falsetto singers from Badong. Aside from the melodious tunes, the words of their music are, he remarks, "[not] particularly interesting" and are mainly a crude improvisation through which the workers, while away from home all year around, channel their anger and frustration. However much this subject arouses "my" curiosity, the song collector interrupts "my" thoughts by presenting "me" with the hand-copied songbook of the *Record* and, accordingly, both of them indulge in ecstasy, admiring the beauty of the folksong's language.

IV. Religious Sanctuaries

Apart from delving into the cultural heritage of Han Chinese, "I" make frequent visits to religious sites on "my" journey in expectation of finding a spiritual shelter for people who face difficulties achieving freedom and peace in this earthly world. In so doing, "I" explore and espouse a variety of religious beliefs – Daoism, Buddhism, and even Christianity – as a module upon which to build an alternate vision of the universe: a life-giving elixir that proffers peace and consolation to mankind. Religious tenets, first and foremost, are implied by the very structure of *Soul Mountain*, which is divided into eighty-one chapters, a number in accordance with the Buddhist concept of *jiujiu guiyi* 九九歸一 (literally, nine nine eighty-one; literarily, the completeness and finality of life). In this light, the novel seems to be governed by an overarching theme that one can eventually attain the ultimate goal – a path to the transcendent self – after

countless calamities.[16] Additionally, religious metaphors are interspersed throughout the narrative, such as "the other shore" where "wonderful things can be seen, suffering and pain can be forgotten, and one can find freedom" (68). Historically, Confucian tradition reigned as the most prominent moral and intellectual force in ancient China and was sanctioned by the imperial rulers as an autocratic ideology to safeguard the prevailing social structure and political system. Although it was degraded during the Cultural Revolution, the philosophical doctrine of Confucius has seen a revival in the modern era. It has been ardently embraced by the ruling party for their demand for individuals' submission and conformity. Predictably, the ostensibly coherent cultural identity involves the suppression of internal differences, tensions, and contradictions posed by other cosmological ideas. Buddhism and Daoism, for instance, both of which lay emphasis on natural spontaneity, freedom, and egalitarianism, have been eclipsed by the prevalence and orthodoxy of Confucian thought and institutions. In the novel, "my" resistance to authoritarian discourse and pursuit of individual initiative align with the religious spirit of disengaging from worldliness and maintaining freedom of will, the state equated with self-transcendence.

In chapter 47, "I" encounter a Buddhist master (also a traveler) who was performing a ritual worship in front of a pagoda and later strike up a conversation with him. In response to "my" admiration for his steadfast sincerity and "a sacred goal in his heart," the master dismisses the significance of any specific goal and stresses that "[t]he true traveller is without goal, it is the absence of goals which creates the ultimate traveller" (277). When asked if he intends to return to his native village after the sacred journey, the master answers, "for one who has renounced

[16] Wu Cheng'en吳承恩 (1500-1582)'s *Journey to the West*西遊記, one of the "Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature," narrates eighty-one calamities that the master and his three disciples experience in their pilgrimage to the west (the symbol of ultimate enlightenment).

society all within the four seas is home, for him what is called native village does not exist" (278). Committed to the idea of abandoning the human world, the master has achieved a state of liberation "from the worries of the inner heart" and revels in the prospect of "setting out on a distant journey" (280). Truly charmed by the monk's spirit and his insight that the Buddhist path is open to all, "I" attempt to follow the monk for a while after bidding him farewell. The master, however, vanishes in an instant among the throngs of sightseers, leaving "me" perplexed and "still rooted in the mundane world" (280).

"My" incapability to abandon the human world resonates with the ending of the same chapter, in which "I" overhear a conversation in a monastery between a young monk and his father. The youth has yet to have "the initiation burns made with incense sticks" on his "gleaming black shaven head," and his ruddy complexion has yet to turn "dark yellowish" like those monks who have long been vegetarian (281). His father is holding a pair of new basketball shoes that the son wanted and perhaps, as "I" surmise, is pressuring his son to go home for the sake of his sick mother or to get married.[17] Witnessing this scene, "I" cannot help but wonder if the youth will take his vows in the end. Unlike the Buddhist master who is unfettered by both fondness and hatred, the young monk and "I" share a common struggle to disentangle themselves from the mundane affairs of "home," a human world, however noisy and anxious, in which one can "search for sunlight, warmth, happiness" (222).

Despite "my" unsuccessful attempt to renounce the secular world and follow in the footsteps of the Buddhist master, "I" am intrigued by escapist strains of thought (a Daoist

[17] As a significant step to becoming a Buddhist monk, tonsure is part of the ritual "Pabbajja," meaning that a person leaves his home and "goes forth" to live the life of a Buddhist. Ridding oneself of one's hair symbolizes renunciation of worldly ego and fashion. Monks usually have six, nine, or twelve dots on top of their head as a result of burning the shaven scalp with the tip of a smoking incense stick, during which one can only recite Buddhist teachings when in pain instead of crying. This ritual is also seen as a test of sincerity and endurance. See Ling Haicheng, *Buddhism in China* (Beijing: Chinese Intercontinental Press, 2004).

transcendental spirit) that survive by blending into folk wisdom and imperceptibly shape individuals for centuries. In chapter 30, "I" learn of a local legend in Anhui Province about a deadly venomous snake, Qichun, which knows battle strategies and strikes like a flash of lightning before being detected. Since victims would drop dead within five steps, mountain people must wear snake-proof apparel and silently intone incantations to ward away its evil spirit. Wandering about the village, "I" chance-meet a peasant, who survived the snakebite by instantly chopping off his right hand, and marvel at his strong mind in a time of crisis, especially when tempted by a dangerous alternative. The peasant responds by juxtaposing humans and animals, "[t]o lose a hand to save one's life, how could I quibble over it? Even a praying mantis will shed a claw to save itself. […] Foxes have bitten off a leg to get out of a trap" (170). To his way of thinking, it is crucial for humans to retain their natural instinct as an enactment of sagacity, however primitive and animalistic it may seem, in the face of such a life-and-death situation rather than blindly obey social norms and teachings.

When "I" chance upon dead Qichun snakes processed for medicinal use, "my" wandering mind travels back in time to the snake described in a widely known essay, "Bushe zhe shuo" 捕蛇者說 (Discourse of the Snake-catcher) by the Tang scholar-official Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773-819), for both snakes share exactly the same look: a "[b]lack body with a white pattern" (170). Having been demoted and banished from court, Liu turned his attention from his own political misfortunes to those of common people living in remote areas who struggled against impoverishment. Drawing a parallel between heavy taxes and the venom of the Qichun snake, Liu reproached the government regulations as being so harsh that people in desperation would choose to risk their lives catching venomous snakes and selling them as medicinal materials for a high price. Notably, the symbolic use of the poisonous snake in Liu's political allegory is

primarily confined to the aspect of an inhumane government. From "my" point of view, the image of a snake can be linked with a far broader range of circumstances, namely, anything that threatens to undermine "my" individual self – both physical and mental – and provokes "my" urge to identify these threats to selfhood and to guard against them (170).

A further point worth accentuating here is that such a spirit that desires to escape – from either natural threats or from the hostility of the human world – should be viewed less as an act of avoidance than as a spirited pursuit energized by one's true nature. In chapter 49, "I" am introduced by a folk Daoist to a group of teen girls who excel at singing mountain songs. As one of them starts singing a song about "two sisters weeping as they go off to marry," her high-pitched soprano voice "cuts through the noise of the crowd and spirals upwards, instantly transporting me from the shadows into the mountain wilds. The sadness of a murmuring stream and the mountain wind are remote but clear" (295). The evoked mental image triggers "my" long-sealed memories in a momentary flashback. "I" begin to recall that "I" once had to "work barefoot in the paddy fields" in a mountain village during the day and spend time at the house of a primary school teacher at night, "the only place I could go for a chat, to drink tea, and just sit, to idle away the loneliness."[18] It is during one of those nights that "I" encountered two night travelers, an old man holding a pine torch and a girl about the singer's age, walking past the house and heading toward the dark mountain. "I" gazed after their glowing torch until it became "a small unsteady flickering flame moving in the black mountain shadows, leaving intermittent sparks to mark their trail" (296).

As the "sparks and dark red embers" of the torch finally vanish in the scene from "my" memory, "I" am brought back to the present moment, during which the singer's song, "flickering

[18] During the 1970s, Gao was persecuted as a public intellectual, forced to destroy his writings, and was sent to the countryside to do hard labor in Anhui Province for six years.

in a flame the size of a bean seed on a candle in the shadows of a room," also draws to an end (296). As specified, the pure and heartfelt sorrow of this song extolling sisterly love moves "me" so deeply as to summon "my" dust-covered memories of the turbulent decade when "I" suffered political persecution, betrayal and isolation from family and friends, and hard labor in the countryside. The only solace and contentment for "me" was those nightly conversations at the primary teacher's house, where "I" could let "my" guard down and have "my" heart warmed by the pure kindness and genuine trust from people with a kindred spirit. This last trace of humanity, a rare find at a time when mania and violence were pervading the nation, is visualized by the image of the torch with a flickering flame held by the night travelers, who walked through the dark mountains alone but with a glimmer of warmth in their hearts. In spite of the adverse circumstances that the night travelers and "I" have experienced, they both are empowered to preserve and nourish their individuality in the tranquil simplicity of solitude with no interference from man-made social, moral, and political orders. It is noteworthy that the solitude here carries with it much greater profoundness than flight and escapism, such as those attributed to a Daoist hermit, into the illusion of a rural idyll. Rather, solitude concerns itself with a condition not of escaping the reality but of encountering it, a separation from the dangerous and disorienting world in order to approach it again.

"My" earnest espousal of the spirit of Daoist escapism prevents any imposition of a prescription or imperative, and allows "me" to preserve "my" true nature, purify "my" confused mind, and convert the extremely adverse situation into an opportunity to reorient "myself" for the future. The vividly rendered scene – set in the same chapter as the folk Daoist's performance – seems to further validate "my" religious stance as a Daoist follower. On "my" way to collect folksongs and ritual music, "I" take a deep interest in a folk Daoist who formerly managed a

Daoist monastery and is well-versed in Daoist principles and practice. At his home, the Daoist priest performs for "me" a fully-attired ritual performance intended to expel illness and calamity. To begin, the Daoist, assuming an air of majestic somberness and carrying all vital stage props, intones a string of incantations to invoke the spirits and demons of Heaven and Earth. Reaching a crescendo in his performance, "[h]is words become incomprehensible and his movements wilder as he circles the table and demonstrates a whole range of martial arts sword techniques" as if he is communicating with the spirits (294).

Whereas the performer indulges himself in an "intoxicated, crazed state" and the cheering audience are filled with uncontained excitement, "I" retain "my" position as an objective observer by casting an analytical light on such a theatrical Daoist ritual that "I can't decide whether or not he believes his own techniques but he dances and waves his arms and legs about, walks with a swagger, and looks very pleased with himself" (295, 294). Although this spontaneous performance that "I" desired appears to encompass all the qualities necessary to represent an authentic Daoist tradition which has suffered marginalization and suppression, "I" remain skeptical of the extent to which its original substance remains beneath the superficial religious formality, which, to "my" critical eye, verges on an entertaining show designed to win over the curious crowd and an appreciative outsider ("I"). As if to corroborate "my" speculation, "I" was surprised later by the other character trait of the Daoist. When asked to sing a bawdy song after his ritual performance, the Daoist's demeanor has dramatically "transformed" from austerity to being "crafty, rakish and wicked," and the crowd roars with laughter (297).

In keeping with "my" embrace of "the ineffability of life," at the end of "my" visit to the folk Daoist's hut "I" grow increasingly skeptical about didactic doctrines and ritual practices in support of any religious indoctrination and institutionalization (299). During "my" stay in the re-

established Palace of Supreme Purity on Qingcheng Mountain (c. 63), "I" delight in the natural serenity and ancient ambience inside the temple, which "I" prefer over "the oppressive and prohibitive harshness of the Buddhist monasteries," and take interest in the head Daoist's lectures of Daoist teachings (402). Interestingly, when the head Daoist expounds the central tenet of "purity" to "me," saying that "purity is the principle, nonaction the essence and spontaneity the application; it is a life of truth and a life requiring absence of self," "my" attention is inadvertently drawn to those young disciples, men and women, who sit all huddled together as they listen "intently and wholeheartedly" (403). In speculating whether "I would be able to attain this realm of purity where there is an absence of self and lust," "my" thought lingers on the image of a young nun, who has attended "me" with a palpable tenderness during "my" visit and appealed to "me" insofar as "I" can barely decide whether "I" am staying because of "the charming spontaneity of her movements and her unaffected gracefulness" or simply the tranquility in the temple (403, 401).

Although the Daoist master believes in "purity" as a gateway to the "Way" of sagehood, "I" cast doubt on the attainability of such a spiritual realm purged of self and desires. From "my" perspective, the Daoist "Way" could hardly be achieved once and for all upon receiving enlightenment, but only through a dynamic course of being "on the Way." In this dynamic course, the self, actively present throughout rather than being absent, would engage in intimate interactions with the places "I" traveled, the people "I" conversed with, and the cultural practices "I" was fascinated by. In so doing, "I" recast "my" religious belief in accordance with a personal and experiential perspective. Namely, the spirit of Daoism exists not merely in its traditional doctrines and institutionalized orders but could be captured in myriad encounters with the world, such as the aforementioned young nun, whose voice "[rang] with a clear purity," the lines of

flying eaves expressive of "pure simplicity," or the surging sound of the river "under the stone bridge and the soughing of the night wind [which] all seem to be flowing from my heart (403). This acquired insight, consequently, eliminates "my" confusion early on in the novel regarding "my" purpose for visiting the primitive forest: it is not in the least a reclusive avoidance of "the unbearably perplexing world of human beings" but rather a means of seeking another kind of life, roaming freely, in which one can break away from the analytical mind, artificial logic, and meaning-making (50).

V. Historical Sites

When "I" turn "my" attention to influential and iconic figures in history on whose basis "I" aspire to reconstruct the "origin" of the Chinese, the narrative presents a similar discourse teeming with discrepancies and discontinuities. Approaching the end of the novel (c. 71), "I" travel to Shaoxing to visit the tomb of Yu the Great, "the first dynastic emperor with a documented genealogy" (448). According to the earliest record in *Guoyu* 國語 (Discourses of the States, approx. 4th century BC), Yu the Great unified the empire and, after curbing the floods, called for an assembly of all commanders to proclaim their achievements and reward them. At the ceremony, however, Yu was provoked by the giant Fang Feng防風, who arrived late and looked slovenly, and ordered his retainers to decapitate the giant. Instead of remarking forthrightly on Fang Feng's execution as a wrongful death, "I" digress into the biographical story of a comparable figure, Sima Qian司馬遷 (145-86 BC), a historian who also visited the tomb of Yu two thousand years ago for his historical investigation and chronicled Fang Feng's death in his *Shi Ji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian, 91 BC). By drawing on a pun, Sima insinuated that Yu's accusation of Fang Feng for his late arrival was likely a pretense of his deliberate calculation meant to eradicate Fang Feng, a dissident and a threat to the son of Yu's claim to the

throne.[19] As for Sima Qian, his outspoken political comments likewise offended the emperor and he was castrated and sentenced to life imprisonment. Notably, when "my" thoughts roam back to the present, "I" notice that the new statue of Yu the Great inside the main hall appears to be unnaturally amiable, while the nine battle axes behind the statue, symbolizing his incontestable authority, "succeed in indicating something closer to the truth" (449).

Apart from being deified as an undaunted hero among folk cultures and as the first autocratic ruler in Chinese history, the image of Yu the Great has been embellished with a mythological dimension. "I" first reference a passage in *Shubenji* 蜀本記 (Records of the State of Shu), which documents that Yu's birthplace was Shiniu, also the home of the giant panda. This historical account in turn led to the legend of Yu's animal descent, substantiated in *Shanhaijing*山海經 (Classic of the Mountains and Seas), that "Yu was born from the womb of a bear" and later married to a seductive beauty named Nüjiao女嬌 (449). According to legend, as Yu accidentally revealed his original bear appearance, his panic-stricken wife escaped hastily and turned into a rock. Therefore, "I" conclude, the hero could have a thousand faces: "For his wife Yu was a bear, amongst the ordinary folk he was a god, for the historian he was an emperor," and for fiction writers he could be the first person in history who kills to fulfill his ambition to the throne (450). Concerning Yu's legendary feat (curbing floods), "I" discredit the existence of the mega flood in prehistoric times by alluding to some foreign research based on which the alleged flood could possibly derive from a mythological prototype, indicating the human struggle with "elements of prenatal memory in the amniotic fluids of the womb" (450).

[19] Sima Qian used a homophonic pun, *Kuaiji* (meaning 會計, calculate or, 會稽 the city name, where Yu's assembly was held, known today as Shaoxing), suggesting that Yu's killing of Fang Feng marked the end of the abdication system and the beginning of autocratic monarchy.

Perplexed by a wide range of competing interpretations regarding Yu the Great, "I" find that the truth of this historical event grows increasingly obscure. Such is the case with the indecipherable "tadpole-like script on the stone epitaph opposite the main hall," which represents how the last vestiges of Yu's history become more difficult to read (450). Having thoroughly examined the script and ruminated for a while, "I" am suddenly enlightened that history could in fact be read in any way, whether as a riddle, lies, nonsense, prediction, rational thinking, experience, proof, a sequence of cause and effect, an analogy, sad sighs, or as absolutely nothing (450-1). Such a major discovery allows one to demystify the ground on which the monopolized historical narrative is built, to deconstruct the unified vision of history into a continued proliferation of alternative interpretations, and to revitalize individual memories of a subjective and complex nature to contest or subvert the state-sanctioned discourse.

It is worth noting that Yu the Great, a historical deity now demystified in "my" discerning eye, has been intimately intermeshed with a broad constellation of Shaoxing natives, from great politicians, literary giants, and revolutionary martyrs, to people of the lowest rank, all of whom are tinged with a noble sadness for their "heroic" deeds. As Mabel Lee remarks, walking past museums converted from their former residences, "my" mind's eye constantly reaches beyond the physical boundaries of geographical space, owing to which "my" chain of thought tends to generate questions and resistance to the institutionalized significance embedded in those famous personalities.[20] That is, when "my" moving body traverses space and "my" thinking mind travels in time, numerous interpretative portals are thus opened for "me" to converse with history. Ah Q, for instance, a local delinquent created by Lu Xun鲁迅 (1881-1936), was notorious for his self-deception (an illusory superiority called "psychological

[20] Mabel Lee, "Gao Xingjian's Dialogue with Two Dead Poets from Shaoxing: Xu Wei and Lu Xu," *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2001), 278-9.

victory") while facing reality, and was wrongly executed for his involvement in a revolutionary activity.[21] At the sight of the thoroughly renovated local grain temple (a real-life prototype for the one Ah Q sheltered in in the fiction), with a tablet inscribed by a famous contemporary calligrapher, "I" could not resist the thought that Ah Q would by no means have imagined such a posthumous honor.

With the incisive satire of Ah Q, Lu points his criticism not merely at deficiencies and defects in the Chinese national character but also, of equal significance, manifests his pessimistic speculation on the revolutionaries as being superficial and ineffective. "I" contemplate that such a social milieu at the time foreshadows the fact that the revolutionary martyr Qiu Jin秋瑾 (1875-1907), who believed it was her duty to save the nation, was doomed to fail from the outset. Following an associative trail, "my" mind meanders to Ah Q's creator Lu Xun, perhaps the most idolized writer of modern China, who was indeed "a fugitive on the run all the time" and fortunately moved into the foreign concession during the war for better medical treatment and living conditions. In turn, "I" recall a line in one of Lu's patriotic poems, "I spill my blood for the Yellow Emperor," but cannot help but question what is the "Yellow Emperor" referred to (the first emperor of this land, one's homeland, race, or ancestors), and whether one can truly achieve greatness by self-sacrifice (447). While reflecting upon the case of Lu Xun and his patriotic psyche, "I" suspect that this kind of political sentiment is potentially another form of individual subjugation to a collective unconsciousness.[22]

[21] In Lu's fiction, Ah Q was a rural peasant with little education and no definite occupation. He was a bully to less fortunate people but fearful of those above him in rank, strength, and power. He fooled himself into thinking that he was spiritually "superior" to his oppressors even when he succumbed to their tyranny and suppression. Ah Q ended up being a scapegoat for a revolutionary activity (of plundering the landowner) and beheaded as a bandit. According to Lu Xun, Ah Q's faults were symptomatic of the Chinese national character of his time.

[22] As Mabel Lee points out in her introduction to *Soul Mountain*, patriotism or self-sacrifice is an entrenched habit that "facilitated, aided and abetted the extremes of social conformity demanded by the Cultural Revolution which was engineered by sophisticated modern strategies for ideological control" (vii).

Having encountered the Green Vine Studio, the former residence of the late Ming literatus Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521-1593),[23] "I" wonder how those peaceful surroundings could still leave him mentally distraught later in life. In ruminating on Xu's couplet, "[one's worldly appearance] is a false illusion created by others, what is original and authentic is what I propose," "I" challenge the notion of this "false illusion," which "I" argue is unnecessarily a creation by others (448, modification mine). Compared to "authenticity" in and of itself, "I" attach greater importance to "whether or not [authenticity] can be proposed" through encountering reality (448). By doing so, "I" demystify the aura of Xu's madness and reclusiveness, an "original and authentic" state of existence worshipped by the late Ming literati as representing a spiritual transcendence beyond worldly chaos and the source of artistic originality. To "my" way of thinking, Xu's preoccupation with his descent into madness – be it real or not – is but another self-made "false illusion," an indirect means of escape into a world that appeals only to Xu's own eyes as rational, and an anxious disguise that fails to carry him beyond the predicament between individual preservation and subjugation to the society (445).

After this epiphany, "I" realize that "I" am neither prepared to die a martyr's death nor to be turned into a madman in exchange for self-preservation within a world "not meant for human habitation" (445). For the sake of survival and "retain[ing] the authenticity existing at parturition," "I" am left with no alternative but to flee from this small town, which claims a place of prominence in Chinese history because of those influential figures. With respect to the discussed sites in the vicinity of Shaoxing, "I," on the one hand, draw scrutiny to those historical accounts "deciphered" by authorities and ingrained in the collective memory; on the other hand,

[23] Xu Wei was a Ming Dynasty painter, poet, and dramatist famed for his expressive and revolutionary artworks and writings, who exerted his influence on many descendants. Xu was unsuccessful in his career and mentally ill. He ended his life in poverty after the murder of his third wife and several attempts at suicide.

"I" provide the readers with alternative possibilities of history through a personalized perspective and re-articulation. The kaleidoscopic appearance of history thus presented, such as legends, folktales, and myths unfolding around the Yu Crossing, never ceases to alternate between distinction and indistinction, and the truth only flashes up for an instant, when it can be recognized but its solidity always remains in question.

"My" historical investigation in *Soul Mountain* distinctly carries out the Foucauldian idea that "the purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity, but to commit itself to its dissipation. It does not seek to define our unique threshold of emergence, the homeland to which metaphysicians promise a return; it seeks to make visible all of those discontinuities that cross us."[24] Foucault's argument shines critical light on the reason why the truth of our origin – and history – keeps eluding our recognition and reconstruction and steers itself into the very "dissipation" of our knowledge of history. He continues, "[i]f genealogy in its own right gives rise to questions concerning our native land, native language, or the laws that govern us, its intention is to reveal the heterogeneous systems which, masked by the self, inhibit the formation of any form of identity."[25] For this reason, history should by no means be construed as consistent and progressive, but rather as contingent and unforeseeable. In an attempt to approach a version of history that presents itself as "neutral, devoid of passions, and committed solely to truth," one must arm oneself with "the will to knowledge," a hidden and instinctively violent position that sides against "those who are happy in their ignorance, against the effective illusions by which humanity protects itself, a position that encourages the dangers of research and delights in disturbing discoveries."[26] In a Foucauldian light, "I" demonstrate

[24] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 85.
[25] Ibid., 95.
[26] Ibid.

extensively in *Soul Mountain* the power of the "will to knowledge," which aims not to "achieve a universal truth [but] ceaselessly multiplies the risks, creates dangers in every area. […] [It] breaks down illusory defenses; it dissolves the unity of the subject; it releases those elements of itself that are devoted to its subversion and destruction."[27] Embracing such a spirit in "my" explorative walks, "I" seek to deny the possibility of man's "exact and serene mastery" over the world with a view to untying people from the enslavement of "truth" or "knowledge" produced and shaped by the intention of "power."[28]

As "a perspicacious sceptic" in general or as a writer who adopts "an individual stance of positively engaging in doubt" in terms of literary creation,[29] Gao manifests in *Soul Mountain* a "struggle of the individual to survive the history of the masses" by unveiling the dangers of those purportedly authentic accounts of history, culture, and human subjectivity. The walking subject "I," as opposed to simply returning to the natural world, cultural roots (of both minority ethnic groups and Han Chinese), religious sanctuaries, and historical monuments with the aim of reaching one desired destination, unremittingly opens himself to "new possibilities with new interchanges and connectedness."[30] By virtue of such a pedestrian perspective, the walking subject re-examines and re-articulates the geographical and psychological space he has traversed, and thereby foregrounds a phenomenological realm in accordance with the Lefebvrian "lived space," a key site of affective encounters where oppression and struggles may be revealed, and potentialities for meaningful change can be nurtured.

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[27] Ibid., 95-6.
[28] Ibid., 96-7.
[29] The Swedish Academy, "The Nobel Prize for Literature 2000," *Press release*, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2000/press-release/. Julia Lovell, "Gao Xingjian, the Nobel Prize, and Chinese Intellectuals: Notes on the Aftermath of the Nobel Prize 2000," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Fall 2002), 16.
[30] Gao Xingjian, *Cold Literature*, trans. Gilber C. F. Fong and Mabel Lee (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2005), xl.

## Chapter Two

### The Cold Dreams

As discussed in the introductory chapter, Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* features a two-fold structure, namely, the ethnographical investigations of the I-narrator in the domain of the actual and the dreamlike wanderings of the you-character in other realms. Unlike the I-narrator, who often casts his critical attention outward on historical and cultural vestiges for the purpose of demystifying and delegitimizing the ideological hegemony, the you-character directs his focus inward as he floats through an extraordinary dreamscape, hoping for a truthful revelation of his concealed sentiments and repressed desires. Given that one's altered states of consciousness, in a Freudian light, may well operate as an efficient medium for the release and representation of one's inner truth, the you-character's many uncanny rendez-vous conceivably exist to provide a more comprehensive and dynamic view of the narrator's selfhood, and could even uncloak the hidden message embedded within the image of his fabled and far-flung destination – Soul Mountain. However, whether in the nonfigurative dreams (such as his nostalgic ramblings that thread through two thirds of the novel) or in a series of allegorical visions (such as his adventures across the mysterious valley, river, and icy mountain) that are grouped toward the end, the you-character seems to relinquish full control of his exploratory engagements and to embrace disorderly spontaneity. The accounts of dreams in the novel also exhibit palpable signs of a "cold" refusal to be understood and interpreted as a coherent whole. Such an anti-Freudian treatment of the dreams in *Soul Mountain* thus becomes the primary task for this chapter's discussion.

I. A Childhood Home

In *Soul Mountain*, the larger half of the "you"-journey (chapters 1-54) overflows with a nostalgic sentiment, which motivates "you" to return to "your" hometown that encompasses blissful childhood memories. This retrospective nostalgia seems to accord with a natural impulse of any exilic writer, who is inclined to reminisce about one's early life after having been uprooted to an entirely unfamiliar land and thus suffered "an unhealable rift." Edward Said defines this as a space forced "between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home."[1] Fueled by the writer's insurmountable feeling of loss and dispossession, the novel opens with the solitary walker "you" arriving at a random bus stop in a mountain town and feeling envy toward local people who "have been here for many generations" and those who, despite having left their hometown at a young age, all "hurry back because they are getting old. After all, who doesn't love the home of their ancestors" (1)? Bearing this thought in mind, the outsider "you" are then struck with a feeling of *déjà vu,* when walking about in Wuyizhen烏伊鎮 "on a long and narrow street inlaid with black cobblestones [and a] deep single-wheel rut," as if "you" grew up "in an old mountain town like this" (16). However, the ecstasy that "you" feel that "you suddenly enter your childhood" instantly evaporates at the sight of the streets crammed with bicycles, instead of one-wheel handcarts, and a newly renovated department store standing as a foil to those once-imposing buildings, which have now fallen into disrepair after years of neglect.

While the tightly closed doors of most residences that "you" have walked past form a barrier to "your" desiring eye, "you" later come upon a desolate courtyard with a half-closed door and piles of rubble in the corner that gives the impression of "your" childhood home. The

[1] Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 173.

farther sight of “pale withered weeds and lush green new sprouts in the roof-tiles” wakens in “you” a distant memory of dry weeds blown by the wind and the sound of “your” bare feet “patter[ing] on the black cobblestone street with its deep single-wheel rut” (19). The past and present thus converge in this visual-auditory assembly of weeds quivering in the wind and the pattering sound of a child’s running feet, following which “you’ve run out of your childhood back into the present” (19). “[A] forgotten past is re-lived” more thoroughly in chapter 17 when “you,” during “your” stay in a village hut, seem to see a threshing lot in the dark mountain shadows and hear the sound of children playing and laughing. It is precisely at this moment that the sound of bare feet pattering along cobblestones rings in “your” ear again and spurs “your” childhood memories – such as “your” mother’s torn shirt and plump arms, a wet nurse and her homemade snack, and the toothless girl “Yaya” whom “you” liked to tickle – all of which become “stark and vivid” in the moment (102).

Although the instant revival of “your” childhood memories stirs a tender affection within “you,” an inauspicious scene of roaring, dive-bombing planes emerges in “your” memory, with their “black wings [that] suddenly swoop up and fly into the distance,” succeeded by a woman’s “long shrill wail” that “doesn’t sound human” (103-4). “You” are then reminded of a neglected scene from “your” memories, of “you” being “shaken about on endless mountain roads in a tarpaulin-covered truck,” which suggests a time of social turbulence (104). It is at this very moment that “your” attempt to restore “your” childhood experience comes to a sudden halt – “all that confront you are the dark shadows of the mountain” – even though the shouting and laughing from the children on the threshing lot continues (104). Remarkably, “your” avoidance of confronting traumatic memories of the war can be juxtaposed with “my” yearning for

"returning to my childhood, moving backwards on my heels" as if "I haven't gone through the war […] and I haven't endured any sufferings" (c. 22, 131).

Gao places such nostalgic sentiments under further scrutiny in chapter 37, when "I" dream of joining a family dinner with "my" dead relatives behind a broken wall. The relatives' conversation about the past allows "me" to fill lacunae in "my" childhood memories and to weave together their disjointed fragments into a meaningful whole. In so doing, "I" start to recall that it was during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) that "I" escaped to the countryside from Japanese bombings of the city (where "I" had lived) with "my" family and often entertained "myself" by tumbling in the hay with the peasants' children on a threshing square. Consequently, as opposed to "your" vague recollection of stumbling through the mountain roads in a truck, "I" tease out further details of "my" memories of a childhood during war, such as having been squeezed into a boat overloaded with refugees on the Xiang River and having sought shelter from the bandits in a pig pen, all the while feeling terrified by bursts of gunshot "from the ink-black mountain shadows at the back" (213).

No longer infatuated with the romanticized image of "my" childhood, "I" discover that, no sooner do "I" creep up to "my" dead family by crossing the ruins of the wall, than those ghosts "get up and quietly vanish behind another wall. […] Instantly the table is covered in velvety moss, breaks, cracks, then collapses into a heap of rubble and bushes sprout all over it" (212). The sudden disappearance of "my" family, emblematic of an emotional distanciation, occasions a subtle change of narrative tone, as "I" am left to wonder whether they would disapprove of "my" way of living and would plot how to arrange "my" life. Having finally reached a point of disillusionment upon realizing "I can't live the lives they lived, and in any case their lives weren't particularly wonderful," "I" awake to the fact that "I" am standing among

the ruins of an ancient temple, Gold Top, which was historically acclaimed for its grand scale and artistic design but has currently fallen into a state of disrepair (212). Frustrated by "my" futile search for the evidence of the temple's former glory, "I" lament that "even the iron tiles have completely rusted away" (231). Such is the loss that parallels the decay of "my" tenuous and malleable memories of a blissful childhood (231).

Upon returning to "your" childhood hometown after all, "you" find nothing but a city that radically hurries toward modernization and tramples the old city underfoot by wiping out that which is deemed unfit for a fast-growing society. In chapter 54, "you" are discontent with the fact that the courtyard compound of "your" childhood home has been turned into an asphalt road heavy with traffic. The prior views of yellow chrysanthemums, crimson cockscombs, and the elongated reflection of the moon in the lake are replaced by those of standard red brick buildings all lined up and chemical fertilizer stacked at warehouses. Also, instead of the sound of flapping flags in the wind along riverbanks, "you" now hear only loud shouting or singing blaring from speakers. To put it briefly, a space once laden with lively emotions has been flattened into a linear and standardized representation of modern society characterized by a deteriorating environment and materialistic chaos, in which pounding machines keep heaping up ruins (327).

Disappointed with "your" hometown now bereft of traces of "your" childhood, "you" eventually liberate "yourself" from a deep-rooted preoccupation that "[y]ou are always searching for your childhood […] [and] want to visit each of the places you stayed during your childhood, the houses, courtyards, streets and lanes of your memory" (325). In a refreshed state of mind, "you" set out to free the concept of "home" from its anchorage in time and space and realize that "home" could be any place that stirs within "you" a feeling of "homesickness," "irrepressible sadness," or that "tell[s] you something" (328). Whether the everyday scenes drawn from "your"

childhood experiences (ponds with floating duckweed, arched stone bridges), the remote places "you" have not actually visited as a child (old slate-roof houses, the tomb of a Tang poet), or the fanciful ethnic communities (lonely compounds and wooden houses) "you" have never even dreamed about, "all evoke this homesickness of yours and have become the hometown of your dreams" (328). Awestruck by the proliferating images of "your" home, "you" cannot help but wonder "whether you have another life, that you have retained some memories of a previous existence, or that these places will be your refuge in a future existence. Could it be that these memories are like liquor and after fermentation will produce a pure and fragrant concoction which will intoxicate you again" (328)?

In unbinding one's hometown from a definite location, "you" cast doubt on the veracity and verifiability of "your" childhood memories, asking: "[w]hat in fact are childhood memories? How can they be verified? Just keep them in your heart, why do you insist on verifying them" (328)? It should be underlined here that "your" eager embrace of accumulation and bricolage when retrieving "your" memories of a bygone age reflects a profound sense of homelessness that "you" feel at the present. Despite having been born and raised in the city, "you" could never "make that huge urban metropolis the hometown of your heart," other than some scraps of memories that only become manifest "in a particular place" and "in a particular instant" (328). "[H]azy, intangible, dreamlike" as they may seem, these memories belong purely to "yourself" and thus "preserve yourself fully" (328). Prompted by such an instinct of self-preservation, "you" engage in a dynamic process of walking and remembering in the prospect of guarding against the formidable world – the "vast ocean of humanity" – that has reduced "you" into an "insignificant and fragile" life (328). Interestingly, the state of enlightenment that "you" have reached – i.e., understanding that one's "home" can be incessantly (re)constructed with every

instance of remembrance by the remembering subject – resonates forcefully with the Buddhist maxim (related by a monk to "me" in an earlier chapter) that "for one who has renounced society all within the four seas is home, for him what is called native village does not exist" (c. 47, 278).

The homebound searches in *Soul Mountain* are motivated by a driving force that proves to be more complicated than an innocent longing for the good old times. The concept of "home," as Tuan Yi-Fu asserts, denotes not simply its natural or physical setting but, more crucially, "a unit of space organised mentally and materially to satisfy a people's real and perceived basic biosocial needs and, beyond that, their higher aesthetic-political aspirations."[2] In this light, Ralph Harper states that the homecoming journey is "neither illusion or repetition" but rather "a return to something we have never had,"[3] an imaginative construction of an idealized past that never was. In Chen Jianguo's words, homecoming is "a discursive practice that operates between waiting and longing."[4] Therefore, such a future-oriented nostalgia concerns itself less with a regressive (or restorative) act in the traditional view than with a point of departure toward a productive process of personal reflection that entails a plurality of opportunities to achieve one's self-fulfillment. Interestingly, this process of reflection is unending in the same manner as the "running" child who provoked "your" homebound searches to begin with.

A palpable yearning for home – or the fear of losing it – threading through chapters 1-54 in *Soul Mountain* reveals a deep-seated desire for a sense of belonging, which ought to be contextualized within the general social milieu at the time. When the Cultural Revolution finally came to an end, the decade-long nightmare left the nation physically and emotionally wounded.

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[2] Tuan Yi-Fu, "A View of Geography," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (Jan 1991), 102.

[3] Ralph Harper, *Nostalgia: An Existential Exploration of Longing and Fulfilment in the Modern Age* (Cleveland: Press of Western Reserve University, 1966), 26.

[4] Chen Jianguo, *The Aesthetics of the "Beyond": Phantasm, Nostalgia, and the Literary Practice in Contemporary China* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009), 138.

As people began to cope with and recover from their traumatic experience, the totalitarian party continued to exert its formidable power over them by banishing and suppressing their memories. Any individual attempting to preserve their voice (and memory) against this state-sponsored amnesia would face political pressure and even threats to their life. Compared to *Soul Mountain,* the pervasive despair over one's plight at facing political threat has been more tellingly exposed in Gao's semi-autobiographical novel *One Man's Bible* (1999), the protagonist of which desperately seeks refuge in a "nest," where he "could be away from people […] have privacy as an individual and not be observed," in "a soundproof room […] where he could shut the door and talk loudly without being heard," or in "a domain where he as an individual could voice his thoughts […] so that he no longer needs to be wrapped in a cocoon like a silent larva."[5]

II. The "River of Forgetting"

In *Soul Mountain*, "your" frequent infatuation with childhood memories fades into the background after chapter 54 before a series of allegorical visions, which tap into "your" inner world, emerge to occupy the novel's center stage. Before moving forward, two mountain walks that "I" undertake through a stretch of dark forest merit careful consideration, because the formidable adversary that "I" have experienced, almost undeniably, provokes "you" to seek shelter in "your" fantastical world of imagination. In chapter 10, after losing touch with "my" guide in a gloomy ravine, "I" find "myself" enclosed by a dark forest pervaded by an obscuring mist that turns everything into "a grey-black blurred totality" (62). In addition to the utter lack of response to "my" hysterical shouting for help, "I" am horrified to discover that even "my" own trembling voice "immediately vanish[es] without even echoing" (62). Stumbling toward a signpost, "I" come upon a strange-shaped tree, with a sloping trunk that branches into two parts,

[5] Gao Xingjian, *One Man's Bible: A Novel*, trans. Mabel Lee (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2002), 17.

similar in appearance to a giant fishing-spear pointing into the sky. At that very moment, "I" realize that "I" am already standing at the edge of the forest with a dark ravine – "a path straight to death" – down below (63). When "I" am waiting in a total despair for the guide to come rescue "me," those stories that "I" have heard of people losing their way and dying in the mountains cause "me" bouts of terror, due to which "I" feel as if "I" am a fish struggling in vain while "impaled upon this giant fish-spear" and wonder if a long-awaited "miracle" will occur and change "my" fate (64).

"My" feeling of being "toyed" with and disregarded by nature in chapter 10 takes on a political dimension through another dreadful encounter with the dark forest in chapter 65. Having been refused a visit to a Daoist temple on Wudang Mountain (a closed world in which inhabitants "have their own methods of survival and self-protection and roam beyond the fringes of what is known as society"), "I" walk in dismay down a steep mountain path and reach a secluded valley of primeval forest, which "I" am unable to recall if "I" encountered before (415-6). Dispirited with the prospect of climbing back up "the many steep rock steps I have come down," "I" charge blindly down into the forest, as with those dying people whose souls "probably rush unstoppably to Hell" (416). After reaching a stop, "I" discover "myself" confronting an infernal landscape that features a multitude of what appears to be cows' eyes (they are in fact eye-shaped notches cut by mountain folks as they tap the lacquer trees) coldly observing "me" (416). The scene of "me" exuding fear while being watched can be juxtaposed with the beginning of chapter 65, in which "I" lament going through tiring struggles with the human world to find individual freedom in "my" literary creation. In all discussions, controversies, and debates, "I" have invariably been made the subject of criticism, "made to listen to instructions, made to wait for a verdict" or for some kindly divinity, who, though it

eventually emerges, shows no sympathy to "my" predicament (410). In view of the constant failures – either "my" efforts to voice "my" own opinion or those of "my" friends who argue in "my" defense – "I" begin to relinquish "my" hope and submit to the fact that "[s]uch is my fate" (410).

The reference to "fate" that concludes both of "my" encounters in the dark forest is charged with an overwhelming sense of powerlessness (when confronted with either unruly nature or perilous politics) so that the narrator starts to wonder about an after-death experience that perceivably liberates one from pain and suffering. Accordingly, the end of chapter 65 – when "I" am facing the spine-chilling stare in the lacquer-tree forest that causes "my" "panic, terror, struggling and wild thrashing" – is succeeded by the beginning of chapter 66, in which "you" loiter in a dark forest in bewilderment and notice a strange fishing-spear "pointing at an angle into the grey misty sky" (418).[6] This figure reminds "you" of an earlier image of a branch, which "I" incidentally encounter when losing "my" way in the forest, also in the shape of a giant fishing-spear and with the "path straight to death" down below (c. 10, 80). At this moment, "you" realize that "you" have reached the border between the forest and the valley or, metaphorically, between life and death. In hopes of suffering no more earthly predicaments, as if "you" were a fish skewered to death on a fishing-spear,[7] "you" determine to "discard this last thread to the familiar human world," which teems with poignant memories of "your" past tribulations and run straight down to the bottom of the valley (418).

Having realized that "you" will never return to "the human world with its anxieties and warmth," "you" cannot stop from giving "a loud shout and charging towards this dark River of Forgetting" and feel as if "you" were a newborn coming fearlessly into the world in a state prior

[6] Yucha魚叉 (fishing-spear) in the original Chinese text is translated as "fish skeleton" in Lee's translation.
[7] Yucha魚叉 (fishing-spear) in the original Chinese text is translated as "fishbone" in Lee's translation.

to all sorts of stifling "customs, instructions, rituals and teachings" (418-9).[8] Although "your" shouting turns out to be unheard, "you" are so overjoyed at "your" regained freedom that "you" only sense "a slight trepidation," rather than the paralyzing fear that "I" previously felt from not hearing "my" own voice echoing in the valley (c. 10). When "your" remaining memories of the human world begin to vanish and "your" body disintegrates and disperses till its last gossamer-like thread serenely drifts across the valley, "your" descent into the abyss of death eliminates "your" initial "despair of not belonging" and indulges "you" in an "amazement tinged with joy" (419-20). In the ensuing moment, "you" feel that "you" are sleepwalking across the River of Forgetting with river weeds underfoot and hear heavy sighing and groaning from several women's bodies drifting past, with their hair bedraggled and waxen faces devoid of color. Although "you" recognize these wretched women, who tragically died by drowning themselves in the river during social turbulence, "you" surprisingly have no desire to rescue them, nor even think to rescue "yourself," while indulging in the ecstasy of freedom.

Whereas the erasure of "your" tiresome and painful memories seems to provide "you" with momentary relief, "you" soon detect a lurking uneasiness that "life is not within your grasp" in such a netherworld (420). "You are still breathing because of your bewilderment and life [depends on] one moment to the next of this bewilderment" (420). Following this train of thought, "you" begin to exercise caution when wading across the river in fear of slipping and becoming one of those floating corpses. "You" speculate that "[i]f your feet slip, if the pebbles under your toes start rolling and in your next step you can't touch the bottom, you too will drown

[8] No longer emblematic of the smothering lust as in the previous images of a black sea and the surging tide (c. 21, 129; c. 23, 137), the river in this episode seems to give expression to an existence of weightless freedom that the you-character has never experienced.

in the River of Death like the floating corpses, and you will sigh with them" (420).[9] The rising anxiety causes "you" to apprehend again that the sound of "your" shouting is muffled. The only sound that could be heard in this unnamed space is "the gurgling of the water as it strikes the [empty] holes at the roots of the trees in the river," which propels "you" to wonder: "where do the [empty] holes come from" (420)? Here, Gao plays with the word "kongdong" 空洞 (literally, "empty holes"; in extended use, "sense of emptiness") in order to create semantic ambiguity with two possible interpretations: either "where do the [empty] holes come from?" or where does the sense of emptiness come from (420)?[10] In view of this, the semantic alternative of "kongdong" glosses "your" unwillingness to be one of those drifting corpses and "your" awareness of the pervading silence that constantly punctuates "your" pleasurable reverie about "your" afterlife – a variation of eternal forgetting and being forgotten.

Contrary to the concept of *Lethe* in Greek mythology or *Wangchuan*忘川 (River of Forgetting) in Chinese mythology,[11] both of which represent a rite of passage that the dead undertake to erase memories of their mortal life before reincarnation, the River of Forgetting that "you" experience induces a void of emptiness waiting to be filled or a feeling of loneliness that yearns for a connection to that which "you" have discarded. The image of the River of Forgetting, indicative nominally of a gateway to the painless afterlife that "you" have desired, calls to mind a Buddhist proverb, "kuhai wubian" 苦海無邊, which illustrates a "sea of

[9] "Floating with the crowd" has an exact equivalent in the Chinese expression "suibo zhuliu" 隨波逐流 (literally, "go with the stream," figuratively, "follow the crowd blindly").

[10] *Kongdong* can be used as a noun, literally meaning "empty holes," or as an adjective, literally meaning "empty." In Lee's translation, *kongdong* is translated as "holes," omitting the adjective "empty." To facilitate my discussion, I add back the adjective *kong*, "empty."

[11] *Wangchuan* in Chinese mythology is a river that separates the human world and the underworld. A bridge named *Naihe Qiao* 奈何橋 (Naihe Bridge) is built across the river and guarded by an old lady named *Meng Po*孟婆 (Old Lady Meng) who serves "Meng Po Tang" 孟婆湯 (Meng Po Soup). This soup wipes one's earthly memories so one can be reincarnated into the next life without the burden of one's previous life.

suffering" as a "vast and boundless" watery region with no shores in sight (402-1). By such a maneuver, "your" imagined encounter with "your" mortality in the River of Forgetting denotes that the perpetual oblivion and utter disregard for one's silenced (or unheard) condition – a metonymic and metaphorical trope of death and non-existence – could barely address one's existential crisis except for providing a fleeting moment of relief.

To underline again this profound apprehension about one's annihilated identity and a life bereft of meaning after a clean break from the human world, "you" admit in a playful tone at the end of this chapter that "you," upon hearing "a choir singing a dirge," are not yet ready to accept the far less "wonderful prospect" that "a squirming mass of maggots" would be feeding on "your" rotting corpse (421). Symbolically, this bit of dry humor implies "your" reservation about bracing "yourself" for a state of total meaninglessness – silence, invisibility, and oblivion – to alleviate existential crisis (421).[12] Seen in this light, "your" encounter in the unnamed valley and the River of Forgetting, where "you" feel liberated from the burden of memories and earthly responsibilities, merely offers "you" an illusory refuge.

III. A Transcendent World of Ice and Snow

Following "your" defeat in pursuit of a promised land for self-preservation in the afterlife, "you" resort to the ancient ideal of withdrawal from the public sphere to a private space (literally and/or figuratively) during times of turbulence for mental cultivation and transcending worldly troubles. In a somewhat self-contained episode (c. 70), two anonymous discussants are

[12] Thomas Moran points out that this episode echoes chapter ninety-eight of Wu Cheng'en 吳承恩 (1500-1582)'s masterwork, Xiyouji西遊記 *The Journey to the West*. Upon the successful completion of the journey, the Buddha ferries the five pilgrims up the Divine Cloud-Transcending Stream, which rushes down the slopes of Lingshan靈山 ("Mount Spirit" or "Soul Mountain"). When Xuanzang was terrified when catching sight of a corpse floating down the stream, the Buddha's companion reassures him, saying, "Don't be afraid, Master, […] It's actually you!" Thomas Moran, "Lost in the Woods: Nature in 'Soul Mountain,'" *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Fall 2002), 228. Wu Cheng'en, *Journey to the West*, Vol. 4, trans. Anthony Yu (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 382-4.

engaging in an artistic conversation about a scroll painting by the late Ming literati-painter Gong Xian龔賢 (1619-1689), which depicts a snow-swept landscape with only a "wooden bridge on the river overlook[ing] the clear stream and solitary hut" in the foreground. Across the spectrum of his lifetime of artistic endeavors, Gong projects his ideals of beauty, serenity, and infinity on nature and discovers in both its outer form and inner vitality an artistic medium for self-expression. Through this medium, he can preserve his "natural sensuousness" that not only "exists with mountains, rivers, plants and trees" but also "comes into existence together with life" (444). Attributed to his refined sensibility to nature, Gong's painting presents the viewers with a harmonious coexistence of "signs of human existence" and natural setting so "boundless to the point of forgetting one's existence" (444).

According to the time-honored tradition of Chinese literati painting, artists incline to bridge together their perceptive observation of natural surroundings and their personal reflection on earthly affairs. In the decades following the political changeover that occurred with the Manchu conquest of China in 1644, Gong gradually distanced himself from the group of loyalists (known as the Ming *yimin*遗民 "the remnant subject"), who retained a despairing attachment to (or indulged in the nostalgic idealization of) the bygone dynasty, and reconciled himself to the causes of the Ming's collapse that primarily included governmental incompetence and societal disruption. Having acknowledged the dynastic overthrow as inevitable, Gong did not celebrate the established new Kingship of Qing – an opportunistic move at the time – to maintain social status or gain preferment in officialdom. Instead, Gong withdrew far away into the wilderness, "a remote corner," and became a *yimin*逸民 (a subject who has fled or lived as a recluse, a homophonous term with "the remnant subject"), who eked out a simple life through

teaching and farming (445).[13] In so doing, Gong not only lodged his feelings of despair and trauma in nature, a properly dignified and aesthetically pleasing place, but, more importantly, managed to find freedom and rejuvenation in rural solitude.

Accompanied by his adoption of a recluse's attitude in response to the changing circumstances, his "poetics of loss and defiance," as Jonathan Hay insightfully observes, Gong also moved on to a new "terrain."[14] Specifically, Gong radically shifted from cramming his artworks with dystopian expression of the "utter disruption of his life," such as turbulent compositions, to restoring classic compositional rules in pursuit of more stability and monumentality.[15] As stated by the two discussants in chapter 70, Gong chose not to rely on haughty contempt, religious belief, or feigned madness,[16] like many of his contemporary painters when facing the invincible world. Rather, he created in his artworks an alternate reality – a *huanjing*幻境 (an "illusory state"[17]) – so as to preserve "the totality of his being" in a desired communion between the subjectivity of the painter and the allure of the natural world (446).

Gong's snow-swept painting, in which the recluse's abode forms a striking contrast to the winter blankness, provides a visual representation of a widely known essay, *huxinting kanxue* 湖心亭看雪 (Viewing Snow at Lake-heart Pavilion), by his contemporary, the writer Zhang Dai. Seen from the vantage point that Zhang's narrator adopted, the human viewers (including himself) were diminished by the vast expanse of whiteness and appeared as infinitesimal as a

[13] Jonathan Hay, "Posttraumatic Art: Painting by Remnant Subjects of the Ming," *The Artful Recluse: Painting, Poetry, and Politics in Seventeenth-Century China*, ed. Peter Sturman and Susan Tai (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2012), 80.

[14] Jonathan Hay, "The Suspension of Dynastic Time," *Boundaries in China* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), 193.

[15] Ibid.

[16] When the I-narrator visits Shaoxing, he also places Xu Wei's alleged madness under scrutiny and demystifies such an eccentric disposition that has historically been celebrated and ascribed to genius.

[17] Lynn A. Struve, *The Dreaming Mind and the End of the Ming World* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2019), 142.

speck of grass or a grain of seed. After Zhang's narrator switches his perspective back down to the pavilion on the lake, a convivial scene is rendered where he delighted in an invitation to drink wine with a sightseer as idiosyncratic as he was. Similar to the aura of dreaminess filtered through Gong's painting, the ability of Zhang's narrator to observe his own presence from beyond himself suggests likewise an attempt to escape from the perpetual flow of time into an atemporal ideal realm – the vastness and serenity of the wintry landscape – in opposition to the actual world "which had gone mad" (445).[18] In the snow scenes in both Gong and Zhang's works, the dream state, "as a veiling or encompassing conceit," concerns itself with a manner of self-preservation by which the agonized literati during the Ming-Qing transition can "maintain psychological connection to lost times, places, or persons" and "distance their consciousness from the present, unacceptable world of social and political affairs."[19]

Even so, the atmosphere of tranquil stability and optimism pervading Gong's landscape painting may hold more significance than meets the eye. In rereading the conversation in chapter 70, a detail emerges that breaches the state of harmony in Gong's artwork: one discussant describes the painter's mental state (after his retreat from the center of the political storm to calming nature on the world's periphery) as having immersed in "yige qingming de meng" 一個清明的夢 (a realm of lucid dream). That is, the dreamers are aware of their action of dreaming and maintain, in some way, an outsider's perspective beyond their own dream. Additionally, Gong's brushworks seem to corroborate such a waking consciousness because the resplendent

[18] Apart from the common admiration of nature represented in both Gong and Zhang's works, Zhang's narrator is additionally enraptured by engaging people who share his idiosyncratic mindset. On this quality that Zhang espoused as quintessential to the formation of his imagined community, Philip Kafalas offers an insightful discussion in his monograph on Zhang Dai's oeuvre (see chapter 6, "Presence and Apparition, Acting and Artifice"). Philip Kafalas, *In Limpid Dream: Nostalgia and Zhang Dai's Reminiscences of the Ming* (Manchester: Camphor Press, 2007).

[19] Struve, *The Dreaming Mind*, 200.

dreamscape, emblematic of an eventual self-transcendence through imagined connectivity and union with nature, is encircled by inscrutable "darkness," though nearly invisible, at the edges of the painting (444). As the conversation indicates, this artistic treatment disrupts the picturesque fantasy and likely conveys Gong's self-doubt on the validity of the transcendental vision of the harmonious coexistence of mankind with nature.[20] From this perspective, the romantic conviction that views nature as perhaps the most essential means to nurture one's selfhood, and which sustains the Ming remnants' hopes in the face of adversity, now verges on an uncritical assurance as to the wisdom of self-preservation.[21]

It should be noted that a space of self-imposed exile in the wilderness underlies the appeal of Gong's representation of nature. In his thorough examination of two paired concepts in Chinese cultural history, *chao*朝 (literally, the court; in extended use: the space of central power) versus *ye* 野 (literally, the wilderness; metaphorically, the periphery), Jonathan Hay rightly points out that the "wilderness was inherently political" and has historically been associated with the exile experience. Whether the exile in question was physical or mental (or both), "it more fundamentally referred to a self-displacement of consciousness – a disengagement from the sphere of political authority."[22]

[20] In fact, after being refused to visit the Daoist temple (Palace of Supreme Purity), the I-narrator explicitly admits that "[i]t is also impossible for me to be a recluse. [...] in the end, I am just a connoisseur of beauty" (c. 65, 410-11).

[21] In fact, this kind of uncritical self-assurance is suggested in a few places as the conversation progresses. As the two discussants are exchanging ideas about the artistic style of literati painters in Ming and Qing dynasties, one discussant points out that the "lofty purity" embedded in Zheng Banqiao's鄭板橋 (1693-1765) painting of bamboo has been misinterpreted ("destroyed") by later generations as a symbol with which they can compensate for their frustrations with unrealized ambitions (445). Interestingly, these two discussants fall into the same pitfall (by perhaps failing to realize their own artistic ambitions). At the end of their conversation, they show an apparent lack of concern toward the painting's authenticity. That is, the painting is authentic as long as "you and I *think* we have seen *his* work" (446, italics mine).

[22] Hay, "Posttraumatic Art: Painting by Remnant Subjects of the Ming," 80.

The crippling sorrow of homelessness and estrangement in exile, which in Gong's case could range from the unappeasable shame of failure to meet obligation as a Ming loyalist to the implicit regret of abandoning his scholar-official career due to his refusal to serve the new regime, is not expressly revealed until the very end of the novel. In chapter 80, Gao envisions another wintry scene – a mountain formed of snow and ice, where "you" experience the final death throes and an assured rebirth – which evidently alludes to Gao's own exilic experience, as he fled imminent political persecution in China and eventually put down roots in foreign soil.[23] The chapter opens with a scene in which "you" struggle to walk toward the snow-covered mountain against the flow of the glacier. Enclosed by crystal ruins and gasping for air, "you" find that "your brain has already frozen so that you can't think, everything is almost blank" except for "some indefinite blurred images created by shadows – they don't tell anything, have no meaning, are a stretch of deathly loneliness" (501). The sight of such a world of ice and snow exempt from fear and anxieties – a state of existence "you have been aspiring to reach" – fills "you" nonetheless not so much with comfort as pain that "you" feel in "your" lungs (501).

Upon seeing a bald eagle "circling in the valley of ice below your feet," "you" seem to reincarnate into this form of life and then assume its flight capability (502). "[Spiralling] upwards […] between life and death" in a vast silence, "you" believe that "you" have heard a faint sound of tinkling bells from the direction of a woman riding on a horse, against the background of the gloomy icy ravine, and enticingly smiling at "you." Exerting "yourself" strenuously not to walk toward her (and again fall into that icy ravine), the sound of tinkling, which was barely audible, now "sticks in your mind" and causes "an agonizing, searing pain in

[23] As Mabel Lee remarks in her introduction to *Soul Mountain*, in a conventional society non-conformists can survive by feigning madness or remaining in a dream state in order to achieve freedom, transcendence, and self-realization in literary and artistic creation. However, in twentieth-century China these options were eroded (vii). Therefore, as a modern writer, Gao is left with no choice but to flee to a foreign country.

your lungs and stomach, your heart pulsates wildly, chaotically, and your brain is about to explode" (503).

As the pain increases, "you" realize that "you are still crawling" (503). Meanwhile, "you" still retain "vague hope, refusal to be extinguished" and thus experience difficulty in parting with those ephemeral fragments of "your" past, while the pain-inducing sound of tinkling bells – reminiscent of "your" distant memories and indistinct longings – has faded (503). Before long, "you" are compelled again to "swirl around upside-down, float backwards, lose the ability to control yourself" and, as an explosion occurs, "you" are enclosed in "a never before experienced limpidity, a totality of purity and freshness" (503). The last piece of "your" body, reminiscent of the earlier thread of gossamer drifting across the valley (c. 66, 419), carries "no physical burdens and no rashness," grows smaller "but increasingly clear," until it metamorphoses into countless "minute points of light" (503). When "you" finally stop breathing and "reach the extremity of life," a solidified sound rings in "your" ear at the edge of the dark silence, which "gradually expands, spreads and sparkling crystals of sound penetrate your body" (503). The force pushes "you" toward a high tide of "pure spirituality" that ultimately culminates in the cessation of suffering and the emergence of a transcendental rebirth (503).

The thunderous crescendo of the sustained sound precipitates another exploding blast that, unexpectedly, thrusts "you" from "your" dream into reality where "[i]n the darkness, in the corner of the room, the line of bright red lights on your tape recorder is flashing" (504).[24] Contrary to the celebratory mood that "you" previously erupted into upon the completion of "your" rebirth, which absolved "you" from "your" anguished past life, "you" now relish "your"

[24] Gao has been known for speaking into a tape recorder while drafting his text, with a keen eye to the musical quality of his language. Mabel Lee, "Gao Xingjian's Transcultural Aesthetics in Fiction, Theater, Art, and Film," *Polyphony Embodied – Freedom and Fate in Gao Xingjian's Writings*, ed. Michael Lackner and Nikola Chardonnens (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 28.

recovered bodily senses, such as heart palpitations and physical pain, as vital signs of "your" "physical form" and "living body" which would have been annihilated (504). No longer preoccupied with a spiritual rebirth toward an ontological renewal, "you" suggest a more sensible pathway toward a redefinition of the self. Such a path leads also to a reintegration into the new world where "life is fragile, yet to obstinately struggle is natural" (503). If one reads "your" rises and falls in the icy purgatory as an allegorical tale of the writer in exile, "your" disillusioned view of transcendental bliss in the cycle of rebirth can be read as casting doubt on the exilic prospect that exiles can reach an ultimate solution to suffering by taking nourishment from and re-anchoring themselves in new soil.

In continuity with "your" being "reborn" back to reality, "I" am facing a view of snow outside a window and a small green frog with "one eye blinking and the other wide open, unmoving, looking at me. I know this is God" (c. 81, 505). Seeing the frog's eye that "opens and closes as it speaks a language incomprehensible to humans," "I" seem to have received a message from God that "maybe there is no meaning at all in this blinking eye, but its significance could lie precisely in its not having meaning" (505). Upon receiving the God-sent message, which indicates that "miracles" performed by a divine power do not exist and denies inherent purpose or significance to life in all forms,[25] "I," as one of the insatiable human beings, catch sight of the tranquil view of snow outside the window, a reiteration of Gong Xian's picturesque snowscape, in which "[a]ll around is silence, snow is falling soundlessly. […] In Heaven it is peaceful like this" (506).[26] Such a nihilistic scene, which contains neither joy nor anxiety and

[25] Similarly, when the I-narrator was lost, he desperately waited for the "miracle" to come (c. 10, 81).

[26] The narrator's keen awareness of "silence" – an equivalent of oblivion, annihilation, or death – runs throughout the entire novel and invariably disturbs his peace of mind. In the earlier conversation about Gong's snowscape painting, one discussant also points out that "[t]here is such tranquillity one can almost hear the snow falling. It seems audible and yet is soundless" (c. 70, 444).

exists in silence, appears to have addressed "my" overriding concern in terms of the plausible solution to resolve an existential crisis.

Subsequent to "my" self-reflection regarding "where I am at this moment" and "where this realm of Heaven comes from," the last few lines of the final chapter break abruptly from the nihilistic ambience which defies attempts at significance and interpretation by any means. The novel concludes with a series of enigmatic soliloquies (504). That is, however much "I" deny knowing and comprehending anything (or admit to pretending to do so), "my" awareness of "a mysterious eye" always behind "my" back betrays an unappeasable urge to know and comprehend everything (506). Accompanied by such a change of mind, "I" cast doubt on the wisdom that has been imparted to "me" in all the preceding wintry scenes – whether Gong Xian's dream state displayed in his snowscape painting, "your" prospect of achieving a transcendent rebirth in the icy purgatory, or the blank snow scene outside "my" study's window – which are all revealed to be provisional, contingent, and uncertain upon further inquiries. In this light, the end of *Soul Mountain* concerns itself not with a nihilistic attempt to trivialize the value of any quest for certainty but rather presents a disguised skepticism toward the attainability of an ultimate solution to the human crisis.

To further decode this puzzling ending and to understand *Soul Mountain* in its entirety, another kind of wintry sentiment, Edward Said's "mind of winter," may provide readers with valuable insight into the mind of Gao as a modern writer in exile.[27] Said's vision of winter is a remarkable tribute to the poem "The Snow Man" by Wallace Stevens, which promotes a change of perspective from objectivity, invariability, and universality to subjectivity, mutability, and

[27] Said, "Reflections on Exile," 186.

diversity.[28] In his poem, when facing the wintry view that has progressively been stereotyped as a metaphor for desolation and lifelessness, Stevens encourages readers to adjust their fixed perspective, through which the winter landscape can also have a touch of optimism and vitality. Although not immediately associated with an exilic condition, Stevens's poem has become an allegory upon which Said builds a template for the literary imagination in exile. For Said, instead of projecting one's own emotions onto the wintry landscape, the exilic writer learns to view the world from a distance, beholding the "nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."[29] This unique perspective confers upon the viewer an ability to acquire a "mind of winter," namely, a supreme – if bittersweet – assertion of the will.[30] Cold and indifferent as it might seem, the "mind of winter" shows a mark of persistence and fortitude with which the exilic writer is granted freedom to move from place to place and to bid farewell wherever possible, without being emotionally attached or entrapped, to pursue greater, farther, and more permanent things than his present existence.[31]

In light of the Saidian "mind of winter," which enriches the notion of wintry coldness by foregrounding the vigorous attempts to wrestle with ideologies deeply ingrained in the mind of the exilic writer, the message of coldness delivered by the enigmatic end of *Soul Mountain* is merely employed to disguise the narrator's persistent refusal of any established beliefs and assumptions. Quite coincidentally, Gao Xingjian, who shares with Said the status of an exile, coins the term "Cold Literature" as his ideal form of literature, one that resists being "strangled

[28] Wallace Stevens, "The Snow Man," *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 9. This poem is an expression of the poet's notion of "Perspectivism," a view that perception, experience, and reason change according to the viewer's relative perspective and interpretation. It rejects the idea of an unchanging and essential world accessible to neutral representation by a disembodied subject. Horst Czichos, *The World is Triangular* (Basel: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 57.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Rebecca Ruth Gould, "A Mind of Winter: Notes on Exile," *The Critical Flame*, Issue 64, (Sep 2020) http://criticalflame.org/a-mind-of-winter-notes-on-exile/.

[31] Ibid.

by society in its quest for spiritual salvation."[32] Standing in opposition to moral obligation, political impetus, socio-cultural constraint, and commercial manipulation, this "non-utilitarian literature" can only serve as "the voice of the individual." As "purely a matter of the individual," Gao continues to specify, "[o]nce literature is contrived as the hymn of the nation, the flag of the race, the mouthpiece of a political party, or the voice of a class or group, it can be employed as an all-engulfing tool of propaganda. Such literature loses what is inherent in literature, ceases to be literature, and becomes a substitute for power and profit."[33] In other words, only through implementing the notion of "Cold Literature" can the writer preserve his intellectual freedom and artistic purity and recover literature's "innate character."

To reclaim a personal voice and achieve a "spiritual salvation," Gao stresses the significance of a writer's "willingness to be lonely." Due to this loneliness, the writer must remain on the margins of society, cast a detached gaze with "a pair of cold eyes" toward both the social reality and his inner being, and write independently of any extraliterary factors which are superfluous to literature itself. Of critical importance is that the writer's adoption of this peripheral position distinguishes itself fundamentally from the attitude of aloofness and avoidance toward the world – a passive state of withdrawal that gained great popularity among Gao's recluse predecessors in the early modern times. Rather, this marginal existence calls for unremitting endeavors of "fleeing" from the center of society.[34] The escaping body not only offers the writer an opportunity to physically disentangle himself from his immediate surroundings but also lends him a constantly refreshed perspective from which the writer can

[32] The text of Gao's Nobel Prize speech can be found at https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2000/gao/lecture/. See also in Gao Xingjian, "Cold Literature," *The Case For Literature*, trans. Mabel Lee (New Haven: Yale University Press), 78-81.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.

(re)position himself in relation to the world and can (re)investigate his own self. Given the socio-cultural context in China at the time, Gao's manifest interest in such a 'disinterestedness' proves particularly important because it actively resists any ideological regulations and therefore clears a path to defending or restoring his freedom of thought and expression.

As one of the key notions that establishes Gao's political stance and aesthetic philosophy, such "coldness" also illuminates the narrator's extraordinary encounters in *Soul Mountain*. In reconsidering the narrator's uncanny experiences discussed in this chapter (whether his return to hometown, his reach beyond the end of life, or his settlement in a foreign country), readers can hardly overlook that those dreams are invariably interrupted on the verge of their fulfilment, almost without exception, by the narrator's waking consciousness. More precisely, the dreams are interrupted by an attitude of coldness that refuses to indulge in the sustenance and solace provided by mind-calming and spirit-lifting scenarios. Crucially, it is not in spite of, but because of, this alienated perception that the narrator can probe his own internal existential state, which would otherwise be untraceable and undefinable, through a distanced perspective from outside of his existence while also remaining within himself. By virtue of such a "cold" introspection, the narrator loses enchantment with his reassuring fantasies, which have likely been masquerading as his unconscious truths, and can eventually see with greater clarity both the outer world and his inner being.

## Chapter Three

### The Digressive Storyteller

Although the novel is titled after a named place, Soul Mountain, which the walking narrator hopes to reach at the end of his journey, he dismisses the significance of moving toward a presupposed destination. A prominent example occurs at the beginning of chapter 68: "you" are climbing mountains and feel exhausted when approaching each peak. Although "you always think it is the last time" with every summit, "your" desire to climb mountains resurges when "your" weariness vanishes and the exhilaration of reaching the peak subsides (435). Invariably drawn to the sight of the "rising and falling lines of the peaks in the hazy distance" and the prospect that a "mountain beyond will have things you haven't encountered," "you" are not greeted by "your" envisioned wonders when "you" eventually arrive at the peak but merely by "the lonely mountain wind" (435). Having realized the ultimate futility of "your" efforts, "[a]fter some time you get used to this loneliness and climbing peaks becomes an obsession," during which "you" would need to "have some distraction" and achieve this by "fabricat[ing] stories for yourself" (435). Accordingly, the act of mountain climbing can be seen as a spatial metaphor for "your" internal state, and "your" way gives form to "your" narrative by means of stretching imagination and unearthing memories.

Corresponding to the individual experiences that stand against the stereotyped impressions aligned with the peripheral areas that "I" have walked past, the reader can discern that the significance of "your" journey consists less of the anticipated mountain-top view or any physical location than of those passing moments of restless searching and exploring. In spite of

the disheartening fact that the destination remains elusive in the novel, every step moves "you" along the path toward a discovery of the self and the world. "Your" persistent attempts to climb up those mountains is visualized all at once in the carnivalesque deconstruction of a legendary figure, Grandpa Stone, which forms one of the "fabricated stories" born from "your" imagination when "you" are climbing mountains (435). First introduced to "me" by a Qiang villager at the beginning of the novel (c. 2), Grandpa Stone was reputed to be a masterful hunter in the Qiang tribe and an expert versed in mountain magic that drives wild animals into pits and snares. Although known as being long-deceased, his death has never been verified because, according to the local legend, he lives in a solitary hut in the mountain the route to which has been barricaded for decades. In claiming that Grandpa Stone "has become history, real history," the Qiang man assures "me" that despite the high humidity in the mountain, Grandpa Stone's corpse has not rotted and he "just lies there all stiff and emaciated" (14, 15). His rust-free rifle hangs above his head on the wall, and wild animals do not dare come near. It is also at this moment that "I" detect "a cunning streak" in the Qiang man's eyes and realize that for the tribal community, Grandpa Stone has likely been converted into "a mixture of history and legend" (15).

On account of his shooting expertise and knowledge of miraculous incantations, the figure of Grandpa Stone exemplifies courage and wisdom to overcome fear in the face of life-threatening danger in the mountains. His position of authority depends additionally on his immortality in the form of the undecayed corpse and rust-free rifle. While the cultural belief that Grandpa Stone, as a heroic guardian, wards off misfortune and danger to protect local villagers has been preserved and steadily passed down through generations, no one can summon enough courage to go hear him. More believably, the allegedly invincible Grandpa Stone has been culturally transformed from a figure of a revered guardian into a source of another kind of fear:

an unchallenged supremacy that tolerates no question or challenge to his authority. All his supernatural traits as previously discussed – such as his marksmanship, black magic, and immortality – converge to create an image of him as a supreme leader who enforces his ruling order.

As influential as the figure of Grandpa Stone may be among the Qiang tribe, this firmly entrenched cultural belief can hardly be related to "me" as an outsider, just as the wooden talisman, the "old root," would only perform miracles for the local hunter and "wouldn't be of any use" for "me" (13). In pursuing "my" inquiries about this tribal legend, "you" intrude into Grandpa Stone's hut by accident (after experiencing the unnamed valley and River of Forgetting in chapter 66) and eventually confront him. Sitting on a wooden bed that could have crumbled with a touch, Grandpa stone is staring straight at "you" with his deeply sunken eyes. His rifle, "[o]iled with bear fat which has turned to black grease [and having] no rust on it," hangs above his head on the wall as if it were still in use (436). As a move to verify the legend's authenticity, "you" carefully reach out for his rifle but, to "your" astonishment, "it crumbles as if it had been fried to a crisp" (437). Cascading disasters immediately occur: a thunder clap resounds overhead, countless white bats shriek and fly, huge boulders roll down the mountain, and the cliff completely collapses. Whereas this catastrophic outburst "turn[ing] the whole mountain into smoke and dust" may well have been intended by the Heavenly Court and mountain divinities as a punishment for "you," an unbelieving intruder who attempts to question the authority, it also, symbolically, leads to the eventual collapse of this mythological belief, which has been systematically formed, maintained, and institutionalized (437).

Both instances of Grandpa Stone's occurrence – "my" skepticism about the veracity and verifiability of the tribal history allegedly preserved in this legend (c. 2) and "your" intrusion into

Grandpa Stone's hut which triggers the explosive disintegration of the mountain (c. 68) – concentrate on the perennial struggle with the predicament generated by a dominant cultural expectation versus the individual's will to interpret history. The spectacle of a destructive earthquake serves additionally to echo Gao's artistic attitude, which defies all pre-determined principles of cognition, ideology, and aesthetic, in order to avoid a sense of entanglement or entrapment by collective appeals. In fact, the writerly struggle with established principles of literary creation that hold sway over individual artistic choices is overtly presented in a conversation between a literary critic and a writer ("he"), who apparently assumes Gao's perspective (c. 72).[1] The "basic common knowledge for writing fiction," the critic upholds, is to "first foreshadow, build to a climax, then have a conclusion" (452). In keeping with this standard, the critic finds fault with "his" novel because the stories that "he" told, "some with endings and others without," are "all fragments without any sequence" to organize and connect them (452). Contrarily, "he" shows suspicion about the necessity of complying with the critic's definition of "fiction" or any fixed model for literary creation. However non-linear, incomplete, desultory, less developed, or fragmentary some writings appear to be, they, from "his" perspective, should all be regarded legitimate as stories (452).

Whereas "he" defends "himself" against the critic's charge that "he" only writes to disperse loneliness and "to amuse himself," "he," after the critic departs, is compelled to ruminate further upon the aesthetic criteria for fictional writing (453). Except for a bombardment of self-directed questions ("Is it the narrative? Or is it the mode of narration? […] Or is it not in the language but whether the language is interesting?"), "his" feeling "confused and uncertain" about "what it is that is critical in fiction" is made apparent in a rambling, punctuation-free

[1] Although the identity of the writer "he" remains obscure, it may likely be the he-character in the key-search series (c. 62 and 64), in which "he" dreads a meeting within a literary circle.

paragraph that extends over thirty-five lines: "[…] he is intrigued with using language to talk about women about men about love about sex about life about death […] it is impossible to arbitrate this as truth about the fallibility of experience which is only a crutch about falling if one has to fall about revolutionary fiction which smashes superstitious belief in literature about a revolution in fiction about revolutionizing fiction" (454-5). "His" painstaking contemplation, however, produces no solution to the writerly crisis in the face of the entrenched beliefs and principles of literary creation. The aesthetic arbitrariness forced on the writer is mockingly mirrored by an arbitrary statement given in the concluding sentence of this chapter: "Reading this chapter is optional but as you've read it you've read it" (455).

Utter liberation with respect to artistic creation is presented as a ritualistic festival in the immediately following chapter (c. 74). The chapter begins with "you" hearing from "them" and "her" about a Daoist temple, inside a crack in a cliff and invisible in the daytime, where Daoist priests and nuns hold their secret ceremonies at night. In expectation of a spectacle of hundreds of men and women singing, dancing, and wailing "as they went into trances of ecstasy and hysteria," "you" head into the mountain and stumble on the said Daoist temple in a cave (464). Permitted by a Daoist master to spend the night, "you" are drawn to the faint sounds of bells tinkling and women chanting upstairs, which, as "you" surmise, come from one of those bizarre ceremonies. Though curious, "you" restrain "yourself" from leaving the room and, as an image of a sedately seated young nun arises in front of "you," pray for "your" soul to have peace. As if "your" prayer has been answered, "you" wake up the next morning to an empty hall with neither the Daoist statues nor the incense tables that "you" noticed the night before. Only a huge mirror

faces the entrance "you" came in by. The reflection of the blue sky in a mirror brings "you" to "a silent halt" (468).[2]

The contrast between "your" initial desire for a liberating experience in the Daoist temple and the eventual acceptance of "a silent halt" (also referred to by "you" the previous night as a soul in peace) corresponds to a writerly struggle with standing up to dominant aesthetic values. Such a lingering agony takes on an ethical dimension in the latter half of the same chapter, when "you" meet a mute child on "your" way back from the Daoist temple. Out of sympathy for him, who reminds "you" of "your" own once-abandoned child, "you" carry him for some distance. Upon realizing that this child can be a burden, "you" decide to leave him where "you" found him, run off "like a fugitive criminal," and dare not to look back even if there seems to be sobbing behind "you" (470). "Your" palpable guilt when wrestling with the commitment to save the mute child, who is likely to talk again, suggests a writer's excessive burden to comply with the deeply ingrained norms and concepts of literary creation.

A writer's feeling of being at the crossroad between being a conformist (such as the critic) and being a non-conformist (such as the writer "he") would affect their literary endeavor in general terms, but it may weigh particularly heavily on a writer's mind when dealing with traumatic experiences. Two stories about female victims of political upheaval are aptly arranged in two chapters before and after the above-mentioned chapter 74. In chapter 73, an unnamed lesbian woman invites "me" to dinner in hopes that "I" could write a fiction based on her girlfriend, who endured unjust treatment during the Cultural Revolution. Adhering precisely to

[2] In fact, what "they," "she," and "you" have experienced at the temple alludes to an encounter by the fisherman in Tao Qian's 陶潛 (365-427) *Taohua yuan ji* 桃花源記 (The Peach Blossom Spring), who entered an idyllic grotto by accident but failed to locate it again. The main plot of the story is as follows: once upon a time, a fisherman entered a grotto by accident and was warmly received by the villagers, who knew nothing about the outside world (dynastic change, political turmoil, etc.). Upon leaving, he was warned not to reveal this experience to the world. However, he marked his route on his way out with signs and later divulged the existence of this place to others. When others searched for the grotto, however, they failed to find it again.

the critic's espoused narrative "method" that consists of foreshadowing, climax, and conclusion, the woman relates that the girl was reported by her enemy as having an anti-revolutionary agenda (she wrote in her diary about missing her father, a military officer of the Nationalist Party who fled to Taiwan after the civil war), imprisoned afterward, and shot to death by the guards during an escape attempt. However, this heart-stricken tale strikes "me" as only repeating "one of those old stories" (459). "I don't want to hear anymore and just want her to quickly finish the story" (462). Metaphorically echoing such a trite narrative, the seafood at dinner appears to "me" as "strong-smelling," "pil[ed] into my bowl," "not fresh," "disgusting," and which even leads to "an attack of vomiting and diarrhea" later that night (463). Even the woman is seen through "my" eyes as "past the best years of her life" and "devoid of feminine grace" (456, 457).

Another girl's distressing tragedy within the same social context is rendered inconclusively but more powerfully in chapter 75. On the train from Shanghai to Beijing (toward the end of "my" journey), "I" recall that "my" uncle, once a military officer, departed for a mission to "observe" faraway islands during the political turmoil and suddenly lost contact with everyone afterward (475). As an alternative to revealing what he had "observed," "I" turn aside to remember that "I" "observed" at a station (ironically named "Clear Brilliance") a political fugitive being dragged off the train and viciously beaten by leftist fighters. Rather than disclosing his fate – "if the person died or got away with his life" – "my" narrative swerves to an astonishing scene by the same railway tracks of a young woman's naked corpse cut neatly by the train wheels, around which "[b]loody strips of flesh were strewn all over the place […] and the air was thick with the stench of blood" (475, 476). The appalling condition of the body not only attests to the fact that "her heart would already have been dead, so being alive wasn't any better than being dead" but also intimates the untold fate of "my" uncle and the fugitive amid political

storms which, metaphorically, resemble the earth that had gone "crazy and was shaking endlessly" as the train violently jolts to a stop (477, 476).

Whereas the dismembered female corpse evidences the then unspeakable cruelty and suffering inflicted on human beings, a subtle change occurs in "my" narrative tone when the "healthy young woman's body" is portrayed as sensuously appealing as "a broken alabaster statue with the lustre of skin" (476). Additionally, "I" refrain from probing into the girl's ambiguous identity, who could either be a sent-down youth or a local peasant,[3] or into the undetermined cause of her death, whether suicide or accident. The emotional avoidance is made more apparent as "I" admit at the end of this episode that "I don't have the courage of that woman and I have not reached a state of utter despair, I am still seduced by the human world, I still haven't lived enough" (477). Following "my" several attempts to pull "myself" away from confronting the traumatic event, "I" dismember "my" narrative in the same manner as the female corpse was cut by train wheels.

The inconclusive narrative provides an inkling of the internal struggle between one's moral considerations and survival instinct. The untamed self-serving mentality, as "I" reckon, precipitates the escalation of the Cultural Revolution from an intra-party conflict to a national disaster that traumatized the country for a decade. The disastrous outcome of such mentality receives a vivid representation in "my" narrative (between the scenes of the political fugitive and of the girl's corpse) as an infernal spectacle of refugees cramming onto trains. The refugees who scramble to climb through open windows into the carriages turn immediately hostile to their

[3] The "sent-down youth," also known as Zhishiqingnian or Zhiqing (知識青年or知青), refers to millions of urban youth who were forced out of cities and exiled to rural villages (from the 1950s until the end of the Cultural Revolution) as part of the political movement, Shangshanxiaxiang 上山下鄉 (Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement), to receive "re-education" from working peasants. The vast majority of them had only received an elementary to high school education. During their settlement in the countryside, many youths died from harsh living, unjust treatment, and political oppression.

former fellow refugees by shutting the windows. Those left behind on the railway platform hail down a barrage of stones on the departing train, "along with a cacophony of swearing, smashing and screaming" (476). Although both parties – people inside and outside the carriage – may believe that "they are suffering for their faith," to "my" mind, they seem to act in their own best interest, whether political or practical (476).

Such moral reflection on the role of an individual amidst collective chaos is missing altogether from the woman's narrative of her girlfriend. As "I" suggest, although the totalitarian party should be held accountable for destroying a beautiful, innocent girl, what leads to her final destruction was more likely the sheer betrayal and abandonment by her entire family and perhaps the woman herself, who may have regarded herself as the girl's 'guardian angel.' When "I" interrupt the woman by questioning their roles in the girl's perishing ("Are you saying that everyone informed on her and exposed her, even her mother and uncle?"), the woman evades the discussion of her own actions and digresses to tell how she was mistreated by the girl's family (461). Although "I" can relate to her self-justifying impulse – "[i]t was the way things were (family and friends denounce against each other) in those times" – "I" turn inward to consider that "[i]f this had happened to me at that time I wouldn't necessarily have been more level-headed" (461). Having realized this, "I" find that "[i]t isn't just the strong-smelling crab marinated in brine which is disgusting, it's also me" (461). Seen in this light, it is precisely due to the manifestation of "my" moral tension (in this episode and in the account of "my" observation by the railway tracks) that the reader can become aware of the underlying cause of the trauma and adversity at the time. By comparison, the woman's lack of self-reflective capacity reduces her storytelling to a hackneyed attempt to simplify and sanitize a complicated reality into a bland melodrama.

Aside from the moral inadequacy and artistic banality, "my" disgust toward the woman's storytelling assumes a political dimension. Her story about a victim of political persecution distinctly befits one of the main literary stereotypes, *shanghen wenxue* 傷痕文學 (Scar Literature), in the post-Cultural Revolution era. Reflecting on the man-made disaster, writers of "Scar Literature" strove to reveal individuals' traumatic experiences, rebuke political tyranny, and restore people's faith in humanity before ushering in a new era.[4] As a literary space in which survivors at the time could work through their psychological trauma and ideological uneasiness, works of "Scar Literature" were rapidly embraced by readers and literary critics for their redemptive value and therapeutic capacity. In spite of that, "Scar Literature" was later criticized for its historical naivety and political rhetoric, which remain essentially unchanged compared to the Maoist utopian vision. Through his narrator's response to the woman's story, Gao urges the reader to scrutinize the authenticity of such testimonial literature: whether it can bear witness to – if not bearing witness against – historical events as unthinkable and unrepresentable as was the Cultural Revolution? And if so, to what extent?

Before considering the testimonial reliability of "Scar Literature," it is worth pausing to discuss the undeniable effectiveness of the woman's mental process of working through her trauma because "the dead girl clearly weighs heavily in her heart" (458). To address such a psychological burden, the underlying dynamic between her repressed traumatic memories and the incessant return of the "unconscious" mind propels her narrative toward a desired end: to fully disclose the ill-treatment, torture, and death inflicted on her girlfriend and to bring a long-

[4] Shortly after Mao Zedong's毛澤東 (1893-1976) death and the fall of the ultra-leftist "Gang of Four," a Maoist political faction composed of four Communist Party officials: Jiang Qing江青(1914-1991), Zhang Chunqiao張春橋 (1917-2005), Yao Wenyuan姚文元 (1931-2005), and Wang Hongwen王洪文 (1935-1992), "Scar Literature" emerged as the first public literary movement that reflected on the traumatic experiences during political chaos. Representative writers included Lu Xinhua盧新華 (1954-), Liu Xinwu劉心武 (1942-), and Zhang Xianliang張賢亮 (1936-2014).

awaited accusation against those victimizers. In Freud's psychoanalytic theory, unconscious neurosis can be reintegrated in the analysand's self-narration so that it grows to be progressively coherent until it reaches a closure. Alternating between fluidity and crystallization, this complex progression consists of cyclical processes whereby repressed components preserved in the unconscious mind repeatedly return to consciousness as "derivatives of the unconscious."[5] The unconscious is thus far more than a reference to that which lies dormant beyond consciousness but is rather a site of dynamic interplay of repression and the return of an unresolved conflict, one that engenders detours and delays akin to the well-developed plot of a narrative.

In response to the woman's instinctual impulse, her story also presents a textual "unconscious," which Peter Brooks models on the opposition between Freud's life and death instincts. For Brooks, narrative, with its linear movement toward an end, can be seen as the "life" of a novel; within the narrative there exist repetition, repression, and a return of the repressed which may be comparable to Freud's "death" instinct. In the woman's narrative, a few prominent examples of the "return" before the "death" of her story occur (not limited to the girl's actual death): the girl was isolated for her extraordinary beauty, reported by her enemy and charged with anti-revolutionary offence, betrayed by her entire family during the investigation, and deprived of outdoor activity and visits in prison (after being caught passing notes to a male prisoner). As such, "a binding of textual energies" is created between the text's forward movement and the compulsion to repeat that permits plots "to be mastered by putting them into serviceable form."[6] Central to this process is that "the energies released and aroused will not be lost: the text is a kind of thermodynamic plenum, obeying the law of the conservation of energy

[5] Sigmund Freud, "Repression," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14. trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1915), 147.

[6] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 101.

([and] the law of entropy)."[7] In the nineteenth-century novels that Brooks discusses (for instance, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, 1860), the "fully realized" plot, organized around repetition, repression, and return, would have its enigmas and tensions resolved through a sequence of events moving toward unity and completion – "the right death, the correct end" to the story.[8] The same holds true for the woman's traumatic narrative, in which the dynamic of the return and the repressed, as an emplotment strategy (or a dramatic trope), drives her story in a linear movement toward its completion and resolution.

Finally, it cannot be overlooked that the "political unconscious" is a fundamental current that operates through the woman's story. According to Fredric Jameson, the reader can always uncover political content that structures itself as a narrative in a literary text. "It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history, that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and its necessity."[9] Through every individual utterance – that is, "a symbolic move in an essentially polemic and strategic ideological confrontation between the classes,"[10] Jameson strives to "restructure the problematics of ideology, of the unconscious and of desire, of representation, of history, and of cultural production, around the all-informing process of narrative, which I take to be […] the central function or instance of the human mind."[11] As previously mentioned, the *Zeitgeist* demonstrated by the outpouring of literary responses to the Cultural Revolution still echoes in the utopian presumption of Socialist Realism that accommodates hope and transcendental potential. Driven by such an ideological force, the

[7] Ibid., 123.
[8] Ibid., 103.
[9] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 20.
[10] Ibid., 85.
[11] Ibid., 85 & 13.

woman not only orients her narrative toward a full disclosure of her girlfriend's traumatic experience but, perhaps more importantly, toward a definite closure of the nightmarish past for herself.

Thus far, it is beyond doubt that the repressed content on the woman's mind – whether the instinctual, textual, or political "unconscious" – refuses to be relegated into oblivion and obsessively resurfaces in various forms until it eventually enters her consciousness. On the textual (and political) level, the act of "return" keeps interrupting the progress of the narrative and replacing it with a newly formed episode before the storyteller reaches her telos. Be that as it may, the ultimate closure and resolution that the psychodynamic principle seeks to achieve is bound to face the risk of reducing broader cultural, social, political contexts into an authoritative master narrative. In fact, "my" several interruptions as the woman's storytelling progresses denote that which has been distorted, omitted, and falsified in her account – namely, her share of responsibility in the girl's tragedy. For instance, the woman had also reported her girlfriend to the political persecutors and betrayed her commitment to their relationship by marrying a man. While traces of her remorse can be perceived, such as living a frugal life as a self-punishment, "look[ing] at me apprehensively" when noticing "my" discontent, and having "her head bowed" as she finishes her narrative, the plot of her story structured as a unified whole only reinforces a totalizing and teleological narrative at the expense of an accurate and efficient representation of both the human mind and history (458, 462, 463). In this light, the woman's working-through process fails to ensure a reliable "return." Her literary testimony merely provides an outlet for a cathartic release by purging her unwanted memories and thus holds very little potential for revealing the curative truth.

Compared to the woman's exploration of the unconscious aspects of the human mind, which still bears the hallmark of premodern aesthetics, postmodern writers, such as Gao Xingjian, seek to move beyond the strict and closed economy of the return and the repressed. Both entertaining and apprehending the notion of the psychoanalytic unconscious, postmodern writers attempt at once to elicit – and frustrate – a coherent and complete account by creating a text that is less accessible to or controllable by any type of authority. Attributed to these writers' fundamental distrust toward the "unconscious" mind, around which a literary space seems to be developed for the ultimate rescue of coherence and unity, they, in theory and in practice, refrain from imposing any dominant order or conclusive model upon the human mind and the world, and brace themselves for a new aesthetic characteristic of non-closure, heterogeneity, and irreducibility.

To escape the pitfall of moral inadequacy, artistic platitude, and naive historical consciousness, Gao forces his story ("my" observation in chapter 75) to remain open to unending engagements with the repressed content within the literary text, keeps nullifying the line of narrative causality, and defers the ultimate resolution from coming into existence. His narrator's trauma-informed storytelling is organized around disconnected chains of association, disturbed moments of revelation, and even disjointed images. Rather than shaping his narrative by a teleologically oriented force and imposing any meaning from beyond onto his text, Gao's narrator foregrounds the very gaps and fissures in his text, which only occur while memory clashes with oblivion and order with chaos. In contrast to the woman's story that features a closed narrative economy and a political perspective as the "absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation,"[12] Gao's discursive narrative parodies the tradition of testimonial writing by

[12] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 17.

testifying deliberately to "the collapse of the authorial voice and against the hope of a meaningful history."[13] The alternative vision of history thus evoked strikes the reader as a more disordered unconsciousness stemming from an unspeakable loss.

Corresponding to the explosive force in Grandpa Stone's episode, which provokes the deities and troops of Heaven, triggers a tremendous earthquake, and frees the uncanny creatures from their blockage, Gao not only engages in an anti-plotting effort to defy chronological, causal, and teleological coherence in his narrative (as discussed above), but he also evades the demand of the Lyotardian "grand narrative" by virtue of his metafictional productivity,[14] which manifests itself in the sheer outburst of historical anecdotes, legends, and stories in his novel (primarily in the "you" chapters). While held in contempt by the critic for having done nothing more than "slapped together travel notes, moralistic ramblings, feelings, notes, jottings, untheoretical discussions, unfable-like fables, copied out some folk songs, [and] added some legend-like nonsense of your own invention," the metafictional dimension in *Soul Mountain* proves instrumental in debunking those widespread beliefs, legitimized discourse, and mythologized 'truths' that seek either to silence the "*petit récit*" of an indomitable individual or to assimilate them into the mainstream discourse (453).[15] Such an impulse toward counter-

[13] Yomi Braester, *Witness against History: Literature, Film, and Public Discourse in Twentieth-century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 157. In discussing the linguistic repression in Zhang Xianliang's diary, *My Bodhi Tree* (1994), about his life in a labor camp, Braester states that the conflict between the author's diary and his own commentary demonstrates his split voice and ripped consciousness. The commentary keeps undermining the diary by constantly referring to the "omissions and contradictions in the diary and stress[ing] the need to fill in the blanks and reconstitute experience through a more coherent narrative." Braester suggests that a viable testimony can be retrieved in neither of them but only exists between their unbridgeable gap or "the elusive distance between the wounded flesh and the scars that cover it" (Braester, 136-7).

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

[15] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 60.

assimilation is similar in effect to a Bakhtinian carnival in celebration of the "ever changing, playful, undefined forms."[16]

It is of particular importance that Gao's fascination with Chinese history (evident in the novel's metafictional narrative) diverges from the popular root-searching yearning of the 1980s, which sought to reconnect with the nation's cultural heritage to compensate for its current loss. Rather, Gao challenges the alleged accuracy and authenticity of the 'official' history through his fictional engagements, through what is termed by Linda Hutcheon as "historiographic metafiction."[17] This postmodern trope, as Hutcheon asserts, blends the self-reflexive elements of metafiction with an ironized sense of history, foregrounds a distinction "between brute events of the past and the historical facts we construct out of them,"[18] and aims to "re-introduce historical context into metafiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge."[19] "[A]t once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past,"[20] this

[16] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 11.

[17] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), ix. Notably, Hutcheon's celebration of the power of "historiographic metafiction" to produce historical thinking stands in direct opposition to Fredric Jameson's pessimistic view of engaging with history through such literary practices. For Jameson, this aesthetic alternative works only as a "blank parody" or a pure "[p]astiche, […] the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter." Within such a world of "pastiche," "the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts." According to Jameson, the reader is thus left with nothing but a repository of genres, styles, and codes available for cultural commodification. See Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 17 & 18.

[18] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 57.

[19] Linda Hutcheon, "The Pastime of the Past Time: Fiction, History, Historiographic Metafiction," *The Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, ed. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 474. In the same essay, Hutcheon also distinguishes the notion of "historical fiction" from that of "historiographic metafiction." She holds that the former "is modeled on historiography to the extent that it is motivated and made operative by a notion of history as a shaping force" (Hutcheon, 482). The latter seeks however to "demarginalize the literary through confrontation with the historical, both thematically and formally, […] [and] establishes, differentiates, and then disperses stable narrative voices (and bodies) that use memory to try to make sense of the past" (Hutcheon, 486).

[20] Linda Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History," *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 3.

metafictional endeavor is largely "a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present for the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context. […] [I]t directly confronts the past of literature – and of historiography, […] uses and abuses those intertextual echoes, inscribing their powerful allusions and then subverting that power through irony."[21]

Historiographic metafiction, Hutcheon further argues, "suggests the relevance of the binary opposition between fiction and fact, […] it both installs and then blurs the line between fiction and history."[22] The generic blurring of historicity and fictionality allows the writer to gain distance from the official account of history, unearth lesser-known facts of the past, and (re)capture through those textual traces and relics a lost history or counter-history. The metafictional transgression of the history/fiction boundary in *Soul Mountain* initially occurs in an episode about a place named "Yu Crossing," which, according to the town records, Yu the Great crossed on his way to quell the floods (c. 7). "[A] round carved stone with seventeen barely discernible tadpole-like ancient ideograms on it" was said to lay by the riverbank, but no one was able to decipher the inscription before the stone was dynamited for the purpose of building the bridge (42). Whereas many generations of this town's inhabitants lived eventful lives that would have amazed fiction writers, "you" lament that they "don't know the history of the place, don't know about themselves" (42).

Another reference to Yu Crossing occurs in chapter 9 when "you" recount the story of a female student who drowned herself during the Cultural Revolution after being raped by a local official. Ironically, the rock by the river-bank, where the girl had neatly left her sports shoes before jumping into the river, was later inscribed with the words "Yu Crossing" and painted red

[21] Hutcheon, "The Pastime of the Past Time: Fiction, History, Historiographic Metafiction," 487.
[22] Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafiction Paradox* (London: Methuen, 1984), 62.

by the tourist planners, for a schoolteacher's recent archeological research had appeared to confirm the connection between the crossing and Yu the Great. Uninformed tourists at later times, fascinated by Yu's heroic adventure and poignant romance, all climb to the painted rock to have their photos taken. In contrast to the inscription "Yu Crossing" on the rock, "the spirit which had suffered an unjust death has been completely forgotten" by the outsiders (54). Additionally, to the local villagers Yu Crossing is more commonly known as "Grieving Ghost Cliff," where "people used to die […] all the time" (54). Except for the children who failed to resurface after diving, the drowned victims were mostly women who suffered romantic betrayal, domestic maltreatment, or political violence. Female ghosts in white were even rumored to appear at midnight, singing a sorrowful song. In this vein, although the inscription "Yu Crossing" has been carved into the rock, the carving could barely smooth out the rugged truth – the unjust deaths, for instance – or wipe away those lively and tenacious memories across generations in an attempt to achieve a simplified falsehood termed 'history.'

After recounting the female rape victim's suicide at the Yu Crossing during the Cultural Revolution, "you" introduce "her" to a local aquatic bird, alert and agile, with dark blue plumes on its head that is aptly named "blue head" (c. 9, 55). Although "you" claim that there is a difference between this local "blue head" and the mythological blue bird which, according to *Shanhaijing*山海經 (Classic of the Mountains and Seas), fetches food for the Queen Mother of the West, "you" point out that both birds share "an aura of magic" (55). Without clarifying which bird "you" are referring to, "you" state that the blue bird symbolizes "feminine intelligence, feminine sensuality" and that women of this kind usually suffer from men's carnal desire, infidelity, and objectification (55).

Having associated the pleasant image of the blue bird with women victimized by male maltreatment, "you" start another story about a village girl, Yaomei,[23] who eloped with her lover, a young village fellow, on the night when she was arranged to marry a wealthy man as his concubine. Although they pledged themselves to one another and agreed to run away into the mountains to eke out a living, the lad vacillated and failed to show up at their agreed time. Yaomei, last seen by a ferryman carrying a bundle near the river, disappeared. However certain "you" are that people must have sighted her before she died near such a bustling riverbank, Yaomei's suicidal drowning due to her lover's betrayal has never ceased to be controversial for its suspenseful end. Her poignant romance, with the passage of time, has turned into a local legend revolving around an unappeasable whimpering ghost, who is said often to appear at midnight in white and sing an unidentifiable song.

As ambivalent as the "morning mist from the river," Yaomei's story becomes a breeding ground for a succession of "your" stories of women's suffering in the novel (56). Chapter 13 unfolds around a shaman, Zhuhuapo (Madam Zhuhua), who specializes in enticing men and shows benevolence toward people by treating their illness (due to her masterly knowledge of the meridian points of the human body). Although they are fatally drawn to her beauty, most men show respect or "recoil" because of her power.[24] Upon telling "her" about "your" personal encounter with Zhuhuapo in a pavilion on the mountain top, "you" digress unexpectedly into hearsay related by a group of masons, that once upon a time three brothers scoffed at Zhuhuapo's

[23] Yaomei幺妹as a term of endearment is especially used to address the youngest sister in a family or refer to young woman in general.

[24] To "recoil" is later mentioned in chapter 65, when the I-narrator is stunned by the combination of beauty and danger in a splendid deciduous pine on Huanggang Mountain. He perceives the pine as a mystical creation of nature that not only possesses powerful vitality and exquisite femininity but also "creates evil" (413).

shamanistic power, two raped her, and the youngest, after she pleaded with him and promised that “good and evil bring good and evil retribution,” decided to let her go (77-8).

No sooner do “you” continue this anecdote, by revealing the “good retribution” for the youngest brother and the “evil retribution” for the two older ones, than “she” urges “you” to pick up where the storytelling left off – that is, when “you” encountered Zhuhuapo on the mountain top – and asks, “did you rape her or did you also let her go” (78)? Rather than providing a direct answer, “you” say that “you” started to walk away but could not resist another look at Zhuhuapo, only to be struck by a light “flash[ing] from the tips of her eyebrows and the corners of her lips” (78). “You” realized at this moment that Zhuhuapo had cast a spell on “you” (78). Before “you” can continue the narrative, a woman beckoning “Come here” interrupts “your” storytelling and propels the narration into a confusing swirl due to the ambiguity of the pronoun “she,” which could refer either to Zhuhuapo in the nested story or to “your” walking companion in the novel (78). With no clarification, the narration proceeds that “you” and this unnamed female both slide into the water and “you have finally captured her, a stubborn struggling wild animal, and she suddenly turns docile in your arms and begins to silently weep” (78). During the struggle, “you” notice “her white toes wriggling in the clear stream,” which share striking features with the white toes of a black shrike, standing on a rock in the middle of the stream and “sticking up its tail as its waxy red beak moves up and down” (79).

The uncanny components shared by the unnamed female “she” (with white toes), the black shrike (with white toes, a black body, and a red beak), and Zhuhuapo (with a white binding on her clothes, black eyebrows, and bright-red lips) convert these images into a layer-by-layer assembly. The visual resemblances shed light on the mysterious identity of that unnamed “she” (the woman struggling with “you” in the water), who, although “she” could not be Zhuhuapo

herself,[25] possesses the same problematic disposition as the shaman. In fact, "her" seductive nature is already implied early on in the chapter, immediately before "your" story about Zhuhuapo. Specifically, "she lets you hold her hand" since "her" leather shoes gave "her" trouble walking (76). When "you" draw "her" into "your" arms after "she" slips, "she says you're bad and frowns but there's the hint of a smile at the corners of her tightly pursed lips" (76). Unable to contain "your" desire, "you" kiss "her" and find that "her" lips "relax and surprise you with their tenderness" (76). During this moment of intimacy, "she entices you and you succumb and she nestles in your arms, closes her eyes" (76).

It is increasingly palpable at this point that Zhuhuapo serves as a pivot merging together the images of the blue bird (Zhuhuapo also wears a "blue fine-weave cotton jacket" and "blue cotton shoes," 77, 78) and the black shrike. The image of the blue bird, which characterizes female "intelligence" and "sensuality," is shrouded in an ominous aura and thus delivers a mixed message of both powerful femininity (capable of seduction and vengeance) and fragile femininity (subject to male violence). Vice versa, the image of the black shrike, a carnivorous predator traditionally considered to be inauspicious in Chinese culture, is tinged with a romantic shade pertaining to the blue bird as a symbol of female virtuosity and vulnerability. As evil borders upon good and vices are confounded with virtues, the narrator keeps disorientating the reader about the very possibility of an unambiguous discovery.

Besides disturbing the virtue-vice binary, the stories of Yaomei, Zhuhuapo, and "your" female companion constitute a palimpsest that allows for a type of porous temporality. In an effort to escape the 'sanctioned' version of history, Gao's narrator scrapes off and merges together classical myth, local legends, folk tales, and personal anecdotes, all of which share

[25] Zhuhuapo and the she-character are apparently from different times and spaces due to the styles of their clothing. In this sense, the she-character could be possessed by Zhuhuapo or possesses a fox spirit.

certain components but vary temporally, and flattens them into a single collage-like layer. Since the writing surface of a palimpsest leaves prior traces visible below the writing surface, this multi-layered assembly can be read as simultaneously retrospective and prospective. Most captivatingly, the palimpsest, here presumed to evoke collective history, is reminiscent of another kind of palimpsest that restores and retrieves personal memory (as previously discussed). In these psychodynamics, the repressed unconscious memory keeps returning to the writer's conscious mind, "often with a vengeance."[26] In this case, "as a metaphor for the layering of both personal and collective histories,"[27] the palimpsest strategy empowers a way of thinking for the writer to subvert historical linearity and hegemonic discourse.

As if to echo the return of the repressed unconsciousness, or the return of the unearthed history, a series of metafictional stories are masterfully infused with the battle of two opposing forces: repression (female victims suffering from injustice primarily via male violence) and return (the victimized women or their ghosts demanding revenge and retribution). Returning to the metafictional narrative in the novel: the black shrike "you" encountered "turns to look back defiantly at you, nodding its head and wagging its tail, […] challenges you to approach and then flies off, but not far, and is again waiting there for you" (79). "You" begin to realize that this "black spirit" could be the return and reincarnation of a young girl with whom "you" were once acquainted. Molested and harmed by "those bastards," the girl was found dead under the pylons of a bridge. The truth of her death – if she was killed or died by her own hand – was never revealed, for the girl's grieving parents rejected an autopsy. Ever since her death, "your" self-accusation steadily worsens for having failed to protect her when she was alive and to expose the

[26] Arkady Plotnitsky, *In the Shadow of Hegel: Complementarity, History, and the Unconscious* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), 353.

[27] Susan Stanford Friedman, *Penelope's Web: Gender, Modernity, H. D.'s Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 236.

crimes of “those bastard” after she died. The dead girl’s tragedy “remains in your heart like a nightmare” and her unappeasable ghost, as “you” believe, returns to haunt “your” mind in various manifestations, for instance, as a black shrike (79). Toward the end of this chapter, this embedded story breaks off abruptly and pulls the reader out of the flow of the narrative, leaving one merely with the feel of the girl’s haunting spirit and “your” lingering guilt.

Unsatisfied readers may be tempted to search for clues to resolve the girl’s mystifying death, only to pull away from a clear understanding due to the moral ambivalence contained within the image of the black shrike (the dead girl’s spirit). In chapter 32, “you” admit to once leering at the girl’s body, but only when she pulled up her skirt for “you.” “You” further suspect that the girl may have voluntarily agreed to go swimming at night with those “bastards” who harmed her, rather than being forced to do so (c. 50). To “your” way of thinking, any romantic relationship involves men and women seducing each other. It is thus pointless to “attribute proportions of responsibility to a woman’s intrigue and a man’s lust” or, more broadly, to identify the elusive boundary between the virtuous and the vicious (303). As the girl’s victimhood is called into question, neither due punishment of the villains nor sought-for vengeance for the victims could be regarded as having been fulfilled in the narrative.

The much-desired vengeance appears to be actualized in chapter 29, when an old carpenter dies of the retribution wrought by an aggrieved ghost. Commissioned by a shaman of Tianmenguan to carve the head of the goddess Tianluo, a vengeful divine figure who presides over the underworld, the skillful carpenter, whose carvings “are like the real thing,” struggles with imagining her appearance until the image of a mute girl who suffered from his maltreatment rises before his eyes (162). In giving life to this piece of craft, the carpenter is compelled to confront the hidden crime that he committed: after raping the girl, he had discarded her, leaving

her pregnant, homeless, and reduced to a contemptible prostitute and beggar. Upon reflecting upon the domestic bliss that the girl could have had had she not been hurt by his self-serving pleasure, the carpenter's conscience for his grave sin haunts him so unrelentingly that he eventually feels the pressing urge to carve before his mental image vanishes, and to remember the exact details of how the girl was raped, starting with the act of "thrust[ing] his hand down under her tightly buttoned collar" (166).

The carpenter is found dead the next morning by the fire and, at his feet, lies the head of the goddess Tianluo that he carved. This finished sculpture, which presents "a young girl's fragile beauty" with her neck "tightly wrapped in the matching sides of her high collar," almost gives evidence of the crime that the carpenter committed against the mute girl (166). However, unlike the girl – with eyes "full of terror," "full of pleading," looking "stupefied, dazed" – as the carpenter recalled, the goddess's eyes "which can barely be seen emit cold indifference" as if she is "scornful of human existence" (165, 166). The marked contrast between the image of the defenseless girl, which arose in the carpenter's mind as his conscience escalates, and the countenance of the malevolent goddess (as represented by the sculpture), provokes the reader to reconsider the cause of his death: whether he died in intense, introspective repentance for his wrongdoings or died in terror of the imminent "retribution" that the vengeful ghost would "gouge out his eyes and curse him violently, invoking demons to banish him to the eighteenth level of Hell so that he can be horribly tortured" (163, 164).

The readerly satisfaction from the resolved ending – a vengeance successfully wrought by the returning ghosts or spirits – eventually comes to fruition in a folktale about a victimized widow, referred to derogatorily as the "fox spirit" (c. 31).[28] When the men villagers lust after the

[28] In fact, the Zhuhuapo figure is modeled upon the fox spirit in Chinese strange tales, who is usually female and capable of shapeshifting. Depending on the varying texts, it can be benevolent or malevolent.

widow's enticing beauty, the women villagers resent her so bitterly that they decide to punish this seductress by stripping off her clothes, trussing her up, and dumping her in a leper's village reputed to produce wanton women. When the widow returns to the village, the women villagers are relieved at first that her face is covered in sores but later are horrified to discover that people in every household have all developed sores on their bodies. At this point, the retribution in response to this collective violence that demonizes the woman has finally been meted out, as in Zhuhuapo's saying "good and evil bring good and evil retribution" (77-8).

A careful re-examination of this episode creates an uneasy atmosphere for the reader. The menfolk in the story, who particularly deserve this punishment for their love affair with the widow, "weren't too worried about how they looked" when the sores developed on their bodies (178). By contrast, the women villagers are fraught with anxiety and more severely punished. Utterly humiliated, Sun the Fourth's wife, whose husband climbed over the wall of the widow's courtyard, has no choice but to be the first to "go to the fields to weed with a kerchief over her face" for spring ploughing (178). More horrifyingly, old Lu's wife, who first discovered a male villager's affair with the widow, "developed mastitis and her breasts rotted completely" (178). Seen in this light, this moralistic sermon may have been intended to admonish against female jealousy rather than collective violence. Given "your" word choice throughout "your" storytelling, in which the women villagers are described as "shrewish" and having the "most venomous" mind, "your" story clearly bears a stamp of misogyny in line with patriarchal norms and expectations (176, 178). Regardless of how "you" claim that "you" are not "censuring," "criticizing," or "debunking" woman, this folktale eventually becomes "a man's story," as

opposed to those "which women like to listen to," one that "she" finds "wicked and crude" (174, 175, 176, 178).[29]

In view of these instances of metafiction, it suffices to conclude that the unappeased grudge and the unfulfilled retribution ought not simply be construed in a moral context but as a literary maneuver that gives presence to the cyclical repetition of repression and the return of the repressed in history. What Gao's narrator intends for the reader to achieve from those retribution-themed stories about victimized women goes beyond the readerly pleasure of victimizers who are punished because they deserve "good-evil-retribution." Rather, by complicating the notion of the "good" (the drowned girl's story), the "evil" (the carpenter's story), and the "retribution" (the leper widow's story) in three separate stories, the narrator opens a gateway to multiplied storytelling that contradicts the 'official' history with the discovery and revelation of "what is rarely known, little known, thought to be known but in fact not very well known of the truth of the human world."[30] Such "apocryphal history, creative anachronism and historical fantasy" not only "revise the content of the historical record, reinterpreting the historical record, often demystifying or debunking the orthodox version of the past" but also "revise, indeed transform, the conventions and norms of historical fiction itself" – a system by which history is constructed, connected, and rendered coherent.[31]

To emphasize the act of "returning," Gao relates the experience of a lonely traveler toward the end of his novel, "he," who becomes lost *en route* to Soul Mountain and asks for directions from a venerable elder (c. 76). Whereas the elder keeps assuring "him" that the

[29] Interestingly, the carpenter's story as discussed above may exemplify another "man's story." When the you-character tries to foreground the carpenter's genuine guilt by telling that "[h]is eyes close tightly and old tears flow," as the goddess's image appears in the sparks and smoke, "she" interrupts the you-character, saying "Don't beautify him!" since, as "she" argues, "[s]moke brings tears to anyone's eyes" (165).

[30] Gao, "The Case for Literature," *The Case for Literature,* trans. Mabel Lee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 42.

[31] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 90.

mountain is “on the other side of the river,” “he” is thrown into greater perplexity because “he has just come from that side of the river,” which the elder pointed at, to “this side of the river” (478). The elderly man continues that, “the road is not wrong, it is the traveler who is wrong,” and alerts “him” to the fact that “he” is only “moving further away” when “he” believes that “he” is walking on the right “way” toward “his” destination (478). In the end, much like “your” disillusioned sight of the “lonely mountain wind” upon arriving at the summit (c. 68), “he stays alone on this side of the river” in bewilderment (479). An old proverb then occurs to “him”: “Existence is returning, non-existence is returning, so don’t stay by the river getting blown about by the cold wind” (479).[32] By diminishing the importance of one’s objective, and treating it as immaterial as the cold wind, “he” comes to realize the significance of the action – “returning” – in anticipation of a new way to begin upcoming adventures which are no longer bound to be predestined or foreclosed.

Before closing this chapter, it is worthwhile to review what is perhaps the most studied episode in *Soul Mountain* for a clearer understating of the writer’s metafictional endeavor (c. 48). In this retold *biji* tale of the Jin dynasty (266-420), a powerful Grand Marshall allows a mendicant nun who comes to seek alms to stay in his mansion. During her stay, the Grand Marshall grows increasingly curious about the nun’s daily bathing and, as he peeps through her door one day, is stunned by her veritable beauty. Having hurried away and composed himself, he is enticed to creep back to have another look. This time he is aghast at the sight of the nun who thrusts a pair of scissors into her navel, pulls out her intestines, presses them neatly together, and then crams them back into her stomach after a careful cleaning. The Grand Marshall is

[32] Since this proverb originated from a folksong used to conjure up the spirit of the dead poet Qu Yuan during the Dragon-boat race, it could also be translated: “if you find the spirit of Qu Yuan, please return; if you don’t, please also return. Just don’t stay by the river getting blown.”

compelled to ask the nun about it after she finishes washing. Unmoved, the nun replies, "If you sir are thinking of usurping the state the situation will be like this" (284). Upon hearing this, the overbearing Grand Marshall, who had been plotting to usurp the state, abandons his original plan and remains a loyal minister thereafter. The story, as "you" indicate in the end, could therefore be read as "a political warning" against the unchecked ambition of people (284).

The original text of this historical anecdote appears in Wang Yan王琰's (454-?) *Mingxiang Ji*冥祥记 (Signs from the Unseen Realm),[33] a collection of Buddhist miracle tales from early medieval China. The nun's daily bathing, purportedly read as an act of ritual purification, is merely depicted in a few lines in the earliest account: "the naked nun wields a knife and plunges it into her stomach, pulls out her bowels, dismembers her arms and legs, and cuts them up into pieces" (Jianni luoshen huidao, poufu chuzang, duanjie shenshou, zhifen luanqie. 見尼裸身揮刀，破腹出臟，斷截身首，支分臠切。) By comparison, "your" remastered version in *Soul Mountain* not only describes the nun's radiant beauty in great detail – from her white teeth to her smooth shoulders – but also renders the scene of her bathing in a sexually enticing manner: while she is bathing, "her delicate outstretched fingers [are] rubbing her full breasts, which are white like snow and each adorned with a budding cherry flower" (283). As the sketch of the nun's appearance is mingled with components of erotic desire in "your" retelling, the original reading of this story as a religious tale that "exhort[s] people to convert to Buddhism" could equally be interpreted as "a morality tale to warn people against lechery and lust" (284).

[33] The same entry can also be found in *Sou shen hou ji*搜神后记 (*Sequel to Records of Searching for the Spirits*) Vol. 2, No. 13. The author is unknown.

In enumerating alternative accounts of this story (such as an ethical lesson highlighting self-rectification, or a psychological perspective probing into the human suffering that derives from one's self), the storyteller underlines the necessity of opening the story to a variety of interpretative possibilities no longer circumscribed within its original scope. The story could therefore be "developed into numerous intricate and complex theories. It all depends on how the storyteller tells it" (285). Whereas the historical resources are available, "you," as the storyteller, consider them irrelevant to the story itself and desire no further examination to decipher the author's intent. "You" only appeal to "the superb purity of the story" that allows ample room for "your" artistic creativity (285). By cleansing the arbitrarily prescribed "significance" from such stories, perhaps in the same manner as the nun's daily bathing, the storyteller is thus granted freedom to retell, recycle, and replenish his narrative to avoid literary exhaustion.

"Your" only concern with "the superb purity of the story" – since "[a]ny explanation is irrelevant, you simply wanted to retell it in the spoken language" – resonates forcefully with Gao Xingjian's proclamation of *Meiyou zhuyi* 沒有主義 ("without isms"),[34] a personal stance in line with the acts of fleeing, distancing, and viewing the world and the self through a "cold" mindset (285). As a counterpart to the journey's elusive destination (either in the form of a physical location or the figurative consolation and wisdom that the narrator refuses to be placated by), the stance of "without isms" advocates "an unlimited and unbridled independence, so that the individual can empty his mind of all the shackles of convention to make the choices best suited to himself, to be skeptical of all blind acquiescence to authority, trendiness and ideological detainment."[35] Whereas "[w]ith ruthless candour the author accounts for his experiences as a

[34] Gao Xingjian, "Without Ism," *The Case for Literature*, 64.

[35] Gao Xingjian, *The Other Shore: Plays by Gao Xingjian*, trans. Gilbert C. F. Fong (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1999), xvii.

political activist, victim and outside observer, one after the other," Gao rejects the stance as "the dissident's embodiment of morality […] and refuses to redeem anyone else."[36] Through his literary innovation and experimentation, Gao strives to denounce the ravages wrought by any ideologies (political and literary); and yet in the meantime he seeks not to promote a new utopian ideal or "any kind of complaisance, even to good will."[37]

[36] The Swedish Academy, "The Nobel Prize for Literature 2000," Press release, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2000/press-release/.
[37] Ibid.

## Chapter Four

### The Fragmented Subjectivity

In the debate about writerly practices (c. 72), the literary critic criticizes the writer's work for its lack of a coherent and complete plot; logical causality with development, climax, and conclusion; and portrayal of main characters. The most unacceptable property of all, the critic points out, is the writer's replacement of his characters with pronouns, which, except for "chang[ing] the point of view of the narrative," can hardly suffice to produce clear images or create discernible personalities for the characters (452, 453). Although the writer is not given an opportunity to persuade the critic of his pronominal strategy in their debate, Gao's *Soul Mountain* certainly offers a remarkable example of replacing characters' names with pronouns. With this strategy, Gao constructs a liminal space in which the objectified "others" – in the disguise of varied pronouns – are turned into subjects of their own history and experience. While the pronouns alternately compete for visibility and perceivability, the narrative space expands by a polymorphous *va-et-vient* among a luxury of differing meanings.[1]

According to the Swedish Academy, *Soul Mountain* is "a tapestry of narratives with several protagonists who reflect each other and may represent aspects of one and the same ego. With his unrestrained use of personal pronouns Gao creates lightning shifts of perspective and

[1] The flexible use with pronouns benefits particularly from the unique quality of the Chinese language. In Chinese, "the subject is often omitted and the verb is not inflected according to the pronoun, so the narrative angle can change with great ease" in favor of multi-dimensional observation. See Gao, "Literature and Metaphysics: about *Soul Mountain*," *The Case for Literature*, trans. Mabel Lee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 92.

compels the reader to question all confidences."[2] As Mabel Lee remarks, this artistic maneuver of replacing a single protagonist with the pronouns "I," "you," "he," and "she" allows Gao to "dissect the authorial self into the singular pronouns […] and resist a rigorous and critical analysis of the self of one man."[3] Speaking either in soliloquies or dialogues, the dynamic among the pronouns brings about refreshing points of view that allow readers to scrutinize diverse dimensions of human subjectivity and the fluctuating state of selfhood. Such an orchestrated polyphony amounts to a level of uncanniness – "the existence of irrationality" – which, as an indispensable part of human life, grants the individual free expression of their subjective condition.[4]

I. "You": A Conversation Partner

In *Soul Mountain*, the "I"-narrative and the "you"-narrative, two main strands that are inextricably bound to each other, alternate for the first two thirds of the novel, with the sporadic presence of "he" in the latter half of the novel as well as a female companion, "she," who begins to occur at the beginning of the "you"-narrative. At the novel's outset, "I" disclose the purpose of two separate journeys: "While you search for the route to Lingshan, I wander along the Yangtze River looking for this sort of reality," by which "I" can escape from "those contaminated surroundings" (c. 2, 11-2). In hopes of escaping the imminent political threat, recovering from the anxiety caused by a cancer misdiagnosis, and rekindling his writerly creative spark, "I" cast "my" curious eye outward and engage in a geographical journey down the Yangtze river. "You,"

[2] The Swedish Academy, "The Nobel Prize for Literature 2000," Press release, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2000/press-release/.

[3] Mabel Lee, "Pronouns as Protagonists: on Gao Xingjian's Theories of Narration," *Soul of Chaos: Critical Perspectives on Gao Xingjian* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2003), 235.

[4] Nicoletta Pesaro, "Cong Xiandai xiaoshuo jiqiao chutan dao Lingshan he Yi ge ren de shengjing – Gao Xingjian tongguo xushu moshi fansi zhongguo" 從《現代小說技巧初探》到《靈山》和《一個人的聖經》– 高行健通過敍述模式反思中國 (From a Preliminary Discussion of the Art of Modern Fiction to *Soul Mountain* and *One Man's Bible*: Gao Xingjian's Use of Narrative Patterns to Rethink China), Xianggang xiju xuekan 香港戲劇學刊 (Hong Kong Drama Review), Vol. 8 (2009), 409.

meanwhile, embark upon a psychological journey to a magic place, Lingshan靈山 (Soul Mountain), during which "you" seek to retrieve distant memories, explore subjectivity and selfhood, and tackle philosophical inquiries. Given that "[the reality of] life is not the same as [life's] appearances," "your" inner travel across the labyrinthine realms of the human mind, richly overlaid with dreams and illusions, endeavors to "penetrate the surface layers and reach deep into the inner workings of reality" (12, modification mine).[5]

It is not until chapter 51 that "I" and "you" are revealed as a pair of complementary opposites. At a local museum in Sichuan, "I" encounter some earthenware spinning wheels painted with "red and black swirling patterns" (307). The ancient pattern reminds "me" of the Yin-Yang fish design or, the Daoist Taiji Chart, which marks the genesis of mankind's essential concepts about the universe: for instance, the "complementarity" (or the "alternation") of Yin and Yang, good fortune and bad fortune, images and sounds (thus speech and meanings), and man and woman (307). The individual's self-awareness, too, comes into existence in accordance with two fundamental principles. As "I" trace the origin of personhood since prehistorical times, "the birth of I derived from fear of death" and only afterward did "an entity which was not I [come] to constitute you" (308). Such a "distinction between I and you," or a binary between the self and the other, can only be "affirmed by possessing and being possessed, and by conquering and being conquered" (308).

In fact, "your" significance to "me" as a doubled selfhood is intimated by the novel's title. The first character, Ling, refers to "something or someone quick and clever, spirited and intelligent, a fairy, sprite, elf, goblin, in other words, something or someone otherworldly,

[5] Gao Xingjian, "The Case for Literature," *The Case for Literature*, 43.

whimsical and mischievous, miraculous and magical."[6] For that reason, "your" frequent presence throughout the narrative can be regarded as an effort to discover and reflect upon "my" hidden subjectivity. The novel starts with "your" arrival at a remote mountain town, Wuyizhen, *en route* to Lingshan – a holy site, described to "you" by an unnamed stranger on a train, where one can see "wonderful things," forget "suffering and pain," and "find freedom" (c. 11, 68). Attentive readers will notice that this stranger, a foreshadowing of "my" presence in chapter 2,[7] and "you," sitting opposite each other, constitute a mimicry of the self and the imaginary other. Their cups, which clatter against one another as the train moves, reinforce such an uncanny bond (2).

The mirroring effect that merges real and unreal existences is reminiscent of a literary device that Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (1715-1763) employed in his *Hongloumeng*紅樓夢 (Story of the Stone), in which the protagonist Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉and his *doppelgänger* Zhen Baoyu 甄寶玉 represent, respectively, the writer's idealistic vision for himself to flourish with the freedom to direct his own life, and the opposite reality, his initial struggle against and eventual compliance with social norms.[8] Gao extends this mirroring trope to his novel by crafting two structurally parallel journeys, akin to an analogy of the duality of human existence, by which a hidden and perhaps more fundamental level of subjectivity can be brought to light. For instance, "your" obsessive search for and ultimate retrieval of "your" childhood memories (c. 15, 17, 27, 32),[9] which thread through a large portion of the novel, correspond to "my" yearning for a shelter to

[6] Luo Shao-Pin. "Magic Mountain and Sacred Script: A Bakhtinian Reading of the Novels of Gao Xingjian," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Spring 2005), 283.

[7] The stranger clearly refers to "me," who could be a sociologist, an ethnographer, an ethnologist, a journalist, an adventurer, or "an expert amateur in all of these" (c. 1, 3).

[8] Acclaimed as one of the pinnacles of Chinese fiction, *The Story of the Stone* not only chronicles the rise and decline of the protagonist's family and provides a panoramic view of its time but, more importantly, throws a penetrating light into the life struggle that is universal to all mankind. Cao Xueqin and Gao E, *The Story of the Stone*, trans. David Hawkes and John Minford. Vol. 1-5 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979-1987).

[9] See this dissertation's second chapter for a detailed discussion about "your" search for childhood memories.

defend against the formidable social reality (c. 14, 22).[10] In a similar vein, the unprecedented freedom that "you" embrace as a rebirth in the River of Forgetting speaks clearly of "my" fear of the imminent political threat (c. 66), symbolized by the dark forest and the staring eye on the tree trunk (c. 65).[11] By such an epistemological understanding of the divided selfhood, the undercurrent of "my" unfulfilled desire is brought to the surface by an onlooker, "you," who holds a surveilling position and commanding tone.

Tantalizing as it is to affirm "me" and "you" as a complementary pair in line with the Yin-Yang symbol, there is more to the "I-You" interplay than meets the eye. To review the previously discussed episode of "your" search for childhood memories: after "your" redemption of childhood memories (c. 32), "I" wake up from a dream in chapter 35 about "my" childhood, which involves "me" being bullied by wild street boys, "my" painful infatuation with a school-girl, and "my" father's worried eyes. In chapter 37, "I" dream of joining a family dinner with "my" dead relatives, during which not only am "I" reminded of "my" long-forgotten memories of a childhood during war, but "I" also disengage from "my" nostalgic fantasies upon thinking that "I can't live the lives they (i.e., "my" dead family) lived, and in any case their lives weren't particularly wonderful" (212).[12]

In chapter 53, while visiting Hu'nan, one of the places where "I" stayed as a child, "I" recount a trio of poignant deaths: "my" mother, who drowned during her time of voluntarily

[10] Notably, the reference to "my" yearning for childhood memories is only interspersed throughout the "I" narrative without have been unfolded. For instance, during a shaman's performance, "I" am distracted by the sight of roof-tiles because their "fish-scale overlapping shapes always conjure up childhood memories. […] Roof-tiles have the power of making me weak and making me succumb to inertia. I want to cry but I have already lost the ability to cry" (c. 14, 83). Elsewhere in the novel, while walking toward a train station in a small town, "I no longer seem to be walking forward but am returning to my childhood. […] It's as if I haven't gone through the war, haven't gone through the revolution, haven't gone through the endless sessions of struggle-meetings, haven't gone through the criticisms and counter-criticisms and the about-turn but not quite about-turn reforms of the present. It's as if my parents are not dead and I haven't endured any sufferings" (c. 22, 131).

[11] See this dissertation's second chapter for a detailed discussion.

[12] See this dissertation's second chapter for a detailed discussion.

working on a farm as self-reform (a behavior which "I" suggest derives from political frenzy); "my" younger uncle (a pilot-to-be), whose drowning was due to reckless swimming rather than for patriotic cause; and "my" eldest uncle, who was fascinated by modern modes of living but ironically died of ignorance of modern medicine. Having finally visited the institution for the elderly where "my" superstitious and ill-tempered maternal grandmother died, and paid tribute to her, "I" begin to be disillusioned with "my" obsession with "those warm memories" about "my" childhood and find "myself" free to step back and cast a skeptical eye upon "my" past (202-3). After all, each time when "I am looking for the house where I once lived as a child" in "my" dream, "I can never find a path which is the same so that I can come out by the way I came in. Every time I enter the courtyard in this dream, it is always by a different path" (202-3). It is precisely from this moment onward that "you" experience a major epiphany in chapter 54. That is, instead of obsessing over each place "you" have stayed during childhood, any place can "evoke this homesickness of yours and [has] become the hometown of your dreams" (328).

In a similar manner, shortly after "you" are enraptured by the utter liberation in the unnamed valley, the female corpses floating in the River of Forgetting bring "you" to a realization that "you" are not yet ready to become a rotting corpse – a synonym for the complete isolation from earthly affairs (c. 66). What "you" intimate at the end of chapter 66 turns into a full-fledged declaration of a desire to re-join the warm and anxious human world in the following "I"-chapter (c. 67). When "I" travel to a town with a network of canals with "my" lawyer friend and his female friend, the three during a night tour through the lake "curl up in the middle of the narrow cabin of the boat" for warmth (432). While "[o]ur bodies are pressed closer together," "I sense a quiet tenseness building up in the soft body transmitting the warmth, and as the stifled excitement heightens the night resumes its mystical pulsations" (433). Unlike the

episode in the River of Forgetting, in which the sound of water leaves "you" with a sense of emptiness, the "splashing" and "gurgling" water here rises to the accompaniment of the boatman's punt-pole singing, which sounds like "the groans of a distorted soul, unrealizable desires, weary and laboured" (434). Upon listening to his song which has no "specific meanings but transmit[s] direct perceptions," "you" feel "the warmth of her body and the rich reverberating sensations, her fingers and mine grip one another tightly at the same instant. […] [W]ith bated breath we listen to the howling tempest raging in our blood" (434).

In light of the preceding discussion, "your" role to "me" as a complementary counterpart is brought into question because "your" purportedly truthful discovery of the protagonist's mentality can hardly continue to hold up to sustain any further inquiries. As a parody or, a development, of the literary tradition manifest in *The Story of the Stone*, Gao's employment of the mirroring trope moves from presenting one particular reflection of the protagonist to providing a kaleidoscope of images suggestive of the complex, fluid, and multi-faceted nature of self-knowledge.[13] The answer to whether "you" are such an indistinct and inconsistent reflection of "me" can be found in "my" acknowledgement that "you" are "my creation": "You know that I am just talking to myself to alleviate my loneliness. You know that this loneliness of mine is incurable, that no-one can save me and that I can only talk with myself as the partner of my conversation. In this lengthy soliloquy you are the object of what I relate, a myself who listens intently to me – you are simply my shadow" (c. 52, 312).

Moving on from this epiphany, "I" continue to wonder "[w]hat would happen if you and I were to change places? In other words I would be your image and you instead would be the

[13] This single "mirror image," as the narrator indicates elsewhere, is only "the reflection of flowers in water, [y]ou can neither enter the mirror nor can you scoop up anything, but looking at the image, [you are either] becoming enamoured of it [or pitying] yourself" (c. 58, 350, modification mine). Also, of more relevance is "not the perception and awareness of the self but the *process* of that perception and awareness" (c. 72, 454, emphasis mine).

concrete form of me – this would be an interesting game. If you listen carefully to me from my position I would then become the concrete expression of your desires, it would be a lot of fun" (314). In fact, this separate "school of philosophy" that "I" allude to (as a result of which "the writing would have to start from the beginning again") is demonstrated thoroughly in the "I"-journey (314). In the "I"-narrative, "I" am rarely immersed fully in the tangible "reality" as "I" traverse various nature reserves, ethnic communities, religious sanctuaries, and historical sites. There always exists an inconsistency between "my" subjective experience and the geographical space "I" traverse – to name a few, the dominant versus the subordinate, the central versus the peripheral, and the traditional versus the counter-traditional. All of these inconsistent spaces hinge upon an individual's struggle with the center of power and are subsumed altogether into an intellectual pursuit to (re)discover his self and (re)structure his position to the world around him. Tangible material reality is no longer of the utmost relevance because even the shortest walk of "mine" can occasion new experience and knowledge through an encounter with the other(s). When "I" strive to grasp a world made of frequent ruptures and complex relations among places, peoples, cultures, and histories, the myth of authentic life as the "transcendental signified" is thereby deconstructed.[14] From this perspective, both "I" and "you," although on separate journeys, are not essentially different from one another. Both undertake an existential quest for a complex, dynamic, and multi-faceted phenomenon. Each iteration of their distancing from each other or "swapping places is aimed at further increasing the vantage points from which to scrutinize the self's thoughts and actions."[15]

[14] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 280.
[15] Mabel Lee, "Pronouns as Protagonists," 238.

II. “He” – A Thousand Shadows

Gao’s introduction of another pronoun, “he,” escalates the state of confusion in *Soul Mountain* due to the selective perspectives and fragmented human subjectivity. The third person “he,” as the narrator describes, though not “directly relevant to I and you,” is “gradually differentiated” and to be found “in large numbers everywhere and [having] a separate existence from oneself, and it was only then that the consciousness of you and I became secondary” (c. 51, 308). Without “his” presence, the self would have been “gradually forgotten and gradually churned like a grain of sand into the chaos of the boundless universe” during “the individual’s struggle for survival amongst others” (308).[16] Gao’s narrator elucidates the formulation of “him” in the next chapter (c. 52): although “I” and “you” wander on separate journeys, “[a]s the distance increases there is a converging of the two until unavoidably you and I merge and are inseparable. At this point there is a need to step back and to create space. That space is he. He is the [shadow] of you after you have turned around and left me” (313, modification mine).[17] Put alternatively, as the alienation between “me” and “you” unavoidably narrows and phases out, “he” arises as “your” distanciation from “me” and becomes another projection of “me” in the same manner as “you.”

Carl Jung’s model of the human psyche may provide useful insights to unravel “his” existence as “my” “shadow.” In Jungian psychology, the “shadow” refers to an unconscious aspect (mostly negative) of the personality which the conscious ego fails to identify or refuses to

[16] This metaphor is descended from a line in the well-known prose piece, “Qian chibi fu” 前赤壁賦 (The Former Ode on the Red Cliffs), written by the poet Su Shi蘇軾 (1037-1101) of the Song dynasty, during his demotion. Passing by the site of historic battles in his boat trip, Su was overpowered by the scenery along the way – the boundless river and infinite universe – which brought about his sensation of insignificance and the ephemerality of human life that bears a striking likeness to mayflies and a grain of sand.

[17] Beiying背影 (shadow or shadow of one’s back) in the original Chinese text is translated by Mabel Lee as “the back,” leaving out its connotation of being a “blurry image” caused by the blocked light and the distance between the observer and the observed. I use “shadow” here instead to keep my discussion coherent.

associate with itself.[18] As opposed to the obedient "persona-self" who makes himself socially desirable by wearing "masks," the "shadow-self" incorporates all content that is denied in himself and cast into oblivion. "Everyone carries a shadow," Jung argues, "and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is."[19] In line with Jung's interpretation, the "shadow" that lies outside the light of consciousness alludes to the boundless region outside the reach of human cognitive and intellectual capabilities. Within Gao's pronominal system, the as-yet-unknown space of self-knowledge is visualized by the image of "him" or "them" (the third-person plural) – "a composite image" of countless entities termed "him." Because of the complex, fluid, and multifaceted nature of human subjectivity, "he" invariably remains mysterious and "external to you and me" and "neither I nor my [reflection] ("you") can see his face" but only see a vague silhouette (313, modification mine).[20]

Aided by the intellectual mobility that arises from grappling with the third alternative ("he" or "they"), Gao establishes a tripartite structure delineated as follows: "you" are the reflection of "mine" and "he" constitutes the shadow of "your" back and is "the shadow of a shadow" (454). By means of such an endless process of self-(re)definition and (re)articulation in response to each experience of dislocation, Gao's narrator surmounts the traditional mode of binary thinking (such as the "I-you" opposition) to bring concomitant beliefs and solutions into doubt. Moreover, the interlinking sequence of "I-you-he" not only facilitates one's self-

[18] C. G. Jung, "The Shadow," *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self* (Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Vol. 9), trans. Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 17.

[19] C. G. Jung, "Psychology and Religion," *Psychology and Religion: West and East* (The Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Vol. 11), trans. Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 63.

[20] This unconscious mode of being where the true self may lie is also aligned with the Zen Buddhist concept of "Alaya-vijnana" 阿賴耶識 (store consciousness), which denotes a natural unfolding of the unconscious in an effort to overcome the limited sense of who we are as individuals. See Terry Siu-han Yip and Kwok-kan Tam, "Gender and Self in Gao Xingjian's Three Post-Exile Plays," *Soul of Chaos*, 217. Within such an ongoing mobilization of the unconscious, formerly repressed feelings and underlying impulses are activated and begin moving toward conscious awareness. As the barrier between the conscious and the unconscious becomes permeable, the system of the human psyche is kept in a constant flux and is always in the process of transformation.

understanding as to the formation of an individual's identity but also manifests Gao's literary concern in general and his writerly expectation for such a pronominal experiment in *Soul Mountain* – Gao moves far beyond "playing games with language, […] each of these pronouns gives you three different levels and three different starting points in which to enter the work."[21]

Returning to the novel, two succeeding chapters (c. 42, 43) refer to the converging of "I" and "you" as well as "his" emergence as a subsequent projection of "me" serving, in a manner of speaking, to revive "you." In chapter 42, "you" wander about in a dreamlike state, going in circles in search of a route up to the cliff but feeling that "you are moving further away" whenever "you" approach it. Having put aside the thought of reaching an ultimate destination, "you" let "your" feet lead "you" and "you" suddenly arrive at the foot of a stockade with layers of pylon houses. Unexpectedly, although the stockade looked beautiful from afar, in reality it is crowded with old people chanting to mourn a corpse lying on the planks behind the curtained doorway. In realizing that the body is in fact "you," "you" refuse to die and quickly "return to the world of human beings" (249). The reborn "you" appears in the form of "him" in the next chapter (this is also "his" debut in the novel) as "my" fellow traveler on a mountain road, who shares with "me" a similar look, outfit, facial expression, and body language. Sitting opposite each other, they both suspect that their counterpart is a robber and prepare themselves for a fight. After a brief confrontation, they walk past one another toward opposite directions. Seen in light of Gao's artistic maneuver of creating multiple pronouns, the fact that both "I" and "he" remain on guard and stay alert to one another suggests an increased distance which occasions "a different perspective […] of looking at myself."[22]

[21] Gao Xingjian, "A Conversation with Gao Xingjian" (interviewed by David Der-Wei Wang), *Asia Society*, Aug 17, 2001. https://asiasociety.org/conversation-gao-xingjian

[22] Gao, "A Conversation with Gao Xingjian."

Even so, corresponding to "his" lack of a distinct personality, as "he" admits to the literary critic, and "his" generally undefinable appearance, "his" role in the tripartite pronominal structure "I-you-he" remains by and large obscure. Chapters 60, 62, and 64, with their common plot of a key-search (the key emblematizes one's identity and memories) and narrated in a symbolic fashion, prove particularly helpful in understanding the contribution of the pronoun "he" to the development of and dynamic within a non-unitary, multi-layered, and dynamic subject. At the end of chapter 60, "you" mention in passing to "your" female visitor, "she," that "your" key was lost and has now been recovered. The details, however, do not unfold until chapter 62, which begins with "his" search for the misplaced key after rummaging through everything. Frustrated, "he" determines to set aside "his" worries about the unfound key and leaves the room for a walk. "Wander[ing] aimlessly around the streets," "he" experiences unprecedented joy and the relaxation of "his whole body and mind" (393). However, anxiety soon creeps into "his" mind because the passersby, "he" suspects, are perhaps staring at "him" for "his" abnormal gait – that is, walking with the "entire sole coming in contact with the ground" as if "he" were a bear – in comparison to others who are "walking with their heels striking the ground and, day after day and year in year out, jarring their bodies, and, making themselves tense, anxious and stressed" (394).

Although no passerby is actually taking notice of "him," "his" feeling of loneliness intensifies insofar as "he" "begins to sway as if he were sleepwalking" along the street (394). "[S]quashed in the thronging crowds on the pavement […] [and] being knocked and jostled by the people behind," "he" finds it nearly impossible to slow "his" pace (394). Seen through "your" perspective from an upstairs window over the street,[23] "he" looks like "a discarded cork

[23] In both chapters 62 and 64, Gao purposefully omits the quotation marks when "you" begin to recount "your" experience on the street. The mixture of direct speech with in-direct speech therefore facilitates a smooth shift

swirling helplessly as it floats down the gutter after the rain, together with dry leaves, cigarette packs, ice-cream wrappers, used take-away plates and the paper wrappings from all sorts of snacks" (394). When "she" interrupts "your" narrative at this point and asks if "his" existence akin to a discarded cork refers to that of "yours," "you" clarify that, "It isn't me it's a state of being," which is reminiscent of "your" experience when floating along with the female corpses in the River of Forgetting (c. 66).

With reluctance, "he" admits that it was "him" who "had thrown himself away" as if "a discarded cork" and begins to retrieve those "discarded" memories that include the street view that "he" was once acquainted with and several failed romances (394, 395). As the lost memories appear as "a few pale impressions" and start to stir within "him," not only does "he" remember the purpose of that pointless meeting, which "he" simply attends due to the unbearable loneliness, but the location of the key is also revealed to "him." Returning to "his" chaotic room, "he" discovers that the key is on the side of the desk, which was blocked from "his" view by a letter waiting to be answered. The key could not previously be seen because "he," as "he" searched, rustled through everything inside the room; it can now be seen as "he" stands right at the door and looks inward from a distance. As such, a change of perspective created by the physical distance from the door to "his" desk leads to a retrieval of the lost key. Read symbolically, "he" has rediscovered "his" lost identity and memories.

By virtue of an inspection through a pair of detached eyes and the accompanying psychological distance, the protagonist presents a self-reflexive performance that exemplifies a situation caused by the existential anxiety of an individual who finds the erasure of his identity and memories at once appealing and appalling. However much "he," enjoying his unprecedented

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between "your" perspective and "his" perspective and produces a sense of ambiguity in terms of who the protagonist really is: i.e., whether "you" are recounting "your" own experience or "his" experience.

freedom through the flight of “his” room, which appears as an “abysmal mess” caused by the key-search, “he” still vacillates, when facing the prospect of being a “discarded cork,” over severing ties with “his” past and society, and eventually determines to return home as a solution to his predicament. Having found “his” room “orderly” and comfortable again, “he” reconciles with “his” past that “he” attempted to obliterate and retrieves his misplaced key (392).

This episode about “him” strolling in the streets with “his” mind occupied by the misplaced key is narrated differently in chapter 64. At first, the female visitor, “she,” regrets having cropped her hair, a symbol of “cut[ting] off the past” as in the case of the lost key. Unlike “your” feeling of restlessness in the previous episode, “you” respond with indifference that “if it’s lost it’s lost, […] why look for it” and tell an alternative version of the key-search story (404). Wandering around, “he” fantasizes about “drifting wherever he liked in the city at night, like a gust of wind,” or “jump[ing] on a train and let[ting] it take him anywhere, […] whatever he felt like, getting off wherever he wanted” (408). Enraptured by the utter liberation, “he” feels that “he could begin everything all over again, like a naked baby,” kicking and crying “to let the world hear his voice” (409). Nonetheless, as with “his” previous experience of being “knocked and jostled” by the thronging crowds, “he” detects that “his” body appears to be “empty inside” and cannot produce a shout to “unleash the full extent of his emotions” (409). Seen once again through “your” scrutinizing eye having followed “him,” “he” stands on the deserted square like a disoriented sleepwalker (409).

A thought-provoking detail emerges at this point: Whereas “your” distanced perspective helps to identify “this physical body” as the source of “his” feeling of emptiness, “you” refrain from awakening “him” by patting “him” on the shoulder from behind, for “he,” as “you” explain, “wouldn’t be able to cope” with the fact that “his” soul “comes out of the orifices of the body”

and would only have been frightened to death (409). As opposed to "his" returning home (and rediscovering "his" misplaced key) in chapter 62, "he" keeps wandering aimlessly in this episode to the extent that "you" fail to maintain "your" formerly clear perspective. Regarding "his" whereabouts, "[y]ou can't say for sure" whether "he" intends to go back home or to any place else. "You just followed him, passed along a big street, went into a lane and came out at the other end, came back to a big street, went into another lane and emerged from it again. […] And returned to the street you started off from" (409).

Juxtaposing the two chapters about key-searches (c. 62, 64) highlights that in the former chapter "he" feels anxious about the lost key and is comforted by its rediscovery (along with "his" memories that are still "worth treasuring") due to "his" unwillingness to remain "a discarded cork." In the latter chapter, conversely, "you" deliberately keep "him" from a possible awakening from "his" lamentable condition as a sleepwalking zombie and even readily accept the prospect that "he" may not return to "his" home (and to "his" key and memories) (391). Provided that the retrieved key in chapter 62 symbolizes a reconciliation of conflicting identities and the achievement of a stable selfhood, "his" directionless wandering toward an uncertain future in chapter 64 suggests an unstable equilibrium of "his" personality that continues to defer the coherence and closure of identification. The path ahead of "him" that confuses "you," alongside the blurred images that "he" leaves "you,"[24] are reminiscent of "my" soliloquy in the final chapter: "I comprehend nothing, I understand nothing" (c. 81, 506).

The frequent references to "body" and "soul" in the key-search stories resonates with a fantastical trope in Chinese classical romances, *lihun*離魂 (the disembodied soul), except that in *Soul Mountain* the story of the disembodied soul ends inconclusively. In classical romances, the

[24] It should be noted that "you" never see "his" face and can only follow "him" around (c. 64).

disembodied soul of the protagonist (primarily female) leaves its physical body in search of her unfulfilled desire. Having actualized her desire and increased her self-awareness, the soul returns in the end and integrates into the body as a unified whole.[25] It is chiefly through the medium of the disembodied soul that the hidden reality of an individual's being can be thoroughly explored and their internal conflict eventually resolved. Unlike the blissful body/soul reunion in traditional narratives, Gao's narrator purposefully perpetuates the condition of one's internal conflict and defers the body/soul reunion by maintaining the distance between the body ("I") and the soul ("you") through creating multiple images of "him," which succeeds in circumventing both the false reconciliation between divided selves and a renewed self-awareness. Had the traditional reconciliation occurred, it would have led to a reductive interpretation or a limited view of the complex human mind in the postmodern context.

The dramatic rendering of "him" in the key-search chapters should be read in connection with Gao's theatrical experiments because his pronominal approach "derives from his dramas, which often require actors to assume a role and at the same time describe it from the outside."[26] To achieve an actor-centered theatrical production, Gao promotes the concept of Sanchongxing 三重性 (tripartition) that comprises three states of the actor: the "self," the "neutral actor," and the "character." As separate as they seem from one another, "one may pass from one to the next through the negotiation of a partition."[27] For Gao, the "self" is to be understood as the actor's

[25] "Pang E" 龐阿, the earliest story of the disembodied soul, is found in Liu Yiqing劉義慶 (403-444)'s collection of tales, *Youminglu* 幽明錄 (Records of the Hidden and the Visible Worlds). This simple story is further developed in later times, such as in Zheng Guangzu鄭光祖 (1260-1320)'s play, *Miqingsuo Qiannü lihun* 迷青瑣倩女離魂 (Dazed behind the Green Ring Lattice, Qiannü's Soul Leaves Her Body) and Tang Xianzu湯顯祖 (1550-1616)'s play, *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭 (The Peony Pavilion).

[26] The Swedish Academy, "The Nobel Prize for Literature 2000," Press release, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2000/press-release/.

[27] Todd J. Coulter, *Transcultural Aesthetics in the Plays of Gao Xingjian* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 49.

self-awareness of the performance being done and their communication with the audience. Being a "neutral actor," as opposed to suggesting a sense of inaction and calmness, allows the actor to acquire a "third eye" of inner vision, with which he is capable of detaching from the character he is portraying, observing his performing self (as well as other actors on stage and the audience), and adjusting his performance accordingly.[28] In response to such a mercurial state, the actor can thus accommodate multiple identities in conjunction – or possibly in contradiction – and maneuver among radically different representations of his character. As each third influences the presence of another third, the three components of the tripartitioned actor operate like three mutually constitutive identities.

Introduced from dramaturgy into narratology, the tripartite model "projects different modes of perception" in *Soul Mountain* through the pronominal characters, "I," "you," and "he."[29] As with the actor who embodies a transitional phase between the acting self and the character, the narrator in the novel also inhabits a liminal space between the narrating "I" and the narrated "him." In both cases, the neutral point of view affords the representing (or narrating) subject an opportunity to step briefly outside of his role, move toward the object being represented (or being narrated), and withdraw from it in order to skirt around a full blending with the latter. In the key-search series, it is through the pair of "your" detached eyes that "his" appearance assumes an indeterminate quality. This indeterminacy opens myriad cognitive possibilities and interpretative horizons as a pathway to decrypting the perplexing human mind. The most significant aspect of the stranger's perception lies not in a more balanced and accurate

[28] Gao's concept of tripartition is mostly inspired by his observation of Jingju京劇 (Beijing Opera). In traditional Chinese theater, "when the actor gets ready for the role he is to play, he extracts himself from his everyday activities, relaxes his body and focuses his mind to go into his performance. During this time, he 'purifies' himself into a 'state of neutrality'; in other words, he is in transition between his everyday self and his role." See Coulter, *Transcultural Aesthetics*, 50.

[29] Gilbert Fong, "Gao Xingjian and the Idea of Theatres," *Soul of Chaos*, 150.

view of the self but rather in the dynamic between experiences that are at once both remote and near, detached and involved, indifferent and concerned. This state of in-betweenness readily lends itself to an epistemological advantage of observing and reflecting on one's internal state, which can only be imperfectly known and always remains open to revision. During such an ongoing process of observation and reflection, the very plurality and contingency of selfhood – which would otherwise be inaccessible due to a fixed and uncritical perspective – may start to crystallize.[30]

III. "She" – Wrestling with a Woman

Having put the male characters – "I," "you," and "he" – under scrutiny, we should turn to the character "she," who captivates the reader's attention as the only feminine figure. Of the 81 chapters of the novel, more than one third of them recount the narrator's romantic chance encounters and sexual relationships with women along the journey. According to the Swedish Academy, the rich depiction of the male/female interaction, which lends to his text "feverish excitement," "gives the same weight to the truth of woman as to his own."[31] However, Gao's intention in creating a female character, "project[ing] himself with immense freedom into the psyche of women,"[32] and having "you" and "her" follow "the choreography of seduction as their basic pattern" holds an extra layer of significance.[33] As with the case of "I" creating "you" in order to alleviate incurable loneliness, "you" invent "her" in order "to find a partner for your conversation" (312). In line with the intricate intimacy between "me" and "you," "she" could

[30] Gao's concept of the "neutral eye" is also indebted to Daoist beliefs and practices. The constant displacement of pronouns, which generates a psychological distance between characters, adheres to a method of Daoist meditation known as "neiguan" 內觀 (inner vision). In visualizing one's inner body and mind, the self can assume the roles of both the perceiving subject and the perceived object.

[31] The Swedish Academy, "The Nobel Prize for Literature 2000," Press release, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2000/press-release/.

[32] Gao, *Soul Mountain*, ix (Mabel Lee's introduction).

[33] The Swedish Academy, "The Nobel Prize for Literature 2000."

also be conceived of as "an affirmation of myself" and hence another potential revelation of the hidden dimension of the protagonist's subjectivity (312).

Read through the Jungian theory, "she" likely refers to the archetype "anima," which denotes the unconscious feminine traits of a man (similarly, "animus" refers to the unconscious masculine traits of a woman).[34] As a personification of the feminine tendencies in "you," the recurring presence of "she," who entangles "herself" in a romance with "you," enables "your" unfettered emotionality and enhanced psychic sensitivity. Such a refined self-awareness in the process of individuation helps "you" to recognize how "you" relate to the world from the imaginative perspective of a female other. Interestingly, the discussed term "shadow" and the gendered pair of "anima/animus," which is nested inside the "shadow," are both independent from one's conscious mind and are associated with an unconscious complex.

In the case of the "shadow," the content of one's personal unconscious is acquired through the lived experiences of each individual in a society. The understanding of the qualities of one's "anima/animus," however, depends on that which one inherits from the collective unconscious: the overall experience with members of the opposite sex and, in broader terms, the social influence of cultural heritage. Specifically, the pair "anima/animus" (or the "eros/logos," which Jung borrows from ancient Greek philosophy) operate as mediators of the unknown and guide people through the discovery of underdeveloped (or undeveloped) dimensions of their subjectivity.[35] In view of this, the alternation between repression and re-emergence of the "anima" becomes a source of creative ability for Gao's narrator.[36]

[34] Jung, "The Syzygy: Anima and Animus," *Aion*, 20.

[35] To name a few, the feminine qualities can refer to nurturance, relatedness, receptivity, creativity, empathy, spontaneity, intuition; the masculine qualities can indicate power, thought, and action.

[36] Anthony Stevens, *On Jung* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 2006.

In the novel, “you” first meet “her” near a pavilion in Wuyizhen and “[h]er figure, poise and enigmatic expression” stir within “you” “an undefinable longing, a vague hope” (c. 5, 29). “You” and “she” later become acquainted with each other and both attend a performance of traditional storytelling, in which “she,” “pursing her lips like a cheeky child,” concurs with “your” comment on the show and seems to be “your echo” (c. 5, 33). As their chance encounter turns into a fervent romance, “she” struggles at first to escape from “you” during their love-making for “she” feels as if “[s]he has been stalked, hunted, torn apart, devoured” by an “animal” (c. 21, 114). Toward the end of this “fierce battle,” “she” surrenders to “your” male dominance, saying that “I’m yours, speak to me tenderly”; “you” in turn call “her” a “silly child” (115). After their love-making, “you” tell “her” a story in which a brother and his younger sister sought shelter in a small boat during the outbreak of the Great Flood and huddled close together to disperse the loneliness. Adopting separately the brother’s and his younger sister’s voice, “you” say, “the girl was seduced by the snake,” and “she” says, “[y]ou love me. […] The snake is my big brother” (116). Their sexual intimacy, interestingly, alludes to the mythical union of two ancestral divinities (also siblings), Fuxi伏羲 and Nüwa女媧, the first named woman and man in history who respectively “constitute the collective consciousness of men and women” (c. 51, 307).

Shortly, “she” breaks the shackles of gender stereotypes as a “child” in “your” eye and advocates for gender equality by, for instance, blatantly admitting that women’s sexual desire and primitive urges could be as strong as those of their male counterparts: “It’s not only men who lust. […] Why can’t women do what men can?” (c. 31, 174) Moreover, “her” libido grows to be so powerful that “you,” while sleeping “pressed against her breasts,” dream of having been oppressed by “a black tide, a surging tide, like surging lust, growing higher and higher, wanting

to engulf you" (c. 23, 137). To relieve "your" anxiety from "your" nightmare, "she" nestles "you" in "her" arms, "like a sweet child" (a role reversal occurs: "you" become the child as "she" used to be) (137). The image of a black tide, emblematic of female dominance over the male, turns later into a bloody scene – a mental image which "she" envisions to frighten "you" (c. 38, 217). "She" directs this destructive force toward "you" as much as toward "herself" by imagining that "she," stark naked, is also "soaked in the purple-black blood" (218). At the end of this chapter, "you" begin to feel apprehensive and "break away from the woman clinging tightly to you" while she is asleep (221). Later, the power struggle culminates in a scene in which "she" hysterically wields [a] knife toward "you" and deters "you" from ending their relationship (c. 46, 272). After detecting traces of "your" vacillation, "she" attempts to manipulate "you" by "lock[ing] her arms around you tightly, weeping" and promises "you" freedom "as long as you love her and don't leave, as long as you stay with her" (274). Eventually, "[s]he has won, you can't resist and again sink into carnal lust, unable to free yourself" (274).

The power struggle leaves an indelible impact on "your" and "her" relationship. In chapter 50, "she" condemns "you" for being a hypocritical monster, who has "tormented her soul more cruelly than [you] had ravaged her body," and walks off from "you" in indignation (301, modification mine). "You" resolutely refuse to look at "her" for fear that "she" would entice you again and "drag you back down the same old road" (303). To encapsulate their volatile romance at this point: "she," who used to assume a submissive role, steadily outwits, challenges, forces "you" into the defensive. "She" finally rises to a position of authority that demands docility, subservience, and compliance from "you," who initially cast "yourself" in a leading role (such as "your" volunteering to be "her" tour guide in a remote village) and attempted to pin "her" down

as wounded and vulnerable. In exchanging assigned gender roles, "your" and "her" power relations are reshuffled to the extent that a new gender order can be instituted.

As Mabel Lee remarks on Gao's play *Between Life and Death* (1991), the woman is "twice removed from the male author Gao Xingjian who shares with the audience his observation of the woman's psychology by coldly and clinically reporting on what the woman purportedly says."[37] The episodes concerning "your" wrestling with "her" thus communicate to the reader a two-fold message: on the one hand, "your" effort to draw the consciousness of a gender typecast in a subordinate position sensitizes "you" to a different living situation, which unchains "you" from "your" patriarchal mindset and prepares the ground for "your" subjective growth. On the other hand, "you" cast a suspicious eye on women who, once released from a marginalized position and moved to center stage, could in all likelihood increase and consolidate their power through reenacting the system of oppression. Having achieved an understanding which favors neither gender, "you" disengage from "your" sympathetic identification with women and part ways with "her," for "you can't yield to a woman's will. […] She is suffocating you, you can't be anyone's slave, you won't submit to any authority whatever tactics are used" (c. 46, 274).

Apart from probing into the individual's unseen dimension for a fuller self-realization, the motif of "you-she" wrestling for power explores the interplay between a writer's lived experience and creative imagination in his self-expression. As "you" acknowledge, "[y]ou who are the partner of my conversation transform my experiences and imagination into your relationship with her" (c. 52, 312). In the first thirty-one chapters in *Soul Mountain*, "you"

[37] Mabel Lee, "Gao Xingjian's Transcultural Aesthetics in Fiction, Theater, Art, and Film," *Polyphony Embodied: Freedom and Fate in Gao Xingjian's Writings*, ed. Michael Lackner and Nikola Chardonnens (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 31.

appear as a speaking and thinking subject, who tell "her" a number of stories drawn from local anecdotes, legends, and folktales.[38] Except for "her" occasional attempt to contradict "your" stereotypical perception of women as less capable of "think[ing]" than men, "she" mostly "listens intently," "nods and listens child-like," "holding your hand, docile and compliant" upon listening to "your" stories "so that she will not feel lonely" (52, 55, 87, 126). "Your" female companion "is thus made to be watched / observed but not to be heard."[39]

As the narrative progresses, "she" gradually steps out of "her" role as a listener, who often pleaded with "you" to tell stories, and gains "her" own voice by narrating "her" stories which involve an unfortunate past regarding "her" uncaring stepmother, cowardly father, repellent workplace, and unfaithful boyfriend (c. 11). Once "her" voice becomes palpable, as "you" notice, "she can't stop talking" as if the "flood gates have opened" (c. 21, 128). While describing the intoxicating view of a summer night that "she" and "her" childhood friend encountered, "she" begins to strengthen "her" position of authority as a storyteller, by asking if "you" could envision this scene as well, and demands "your" attentiveness as a listener because "[s]he wants you to listen to her" (c. 27, 154). As "her" voice gathers momentum, "she" expresses "her" distaste for "your" "[c]ommon and vulgar" stories (at this point "your" stories are largely finished) and claims, quite assuredly, that "she" seeks nothing but "totally undisguised truth" from the "women's stories" that "she" has told (c. 32, 180).[40] For this reason, "she" desires to help "you" retrieve "your" forgotten childhood memories and to rediscover "your" most secret feelings. Through "her" attempts to "imagine with you, curl into the deepest

[38] See this dissertation's third chapter for a detailed discussion of "your" stories (the aspect of historiographic metafiction in *Soul Mountain*).

[39] Chen, *The Aesthetics of the Beyond*, 145.

[40] Significantly, unlike the general arrangement in *Soul Mountain*, by which "I"-chapters and "you"-chapters take turns, chapters 31 and 32 are the only case where two "you" chapters are consecutively arranged.

recesses of your soul and […] manipulate your imagination," "you" could perceive the world following "her" lead – such as, "to touch with her fingers, to see with her eyes, to create images with her" (181). It is then that "you" start to remember "your" childhood, a subject "you" have avoided, which "wasn't in fact without happy times" (182).

"Her" total possession of "your" soul encounters a challenge in the next "you" chapter (c. 34). Alternately exchanging stories, "you" reminisce about a family anecdote of "your" great-grandfather's mysterious death and wish that "she" could hear "your" story "like the good little girl […] sitting on your knee and snuggled in your arms" (192). "She" relates to "you" "her" irrepressible infatuation with an older man. Before introducing the end of their respective stories (i.e., whether "your" great-grandfather dies due to the retribution brought forth by the fire god or at the hands of his murderous enemy, and whether "her" romance heads toward a poignant ending), "you" interrupt "her" by claiming that all "her" stories, rather than stemming from "her" creative imagination, are drawn entirely from "her" actual life experiences; and "she" finds fault with "you" since "she" believes that "you" only tell make-believe stories "to frighten her" (195). As in the end of the fight between "you" and "her" for gender dominance, "she" strides away from "you" with rage (c. 50).

Seeing "her" vanish, "[y]our heart is suddenly desolate": "where [to] find this Lingshan" (303, 304, modification mine)? Having soon realized that "you can't say what she looks like or how her voice sounded" and that "[y]ou don't really know her at all, whether what she told you was truth or only half truth," "you" feel as if "you've attained some sort of release" (303). Considering that "you" and "she" are respective personifications of "my" lived experience and imagination, which are too inextricably intertwined to disentangle one from another, their power struggle to determine the one which is "more real" is destined to fail because the "totally

undisguised truth" occurs most likely in the slippage between the "memory" of one's real life experiences and "wishful thinking" (304). As with the scene in which "he" is left wandering on the street at the end of the key-search stories, "your" unresolved battle with "her" suggests Gao's stance against privileging either reality or imagination as truth-revealing devices in his writing; rather, he readily adopts a perennial state of flux, in which he can migrate freely across borders between the factual and the fictional.

In view of the preceding discussion of "you," "he," and "she," it suffices to say that Gao's pronominal trope operates in a similar manner to the Derridian notion of situating the "decentered Subject."[41] To decenter the definite and to un-privilege the dominant, Derrida's decentering process comprises a flow of different points of view transcending socio-cultural borders that (re)situate and (re)frame the subject position, and that produce an array of creative counter-images of the subject. A decentered and multi-layered subject undergoes ambiguous (re)construction and turns up in a porous, plastic framework not bound by pre-existing social categories but contingently situated in time and space. Interestingly, this dynamic progression accords with a Daoist notion mentioned in chapter 63, "The Way gives birth to one, one gives birth to two; two gives birth to three, three gives birth to the myriad things,"[42] which promotes a way of thinking that moves beyond a duality, and onto or beyond a third alternative (and many others) (402).

[41] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 292.

[42] Since this quote from the Daoist classic occurs in chapter 63 (inserted between the two key-search chapters), it likely foreshadows the open end of the second version of the key-search episode (c. 64).

IV. “We”: A Total Sham

During “my” stop at a local museum in Guiyang, “I” am intrigued by a carved wooden mask of an animal head with a human face. Upon scrutiny, a feeling of unease wells up inside “me” because, except for discovering the animal savagery that lies in human beings, it seems impossible to “cast off this mask” which appears as a “replica of himself” that “has already grown like skin and flesh” (c. 24, 141). Not only that, but the inescapable self tends to torment mankind due to its forever-changing nature. In the next “I” chapter (c. 26), “I” detect that “this strange thing, the self,” varying constantly in a manner similar to clouds, water stains on the bathroom wall, and the projected light onto the ceiling, would “gradually separate from the self [I am] familiar with and multiply into many startling forms” (150, modification mine). The myriad versions of the self not only leave “me” in a state of bewilderment as “I” struggle to determine the one which best represents “me” but also terrify “me” as they often grow “not as [I] wish and moreover, mostly, contrary to what [I] wish. It is a monster child which [I] find impossible to accept, yet ultimately it was born of the self and has to be accepted” (151, modification mine). Such a “detestable” self, as “I” meditate, keeps interfering with “my” perception and understanding in everyday life. As a result, nothing “I” encountered could survive “my” “superficial and arbitrary” state of mind, and everything “I” observed inevitably becomes “illusions I have created to delude myself” (151). As with “my” agony in the encounter with the irremovable wooden mask, “I” feel powerless to address this existential predicament by simply killing “the awakened self” (152).

The reason behind “my” struggle with the “superficial and arbitrary” mind is to circumvent the pitfall induced by an individual’s own “self-love, self-adoration, and a sense of superiority,” which tend to bloat the conception of a single self into a notion of “we” – a pronoun

that Gao's narrator avoids using throughout the novel (151). In chapter 52, "I" emphatically distinguish the first-person plural "we" from the other discussed pronouns, which all play essential roles in self-exploration, as "I" consider the notion of "we" to be none other than a "totally meaningless […] sham" (313). However indistinctly and inconsistently the images of "you and she and he and masculine they and feminine they" are to be perceived and recognized, they reveal and concretize, in some measure, layers of individual subjectivity and thus "are more substantial than […] we" (313). By contrast, adopting the pronoun "we" would only make the speaking subject feel "immediately uncertain" ("how many of me are in fact implicated?") and frustrate the listeners, who are arbitrarily represented and spoken for, with his extreme hypocrisy or a "bloated sham affectation" (314).

Seen from Gao's perspective, the uncritical use of "we" problematizes one's understanding of the self and the world. Echoing Jean-Paul Sartre's slogan that "[h]ell is other people,"[43] which illustrates one's painful coexistence of the others, Gao advances his own concept, Ziwo ji diyü 自我即地獄 (Hell is the Self), to reveal that the self is a "delusion that can suffocate and destroy a person" and is thus "the source of mankind's misery" (152).[44] In his essay "Freedom and Literature," Gao asserts that "[t]o flee is […] to save oneself, and even more difficult to flee are the dark shadows of the inner mind of the self, and if one lacks sufficient awareness of the self, one will undoubtedly first be buried in the hell of the self, and right until death not see the light."[45] In an effort to "escape from the self-built prison,"[46] Gao resorts to a pronominal structure in his novel, by which he is empowered to examine the complex and multi-

[43] Jean Paul Sartre, *No Exit*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), 61.
[44] Gao Xingjian, "Freedom and Literature," *Polyphony Embodied*, 17.
[45] Ibid., 16.
[46] Liu Jianmei, "Gao Xingjian: The Triumph of the Modern Zhuangzi," *Zhuangzi and Modern Chinese Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 227.

faceted individual subjectivity and the kaleidoscopic spectacle of reality through the varied perspectives of "I," "you," "he," and "she." Admittedly, the ongoing and improvisational process of self-discovery fueled by the dialogic exchange between the chaotic and decentralizing forces of subjectivity may result in a dislocated narrator with a lost horizon (such as "my" sense of falling into "a void […] without somewhere to land," "his" disoriented wandering on the streets, and "your" feeling of desolation when "she" departs). However, only this particular "way of sequencing, […] a sort of logic or karma" allows the narrator to affirm himself in the unordered world, feel "secure in [his] own actions and have peace of mind," and summon up courage to stand up against the plural first-person pronoun "we" (314, modification mine).

Gao's avant-garde choice to use pronouns as protagonists moves beyond the mere focus on the difference and differentiation of multiple dimensions of personhood through self-splitting. Rather, it allows considerable flexibility in the enunciation of an individual's thoughts and feelings and visualizes the ambiguity, fluidity, and relativity of human subjectivity in negotiating and struggling with society. This literary strategy increases the nomadic quality of *Soul Mountain* in the sense that the wandering protagonist, in both his geographical and psychological adventures, holds a nomadic and non-unitary vision of the self and the world. Resounding forcefully with the Deleuzian concept of "nomadology," Gao's nomadic subject always remains in a process of becoming; specifically, it remains in a constant flux of de- and re-territorializing its stable identity. Though differing in socio-cultural context, "Nomadology," as a kind of "war machine" which lies "exterior to the State apparatus,"[47] proves integral as a source of artistic creativity to Gao's walking narrative by bringing forth pure potential for change.

[47] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Nomadology: The War Machine*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Semiotext, 1986), 351.

## A Bridge

### Walking in Wonder

In both Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain*, the focus of the preceding chapters, and W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, the subject of the following ones, the protagonists set foot on a journey in the wake of "A World on the Wane."[1] In his seminal travelogue *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) of his year in South America, Claude Lévi-Strauss laments a sense of belatedness and the diminishing possibilities for discovering the world's wonder in a late modernist world, prompting the nostalgic wish to have lived "in the days of real journeys, when it was still possible to see the full splendour of a spectacle that had not yet been blighted, polluted and spoilt."[2] Compared to Lévi-Strauss' preoccupation with "vestiges of a vanished reality,"[3] the cultural-historical anxiety about the exhaustion of what remains to be discovered has a wider scope in the cases of Gao and Sebald. Specifically, their "disenchantment of the world" derives not only from the modern social milieu characterized by Max Weber as "rationalization and intellectualization,"[4] which gives rise to an increasingly predictable, homogenized world, but

[1] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *A World on the Wane*, trans. John Russell (New York, Criterion Books, 1961).

[2] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 50.

[3] Ibid., 51.

[4] Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), 155. Weber's "disenchantment of the world" primarily focused on the role of science and industry in society. By the early twentieth century, Weber argued, modernized societies "no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service." (Weber, 42). Industrial and scientific advances, he claimed, meant that there remained "no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation" (Weber, 42).

also from all types of political totalitarianism. It is within such a cultural-historical context that both writers embark on their voyage in search of the recovery and renewal of wonder.

In Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain*, the protagonist's journey in search of the sacred site *Lingshan* (Soul Mountain) features a two-fold structure: a physical journey undertaken by the I-narrator in the real world and a spiritual one pursued by the you-character in a highly symbolic realm. On their respective journeys, the I-narrator, after a narrow escape from death, flees the stifling city life and travels along the Yangtze River valley in an effort to experience the world anew. While traversing a primitive forest, minority ethnic communities, rural fringes, religious sanctuaries, and historical sites, he ponders whether life's meaning is embedded in this "sort of reality" and is determined to seek an "authentic life" (*SM*, 11, 12). While the I-narrator engages in an ethnographic adventure in peripheral areas of China, the you-character directs his focus inward with the aim of a truthful revelation of his soul – an inward search denoted by the character *Ling* (soul, spirit) in the novel's title. Such a psychological dimension is unraveled primarily by recourse to the intensive conversations between himself and his female companion, the she-character, in the form of storytelling – whether personal or historical, real-life or supernatural – to achieve a fuller understanding of the composite and complex self.

However, the location, characteristics, and possible routes to the elusive Soul Mountain are never revealed throughout the novel. Not only that, the protagonist's every encounter with places of wonder, where he believes the "authentic life" lies, fills him with great delight, but the feeling of enchantment is more than transitory. Such a disillusionment with the world he traverses, in which the wonder seems to be unattainable, is pronounced in the opening scene of the last chapter in *Soul Mountain* (c. 81): the I-narrator is facing snow outside the window and observes a small green frog, which he speculates represents God. Upon seeing that the frog's

"intelligent round eye doesn't so much as blink once" but the other eye "opens and closes as it speaks a language incomprehensible to humans," the I-narrator contemplates, "I could of course think maybe there is no meaning at all in this blinking eye, but its significance could lie precisely in its not having meaning" (*SM*, 505). "There are no miracles" performed by a divine power, as he reflects on the God-sent message, which can guide human beings through bewilderment toward the truth of life (*SM*, 505). The insatiable I-narrator continues to inquire of God, "[t]hen what else is there to seek?" but only finds that "[a]ll around is silence, snow is falling soundlessly" (*SM*, 505).

The protagonist's futile search for a place of wonder in *Soul Mountain* has its counterpart in W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*. The novel commences with a scene in which the hospitalized narrator attempts to recollect his walking trek through the county of Suffolk in the coastal region of eastern England in August 1992, fearing that "the Suffolk expanses I had walked the previous summer had now shrunk once and for all to a single, blind, insensate spot" (*RS*, 4). Driven by that thought, the nearly paralyzed narrator slips out of his bed, crawls across the flood, reaches the window sill, standing "[i]n the tortured posture of a creature" similar to Kafka's Gregor Samsa in his 1915 novella *The Metamorphosis* (*RS*, 4).[5] Leaning against the glass, the Samsa-turned-insect finds that the scene out of the window – the quiet street where his family had lived – is now a grey wasteland. And the rest of Kafka's novel functions as an oblique allegory about how an individual miserably perishes in confinement and alienation while trapped in the capitalist system. Sebald's narrator "too found the familiar city […] an utterly alien place" (*RS*, 5). When facing such a bleak scene, he feels as if he is "looking down from a cliff upon a sea of stone or a field of rubble" (*RS*, 5). It is from this moment that the narrator's

[5] Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, trans. Michael Hofmann (New York: Penguin Classics, 2008).

transformed consciousness awakens memories of his walking trip across the desolate landscape and that a mental pilgrimage begins, taking the narrator through a history of death and destruction toward the Sebaldian "wonder."

Like the feeling of disenchantment with the world and the alleged sacred site in Gao's Soul Mountain, which remains unfound despite the protagonist's unremitting search, the effort undertaken by Sebald's narrator to stretch back centuries into the past meets a similar frustration. In the opening chapter, the narrator plans out the itinerary for his historical investigation in perhaps the scientific spirit of the Guild of Surgeons depicted by Rembrandt in his painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632): from far-ranging topics including the mysterious death of his colleagues, the unspecified whereabouts of Thomas Browne's skull, exhumed relics in funerary urns, and ancient burial practices introduced in Browne's treatise *Hydriotaphia or Urn Burial* (1658), it becomes clear that the narrator seeks to mourn and memorialize losses throughout history by examining remains of material objects that have survived the ravages of time. In contrast to the quincunx, a form introduced by Sebald's narrator in chapter 1 of *Rings* that Browne identified in varied animate and inanimate matters, Browne's *Musæum Clausum* (1684) invoked in the last chapter of *Rings*, an imaginary library that houses "a register of marvels" and all manner of astonishing curiosities, betrays signs of the world's obscurity and unknowability (*RS*, 273). Thus, the narrator seems to concur with Browne's statement that "all knowledge is enveloped in darkness. What we perceive are no more than isolated lights in the abyss of ignorance, in the shadow-filled edifice of the world" (*RS*, 19).

An examination of the word "wonder" may shed light on both writers' intent behind recounting a voyage of disappointment, particularly when considering their purpose of re-enchanting the world. According to the OED entry, "wonder," as a noun, primarily refers to

"something that causes astonishment," such as "a marvellous object; a marvel, prodigy." Its connotation, however, has not always been exclusively positive, for it can also denote "destruction, disaster," like the histories investigated in Sebald's *Rings* that cannot be described as "wonderful' in a colloquial sense. Such semantic multiplicity is shared by the use of "wonder" as a verb, of which the most colloquial meanings are near contradictory: to wonder means "to feel or be affected with wonder; to be struck with surprise or astonishment, to marvel"; but it also means "to feel some doubt or curiosity." In brief, one stops us in our tracks, the other propels inquiries. Reflecting on both protagonists' disillusionment in light of the polyvalent word "wonder," it becomes evident that no unified vision of the wonder can be achieved; moreover, the presence of wonder is not only bound up with a sensory effect – be it delight or grief – but can also exert a cognitive impact that motivates our curiosity toward the unknown, or toward the unknowable. "Wonder," as a concept full of inconsistency and variety, hence "skirts the boundaries of understanding, cajoles knowledge into a state of uncertainty, [and] harasses us out of the security, however melancholy, of knowingness."[6]

Due to its unusual range of connotation, the astonishing "wonder" can now be viewed as a driver of curiosity about a marvelous object, a provocation of skepticism that fuels the protagonist's unremitting search – however futile – in both novels. Returning to the I-narrator's soliloquy in the ending scene of *Soul Mountain*: "[t]he fact of the matter is I comprehend nothing, I understand nothing" but "there is always a mysterious eye" behind his back that forces him to understand, or even "pretend that I understand even if I don't" (*SM*, 505, 506). It is worth noting that the "mysterious eye" that holds sway over him not only proclaims a desire to know, but also prescribes a particular way of knowing: a conceptual thinking that can easily morph into

[6] Simon Cooke, *Travellers' Tales of Wonder: Chatwin, Naipul, and Sebald* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 8.

a totalizing, all-in-one dogma. Gao's narrator expresses his abhorrence of such a mindset while reflecting on the purpose of his visit to a scientific research camp in the mountain (c. 8): "Too much analytical thinking, too much logic, too many meanings! Life has no logic, so why does there have to be logic to explain what it means? Also, what is logic? I think I need to break away from analytical thinking, this is the cause of all my anxieties" (*SM*, 50). To Gao (and his narrator), the truth of life cannot be conceptualized as a stable and readily graspable totality without having compromised the complexity and completeness of human experience. Human life, as an entity of uncertainty, can only be understood in a nonconceptual, intuitive manner. The narrator's self-doubt about the sought-after wonder throughout the novel insists upon opening what we conceive of as an "authentic life" up to further examinations.

In an allegorical episode (c. 42), Gao points to the implication of a conceptual over-reach. The chapter begins with a scene where the you-character is drawn to a wonderful sight on his walk: a stockade with layers of pylon houses built on the edge of a precipitous cliff. Despite his apparent proximity to this destination, the you-character feels that the stockade keeps eluding him whenever he approaches it. After a few failed attempts in search of a route, he decides to set aside the preoccupation with the destination, "just let your legs carry you along the mountain road, and he suddenly finds himself at the foot of the stockade (*SM*, 245). To his horror, the stockade that looked beautiful from afar turns out to be collapsing wooden houses, crowded with ghostlike people chanting to mourn a corpse behind the curtained doorway. The dead person lying on the planks, in a further twist, is the you-character. In juxtaposing the stockade, appearing wonderful at a distance but hideous later, and one's purpose of life, the you-character contemplates: "there has never been a definite goal in your life. All your goals keep changing as time passes and as locations change, and in the end the goals no longer exist. When you think

about it, life in fact doesn't have what may be called ultimate goals" (*SM*, 245). For him, the purpose of life can be understood or "dealt with in endless ways," "just keep your mind on walking along your road […] as long as there are sights to see" (*SM*, 245, 246).

Compared to the conceptual thinking that Gao considers problematic in finding the "authentic life," Sebald is primarily concerned with a limited, contemporary perspective, suggesting our inability to reconstruct accurately and adequately world history through collecting and researching remains of material culture. Sebald implies that the alleged memorializing function of any material artifact should be questioned due to its inherent paradox: it bears witness to history as a surviving trace of the ravages of time, but it also serves as a reminder of that which has been lost to the destructive forces of both natural and human intervention. The struggle of reconstructing the past is visualized by the first photograph reproduced in the novel: a dark wall framing a blindingly white window-pane draped with black netting. In the eye of the bed-ridden narrator, all that could be seen of the world is a patch of colorless, cloud-filled sky framed in the window, replacing "a reality I feared had vanished forever" (*RS*, 4). The image of the hospital window thus becomes a key metaphor for a falsified perspective and the ensuing crisis of knowledge. Seen in this light, every undertaking to recontextualize the trace of material culture offers the chance to divulge historical reality within the present in the form of a symbolic "transmigration," but this "transmigration" is destined to be imperfect.

Unlike Gao's implication that an uncritical embrace of the conceptual mentality could cause people's submission to ideological manipulation (such as Communism and Confucianism) in *Soul Mountain*, Sebald foregrounds the consequences of fixating upon reality with a falsified perspective: that is, the war crimes and atrocities committed during the age of colonialism and imperialism. In *Rings*, the narrator recounts that the young Joseph Conrad dreamed of a remote

destination, the Congo, then "a white patch on the map of Africa" embellished by the cartographers with drawings of exotic beasts, "over which he had often pored for hours, reciting the colourful names" (*RS*, 117). In a sense, the young Conrad participates as a child in the colonial conceptualization of Africa as an empty, white area on the map onto which the 'civilized' European inscribes order by naming and delineating the territories. The colored exoticness of the African map in the young Conrad's imagination later assumes an unsettling reality as he takes a charge from the Belgian trading company to explore the upper reaches of the Congo river. Through his infamous protagonist Marlow, Conrad described how the Congolese were forced to labor in chain gangs until they dropped from hunger, disease, and exhaustion. The horrifying reality of the Congo stands in complete disparity with Conrad's childhood fantasy of the Congo and, more importantly, with King Leopold's characterization of the Belgian colonial enterprise as "a crusade in order to bring this glorious century of progress to the point of perfection" (*RS*, 118). Such a disastrous outcome of the colonial project demonstrates how a falsified perspective – and its mental projection – problematizes our perception of historical reality and causes memories of those suffering and the cost of human life to be repressed and forgotten.

The protagonists' preoccupation with their futile searches for wonder in Gao's *Soul Mountain* and Sebald's *Rings* is a self-reflexive quality in disguise, a postmodern sensibility that foregrounds the partiality and perspectivity of an individual's mind. Both authors' acknowledgement of an individual's epistemological limitations when confronted with the world's complexity does not form a conclusion but illuminates a point of departure. As is evidenced in both novels, discovering the objective of the protagonist's search is less central than the continuing practice of discovery, which keeps bringing that which has just been discovered

into question. Interrogating the self *en route* to critical consciousness, the wonder-seeker's mind is guided toward the vast expanses of knowledge and experience with which they can re-enchant the world in hopes of encountering "the wonder that came later."[7] In this light, both Gao's and Sebald's literary voyages of disappointment can be read "as both expression of and counter to a sensibility of disenchantment: a challenge to the hubris of thinking the world too well known, and an invitation to encounter and approach the present, past and future, in all its complexity, with a sense of wonder."[8]

In both novels, the self-reflexive moments generally occur – in forms of frustration, bewilderment, and unrecognized longings – as soon as the protagonist comes upon the most wonderful and meaningful scene. In chapter 68 of *Soul Mountain*, the you-character keeps on climbing mountains as he is invariably drawn to the sight of the "rising and falling lines of the peaks in the hazy distance" (*SM*, 435). Upon eventually arriving at the peak, "the wonders you hoped for aren't there, and once again there is just the lonely mountain wind" (*SM*, 435). Although the exhilaration of reaching every summit is bound to subside, his desire to climb mountains resurges, for he holds fast to his prospect that the "mountain beyond will have things you haven't encountered" (*SM*, 435). Eventually, "[a]fter some time you get used to this loneliness and climbing peaks becomes an obsession" (*SM*, 435). In chapter 76, Gao again underscores this self-critical consciousness. The he-character becomes lost *en route* to Soul Mountain and asks for directions from a venerable elder. However much the elder keeps assuring him that the mountain is "on the other side of the river," the he-character is deeply perplexed as he has just come from "that side of the river," which the elder pointed at, to "this side of the river" (*SM*, 478). The elderly man continues that, "[t]he road is not wrong, it is the traveler who

[7] Cooke, *Travellers' Tales of Wonder*, 1.
[8] Ibid., 2.

is wrong," and alerts him to the fact that he is only moving further away when he believes that he is walking on the right way toward his destination (*SM*, 478). In bewilderment, the he-character is struck by an epiphany: "Existence is returning, non-existence is returning, so don't stay by the river getting blown about by the cold wind" (*SM*, 479). Reminiscent of the lonely mountain wind that blows past the you-character upon reaching the summit, the cold wind by the river similarly disenchants the he-character from his envisioned wonder – Soul Mountain – in order for him to keep searching the other shore.

In fact, the self-reflexive sensibility in Gao's novel unveils another dimension to the enigmatic image of Soul Mountain. Besides referring to the truth of life, this fabled and far-flung destination is also characterized by its "all virgin wilderness" (*SM*, 3). As the unnamed stranger on the train explains to Gao's narrator at the beginning of the novel, this pristine state of being is not defined in ecological, biological, anthropological, or archaeological terms but in the context of the "living people" (*SM*, 3). In this light, Soul Mountain can be regarded as representing an individual's mind untouched by any conceptual constraints and ideological contamination. Such purity can only be achieved by virtue of a self-reflexive consciousness. To review the protagonist's experience throughout Gao's *Soul Mountain* – whether an escape from a wonderful sight to maintain a distance in the real world, a refusal to indulge in fond memories of his childhood, reassuring fantasies of the life beyond death and of having settled in a foreign country, the nothing-ism that he chooses to follow in retelling historical and personal stories, or a "third eye" that prompts him to probe into his fragmented and fluid subjectivity – the pronounced sense of self-reflexivity precludes the wonder-seeker from his preoccupation with the sustenance and solace provided by mind-calming and spirit-lifting scenarios and thus leads

his feet along a multiplicity of pathways, on which he walks toward places where one can see "wonderful things," forget "suffering and pain," and "find freedom" (*SM*, 68).

The sense of self-reflexivity reverberates in myriad places through Sebald's *Rings*. At the outset of the novel, the narrator states that his impetus to walk the county of Suffolk is "the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work" (*RS*, 3). His experience of traversing the barren landscape, however, is demarcated by the extremes poles of "the unaccustomed sense of freedom" and "the paralysing horror" – a feeling of fulfillment upon a discovery and an awareness of their potential nebulousness and peculiarity that instantly follows (*RS*, 3). This vacillating mindset is more prominently invoked on the linguistic level by the narrator's frequent use of niggling phrases like "as if," "almost," "I wonder," "likely," which demonstrate an acute consciousness of his own limited perspective (and the crisis of knowledge thereof) that simply produces a falsely seductive sense of certainty. More than that, the recurring impediments that obstruct and obscure one's vision – such as the great fog Browne observed rising from the opened body of the overlooked victim in Rembrandt's painting as well as the white vapour trail crossing the segment of sky framed by the hospital window, which the narrator believes marks "a fissure that has since riven my life" – further emphasize that, for Sebald, maintaining an epistemologically and aesthetically indeterminate state is the key to responding to and representing a history of death and destruction in the most ethical manner (*RS*, 18).

More deliberately than Gao, Sebald's self-reflexive approach, which manifests in his text as a perennial state of uncertainty, not only opens the subject of his investigation to multiple (and potentially conflicting) historical accounts, but also passes that feeling along to his readers. As Sebald explained in an interview: "That uncertainty which the narrator has about his own trade

is, then, as I hope, imparted to the reader who will, or ought to, feel a similar sense of irritation about these matters."[9] In this light, the readers of Sebald's *Rings* – a text that emphasizes its own artifice – are meant to be irritated at the limits of representation and to chafe at the limits to our knowledge of the vanished past. Fascinatingly, whether for Sebald's narrator or for his reader, the tension between the knowing subject's attraction to interpretative certainty and ensuing resistance to it is denoted by the title of this book, *The Rings of Saturn*. According to the cosmological principle, when the tidal forces of a central planetary body (i.e., Saturn) overwhelm the gravitational self-attraction of one of its satellites (i.e., Saturn's former moon) and breaks it apart, the latter disintegrates into "ice crystals" and "meteorite particles" that remain in a state of suspension and constitute the orbital rings around the central planet (*RS*, v). As dismaying as it seems, it is precisely this aesthetic quality that precludes the arbitrary, limited, or even fallacious representation of history and brings us one step closer to the truth, which only emerges within "flashes of insight," or within those associations consisting of crystals and particles and forever circling around the impenetrable mass of historical reality.[10]

[9] James Wood, "An Interview with W. G. Sebald," *Brick* 59 (Spring, 1998), 26.
[10] Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255.

## Chapter Five

### The Pedestrian Perspective

In *Soul Mountain*, the ten-month voyage of Gao's narrator along the Yangtze River was inspired by his misdiagnosis of lung cancer and the resultant eagerness for a new lease on life. Interestingly, *The Rings of Saturn* also opens with a health-related circumstance, in which Sebald's narrator was taken into Norwich hospital "in a state of almost total immobility" (3). "Overwhelmed by the feeling that the Suffolk expanses I had walked the previous summer had now shrunk once and for all to a single, blind, insensate spot," the bed-ridden narrator looks out of the hospital window in order to "assure myself of a reality I feared had vanished forever," and yet, "all that could be seen of the world from my bed was the colourless patch of sky framed in the window" (4). Frustrated, the nearly paralyzed narrator exerts himself to slide off the bed and move toward the window, standing in a "tortured posture" as if he were Kafka's metamorphosing character Gregor Samsa. In turn, he experiences a sudden estrangement from himself and his surroundings – in particular, the familiar view of the city outside the window now looks "utterly alien" (5).

Such an inexplicable transformation of the view outside the hospital window, from a "colourless patch of sky" to a place "utterly alien," concerns itself with a shift in perspective. Although the former affords a view by "framing" a fragment of reality, the very limited view enclosed within that frame certainly obfuscates what remains outside. The matter of perspective in *Rings*, as opposed to its status as an undercurrent throughout *Soul Mountain*, is overtly emblematized by the bed-ridden narrator facing a framed window. As the narrative ensues, the

same concern with perspective affects museum audiences who stand in front of widely recognized paintings with a predetermined way of seeing. Each piece of visual artwork presents the audiences with a coherent narrative while it remains invariably incomplete, for the presence of the forgotten and neglected has been blocked by the painting's frame. This approximates the restricted view through the narrator's framed window, which strikes him as simultaneously comforting and troubling. In this light, seeing and knowing – our visual experience and epistemic quests – are bridged together and the ethical problematics with our perspective become the narrator's primary concern as he navigates various museums, in space and in time.

I. A Museum Tour

In the opening section of *Rings*, Sebald's narrator introduces an encyclopedia entry according to which the skull of Thomas Browne, an English writer and physician, was kept in the museum of the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital. In recounting Browne's life experience, the narrator speculates that he may have been present at a public dissection in January 1632, the spectacle that Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (1606-1669) reproduced in his painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632), which the narrator had seen in the Mauritshuis museum. At first sight, the painting appears to be ordinary: the Guild of Surgeons gathered around a cadaver, a petty thief named Adriaan Adriaanszoon (alias Aris Kindt) just hanged for his crimes, and listened attentively to Dr. Tulp, who had opened up the corpse's left arm with his scissors. As a symbol of methodological advance in medical science, the public anatomy, predictably, attracted a wide spectrum of learned audiences, including intellectuals such as Browne and "a paying public drawn from the upper classes," who were fascinated by "the mysteries of the human body" and demonstrated "undaunted investigative zeal in the new sciences" (12). On such an occasion, "in the agenda of a society that saw itself as emerging from

the darkness into the light," the surgeons were in their finest attire. Dr. Tulp even wore a hat to denote his status, and a formal banquet had been arranged after the event (12). All of those details speak unambiguously to the "ceremonial nature of the dissection," which promises a new era of progress in medical science (13).

A sense of uneasiness begins to stir within the narrator as he zooms in on the painting. Despite being placed at center stage, Kindt's "greenish, prone" body (neck broken, "chest risen terribly in rigor mortis," and flesh of his left arm cut open) seems to be invisible to the surgeons, because none of them, including the instructor, appears to be looking down on the body itself (13). Instead, their scientific gaze is directed "past it to focus on the open anatomical atlas in which the appalling physical facts are reduced to a diagram, a schematic plan of the human being" (13). The surgeons' focus on the anatomical consistency of the body with the schematic diagram adheres to Descartes' fundamental discourse that "one should disregard the flesh, which is beyond our comprehension, and attend to the machine within, to what can fully be understood, be made wholly useful for work, and, in the event of any fault, either repaired or discarded" (13). The Cartesian dialectic of mechanistic domination, however, is regarded by the narrator as an epistemic violence that causes Kindt's corpse, although "open to contemplation," to be somewhat excluded by the surgeons' scientific observation (16). The surgeons' inability to acknowledge the existence of the cadaver manifests their degrading treatment of human physique as a material object, rather than once-living being, and their uncritical privileging of scientific dogma over concrete reality, which reduces human corporeality into a schematic model.

Besides viewing the human body simply in utilitarian terms, the narrator suggests that the public dissection can equally represent "the archaic ritual of dismembering a corpse, of harrowing the flesh of the delinquent even beyond death, a procedure then still part of the

ordained punishment" (12). The concept behind such an unscrupulous means to address ethical failings works in concert with the surgeons' unwavering belief in their cognitive mastery over nature, with which everything in the universe – physical and metaphysical – can be fully "understood," "repaired," and made "wholly useful for work" (13). In metaphorically breaking a literally broken man, the surgeons undertake the dual roles of medical practitioners and moral authorities. The assembled audience, accordingly, not only learns the mechanics of the human body but is exposed to the frightful consequences of wrongdoing. Such a "punitive dimension" that transforms the anatomy lesson into moral edification is particularly corroborated by Rembrandt's treatment of Kindt's "offending hand," where the initial incision was made, whereas the normal procedure usually begins with "opening the abdomen and removing the intestines" (16). As if it were "a transposition taken from the anatomical atlas," the dissected hand, which appears disproportionately large and anatomically incorrect ("the exposed tendons, which ought to be those of the left palm, given the position of the thumb, are in fact those of the back of the right hand"), not only reiterates the surgeons' prioritizing of scientific rationality but, more significantly, informs a posthumous humiliation in public that extends the harrowing punishment beyond death (16). Paradoxically, had this barbaric punishment, a re-enactment of archaic ritual, proved conducive to the development of morals and civilization, it would have been diametrically opposed to the surgeons' prospect of a society that progresses "from the darkness into the light" (12).[1] In a Foucauldian light, Rembrandt's painting of such a public torture delivers "an unsettling comment on the particular kind of knowledge to which we owe progress," for the purported "higher ideals" – in science and morality – are invariably implicated

[1] Sebald remarks more explicitly in his essay on Peter Weiss that "'enlightened' civilizations have not abandoned that most drastic form of penalty which consists of cutting up and disemboweling the human body, thus literally making detritus of it." See W. G. Sebald, "The Remorse of the Heart," 176.

in the mechanisms of sovereign power that seize control over the human body even beyond death.[2]

Whereas the painting was commissioned by the Guild of Surgeons as their portrait, Rembrandt seems to identify himself with the victim and adds an ethical dimension to his artwork by surreptitiously replacing the subject of the painting with Kindt's body, who suffers both physical and metaphysical dismissal. Notably, the painter's sympathetic contemplation frees him of the rigid Cartesian gaze and empowers him to see Kindt's "greenish annihilated body [and] the shadow in the half-open mouth and over the dead man's eyes," emblematic of a lingering spirit that once belonged to a specific individual whose body has been violated and discarded (17). Simon Schama remarks that, in comparison with the traditional representation of an anatomical scene, where the cadaver – with face concealed, body reduced to the "*subiectum anatomicum*," and skin color scarcely different from the living – is depicted not as a person but "an arrangement of organs conveniently awaiting the anatomist's instructive hand,"[3] Rembrandt thoroughly rendered the deceased's body and "devote[d] almost as much detailed attention to the dead man's head as to the paying customers" by, for one, shadowing the man's eyes and "fix[ing] the precise tone and bluish pallor of dead flesh" for the corpse. In so doing, he "manages to rehumanize, rather than dehumanize, that body, forcing the beholder into an uncomfortable kinship with the dead as well as with the living."[4]

Other than his efforts to restore the deceased's humanity, Rembrandt refrains from simply visualizing the bodily cuts as a metonymy for the suffering body. Rather, he "cuts" through the otherwise harmonious surface of his painting by providing a disfiguring

[2] Sebald, "The Remorse of the Heart," 176. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 34.
[3] Simon Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 351.
[4] Ibid.

misrepresentation of the thief's hand. The grotesque rendering of the hand, as if an unreflective "transposition" from the schematic illustration, converts this presumably true-to-life painting into "a crass misrepresentation at the exact centre point of its meaning, where the incisions are made" (16). By labelling the painting's "much-admired verisimilitude" as "more apparent than real," the narrator eliminates the possibility of the unshapely hand being a compositional flaw, "an unfortunate blunder," and discloses the painter's "deliberate intent" of signifying the violence inflicted on Aris Kindt and of seeking redress, in a broader sense, for similar 'insignificant' victims who were maltreated, neglected, and destroyed as the cost of achieving the triumph of science and civilization in human history (16). The painter's creative strategy, in deviating from the artistic principles, therefore unblocks for the viewer an entrance through which to access the historical "detritus": those cast aside in the name of social evolution but refusing to be assimilated into a false representation of reality (16).

Due to Rembrandt's ethical sensibility and aesthetic finesse, the dissected hand, as intense visual stimulus, propels Sebald's narrator, despite standing in front of the large canvas with the paying public who gaze frontward at the dissection, to share the painter's perspective, and thereby perform a subversive act against the uncritical acceptance of scientific rationality and moral righteousness. The narrator in turn directs his skeptical scrutiny toward the painter's identification with the hanged victim. He admits that "we have no definite evidence" for Browne's and Descartes' actual presence at the lesson and that "we *believe* that we see what they saw then," for it still remains controversial whether anyone really saw Kindt's body at that point, when the art of anatomy "was not least a way of making the reprobate body invisible" (12, 13, italics mine). The narrator's introspection distinctly resembles, as Browne says in a later note, "the great fog that shrouded large parts of England and Holland on the 27th of November 1674"

(17). It was "the white mist," adds Browne, that rises from within a body opened presently after death, and which during our lifetime, […] clouds our brain when asleep and dreaming" (17). Like the misrepresented hand that keeps steering viewers back to the point of incision in Rembrandt's painting, the narrator's perpetual uncertainty, symbolized as "the great fog" and suggested by the phrases "would have been" or "might have been" in the text, alerts readers to the forever-unfulfilled demand for restitution by those who have eluded our attention, perception, and comprehension, as they ask us to "intervene in the system of suppression and destruction" (12, 26).[5] Richard Gray observes how the "strategic rupture" employed by Sebald's narrator in laying bare his confused mind demonstrates that he, too, "not only seeks to *voice* a critique of reason, but […] also *performs* this critique in the aesthetic makeup of his own work."[6]

The problematics implicated in Rembrandt's painting disturb the narrator so considerably that "it took me a full hour to recover" in front of Jacob van Ruisdael's painting of a *View of Haarlem with Bleaching Fields*, which possesses an undeniably soothing quality (82).[7] After describing the perspective deployed in Ruisdael's painting as "a vantage point generally identified as the dunes" from which "the flatland stretching out towards Haarlem" can be seen, the narrator proceeds to challenge the apparent presence of such a "bird's-eye view." He states that "Ruisdael did not take up a position on the dunes in order to paint; his vantage point was an imaginary position some distance above the earth" (83). The painter's ability to "see it all

[5] Sebald, "The Remorse of the Heart," 179.

[6] Richard T. Gray, *Ghostwriting: W. G. Sebald's Poetics of History* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 346.

[7] The narrator's horror could also be read as due to the "bad night" that he experienced before seeing Rembrandt's painting, in which he narrowly escaped being slashed by a man running through streets and wielding a knife. The narrator was so disturbed that he was "unable to harness my thoughts" when examining the painting the next day (80-2). Arguably, this enigmatic interlude has two-fold significance: first, the pain that he imagined had the knife pierced "between my ribs" propels him to relate the harrowing punishment inflicted on the hanged victim (both in life and beyond death). Second, his inability to concentrate after that disturbing incident proves itself as salutary, since it "disturbs" his habitual perspective and thus provokes him to view the painting differently, such as turning his attention to the misrepresented hand.

together," which occasions larger visual range (from a little town in the distance to a bright field in the foreground, and to several workers shadowed by a cloudscape and dwarfed by a cathedral), is thus proved impossible in reality (83).

Interestingly, the narrator's discovery of Ruisdael's landscape, now less restorative than suspicious, perhaps sheds light on its not being reproduced in *Rings*, as opposed to Rembrandt's painting. The latter is provided in two places: the full painting appears as a double-page spread and Kindt's hand appears in a close-up. The narrator's compositional treatment likely suggests that Ruisdael's landscape, dominated by a single and all-encompassing perspective, would have excluded any incongruous reading from the viewers, while Rembrandt's jarring rendition of the hand induces viewers to immediately witness the anatomical "spectacle" to its fullest extent. At the end of his visit to the gallery, the narrator reads from the guidebook that this building was originally built by the Dutch Governor Johann Maurits, a contemporary of Ruisdael, while he served in Brazil, and was "fitted out as a cosmographic residence reflecting the wonders of the remotest regions of the earth" (83). When the house was opened in 1644, the governor sought to impress the Dutch citizens with the scope and strength of their nation's global reach by bringing back eleven Indians from Brazil, whose exotic dance conveyed to "the townspeople some sense of the foreign lands to which the power of their community now extended" (83). Nonetheless, the anonymous dancers, or any identifiable traces of colonialism at the time, "have long since disappeared" from history and have gone as unnoticed as the elevated perspective of Ruisdael's painting (83).

The narrator's discursive thought reaches further to the subject of Holland, a curious country acclaimed by Denis Diderot, a French philosopher, as "the Egypt of Europe," across the flatland of which even "the most modest rise gave one the loftiest sensation" (84). Situated in an

elevated position, Diderot states that his enhanced ability to see the world below – "the neat Dutch towns with their straight, tree-lined canals, exemplary in every respect" – generates a view most "satisfying to the human mind" (84). Not surprisingly, the therapeutic effect of the neat cityscape seen through Diderot's perspective bears a telling resemblance to the rationally mapped landscape that constructs Ruisdael's *View of Haarlem*. Similar to his response to Ruisdael's painting, the narrator encounters difficulties in concurring with Diderot's observation. Despite the sight of some fine buildings and gardens, he finds that nothing in Hague can "afford me any respite" and that nothing proves comparable to the meticulously planned and artfully designed community that Diderot raved about. When walking "for a long time in the shadow of tall apartment blocks, as if at the bottom of a ravine," he gradually succumbs to a disoriented state and ultimately reaches the seaside, which he hoped to be able to see "from a distance" (84). Quite clearly, the narrator regards with skepticism Diderot's elevated position, which would alienate people from their immediate experiences and indulges them with the sublime feelings of transcendence. This perspective hardly provokes the viewers to think further but overpowers them with a mysterious and superior force, since the object for observation exceeds their ability to perceive or comprehend.

The high-up perspective that Diderot holds to view the Netherlands' flat landscape is added to an ethical dimension later in chapter 4, when the narrator flies from Amsterdam back to Norwich in a propeller plane. "Spread out beneath us," as he looks down, "lay one of the most densely-populated regions in Europe" with "endless terraces, sprawling satellite towns, business parks and shining glass houses" strewn across the continent, "where not a patch is left to its own devices" (90). "[R]egulated, cultivated and built on" over centuries, this whole region has been "transformed into a geometrical pattern" – roads in straight lines and fields evenly divided, for

instance – that once filled Diderot with admiration (90). Although "nowhere […] was a single human being to be seen," the narrator realizes that people are in fact "present everywhere upon the face of the earth, extending their dominion by the hour, moving around the honeycombs of towering buildings and tied into networks of a complexity that goes far beyond the power of any one individual to imagine" (91). The "networks of a complexity," which tie "the thousands of hoists and winches" that once worked the South African diamond mines to "the floors of today's stock and commodity exchanges," expose the fact that the flourishing economy of European cities in the present age can scarcely be detached from their earlier practices of colonialism in Africa. At the end of his plane ride, the narrator reflects on human history: "if we view ourselves from a great height, it is frightening to realize how little we know about our species, our purpose and our end" (92).

Of critical importance is the fact that the narrator's meditation on his plane ride would have failed to concretize, had he not integrated the pedestrian point of view into the elevated perspective. The elevated perspective, identified also as the "godlike" perspective, conceivably warrants an expanded and clearer view whereby to rescue mankind from their ignorance and incapability. However, this "godlike" perspective transmutes itself into a "panoramic sweep that exterminates the human" and reduces the collective history of human existence into an abstract template.[8] In *The Practice of Everyday Life,* Certeau imagines the experience of a city spectator standing at the top of a skyscraper. His elevated position "puts him at a distance, [and] transforms the bewitching world by which one was 'possessed' into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god."[9] Transfigured into a

[8] Jon Cook, ed. *After Sebald: Essays and Illuminations* (Woodbridge: Full Circle, 2014), 38.
[9] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 92.

"god" or an omniscient voyeur, the perceiving subject is concomitantly removed from his immediate experience of the urban mass. Such a "godlike" perspective and its consequent synopsis of the city contrasts strikingly with the pedestrian point of view, an example of which is the Benjaminian *flaneur* who grasps at the immediate reality and is thus empowered differently from "when one is flying over it by aeroplane."[10]

II. Historical Monuments

Preoccupied with the matter of contrasting perspectives, the narrator recalls his visit to the "so-called historical memorial site": The Panorama of the Battle of Waterloo located in Brussels (c. 5, 123). Inside the immense domed rotunda, he occupies a viewing position on "a raised platform in the middle," from which one can view the battle "in every direction" as if one were "at the centre of events" (124). The particular structure of the panorama and the narrator's elevated position join forces to grant him an immersive experience in reliving the pivotal moment in history, when Napoleon was decisively defeated by the Duke of Wellington in June 1815. Across a "horrific three-dimensional scene," presenting life-size horses and wax figures of cut-down soldiers on a landscaped proscenium to enhance an "authentic" effect, the narrator's attention is drawn to the background: an enormous mural painted in 1912 by the French artist Louis Dumontin "on the inner wall of the circus-like structure" (125). The narrator begins to suspect that this representation of history "requires a falsification of perspective," following which the viewers are enticed into the belief that they can "see everything from above, see everything at once" while they, and the narrator in particular, still "do not know how it was" (125).[11] In an attempt to redress such an inadequate way of seeing, the narrator resorts to his

[10] Walter Benjamin, "One-way Street," *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 66.

[11] This perplexing situation also replays the moment when the narrator attempts to recollect the purpose of his visit to the panorama: "Why I went to Waterloo I no longer know" (124).

imagination – although currently "there is nothing but the silent brown soil" below his foot, thousands of soldiers and horses must have "met their end within a few hours" on this desolate land and "the air must have been filled with death rattles and groans" (125). The hovering melancholy spurs him into further thoughts regarding the anonymous victims of war and the absence of their commemoration: "Whatever became of the corpses and mortal remains? Are they buried under the memorial? Are we standing on a mountain of death" (125)?

The baffling questions all converge on one point: the existence of the fallen soldiers has been overlooked by the credulous viewers, who rely heavily on their "ultimate vantage point" (125). Approximating the perspective "framed" by canvas painting, the elevated and central position inside the panorama produces a "much-vaunted historical overview" and hence discourages any critical thinking or creative imagination in the beholder. To reinforce the validity of his thought, the narrator continues to relate that two copses in the vicinity – in the shapes of a Napoleonic hat and a Wellington boot, respectively – were planted after the battle of Waterloo "in remembrance of that memorable victory" (125). Their outlines, nevertheless, "cannot be made out from the ground" because they are intended "as landmarks for latter-day balloonists" who look downward from a high vantage point, with which only celebrated personages in history are there to be seen (literally and figuratively) (125). Those unidentifiable combatants, conversely, can only remain underground in spite of the ultimate sacrifice they made for the 'cause' promulgated by imperial rulers and military leaders, with a hidden desire to perpetuate their hold on power.

As "a favourite subject with panorama artists," battle scenes are commonly selected to represent pivotal moments of history and are arranged into a coherent narrative intended to be memorialized by the nation (124). Compared to the narrator's implicit criticism of the deficient

recreation of the battle of Waterloo, which depends on a totalizing perspective, David Lowenthal asserts that such a carefully crafted and broadly disseminated national discourse aims not simply to promote a patriotic zeal but also to "secure the pedigrees of existing rulers" and "sanction religious or revolutionary causes."[12] He concludes, "the past is a foreign country whose features are shaped by today's predilections, its strangeness domesticated by our own preservation of its vestiges."[13] In this light, the panorama can no longer maintain its innocent intention of being a truthful representation of the past but rather brings into sharp relief the emergence of a structured system of power, which rests solely with people who occupy positions of authority and privilege. This very group determines which parts of history should (or should not) be preserved and how they should be preserved.

In fact, the dubious ethics of historical discourse is implied at the outset when the panorama impresses the narrator as a "circus-like structure," suggesting that historical representation could be, to a greater or lesser extent, a theatrical performance with a set agenda and target audience. The theatrical aspect proves conducive to understanding history on many occasions. Such a reflection harkens back to the narrator's earlier experience in town, when he was greeted by the sight of "a bleak field," "ramshackle buildings," and a squad of "mummers" in Napoleonic costume emerging on this "deserted stage" (124). Unlike the majestic appearance of the Napoleonic armies featured in most artworks, the performers in this bizarre reproduction are "tramping up and down the few streets, beating drums and blowing fifes; and bringing up the rear was a slatternly, garishly made-up sutler woman pulling a curious handcart with a goose shut in a cage" (124). When the narrator watches them for a while, they "seemed to be in perpetual motion […] as they disappeared amongst the buildings only to re-emerge elsewhere"

[12] David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 235.
[13] Ibid., xvii.

(124). Ghostly as this spectacle may seem, the narrator foregrounds the "perpetual motion" and re-emergence of the theatrical troupe, as these very qualities allow him to gaze into the illegible traces of the past and bring the historical specters to life.

Such a vigilant historical consciousness is similarly experienced by Austerlitz, the protagonist of Sebald's last novel *Austerlitz* (2001), when he visits the fortress town of Terezín in hopes of looking into the last stage of his mother's life before she was confined and deported during the Second World War. Once "a mighty complex rising high above the level country" that represents "the model of a world made by reason and regulated in all conceivable respects,"[14] the wide panorama of Terezín strikes Austerlitz as "half-hidden and sunk into the marshy ground of the floodplain" and shrouded in incomprehensible emptiness.[15] Walking past the desolate buildings with closed gates and doorways, he discerns from "the forbidding aspect of the silent façades" a pervasive reluctance of the town to divulge its past.[16] The only access to such an impenetrable "darkness" is the Ghetto Museum. In the museum, the "incontrovertible proof" that documents "the history of the persecution" is preserved so thoroughly that Austerlitz begins to see, "with the greatest clarity," those victims once imprisoned in the ghetto, who suffered forcible removal from their homeland and were deliberately maltreated as work slaves, as if "they had never been taken away after all."[17]

Despite a clearer picture of the "silent assembly" rising before his eyes as he leaves the museum, Austerlitz boards an overheated bus to Prague and notices that all the other passengers have already fallen asleep, as if they were lulled into a comforting dream to perhaps guard

[14] W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2001), 187, 199.
[15] Ibid., 186.
[16] Ibid., 189.
[17] Ibid, 199-200. Notably, Austerlitz was the only visitor – among very few outside visitors – on that day. According to the museum receptionist, "the people of Terezín didn't come anyway" (*Austerlitz*, 198).

themselves against the troubling history confined in the museum. As the bus goes steadily downhill, Austerlitz strangely feels as if he is "descending a kind of ramp into a labyrinth, […] until I had lost all sense of direction."[18] This sense of disorientation points the reader back to a scene in *Rings*, when the narrator concludes his visit to the panorama by listening to a recorded narrative of the Waterloo battle, provided in the unfamiliar Flemish language, and finds it difficult, except for a few odd phrases, to comprehend the "various circumstances and vicissitudes" (125). This unfamiliar experience, predictably, throws him into bewilderment and forces him to admit that "[n]o clear picture" of the fighting can be captured – "[n]either then nor today" (125-6). Increasingly palpable here is the fact that the narrator shows little concern for whether his viewpoint can be accepted as a reliable analysis of, or the most rational response to, the artistic reproduction of the battle. Rather, he readily drifts away from the solid ground of settled history into an enveloping mist of uncertainty (i.e., the incalculable sum of historical possibilities) for the purpose of preserving a buoyancy that leaves his narrative levitating in midair.

When the recording draws to its end, the narrator shuts his eyes, unbinds his imagination, and "recall[s] […] a cannonball smash through a row of poplars at an angle, sending the green branches flying in tatters" (126). Momentarily, he sees Fabrizio del Dongo, Stendhal's young hero in *The Charterhouse of Parma*, "wandering about the battlefield, pale but with his eyes aglow" (126). As opposed to the splendid image of Napoleon's army retained on Fabrizio's mind, he only saw "an unsaddled colonel getting to his feet and telling his sergeant: I can feel nothing but the old injury in my right hand" (126). Fabrizio's feelings of perplexity and uneasiness, as described by Sebald's narrator, resonate tellingly with his battle experiences in

[18] Ibid., 201.

Stendhal's novel: When stumbling through mud and smoke, he finds himself unable "to distinguish anything."[19] Returning slowly to lucidity, the once naive and starry-eyed Fabrizio eventually abandons his fantasies of military glory and heroic adventure. Notably, his disillusionment is at best provisional. Caught up in the dilemma of distinguishing between the coarse reality and an idealistic *rêverie*, Fabrizio persists in seeking "that undefinable 'something' that will fill his 'inner emptiness'"; his questions still hover over him: "Was what he had seen a real battle? And, if so, was it the battle of Waterloo?"[20]

The appeal of Fabrizio's story does not simply lie in restoring the place of one of the forgotten soldiers in the battle of Waterloo by providing an alternative standpoint in addition to the static and totalizing vista of history. Rather, its value comes in demonstrating Sebald's narrator's propensity for the state of epistemological uncertainty.[21] This vertiginous suspension also calls to mind the opening section of Sebald's first novel *Vertigo* (1990), "Beyle, or Love is a Madness Most Discreet." In an attempt to relive the legendary transalpine march during the Napoleonic wars that he once participated in, the Sebaldian Beyle experienced "various difficulties entailed in the act of recollection" since his view of the past alternated between images of "grey patches" and an "extraordinary clarity."[22] Even though the evoked memories seemed "true to life," one could still only "place little confidence in them."[23] Beyle was obliged to concede that his recollection of the "magnificent spectacle" of traveling with General Marmont, which impressed him so indelibly that he "could remember every detail of that ride" years later, was simply a copy of an engraving entitled *Prospetto d'Ivrea* printed in old

[19] Stendhal, *The Charterhouse of Parma*, trans. Margaret R. B. Shaw (London: Penguin Books, 1958), 88.
[20] Victor H. Brombert, *Stendhal: Fiction and the Themes of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 159. Stendhal, *The Charterhouse of Parma*, 59.
[21] For instance, the trees torn to tatters by the cannonball described in Fabrizio's battle scene reiterate the "tree stumps and undergrowth" contained in the panorama's landscaped proscenium (126).
[22] W. G. Sebald, *Vertigo*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 2000), 5.
[23] Ibid., 7.

newspapers. That being so, the Sebaldian Beyle advised people "not to purchase engravings of fine views and prospects seen on one's travels," because before long they would "displace" or even "destroy" one's memories completely."[24]

Such wit reflects Sebald's unease about people's preoccupation with "preformed images already imprinted on our brains," as a result of which "the truth lies elsewhere, […] somewhere as yet undiscovered."[25] This overriding concern with memory under constant threat receives further elaboration in *Austerlitz*. Austerlitz's history teacher André Hilary revels in recounting in vivid detail Napoleonic battles and military figures, all the while fearing to have "cut his accounts far too short" by summarizing an inconceivably complex event, which "would take an endless length of time to describe," as a "feeble and useless cliché" and thus allowing the unknown factors to sink into oblivion.[26] Hilary's thesis is that even if "we think we have noted every tiny detail," the "set pieces […] have already been staged often enough by others."[27] For that reason, the harder we attempt to restitute historical reality, "the more we find the pictures that make up the stock-in-trade of the spectacle of history forcing themselves upon us."[28]

The sole avenue into the inaccessible is actually suggested by Hilary's instructional method. In his history class, Hilary unremittingly formulates new patterns like "crystals of glass in a kaleidoscope," partly by playing several historical characters "with astonishing virtuosity," partly by studying them "with the cold intelligence of a nonpartisan strategist, surveying the entire landscape of those years from above with an eagle eye."[29] Given that every act of memory, as Huyssen argues, "carries with it a dimension of betrayal, forgetting, and absence" due to an

[24] Ibid., 8.
[25] Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 72.
[26] Ibid., 71.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., 70-1.

obstructed view, partisan perception, or limited understanding,[30] Sebald's narrator, like his Fabrizio, Stendhal, and Hilary, comes to grips with the ever-present blind spots of human knowledge by distancing himself from his habitual perception and stereotypical understanding of the world, and embracing a new perspective from which to see, and think about knowing. In an attempt to cultivate a salutary state of uncertainty, he puts automatized and universalized historical narration to rest. Narrative otherwise only invites falsely simple and gratifying answers, and threatens to banish memory through "cover[ing] up and neutraliz[ing] experiences beyond our ability to comprehend."[31]

III. Martyrs and Memories

In rereading chapter 5 of *Rings*, one may notice that the segment concerning the narrator's visit to the Waterloo panorama seems to be arbitrarily inserted between the tales of the Polish-British novelist Joseph Conrad and the Irish diplomat Roger Casement, both renowned for their long-term efforts against colonization, expansion, and imperialism. Such a narrative arrangement of historical events is far from incidental. The construction of the panorama was completed in 1912, nearly one century after the battle of Waterloo (which occurred in 1815) for the purpose of commemorating Napoleon's final *adieu*. However, creating at the time a memorial structure to honor a national imperative was also likely to divert the public's attention away from the colonial crimes of the Belgian government exposed by Roger Casement in 1903. Those crimes also provided the source material for Joseph Conrad's masterpiece *Heart of Darkness* (1902), a novel regarded as a poignant attack on Europe's colonization of Africa in the nineteenth century.

[30] Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 4.

[31] Sebald, "Air War and Literature," 25.

The life story of the Sebaldian Conrad, unexpectedly, starts with an extensive account of his father, Apollo Korzeniowski, an anti-imperialist revolutionary. Apollo detests the Russian oppression of his native land and resigns from a managerial position in Russian-occupied Ukraine "with the intention of helping pave the way for a revolt against Russian tyranny through his writings and by means of conspiratorial politics" (104). His active participation in patriot rebellions against Russian rule leads to his arrest, imprisonment, and exile in Vologda, where everything "rots, decays and sinks into the ground" (105). Conrad's mother, Evelina Korzeniowska, only wears black "as a token of mourning for her people suffering the humiliation of foreign rule" even though it is forbidden by law (105). On the day of her departure to join Apollo in exile, all her family and friends assemble to bid her farewell "attire[d] in black cloth or black silk. Not a single word is spoken" (106). She dies shortly of tuberculosis "spread[ing] through her body" and of "the home-sickness […] corroding her soul" (107).

Prior to his death, the terminally ill Apollo burns all his manuscripts and, when he does so, "a weightless flake of soot ash like a scrap of black silk would drift through the room, borne up on the air, before sinking to the floor somewhere or dissolving into the dark" (108). Apart from reiterating the scene of the silent crowd seeing Evelina off, the somber and soundless image forebodes the spectacle of Apollo's own funeral. "Conducted in silence" and thronged with attendees in black, Apollo's funeral procession evolves into "a great demonstration" of the invisible – "the dead man in the pit" – that stands in stark contrast to the towering monuments for commemorating the 'honorable' personages and their highlighted moments deemed worthy of remembrance (108-9). Only the alternative perspective of the narrator make this connection between aboveground and underground structures accessible. Without the shift in perspective, the excluded and marginalized group would merely remain underground, and their memories – in

Apollo's case, his patriotic conviction and lifetime struggle for independence – would be destined to be suppressed and forgotten. The narrator's endeavor to shine light on what has been kept hidden underground acts in the same manner as the ash of Apollo's burnt manuscripts: however "weightless" and insignificant it might seem, the soot keeps drifting through the air and avoids dissolving into the dark.

Toward the end of chapter 5, the narrator delineates another heroic figure, Roger Casement, who shares with Apollo a zealous dedication to revolt against political oppression. By providing a specific account of "the utterly merciless exploitation of the blacks," who were compelled to perform heavy manual labor and suffered severe punishment by their white overseers, Casement brings "the nature and extent of the crimes committed against the native peoples in the course of opening up the Congo" into public attention for the first time (127). Despite being offered a knighthood as a recognition for his services "to the oppressed peoples" – or as a possible inducement in exchange for his silence – Casement is not "prepared to switch to the side of the powerful" (129). His "unconditional partisanship" for the victims of exploitation and growing mistrust of "imperialist mentality" expand the scope of his attention beyond the issue of black slavery to the Irish question – his own problem – that becomes acute at the time (128-9). Propelled by his increased awareness of the centuries-long injustice borne by the "white Indians of Ireland," such as enslavement, starvation, and forced emigration by English imperial forces, Casement engages in recruiting members and equipping contingents for the Irish Republican Army. When he fails to enlist German military support for the 1916 Easter Rising, he is executed for high treason and his body is thrown into the lime pit in the courtyard of Pentonville prison.[32]

[32] The troubling tension between the aboveground and the underground, as in the instances of the unidentified soldiers in the Battle of Waterloo, Apollo Korzeniowski, and Roger Casement, runs through Sebald's major texts.

Thus far, in view of the instances of the anti-imperialist hero Apollo Korzeniowski and the anti-colonial activist Roger Casement, Sebald's narrator appears to have achieved "the purpose of representing cruelty" discussed by Sebald in his essay "The Remorse of the Heart." Sebald states that once we discern "the endemic perversion of cruelty inherent in the history of mankind, […] the last chapter in that horror story will be written, and in a better time posterity will be able to look back like the blessed souls in heaven, […] to watch the spectacle of the torments of the damned […] so that they might be all the more aware of their own happy condition."[33] This prospect, much to Sebald's dissatisfaction, "has never been fulfilled and probably never can be, since our species is unable to learn from its mistakes."[34] But still, Sebald asserts that the prescription for the end of human suffering is to endure "[t]he torture of those never-ending efforts" to memorize and imagine, through which "it can at least be absolved in doing penance."[35] Echoing the fiery turning wheel on which Ixion is bound for all eternity,[36] the arduous process of recollection and imagination that Sebald advises as a path to absolve humanity of its past sins manifests itself in *Rings* as a downward spiral of self-destructive attempts leading to a state of uncertainty.

Notably, the state of uncertainty is motivated by the narrator's use of Conrad's various aliases in this episode: Sebald's narrator refers to the author of *Heart of Darkness* mainly by his

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Another such building is the Bibliothèque Nationale that Austerlitz visits in Paris. As a cultural repository for housing the greatest document collection in Europe, the "very big" library, however, "in both its entire layout and its near-ludicrous internal regulation seeks to exclude the reader as a potential enemy" (*Austerlitz*, 286). The "pharaonic President's Grande Bibliothèque" sits on top of the site where German plunder of Jewish possessions was stored during the occupation, and thus has "the whole affair […] buried in the most literal sense beneath the foundations" (Austerlitz, 289). From Austerlitz's perspective, the library rests on the buried site of a historical crime against humanity and functions as an "official manifestation of the increasingly importunate urge to break with everything which still has some living connection to the past" (*Austerlitz,* 286).

[33] Sebald, "The Remorse of the Heart," 189-90.

[34] Ibid., 190.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

Polish given name and surname ("Konrad" and "Korzeniowski") rather than his better known *nom de plume* "Conrad." Behind the smoke screen of capriciousness lies the narrator's deliberate obscuring of the too steady image of Conrad and historical figures who were related to him. The three names are approximately in step with the major stages of his life: his early childhood in a Polish family, two decades of maritime adventure, and his later activity as an English writer. The change of a historical figure's name in narration is a formal device termed by Rebecca Walkowitz as "unassimilation," which refers to "the literal de-Anglicization of proper nouns and also to the less-literal disaggregation of collective experiences."[37] Instead of "return[ing] names to an original state of propriety," the effect of "unassimilation" allows readers to "perceive familiar stories analytically rather than automatically, to reverse and thereby display the processes of translation, immigration, and assimilation in which past experiences are often lost; and to introduce political contexts for which celebrated figures are not yet known."[38]

Returning to the narrator's account of Konrad's father Apollo Korzeniowski: He identifies himself with the characters in Victor Hugo's *Les travailleurs de la mer* (Toilers of the Sea, 1866), which he translated and told Konrad that "C'est un livre sur des destinées dépaysées, […] sur des individus expulsés et perdus, sur les éliminés du [sort], un livre sur ceux qui sont seuls et évités" (107, modification mine).[39] Apollo's lament over exilic individuals, who have

[37] Rebecca Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 160.

[38] As Walkowitz observes, one of Sebald's hallmark techniques is to present his characters with a changed name, by which he can transform concrete monuments into dynamic anecdotes that can be (re)interpreted. Elsewhere in *Rings*, a "young French nobleman," a "vicomte," who fled to England during the French Revolution, is later identified as the Vicomte de Chateaubriand, the French author and diplomat (c. 9). Walkowitz also points out that Sebald sometimes tries to retain his characters' anonymity. For instance, he alludes to "a young Viennese officer," who helped to round up Bosnians, Jews, and Serbs during the WWII and later became Secretary General of the United Nations, but the name "Kurt Waldheim" never appears (c. 4). In *Vertigo*, section one "Marie Henri Beyle," a young officer in Napolean's army and later a great novelist, whose *nom de plume*, Stendhal, is never invoked in the novel. See Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style*, 161.

[39] The French lines are untranslated in the English text. My English translation would be: "It is a book about the destiny of exile, about the individuals who are expelled and lost, whose voices are suppressed, a book about those who are alone and avoided."

sacrificed their lives *pro patria*, helped sow the seed of young Konrad's moral earnestness and humanitarian spirit. However, a sense of confusion starts brewing when Konrad, at Apollo's funeral, is struck by the thought of becoming a sea captain – "an altogether unheard-of notion for the son of a Polish gentleman" (109). The tale of Apollo's lifetime struggle, accordingly, leads into a lengthy digression about Korzeniowski's seafaring adventure and romance in his early adulthood. Not only does he depart from Poland in order to reach those remote destinations he dreamed of as a child, but he also withdraws from his father's faith insofar as he finds Great Britain hospitable and readily absorbs English, an "unfamiliar language" that fills him with "an altogether new sense of purpose and confidence" (114). Moreover, Korzeniowski's ambivalence toward Polish national sentiment continues when he returns to his liberated home country for a visit. On this "winter journey back into childhood," his feeling of familiarity with his native land receded considerably, unlike the coachman's infallible instinct for direction, particularly as they drove on during sunset "into the gathering dark, into the infinite white wastes that met the starry skies at the horizon, where villages amidst trees floated like shadowy islands" (116). The gloomy imagery, arguably, suggests Korzeniowski's despairing resignation about Poland's future and his skeptical appraisal of Apollo's dream of national independence through revolutionary action as prejudice and fanaticism.[40]

After a five-page digression on the narrator's visit to the panorama of the Battle of Waterloo, the narrative returns to Korzeniowski, who was informed that Casement, despite being an administrative officer in colonial Africa (like Franz Kafka's uncle Joseph Loewy), publicized the Belgian colonial atrocities in his report. Compared to most Europeans Korzeniowski encountered in Africa, he exalts Casement as "the only man of integrity" (104). That said, the

[40] Keith Carabine, "Conrad, Apollo Korzeniowski, and Dostoevsky," *Conradiana*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Winter 1996), 6.

hagiographic portrait of Casement, ascribed to his "solitary attempt to change the negative course of history,"[41] faces an unexpected challenge near the end of this chapter when the narrator makes note of the notorious "Black Diary" that chronicled Casement's homosexual indulgences. Whereas the "Black Diary" has long been suspected as a slur cast by British Intelligence to blacken Casement's name and dash any chances of clemency for him in his trial,[42] some freshly unearthed evidence validates its authenticity and thus threatens to discredit Casement's chivalric zeal for exposing the suppressed truth about African colonization and his martyrdom for Irish independence. As the narrator comments, it is precisely those homosexual encounters that "sensitized him to the continuing oppression, exploitation, enslavement and destruction, across the borders of social class and race, of those who were furthest from the centres of power" (134). Recast in a romantic light as belonging to "a creature of sheer temperament,"[43] Casement's tenacious struggles against colonialism and imperialism could not be simply explained in moral terms but, perhaps, were propelled by those "nocturnal activities with the very people he was trying to save [and which] gave him tenderness for them."[44] In light of the irreconcilable facets of Casement that have surfaced,[45] he is reconceptualized as a man of contradictions. The secular

[41] Anne Fuchs, *Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte: zur Poetik der Erinnerung in W.G. Sebalds Prosa* (Köln: Böhlau, 2004), 200.

[42] Casement's homosexuality was vehemently denied by the Irish government as incompatible with his holy status as a nationalist martyr.

[43] Joseph Conrad, "Letter to John Quinn," 24 May 1916. Ms. 17, 601/2/2. Joseph McGarrity Papers, 1789-1971. Manuscript Room. National Library of Ireland. Quoted in Alison Garden, *The Literary Afterlives of Roger Casement, 1899-2016* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 213.

[44] Casement's homosexual activities can also be read in conjunction with Lowey's "gradually tolerable" life in Africa, for they both built a successful career in the colonies. In her essay on the homosexual bachelors in Sebald's works, Helen Finch discusses that Casement's "sexual tourism" in the Congo sits ill with the heroic portrayal of him. Since the "Black Diaries" document a decade-long series of sexual encounters with underage South American and African boys, Finch speculates that the Loanda boy who accompanied Casement when he advanced into the wilderness (appearing at the beginning of chapter 5 in *Rings,* 104), might well be paid by Casement in return for sexual favors. See Helen Finch, *Sebald's Bachelors: Queer Resistance and the Unconforming Life* (London: Legenda, 2013), 78.

[45] The historical Casement is subject to varying views. In citing Casement's personal letters, Colm Tóibín argues that Casement was admittedly a whistleblower who raised the international concern over Europe's exploitation of Africa; yet he was also an accomplice of the colonial crime while he helped to administer in the colonies, and held unpleasant racist view in private against the natives by regarding them as savage and nasty. See Colm Tóibín, "The

sainthood attributed to him for his widely acclaimed dispositions, such as his "unconditional partisanship" with the oppressed minorities, has now fallen under a cloud of suspicion.[46]

It now becomes evident that by the use of "Korzeniowski" against other formulations of Conrad's name, Sebald's narrator maneuvers some level of unfamiliarity and unexpectedness into his text, like the disfiguring hand in Rembrandt's painting, with an eye to disconnect readers linguistically and conceptually from what they believe to be unmistakable and unambiguous about Conrad and other historical figures related to him (such as Apollo Korzeniowski and Roger Casement). As the narrator directs the readerly attention to the potentially obscured, withheld, or misrecognized facts about them, their well-received image is challenged, for the proliferating intertexts do not add up to form a harmonious, integrated whole and the narrative repeatedly refracts itself into a broad spectrum of readings of history. In such a manner, as Walkowitz puts it, the narrator is "not only delaying and diverting the progress of knowledge but also drawing our attention to those processes of editing, contracting, and encoding that limit what we can see."[47] Rather than smoothing the rough edges of their stories by rectifying his critical stance or harmonizing his conflicting visions, Sebald's narrator strives to shepherd his readers along with him – into gaps, absences, conflicts, contradictions, and contingencies – to keep his characters immune to naïve, one-sided interpretations.

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Tragedy of Roger Casement," *The New York Review of Books*, May. 27, 2004. https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2004/05/27/the-tragedy-of-roger-casement/

[46] Whereas the narrator refrains from remarking explicitly on Casement's sexuality as virtuous or sinful, the verified existence of his diaries testifies to his homosexual orientation, which constitutes an undeniable component of his identity, and that he was not deprived of a fair trial, given that homosexuality was criminalized at his time. Long pays close attention to the reproduced entries of the "Black Diary" and discovers that those entries actually chronicled Casement's symptoms ("rectal haemorrhage") of dysentery, rather than his sexual debauchery, as one might suspect. In a Foucauldian gesture, Long argues that the narrator surreptitiously demonstrates "his alignment with a medico-judicial apparatus that forces the diaries to speak the truth, while simultaneously defining homosexuality as an innermost principle of identity and criminalising it" as part of the judicial process. See J. J. Long, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 74-5.

[47] Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style*, 159.

"Who can say how things were in ages past" (84)? Following this line of inquiry, the narrator, when ruminating upon world-renowned artworks during his visits to museums and monuments, dissociates himself from the fixed perspective (framed or elevated) imposed on viewers of these artworks and engages in a pedestrian point of view in hopes of detecting the problematics implicit in the "authentic" representation of history and salvaging the memory of those forced underground or onto the periphery. In chapter 4, the narrator recollects a naval battle between English and Dutch fleets in Sole Bay fought on the 28th of May, 1672. Despite being a widely favored subject among maritime painters, a majority of their versions displease the narrator due to the perspective they have adopted, which the narrator finds as emotionally disengaged as were the inhabitants of Southwold who witnessed the battle at a "safe" distance on the shore. These paintings fail to "convey any true impression of how it must have been to be on board one of these ships," namely, the unspeakable horror that the participants in the battle confronted until they perished (77). Saddened by the countless souls annihilated in such a human-wrought catastrophe, the narrator recalls one of Browne's contemplations in *The Garden of Cyrus*: "[t]he shadow of night is drawn like a black veil across the earth, […] one might, in following the setting sun, see on our globe nothing but prone bodies, row upon row, as if levelled by the scythe of Saturn – an endless graveyard for a humanity struck by falling sickness" (78-9).

The narrator's pessimistic sentiment refers not merely to the ethically inadequate perspective of the maritime painters, but, even more so, to the unattainability of an omniscient stance in reality that would let the perceiving subject "see it all together" (83). In the case of the naval battle, except that the physical distance from the shore and "an acrid, yellowish-black smoke" would have masked the entire bay and obstructed the eyewitnesses from a clear view, "[t]he agony that was endured and the enormity of the havoc wrought," along with the vastness

of material cost in the battle would "defeat our powers of comprehension" (76, 78). To overcome the immense weight amassed through constant disturbance and fundamental uncertainty when one gazes at history, the narrator draws inspiration from "a sense of levitation" characteristic of the style of Browne's prose – specifically, a dynamic equilibrium between "the force of gravitation" (writing out of "the fullness of his erudition") versus the unremitting effort to rise higher (writing through "the circles of his spiralling prose"). A paradoxical phenomenon thus occurs: "[t]he greater the distance, the clearer the view: one sees the tiniest of details with the utmost clarity" (19). In terms of historical metaphysics, the "microscopic immersion" in proximate details would rescue one from any falsified perspective; the "distanced overview" is equally as important, as it affords Sebald's narrator "a perspectival overview permitting reorientation."[48]

[48] Gray, *Ghostwriting*, 357.

## Chapter Six

### The Waking Dreams

Like Gao's *Soul Mountain*, in which the you-character travels across an uncanny dreamscape, a counterpart to the real world, *The Rings of Saturn*, too, features the ubiquitous presence of dreams, illusions, fantasies, and alternate realities. These states of being reveal obscured thoughts and hidden feelings of Sebald's narrator. In *Rings*, the narrator explicitly remarks in a Freudian manner on the function of dreams as a container for "submerged memories" and the "curious air of hyper-reality" (c. 4, 79). Meanwhile, he clearly underscores the existence of "something else" in one's dreams: "something nebulous, gauze-like, through which everything one sees in a dream seems, paradoxically, much clearer" (80). Akin to the instances in the physical world, when "[a] pond becomes a lake, a breeze becomes a storm, a handful of dust is a desert, a grain of sulphur in the blood is a volcanic inferno," the peculiarity of "becoming" in dreams holds strong evocative potential, for it can prefigure alternate dimensions of reality or provide a "manner of theatre" in which "we are at once playwright, actor, stage manager, scene painter and audience" (80).[1]

Seen in this light, the ontological uncertainty involved in alternate worlds engages the creative faculties of the individual and ultimately allows them to attain a heightened awareness and a clearer understanding of one's thoughts and experiences. The Conrad and Casement

[1] The following question in the original German text is missing from the English translation: „Gehört zum Durchqueren der Traumfluchten mehr oder weniger Verstand, als man mit hineinbringt ins Bett?" (Does traversing those escaping dreams contain more reason than you bring to bed, or less?) This quote highlights the illuminating nature of dreams and that they are not necessarily irrational. W. G. Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn -- Eine Englische Wallfahrt* (Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn, 1995), 103.

narrative in the foregoing discussion proves to be the narrator's recollection of his dream while he falls asleep watching a BBC documentary regarding the two historical figures. For the time being, his "waking consciousness ebbs away" so that, though hearing every word of the documentary narrator's account "with singular clarity," he is unable to grasp their meanings (103). When he regains consciousness, the narrator admits that he slept through a major part of the film and could only reconstruct the story of the two men's lives from a few words and some shadowy images retained in his mind (104). On the pretense of recovering the original content of the documentary "as far as I have been able," the narrator in fact engages in his own detective work on history, speculating and exploring by recourse to his altered states of consciousness, and therefore presents the reader with a Sebaldian Conrad and Casement narrative that would not otherwise have been known (104).

I. "In an Opium Dream"

*The Rings of Saturn* embraces a wide spectrum of altered states of consciousness, from illusions and images to fantasies and dreams. Similar to the you-character in *Soul Mountain*, who begins a journey by acting upon a nostalgic impulse toward his childhood hometown, Sebald's narrator travels by train to visit the grand manors in the English countryside – material representations of the national preeminence in its heyday (c. 2). *En route* to his destination, Somerleyton Hall, the narrator catches a glimpse of the Suffolk landscape, where "[s]ave for the odd solitary cottage there is nothing to be seen but the grass and the rippling reeds, […] like relics of an extinct civilization" (30). Enveloped by a mournful air, the narrator gets off the train and walks to the Hall, lamenting the desolate landscape and signs of cultural decline, which, he speculates, "would have been quite different here" in the past (31). The train on the nearby railroad sparks his nostalgic imagination that, in those halcyon days, everything needed to

maintain a lavish residence such as Somerleyton Hall and to secure the social position of the owners would have been imported "on the railway from other parts of the country and would have arrived at this station in the goods van of the olive-green-liveried steam train" (31). Such a mental image spurs him into a wider range of imaginative encounters: for instance, the imported goods would likely have included "furnishings, equipment and impedimenta of every description, […] lawn mowers and great boxes of whalebone corsets and crinolines from London" (31). Large numbers of staff (stationmaster, servants, coachman, etc.) hired for the upkeep of a stately home would also have been required. In providing such an exhaustive list of the goods and staff that once rendered such a luxurious lifestyle possible, the narrator derives great pleasure in painstakingly sorting through them in his mind, as if his unremitting efforts to count those accessories to luxury could revive and sustain the Hall's erstwhile glory. In reality, though, "it takes just one awful second, […] and an entire epoch passes" (31).

As a continuation of the imaginative revitalization of the manor hall in rural England, the current state of the country houses falls under the narrator's scrutiny. The once cherished symbol of cultural heritage is now merely "open to a paying public in the summer months" (31). Beholding the tourists who ride a miniature train for a tour of the estate, the narrator is reminded of the "dressed-up circus dogs or seals, and at the front of the train, a ticket satchel slung about him, sat the engine driver, conductor and controller of all the animals, the present Lord Somerleyton, Her Majesty The Queen's Master of the Horse" (32). Such a farcical scene not only provides an ironic "object lesson from the history of evolution, which at times repeats its earlier conceits," but also reveals the hopeless *status quo* of the present Lord Somerleyton, whose livelihood can only rely on superficial tourism, and thus reinforces the notion of Britain's waning political and economic power (32).

The narrator's starkly contrasting descriptions of Somerleyton Hall's past splendor and current decay leads him to scrupulously recount the estate's numerous changes of ownership over the centuries. The narrator focuses his attention on one of them, Sir Morton Peto, a self-made man who rose from obscurity to social and financial prominence and was regarded as one of "the foremost entrepreneurs and speculators of his time" (32). Peto converted the old country residence into an architectural marvel that "would eclipse everything the nation had hitherto seen" (33). The most telling feature of the house consisted in "the scarcely perceptible transitions from interiors to exterior" so that the visitors "were barely able to tell where the natural ended and the man-made began" (33). The crowning jewel of Peto's *Traumwerk* (dreamwork),[2] "a princely palace," according to a contemporary report, was the view of Somerleyton Hall on a summer's night, "when the incomparable glasshouses, borne on cast-iron pillars and braces and seemingly weightless in their filigree grace, shed their gleaming radiance on the dark. Countless Argand burners backed with silver-plated reflectors, the white flames consuming the poisonous gas with a low hissing sound, cast an immense brightness that pulsated like the current of life that runs through the earth" (34). Rivaling the harmonious integration of the interior with the exterior, the glasshouses illuminated at night presented a dazzling spectacle so undifferentiated from an otherworldly existence that "[n]ot even Coleridge, in an opium dream, could have imagined a more magical scene for his Mongol overlord, Kubla Khan" (34).

The intoxicating view of the luminous night at Somerleyton Hall is matched with another architectural wonder along the Lowestoft coast. Upon sighting the "marks of an insidious decay" apparent everywhere, the narrator wistfully recollects that the deserted coastal town "in its

[2] *Traumwerk* has been translated as "dream" in the English version. However, the original German word, *Traumwerk* ("dreamwork") highlights the man-made quality, as opposed to the natural quality, of the manor house. Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn*, 46.

heyday had been not only one of the foremost fishing ports in the United Kingdom but also a seaside resort lauded even abroad as 'most salubrious'" (45). Peto, the legendary entrepreneur and former owner of Somerleyton Hall, also invested extensively in a great number of properties by the beach and had them "me[e]t all the requirements of London society circles" (45). Lowestoft was thereby historically promoted from a remote coastal town to a "pride of place in the public esteem" (45). One of the seaside gems, according to contemporary magazines, was the new pier, the one "considered the most beautiful anywhere along the eastern coast of England. The promenade deck was made of African mahogany planking, and the white pier buildings, which were illuminated after nightfall by gas flares, included a reading and music room with tall mirrors around the walls" (46).

As told by the narrator's late neighbor Frederick Farr, an annual charity ball under royal patronage was held at this very location, brimming with imperial power and wealth. On the evening of such an occasion, the commoners, though not allowed to come near, would row out to the end of the pier to watch the fashionable society. From his "bobbing, drifting vantage points," as Farr looks back, the mesmerizing sight of the dancing event appeared to be "borne aloft in a surge of light above the water, which was dark and at that time in early autumn usually swathed in mist" (47-8). In addition to recollecting the cheerful crowds thronging the royal event, Farr derives equal pleasure from his childhood memories of family outings at the beach. Applying a dreamlike and nostalgic filter of "seeing everything through flowing white veils," Farr conjures up a mental picture of such seaside serenity that the town appeared as "a mirage over the water" and his own family looked "as if the court of King James II [were] in exile on the coast of The Hague" (48). Notably, Farr's nostalgic retrospect of his hometown is largely interwoven with a sense of patriotic pride that deepened as he grew older. In relating to the narrator his experience

at a preparatory school, Farr remembers that he initially suffered a "great pain of separation" from home, which was however later transformed into "a kind of perverse pride" (46). The headmaster's patriotic speech delivered at the outbreak of the First World War (1914) of "just causes and higher significance of the war" left an indelible impression on his mind and he "ha[d] not forgotten to this day" the bugle playing at the end of the speech from a junior cadet, Francis Browne (46).

As an eyewitness to the town's waning glory, the elderly Farr transformed his agony over its cultural loss and physical decay into a passionate pursuit of gardening. The garden is the last retreat he could hold onto for keeping his fond memories undisturbed – syntheses of family tenderness and national pride. Farr's tireless dedication to breeding rare flowers,[3] on the one hand, elevates his garden to be "one of the loveliest in the whole region" (47). On the other, his immoderate obsession leads to his declining health and perhaps to his eventual death (47). It was in this very garden, the narrator recalls, "one cloudless day in May, that Frederick died; as he was making his morning round, he somehow managed to set fire to his dressing gown with the cigarette lighter he always kept in his pocket" (47). By suggesting that Farr's death is self-inflicted, the narrator throws a light on the indiscernible force inherent in nostalgic yearnings, which could precipitate mental and physical destruction. When the garden boy found the unconscious Farr "in a cool, half-shaded place," the "severe burns from head to foot" that covered his body formed a marked contrast with the "tiny viola labradorica with its almost black leaves (the color of mourning)" spreading and establishing "a regular colony," as if they had been attacking Farr's fragile mind (47). It should not escape our notice that the word "colony"

[3] Notably, Farr's dedication to gardening by breeding rare roses, violets, and irises is nominally related to his three sisters, Rose, Violet, and Iris, under whose care and attention Farr grew up (46-7).

that the narrator uses to describe the labradorica can be linked to the colonial contributions to British wealth and economic development, which nurtures Farr's nostalgic dreams.

The reason behind Farr's unwillingness to relinquish his fantasies of past glory is likely his fear that the discordant historical findings would threaten to mar the ideal image of England. At Farr's funeral, the narrator "could not help thinking of that child bugler Francis Browne, playing into the night in a Northamptonshire schoolyard in the summer of 1914, and the white pier at Lowestoft, which reached out so far into the sea in those days" (47). By invoking these two visions that featured in Farr's nostalgic reverie, the narrator reflects on the perils of failing to reckon with the historical context of the town's bygone splendor: for instance, the bugle sounds at the same time as Great Britain enters the First World War, a war waged between imperial powers for self-interest instead of social justice or common good. Likewise, the African mahogany planking used to furnish the promenade deck of the white pier at Lowestoft was almost certainly imported through British plundering and exploitation of African resources as a result of systematic colonization.

Returning to the luminescent spectacle of Somerleyton Hall lighting up the night, the narrator notes that below the Hall are "steep roofs tiled with dark blue slate, and in the snow-white glow from the shimmering glasshouses the level blackness of the lawns. […] [T]he wary animals keep one eye open in their sleep; and beyond the furthermost perimeter, away toward the horizon, the marshes extend and the sails of the mills are turning in the wind" (35). By making such a sharp contrast between the actual darkness and the brightness due to artificial illumination, the illusion of a "complete harmony between the natural and the manufactured," as with the house's interior indiscernible from its exterior, can no longer be upheld (34). The narrator's further observation of the turning sails of the mills as nature-friendly structures which

are steadily shut down due to the emergence of gas as a new source of energy, not only directs his attention to the poisonous emission of gas that splendidly lit up the dreamlike palace, but, more crucially, reminds him of an ironic fact: the glasshouse was destroyed in 1913 (one year before the outbreak of World War I) by a gas explosion.[4] The narrator, therefore, disengages himself from a romantic fantasy of the pastoral splendor at the height of the British empire by staying as wakeful as those animals which sleep with one eye open.[5]

Strolling through the rooms inside the Hall, the narrator realizes that the stately manor no longer strikes today's visitors as "an oriental palace in a fairy tale" (35). That said, his conscious return to the present and parting with fantasy-laden memories endures vicissitudes, defeats, and setbacks. For instance, he is tantalized at first to imagine servants bustling about to substitute for the despairingly empty sight in front of him. His wistful description of the worn and dispirited decor is still overlaid with a subtle patina of nostalgia. Moreover, he strives to keep the image of "bygone paraphernalia" as innocent and separated from their historical context as possible for fear of any alternative discoveries that may disturb his fantasies of British civilization (35). Nevertheless, among a *mélange* of cultural artifacts, he takes note of a camphorwood chest, which he suspects "may once have accompanied a former occupant of the house on a tour of

[4] In the German text of *Rings*, the image of turning mills is also presented in chapter 5 before the narrator's dream of Conrad and Casement but it is missing from the English translation: „Klappere, Mühle, klappere, ging es mir zuletzt in einem fort durch den Kopf, du klapperst nur für mich" (Rattle, mill, rattle, in the end it went through my head all the time, you only rattle for me), which anticipates a transition of one's state of mind (Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn*, 132). This unidentified quote with minor addition comes from Kafka's *Das Schloß* (The Castle, 1926): „‚Klappere, Mühle, klappere,' dachte er, ‚du klapperst nur für mich'" ("Rattle, mill, rattle," he thought, "you only rattle for me.") Franz Kafka, *Das Schloss*, ed. Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1982), 419. Since Sebald was known for working collaboratively with the English translator, it is nearly impossible that he was not aware of this modification, which proves a Sebaldian discomfort even beyond a complete text.

[5] Although the beginning of the narrator's nostalgic fantasy was not clearly marked, a detail before his arrival at the Hall is worth noting: Unlike visitors arriving by car, Sebald's walker had to "climb the wall like some interloper and struggle through the thicket before reaching the park" (32). The state of traveling in solitude sustains his illusion of going back in time and keeps his dream undisturbed by contact with his present-day reality. Also, Sebald's choice to make the daydreaming narrator out to be a comic figure suggests Sebald's inclination to a soft-pedaled criticism toward his narrator at this point.

duty to Nigeria or Singapore" and foreign souvenirs displayed on the wall ("hussars' sabres, African masks, spears, safari trophies, hand-coloured engravings of Boer War battles") (35).[6] Despite his oblique reference to the historical setting of the "bygone paraphernalia," the narrator still casts a critical eye on the invariable origin of those artifacts – the history of oppression and exploitation – "which [one] cannot contemplate without horror."[7] Specifically, the camphorwood chest could have been carried by a colonial diplomat who departed from England to its far-flung colonies to spread its 'civilization,' and the African-themed wall arts were perhaps the result of exploits and plunders parading colonial triumphs.

The fleeting counter-memories captured and constructed from the traces of those material objects, which bear witness to and provide refuge for the forgotten and suppressed past, prompt the narrator to delve further into the substance of British history. Within a repository of history such as Somerleyton Hall, the narrator thus ponders that, "one is not quite sure whether one is in a country house in Suffolk or some kind of no-man's-land, on the shores of the Arctic Ocean or in the heart of the dark continent, nor can one readily say which decade or century it is, for many ages are superimposed here and coexist" (36). In grouping references to World War I battles, the Arctic, and African colonies, the narrator exposes the dark chapters of warfare and colonization in European history, which have succumbed to a collective amnesia behind the picturesque *façade* of rural Britain, and he starts to relish the opportunity of unmasking a divergent and discordant history or, more suitably, a history of destruction. Surrounded by a large collection of cultural oddities accumulated by generations and stored within the Hall, he comes to realize

[6] When the narrator examines the objects inside the chest, he suspects that "most of them [were] so small they might have been intended for children, or have shrunk in the course of the years" (35).

[7] In his influential essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin argues that any victor's spoils through a violent encounter are deemed cultural treasures which the historical materialist must regard with "cautious detachment," and which "without exception [...] he cannot contemplate without horror. [...] [T]here is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism." Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 256.

"[h]ow uninviting" Somerleyton must have been "in the days of the industrial impresario Morton Peto, MP, when everything, […] was brand new, matching in every detail, and in unremittingly good taste," and "[h]ow fine a place" the house seems now because "it was imperceptibly nearing the brink of dissolution and silent oblivion" (36). In this light, the narrator's ultimate appreciation of the "sheer number of things" which plead for his attention to be salvaged from oblivion, frees him from his sentimental ensnarement in nostalgic memories (36).

In her essay discussing the post-imperial rural histories and nostalgia in *Rings*, Lucienne Loh coins the term "ironic nostalgia" in reference to a struggling mentality of simultaneously indulging in the past's nostalgic pleasure and acknowledging the occluded histories upon which that nostalgia is based. Rather than presenting a cohesive image of British civilization, Loh argues, Sebald's narrator turns the reader's attention to those disjunctive and disparate histories underlying architectural wonders and cultural artifacts. This redirected readerly attentiveness "exposes the myth underlying notions of imperial history and national heritage," specifically, the otherwise neutralized violence and spoils often perceived as part of British civilization.[8] Loh's reading also provides insight into the narrator's allusive reference to a solitary Chinese quail, which he is "saddened" to see in taking leave of the Hall, "in a state of dementia, running to and fro along the edge of the cage and shaking its head every time it was about to turn, as if it could not comprehend how it had got into this hopeless fix" (36). The "hopeless fix" of the demented quail, in a metaphorical sense, parallels the predicament of a remembering subject who, as a result of his uncritical obsession with Britain's imagined former glory lodged in material resplendence, remains unwilling to acknowledge and confront the nation's incongruous history.

[8] Lucienne Loh, "Postimperial Rural Histories and Ironic Nostalgia in W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*," *Perennial Empires: Postcolonial, Transnational and Literary Perspectives*, ed. Chantal Zabus and Silvia Nagy-Zekmi (New York: Cambria Press, 2011), 19-32.

It is precisely this pathological fixation that initially lures the narrator to retreat into a romanticized past of Somerleyton Hall, the glasshouses in particular, and stops him from further inquiries into the monetary foundation of British social wealth obtained by a colonial economy. Aside from a brief reference to Peto's investment in colonial railway construction, where "he set new standards" to prove his financial shrewdness, the role that the vast network of railways played as vital supply lines from British colonies to its metropolitan country, on which the extravagant manor houses depended, is by and large downplayed (33).

The confused Chinese quail trapped in a cage can additionally be associated with the narrator's state of bewilderment when he becomes so lost in the Somerleyton yew maze that he can only figure his way out by "drawing a line with the heel of my boot across the white sand of every hedged passage that had proved to be a dead end" (38). The same feeling of dizziness will hit him again in his dream of wandering the Dunwich heath (c. 7). "Lost in the thoughts that went round in my head incessantly" (171), he is horrified to realize that a glass-domed observation tower is the only discernible landmark and that strange signposts provide no directions. While fighting with his instincts and making mental notes, he cannot remember how he traces his way through the maze but finds that he suddenly stands on a country lane, where "the horizon was spinning all around as if I had jumped off a merry-go-round" (172). The narrator's inexplicable dream of the Dunwich terrain returns to haunt him as he finds himself stumbling through the labyrinthine heath, "which I was convinced had been created solely for me" (173). As he finally reaches a Chinese pavilion in a raised area (similar to the pavilion in the middle of the Somerleyton maze), he sees from "this vantage point" the maze, "the light sandy ground, the sharply delineated contours of hedge taller than a man and almost pitch black now – a pattern simple in comparison with the tortuous trail I had behind me, but one which I knew in

my dream, with absolute certainty, represented a cross-section of my brain" (173). This moment of clarity allows him to see for the first time his predicament of wandering through the maze, during which his conscious mind (a simple pattern representing "a cross-section of my brain") and altered states of consciousness ("tortuous trail I had behind me") never cease to battle each other for the control of his mind.[9]

Moreover, this crystalized view of his mental state grants the narrator an in-between position such that he is "sitting transfixed with amazement in the Chinese pavilion," while "at the same time out in the open, within a foot of the very edge" (174). Being aware of "how fearful it is to cast one's eye so low," a succession of apocalyptic scenes rises in his mind: entire headlands "[breaking] off the coast and [sinking] beneath the waves"; a Belgian villa "teetering over the precipice" with the beams of searchlights probing the darkness "reminded me of the War";[10] "Immediately below the cliff," which render crows and choughs "scarce the size of beetles" and fishermen "appeared like mice,"[11] are "the shattered ruins of a house" and "strangely contorted bodies" in the aftermath of a devastating explosion;[12] and, not far, "a

[9] Judith Ryan notices that the narrator was "compelled to fall back on a more systematic technique of escape" within the Somerleyton maze (Ryan, 50). Following this line of thought, I argue that the narrator's experience in the Somerleyton maze indicates how a conscious mind operates and his first dream of wandering in the Dunwich maze likely represents how altered states of consciousness function. The combination of both is represented in the narrator's second dream of Dunwich heath, where he became lost at first but achieved an expansive view by virtue of an in-between position. See Judith Ryan, "Lines of Flight': History and Trauma in *The Rings of Saturn*," *W.G. Sebald: Schreiben Ex Patria / Expatriate Writing*, ed. Gerhard Fischer (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 45-60.

[10] The feeling of impending disaster is diametrically opposed to the pleasant luminance in the view of Somerleyton at night or of the white pier buildings by the Lowestoft coastline.

[11] This vision in *Rings* faithfully quotes from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, when Edgar, the Earl of Gloucester's banished son, describes the imaginary prospect of jumping off the Dover cliffs. The original scene in *Lear* reads: "How fearful / And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low! / The crows and choughs that wing the midway air / Show scarce so gross as beetles […] The fishermen that walk upon the beach / Appear like mice […] / The murmuring surge / That on th' unnumbered idle pebbles chafes Cannot be heard so high" (Act 4, Scene 6). See William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (Quarto and Folio texts), *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Greenblatt et al., (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 2548. This intertextual reference is left unmarked in the English text of *Rings* as well as the German one: „ Die Dohlen und die Krähen, die in halber Höhe kreisten, sahen kaum so groß wie Käfer aus; die Fischer auf dem Strand erschienen Mäusen gleich, die dumpfe Brandung, die die ungezählten Kiesel mahlt, drang nicht zu mir herauf. " (Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn*, 217).

[12] A later scene that the narrator sees at dawn in the same chapter provides historical context for this devastating explosion: "The contours of the Sizewell power plant, its Magnox block a glowering mausoleum, begin to loom

solitary old man with a wild mane of hair was kneeling beside his dead daughter" – a scene that clearly alludes to the climax in Shakespeare's *King Lear* (174).[13] This synchronized display of historical disasters – natural destruction, warfare, nuclear explosion, and the timeless theme of human cruelty in Shakespearean tragedy – can only be brought to light by an expansive view "as though I stood at the topmost point of the earth," which hinges upon the narrator's position situated both within and beyond the pavilion (174).

II. "Elective Affinities"

After the account of his dream vision on the Dunwich maze, the narrator relates his visit to the Suffolk home of Michael Hamburger, his friend and translator. Like his deserted garden, in which everything seems to be "hollowed out," Hamburger has suffered a long-term struggle with literary creation (181). It is likely under this circumstance that Hamburger attempts to align himself with Friedrich Hölderlin – one of Germany's supreme poets – while translating Hölderlin's poems into English, and grows fascinated with the meeting of two disparate minds, or the formation of "elective affinities" between a writer and his literary precursor.[14] Hamburger notes the similarities between their lives: to name a few, their birthdays are only two days apart, they use the same manner to sign works and receive unwelcome guests, the water pump in Hamburger's garden bears the date 1770, the year of Hölderlin's birth, and his mother's maiden name is the same as the Landgrave of Homburg, to whom Hölderlin dedicated his Patmos hymn. A series of questions is thus prompted based on those unfathomable coincidences: "[a]cross what

upon an island far out in the pallid waters where one believes the Dogger Bank to be, where once the shoals of herring spawned and […] the delta of the Rhine flowed out into the sea and where green forests grew from silting sands" (175).

[13] The original scene in Shakespeare's *King Lear* reads: "She's dead as earth. – Lend me a looking glass. / If that her breath will mist or stain the stone, / Why, then she lives" (Act 5, Scene 3). Ibid., 2565. Although unmarked in the English text of *Rings*, this reference is quoted in English and italicized in the German text (Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn*, 218).

[14] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Elective Affinities: A Novel*, trans. David Constantine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

distance in time do the elective affinities and correspondences connect? How is it that one perceives oneself in another human being, or, if not oneself, then one's own precursor" (182)?

The foregoing questions are presumably raised by Hamburger as closing remarks upon his life's correlations with Hölderlin's. Due to the omission of quotation marks, however, this is no less true of the questions to be asked by the narrator, who ponders the connections between Hamburger and himself. The narrator starts by enumerating the striking similarities of their personal lives: both men are German emigrants living in the same region of England, both struggled with teaching and writing, both suffered from the same allergy, and both share a mutual acquaintance: a colleague named Stanley Kerry at Manchester University. The feeling of incomprehensible uncanniness is increased by the temporal correspondences of their life events. Specifically, they passed through British customs thirty-three years apart (1933 and 1966), and they were both twenty-two years old when they met Kerry at an interval of twenty-two years (1944 and 1966). Not only are the numbers that make up these chronological coincidences paired by identical digits, 22, 33, 44, 66, but the numeric sequences could also, as implied by the narrator, carry spiritual messages about one's life.[15]

In addition to their biographical similarities and temporal coincidences, which establish a mirroring symmetry between two separate lives, Hamburger and the narrator are drawn closer together by a deep feeling of interpersonal attachment. Upon his first visit to Hamburger's house, the narrator "instantly felt as if I lived or had once lived there, in every respect precisely as he does" (183). Standing "spellbound" in Hamburger's studio, the narrator is struck by a strange feeling of *déjà vu*, that it was he who "had abandoned that place of work" and that the spectacles

[15] The belief in the specific significance carried by numeric sequences is called "Apophenia," a term coined by psychiatrist Klaus Conrad to denote a tendency to perceive meaningful connections between unrelated things, which may suggest the early stage of delusion. Klaus Conrad, *Die beginnende Schizophrenie: Versuch einer Gestaltanalyse des Wahns* (Stuttgart: Georg Thieme Verlag, 1958), 149-68.

cases and stationery items had once been in his possession (183). As he tours the garden and kitchen, a "quite outlandish thought" crosses his mind that these trivial collectables "all seemed as if they were still lifes created by my own hand" and that "Michael was taking me round a house in which I myself had lived a long time ago" (184-5). Those mundane objects arranged in a random manner, on the one hand, assume a symbolic weight that alludes to the two men's similar professions and lifestyles; on the other, they denote a common possession that indicates the possible merging of two separate minds.

Aside from the presence of shared objects, the textual subjectivities between Hamburger and the narrator seem also to be converged. Prior to his arrival at Hamburger's house, the narrator recalls an episode from Hamburger's memoir. The pages devoted to Hamburger's recollection of his Berlin childhood open in the third person – "Michael was nine and a half when, in November 1933, with his siblings, his mother, and her parents, he came to England" – but shortly switch to the first person when Hamburger laments "[h]ow little there has remained in me of my native country" since "[t]he disappearance of those budgerigars at Dover customs marked the beginning of the disappearance of his Berlin childhood" (177, 176). Moving forward, except for the narrator's sparse interjections, such as "Michael writes," "writes Michael," or "Michael writes elsewhere," Hamburger's voice rises to control the narrative and continues unhindered for several pages, until the narrator interrupts the text by announcing his arrival at Hamburger's house (176-9). Although the narrator initially identifies "Michael" as an other and keeps his voice at a distance, the distinction between them dissolves as the narrator cites Hamburger in length until the latter's voice dominates the narrative. The narrator's voice thus disappears entirely into Hamburger's discourse.

Having identified himself with Hamburger in a variety of correspondences, Sebald's narrator seems to "[slip] into the life and voice of Michael Hamburger, […] everything comes together."[16] According to McCulloh, the narrator's account of his visit to Hamburger depicts the "mystery of identity and the relationship of identity and memory," and draws attention to the possibility of "merging identity" based on "coincidences and the repetition of coincidences."[17] In spite of that, upon leaving Hamburger's house, the narrator sees "a beetle rowing across the surface of the water, from one dark shore to the other" in the Hölderlin pump at the garden well and feels "a shudder that went to the roots of my hair" (190). To contextualize this scene, the living condition of the beetle, which remains confined within the deep well, suggests a doomed future were one's subjectivity to lose its exclusivity. In Hamburger's case, Hölderlin's poetry, which sought to elevate the status of German as a language to that of the ancient classical languages (such as Greek and Latin), was actually celebrated during the years of the Third Reich as instilling a sense of national pride in its citizens. The unconditional embrace of such a literary ambition – originally private but later appropriated to serve a political agenda – renders the affinity between Hamburger (a victim from the Nazi's persecution) and Hölderlin (promoted by the Nazi as a spiritual forerunner of National Socialism) deeply ironic. Along similar lines, however much the narrator is amazed by the shared mind between him and Hamburger, their distinct origins cannot be overlooked: Hamburger is Jewish and the narrator is non-Jewish; the former's family was victimized in the war and the latter is a descendant of the war's perpetrator. In the instance of their respective departure from German to England, while both poignant, it is a

[16] André Aciman, "Out of Novemberland" (Review of *The Rings of Saturn*), *New York Review of Books* (Dec 1998), 46.

[17] Mark Richard McCulloh, *Understanding W. G. Sebald* (Columbia, S. C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 74.

life-or-death situation for Hamburger and his family but a matter of individual preference for the narrator.

In fact, although initially caught up in the oscillation between being "perceptive" and being "insane" during his visit, the narrator has gradually dispelled the tempting thoughts of the uncanny affiliation between Hamburger and himself "perhaps because it is not possible to pursue them without losing one's sanity" (182, 185). Having noted the figure of Hamburger to be a mixture of resonances and dissonances, the narrator manages to keep his subjective singularity intact without subjecting himself to the other, who appears to have offered a tantalizing promise of satisfying the narrator's expectations. He concludes that chance happenings "occur far more often than we suspect" and appear to be frightened with mysterious invitations to meaning, since "we all move, one after the other, along the same roads mapped out for us by our origins and our hopes" (187). The narrator fears that his rational mind is oftentimes "unable to lay the ghosts of repetition that haunt me with ever greater frequency" (187). To alert readers to the peril of relinquishing total control of one's subjectivity, the narrator parallels this mental peculiarity to a certain physical dysfunction (like a numbness or a stroke) that would result in "a temporary inability to think, to speak or to move one's limbs" (187).

The "temporary inability to think" approximates an observation by Stanley Kerry (the narrator's and Hamburger's mutual friend) about calligraphic practices, for which one must "spend many hours in deep concentration drawing one character after another on immense sheets of paper" (186). However, Kerry remarks that "one of the chief difficulties of writing consisted in thinking, with the tip of the pen, solely of the word to be written, whilst banishing from one's mind the reality of what one intends to describe" (186). This writing experience echoes Hamburger's comment on the writerly task that "[p]erhaps we all lose our sense of reality to the

precise degree to which we are engrossed in our own work" (182). Kerry's reflection on the calligraphic challenge corresponds also to another bizarre vignette, related by Hamburger's wife, Anne, of a strange character Mr. Squirrel, an amnesiac undertaker who is "unable to recall what had happened in his childhood, last year, last month or even last week" (188). Aspiring to be an actor and finally assigned a minor role as a nobleman in a local production of *King Lear*, Squirrel "laboured a whole year at learning by heart those few lines" and delivered them most movingly in his performance (189). Afterward, he keeps remaining in this role and repeating those lines to this day "whether the occasion suits or not" (189).[18] By depicting Mr. Squirrel as an amnesiac lunatic, the narrator advises against a sole reliance on elective affinity, for it is bound to generate "some kind of anticipation of the end, a venture into the void, a sort of disengagement" from reality and an irreparable defect of one's mentality (188). As McCulloh summarizes, "[b]y merging with the Other, consciousness would enter a realm that otherwise recedes from us – the realm of final certainty. Such certainty would be complete and irresistible, however, and would surely mean a descent into madness."[19]

III. In the "Theatre of one's own Recollections"

The unfaltering belief in an "elective affinity," which may cause the loss of one's sanity, is explicitly exemplified by the English writer Edward FitzGerald (1809-1883) in chapter 8.[20]

[18] The original scene in Shakespeare's *King Lear* reads: "They say Edgar, his banished son, is with the Earl of Kent in Germany" (Act 4, Scene 7). See Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 2556. Although unmarked in the English text of *Rings*, this reference is quoted in English and italicized in the German text (Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn*, 236).

[19] McCulloh, *Understanding W. G. Sebald*, 73.

[20] According to Jorge Luis Borges, Edward Fitzgerald could have been a reincarnation of Omar Khayyam and "the Englishman could have re-created the Persian, since both were, in essence, God, or momentary faces of God." Borges engages in an experimental thought similar to Browne's notion of metempsychosis: "The case calls for conjecture of a metaphysical nature. Umar, […] professed the Platonic and Pythagorean doctrine of the transition of the soul through many incarnations; with the passing of the centuries, his soul possibly found its reincarnation in England to fulfill, in a remote Germanic language with Latin overtones, the literary destiny that in Nishapur had been pushed aside by mathematics. Isaac Luria the Lion demonstrated that the soul of a dead man can enter the lost spirit of another to maintain or instruct him. Perhaps the spirit of Umar lodged, around 1857, in FitzGerald's." See Jorge Luis Borges, "The Enigma of Edward Fitzgerald," *A Personal Anthology*. trans. Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 96.

The chapter starts out with the narrator's discussion with a traveler met by chance, Cornelis de Jong, about the enormous capital accumulated through slave labor by European sugar tycoons. Their conversation transitions into the narrator's account of his visit to the deserted Boulge estate, which once belonged to FitzGerald's family, who amassed their fortune over generations "through warring feuds with other lords, by ruthless subjection of the local people and by a no less ruthless marriage strategy. […] [Their wealth] consisted principally, apart from properties in England, of their vast land holdings in Ireland, together with the goods and chattels, and hosts of peasants who were effectively no more than their serfs" (197). Born into a privileged family, FitzGerald nonetheless developed a strong feeling of revulsion ever since childhood against his family and class. After leaving Cambridge, he eschewed a grandiose lifestyle in that dungeon-like manor in favor of a tiny hermitage on the edge of the estate, where he immersed himself in communion with literary forebears of bygone ages by ardently reading and quoting them in his writing, as they appeared "far more real to him than even his friends who were still alive" (200).

FitzGerald's zealous devotion to bring the tidings of long-dead writers to the present is manifested in his marvelous translation of *Rubaiyat* – the only completed project of his lifetime – a collection composed by the Persian poet Omar Khayyam, with whom FitzGerald felt "a curiously close affinity across a distance of eight centuries" (200). FitzGerald's English verses were devised for the purpose of having "a colloquy with the dead man, […] which radiate with a pure, seemingly unselfconscious beauty, [and] feign an anonymity that disdains even the least claim to authorship" (200). For FitzGerald, the feigned anonymity of his translation allowed him to avoid the potential tyranny as the authorial subject, to follow his literary predecessor's footsteps, and to merge textual identities with him. As such, readers are drawn "word by word, to an invisible point where the mediaeval orient and the fading occident can come together in a way

never allowed them by the calamitous course of history" (200). FitzGerald's unprecedented effort of bridging Orient and Occident not only occasions an alternative discourse that unsettles the identification of the Occident with the center of the universe but, crucially, couches his vision in a utopian image of the Orient that proffers a panacea for the moral decay of western society. In line with his lifetime predilection for reading extensively "in a variety of languages" and "pasting up scrap books" of every conceivable material for his project, FitzGerald's literary endeavor of translating *Rubaiyat*, in this light, musters up a cultural counterforce to the colonial hegemony prevalent at the time (200).

Corresponding to his literary resistance against colonial domination, FitzGerald's lifelong eccentricity and social isolation – as well as his affection for men – rebelled in no small measure against the societal oppression of marginalized groups. Once their life paths first crossed on a walking tour of Wales, FitzGerald and William Browne often visited each other in the following years. They delighted in spending idle hours together in everyday pastimes, such as reading and riding, rather than attending the sumptuous social functions that FitzGerald found abominable. Parallel to the creation of a textual intimacy with his literary forebears, FitzGerald fell in unrequited love with Browne, whom he admired as "the personification of an ideal" (201). He had probably, the narrator suspects, never "allowed himself, then or at any other time, to ponder the nature of the desire that moved him" but his constant anxiety for Browne's health and fear of losing him as a life companion was "in itself indicative of the depth of his passion" (201). Despite the ambiguous nature of FitzGerald's romantic attraction to Browne – whether socially, intellectually, emotionally, or physically – the driving force behind this nearly irrational behavior could likely have been a deep-seated frustration toward reality accompanied by a sense of

powerlessness in the face of a dominant class.[21] It is precisely because of his awareness of being inadequate that FitzGerald was "overshadowed by mortality from the start" and retreated from pondering the nature of his desire, fearing that any additional thought would have evoked certain discontents and thus shattered the ideal image of Browne he had so endearingly preserved (201).[22]

FitzGerald's obscure premonition of being unable to keep Browne as a companion was confirmed by Browne's marriage and premature death in the same years as *Rubaiyat*'s publication (1859). After that, it seems as if FitzGerald adopted a self-imposed exile from general society as a result of his deep contempt for "the ruthless exploitation of the land, the obsession with private property, which was pursued by means increasingly dubious, and the ever more radical restriction of common rights" (202-3). As with his childhood yearning for a coastal getaway when trapped in the dungeon-like manor, he started to seek solace in the water "where no friends are buried nor Pathways stopt up," and spent plenty of time either by the sea or aboard a yacht named "Scandal" (203). In his final years, "he continued in remarkably good cheer," in spite of the occasional assaults of "the blue devil of melancholy," by, for instance, staging operas in his own mind – the "Theatre of one's own Recollections" – rather than attending live performances, for they would "only have spoiled the memories of Malibran and Sontag so dear to him" (205). Hurried along by his declining health (tinnitus and ailing eyes), the accentuated

[21] Compared to Roger Casement, FitzGerald's sexual orientation has never been confirmed. Some critics interpret his unrequited love as a sign of unwillingness to produce another generation of rapacious aristocrats and thus as a way to expiate his inherited feudal guilt (Ahmed, 80-1). Other critics link his homosexuality to his overbearing mother, a formidable woman who possessed a terrifying bust and caused her husband to dwindle to a contemptible figure (Finch, 54-9). Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). Helen Finch, *Sebald's Bachelors: Queer Resistance and the Unconforming Life* (London: Legenda, 2013).

[22] The sense of powerlessness that shrouds FitzGerald even goes beyond his death. As the narrator informs us, "he lies […] in a grave beside the hideous family mausoleum, it is owing to one of those wicked ironies against which even last wills and testaments are powerless" (197).

eccentricity of FitzGerald's behavior as discussed ultimately released him from reason and caused his descent into madness.[23]

The narrator's account of FitzGerald's life story is concluded by the following scene: staying at the Bull Inn in Woodbridge after his visit to Boulge Park, the narrator wakes at daybreak from a dream in which he beholds FitzGerald, "my companion of the day before, sitting at a little blue metal table in his garden […] whilst I, though in the dream I was unable to see myself and was thus like a ghost, sat opposite FitzGerald, playing a game of dominoes with him" (208). The narrator's reference to FitzGerald as "my companion of the day before" suggests that his biographical narration of the non-conformist FitzGerald – such as his pursuit of literature, resistance to oppression, and disdain for exploiting natural resources – could have sprouted from his empathic imagination. The starting point of his dream, though never clarified, could be traced back to the moment when he parted from de Jong, before his trip to the Boulge estate "with a warmth which it seemed he returned" (195), a moment indicating the onset of a dream.[24] Standing out from the narrator's dream account, he notices that he is unable to see himself, "thus like a ghost," when playing dominoes with FitzGerald. Such a realization echoes the revelation the narrator had on the Dunwich heath, in the course of which his synchronic view, granted by an elevated vantage point, incorporates both a maze pattern down below (suggestive of his conscious mind) and the involuted conditions "out in the open, within a foot of the very

[23] FitzGerald's recreation of *Rubaiyat* can be considered as a romanticized misrepresentation of Persia produced by an arbitrary innocence or an uncritical gaze of the West, which views the Orient as an exotic Other starring in a sensual fantasy. This instance of imperialist imagination is reminiscent of the way in which the Victorian visitors perceive Peto's Somerleyton Hall "as an oriental palace in a fairy tale" (c. 2, 35).

[24] According to Finch's discussion of FitzGerald's biography by Peter de Polnay, *Into an Old Room*, Sebald embellishes and romanticizes FitzGerald to make him queerer and more unfit for society than his source material would suggest. For instance, FitzGerald's alleged letter of condolence to Browne's widow was hardly a direct romantic declaration of love for Browne. Further, Sebald neglected to mention FitzGerald's marriage, though swiftly dissolved, which attests to the historical FitzGerald's willingness to conform to social mores (Finch, 54-9). Peter de Polnay, *Into an Old Room: A Memoir of Edward FitzGerald* (New York: Creative Age Press, 1949).

edge" that have not yet been lifted up to his consciousness (173-4). In this light, the narrator's awareness of his absence from his own dream indicates the existence of an extraterritorial zone outside both reality and dream or on the threshold between them.

The narrator's departure of his dream from FitzGerald's life story is closed by a scene: "beyond the flower garden an even green park, utterly deserted, extended to the very edge of the world, where the minarets of Khorasan soared" (208). This park, though it may be redolent of FitzGerald's fancied Persia, is not the one located on his family's Boulge estate. According to the narrator, the park belongs to a country house at the foot of the Slieve Bloom Mountains in Ireland where the narrator briefly lodged. In turn, the narrator transitions into telling another dream about the Ashburys: the descendants of British aristocracy who came to Ireland to inherit the nearly unsaleable property, endured pervasive resentment among the Irish populace, and remained there despite the family's unbearable isolation and hopeless impoverishment after the Irish civil war. Their woeful experience in that war – the conflict rooted in Roger Casement's "Irish question" – reveals an otherwise unexposed side of the landowners, the "perpetrator," a term which FitzGerald would have preferred and a class of people that possibly prompted both his vision of an otherworldly Persia and his unrequited affection for Browne as "the personification of an ideal" (201).

In the narrator's dream, Mrs. Ashbury tells him of a neighboring house set on fire by the rebel Republicans on a midsummer night. The "great fire of retribution" raised by the "freedom fighters" forced all the residents out on the lawn, where they had to witness powerlessly their home consumed in flames and huddled together "speechless and paralysed with horror like shipwrecked survivors on a raft" (215, 216). During the civil war, Mrs. Ashbury continues, hundreds of country houses – regardless of the modest properties or stately homes – were burnt

down across Ireland, for this was believed to be the most effective way of casting out those families "who were identified, rightly or wrongly, with the detested rule of the English" (217). Ireland's hard-won independence barely improved its fate and instead left Irish society divided and embittered for generations. Unable to afford the wages demanded by the laborers, the landowning class struggled with making ends meet by selling their estates, an attempt which, Mrs. Ashbury suggests, was doomed to failure from the start because of the dearth of interested buyers and scant proceeds had a purchaser even appeared. Reflective of the declining economy, the "signs of increasing poverty" started to infiltrate everywhere since the rudimentary upkeep of one's house had become impossible (217). The inhabitants of the deteriorating house, when a sudden collapse occurred, would be obliged to abandon the unusable rooms and retreat further to the relatively livable areas, "till they really had no way out and found themselves forced to the last post, prisoners in their own homes" (218).

Mrs. Ashbury's elegiac remembrance of her experience with the social conflict in Ireland abounds in ambiguities and paradoxes. She admits that she had "not the slightest notion of Ireland's Troubles" when first moving back with her husband and finds that they remain alien to her to this day (214). The whole picture of the civil war and the social milieu in the following decades, an understanding of which she could merely piece together little by little from the curt answers her husband provided, "was never more than a rough sketch" (214). Apart from her reticent husband, Mrs. Ashbury's only other source of information was "the legends about the Troubles, part tragic and part ludicrous, that had formed during the long years of decline in the heads of our servants, whom we had inherited together with the rest of the inventory and who were themselves already part of history" (215). For instance, it was from her butler, Quincey, that she learned about that catastrophic midsummer night. Since the ruins of the destroyed house

were subsequently demolished, she adds, the arson incident "was before my time, and I never saw it" (216). More paradoxically, she mentions it in an afterthought that "to the best of my knowledge, […] people were never harmed by the rebels" (217).

Despite the inconsistencies apparent in her memories, Mrs. Ashbury's unabated perseverance in re-enacting traumatic memories verges on a self-destructive attempt symptomatic of a moral masochism, originating conceivably from her guilt for the role that the landowning class played around the time of "Irish Troubles." Her state of mind, ensnared by harrowing experiences, is not, in a metaphorical manner, unlike that of those landowners stuck in the country, for their livelihood depends solely on the proceeds of their estates, or the inhabitants forced to keep evacuating to the remaining livable areas and become "prisoners in their own homes" (218). Much like the spreading mold and dry rot hastening the decay of the house, Mrs. Ashbury's feeling of guilt (aggravated by reliving the traumatic events) is bound to bring about a fatal mental collapse.

It is worth noting that, prior to Mrs. Ashbury starting to share her memories, the narrator is invited to watch a homemade movie showing "what things used to be like" on their estate: "nowhere was there a sign of neglect. The drive was sanded, the hedges were clipped, the beds in the kitchen garden trim, and the now tumbledown outhouses still well maintained" (213). Opposed to FitzGerald's yearning for the return to a bygone age, Mrs. Ashbury seems hardly affected by the idyllic images of family bliss that would stir nostalgic feelings for many, but rather fixates on her memories steeped in grief and trauma, as if she could purge herself of sin by self-inflicted penance. Trapped in the run-down and unsaleable house, she feels as if the whole family "ha[s] remained tied to it, like damned souls to their place" (219-20). In this light, Mrs. Ashbury and FitzGerald, irrespective of their differences, share a common disposition of having

lost touch with reality. This disconnect arises from a sense of lack, be it a suppressed guilt or a keen sense of frustration with personal ordeal and social degradation. The character's uncontainable obsession with projecting their mind onto a distorted image of the past, the narrator suggests, approximates misremembering and even illusion.

For this reason, although Mrs. Ashbury's story stirs a feeling of sympathy in the narrator, who seems to have been extended "an unspoken invitation to stay there with them and share in a life that was becoming more innocent with every day that passed" (220), he is ready to depart. His response should be read in conjunction with that of the first few nights of his stay with the Ashbury family. While resting on the bed, "[his] consciousness began to dissolve at the edges"; he felt unsure of "how [he] had got there or indeed where [he] was" and felt repeatedly as if he was "lying in a traumatic fever in some kind of field hospital" (210). In his mind's eye, he then saw "a battlefield somewhere in Lombardy over which the vultures circled, and […] a country laid waste by war" (210). Whereas the armies had long since marched on, the swooning narrator was left alone "in a house that had been looted of everything," namely, the Ashbury residence (210). Taking account of his later unwillingness to stay at the house, it becomes palpable that the narrator chooses to disconnect himself from the family that is stranded in eternal misery.

In conclusion, despite having presented a wide variety of instances symptomatic of an altered state of consciousness, Sebald's narrator intends not to uphold that memories can truthfully be revived through dreams, hallucinations, and illusions. Rather, he directs the reader's attention to the porosity and permeability of the boundary between real and unreal, waking and dreaming. For the narrator, it is the generative encounters at the intersection of the two dimensions that waken repressed feelings and hidden memories from his deepest unconscious mind. Such a prospect of transgressing borders between altered states of consciousness in both

directions (toward dream and toward wakefulness) is actualized at the end of chapter 7 as a mode of "floating." In an eerily beautiful fashion, Michael Hamburger's wife, Anne, describes one of her dreams to the narrator before his departure, in which she rode a "large gleaming limousine" passing through "an immense forest" and saw the forest scenery "with absolute clarity and in meticulous detail impossible to put into words, as it slid past outside" (189). Her vivid depiction of various layers of the forest life – from miniature plants staying low to the ground, impenetrable leafage of the evergreens "a few yards up," flowering trees from "the next level of this luxuriant forest realm," and above those, to the tops of swaying palms at "a height the eye could hardly attain" – provides a set of images that synthesize proximity and remoteness, depth and breadth. Such a dream situates the observing subject in a condition of hovering "above the ground" or, as Anne contemplates, a mode of "floating" (190). Approximating the narrator's experience in his dream of the Dunwich maze, where he remains within and beyond the pavilion at once, the act of "floating" crystallized in Anne's dream lends her a vehicle of transit with which she could move freely between ordinary and extraordinary levels of reality.[25]

[25] Perhaps when readers are least prepared, a dramatic twist occurs when Anne concludes her dream by admitting that, as to her experience of "floating" and subsequent view of the forest, "I have only an indistinct notion of how beautiful it all was, […] nor can I properly describe now the feeling of being driven in that limousine that appeared to have no one at the wheel" (190), which makes one wonder who the dreamer (and the storyteller) was. Anne's paradoxical account raises doubt as to the identity of the dreamer (and storyteller), and can be connected to an earlier passage, before Anne tells her dream of the forest: "*I asked her to call a taxi for me*. When she returned from making the call, she said that, as she replaced the receiver, the dream she had had just before she awoke from her afternoon nap came back to her. We were all three in Norwich, she said, and, because Michael still had appointments to keep, *I had ordered a taxi for her*" (189, emphasis mine). That is, the narrator could be the one dreaming about the forest while he was waiting for the taxi that Anne called for him. Therefore, the forest experience indicative of the narrator's ideal mode could solely be created by his will.

## Chapter Seven

## The Verbal-Visual Hybrid

Unlike the first edition of Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain*, which only features several reproduced images of Gao's ink paintings, the reprint edition released in celebration of the 10th anniversary of the writer's Nobel Prize in 2000 incorporates plenty of photographs that Gao had taken on his ten-month journey along the Yangtze River.[1] Set into or placed alongside the written narrative, the added photographs not only serve to complement and reinforce the surrounding text but also contribute to documenting the writer's geographical journey, on which the entire novel is based. *The Rings of Saturn*, which follows Sebald's ambulation through varied physical and intellectual terrains as he undertakes his walking tour of the desolate seaside towns along the southeastern coast of England, is also embellished with black-and-white pictures, taken or found by him along the way. A total of 75 images – paintings, illustrations, and above all, photographs – are meticulously integrated into the dense fabric of the narrative of *Rings* and create an overall strong visual statement that captures the reader's interest. Unlike Gao, Sebald manifested a particular interest in exploring the potentials of visual material from the inception of his writing career and continuously engaged in a variety of formal experiments so that the intertwining of visual material with the verbal discourse constitutes one of the most recognizable features of his oeuvre. Employed and emplotted within the explicatory narrative, images join forces with words

[1] Gao Xingjian, *Lingshan*靈山 (Soul Mountain) (Taipei: Linking Publishing Press, 2010). Notably, the visual material in Gao's novel was added to the text after its completion. On the other hand, the text and the visual material in *Rings* participate as equals in shaping the narrative throughout.

to address the writer's thematic concern with redeeming the disintegrating and disappearing past from the ravages of time.

Sebald's predilection for visual media as a form of expression resides in what may be called its indexical function. According to Charles Sanders Peirce's tripartite semiotic model, there exist three kinds of signs: icon, index, and symbol.[2] The icon refers to the physical resemblance or imitation between the sign and what it represents. The index denotes a relationship of physical, sequential, or spatial contiguity, of cause and effect, like a fingerprint. The connection between the symbol and its referent is arbitrary, for it depends largely on cultural conventions. Accordingly, the images incorporated in a text such as *Rings* appear to authenticate the narrator' claims in his textual discourse. To revisit our discussed episodes, ranging from Rembrandt's painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (c. 1, 14-5 & 16, reproduced in full and as a close-up), to an illustration of Somerleyton Hall's past glory from a contemporary magazine (c. 2, 34), the images placed directly into the typographic text either directly follow, respond to, or illustrate the adjacent narrative. The textual-visual relationship thus proves to be direct and unmediated.

Through a close reading, however, the reader may detect that there is more to Sebald's verbal-visual hybrid than meets the eye. In contrast to the pictures inserted in Gao's *Soul Mountain*, which are all carefully captioned and graphically reproduced, the images in *Rings*, nearly without exception, are uncaptioned and possess a grainy appearance. As Lise Patt remarks, most pictures in Sebald's novel, rather than supplementing our seeing and knowing, seem as if they attempt to "def[y] our ability to enter the picture's center."[3] The veridical,

[2] Charles Sanders Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 102-3.

[3] Lise Patt, "Searching for Sebald: What I know for sure," *Searching for Sebald: Photography after W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lise Patt and Christel Dillbohner (Los Angeles: Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2007), 50.

evidentiary function of images is accordingly undermined due to their damaged, degraded, and manipulated state. Not only that, while images are permitted to enter the process of narrative construction and conveyance of ideas, those reproduced in the novel stand in an uneasy, often ambiguous relationship to the surrounding verbal discourse. Since the visual medium cannot fully validate the textual narrative, the reader may be tasked with considering the underlying cause for such a visual rhetoric, a formal approach that enforces an interpretative distance between the reader and Sebald's image/text. The subsequent discussion seeks to unravel the conundrum concerning the intermedial dynamic which characterizes *Rings*.

I. Images at Large

In *Rings*, chapter 3 stands arguably as the most prominent example that demonstrates Sebald's use of images. Walking from Lowestoft to Southwold, Sebald's narrator mourns the desolate landscape of the coastline caused primarily by the declining fisheries. Ruminating on the cause of the dwindling fish population, the narrator's attention is at first drawn to a grisly sight that testifies to the disastrous consequence of severe chemical pollution: congenital abnormalities that sea creatures suffer. The narrator muses that the genetic damage inflicted on them by environmental deterioration runs counter to "the notion of the wondrous increase and perpetuation of life with which we grew up" (53). Moreover, overfishing on an industrial scale must also be factored into a consideration of herring as a species in danger of extinction. As the narrator recalls, herring was regarded as "the principal emblem […] of the indestructibility of Nature" and herring fishing, as shown in a short film of 1936 which he watched in school, became "a supreme example of mankind's struggle with the power of Nature" (54). In the film, fishermen were struggling heroically against the angry sea and the harvested fish was unloaded, hand-gutted, sorted, and packed. To represent this scene, which, to the narrator's mind,

evidences humankind's abusive domination and exploitation of nature, Sebald includes a reproduced image of what appears to be a still shot from that flickering school film, in which a crowd of men in working uniform stand victoriously among a bountiful haul of herring (fig. 1).

The verbal narrative continues to state that, according to traditional belief, herring would be lifeless the instant they were removed from water after a painful "near-eight-hour process of hauling up and winding in the nets" (56). But against this common perception, certain eye-witness accounts attest to the fact that herring can still remain alive out of water. Fueled by curiosity, an inspector of the Rauen fish market undertakes a series of scientific endeavors – such as "cutting off their fins and mutilating them in other ways" – to investigate the survival potential of this 'indestructible' species (56-7). The narrator deplores that such scientific investigation, "inspired by our thirst for knowledge," borders on mindless cruelty, and represents "the most extreme of the sufferings undergone by a species always threatened by disaster" (57). While some scientists assert that "the peculiar physiology of the fish left them free of the fear and pains that rack the bodies and souls of higher animals in their death throes," the narrator objects to this claim, arguing that "the truth is that we do not know what the herring feels" (57). That is, our lack of knowledge is not equivalent to its lack of feeling. The narrator further develops his argument that the herring's perception and sensation are no less complex than that of those "higher animals" due to its intricate internal structure, which "consists of more than two hundred different bones and cartilages" (57).[4] As if to cement this point, Sebald inserts a line drawing,

[4] Sebald's speculation concerning herring's sentience and its probable cause is similar to a remark by Austerlitz's Great-Uncle Alphonso, a keen naturalist: "there is really no reason to suppose that lesser beings are devoid of sentient life. We are not alone in dreaming at night for, quite apart from dogs and other domestic creatures whose emotions have been bound up with ours for many thousands of years, the smaller mammals such as mice and moles also live in a world that exists only in their minds whilst they are asleep, as we can detect from their eye movements, and who knows, said Austerlitz, perhaps moths dream as well, perhaps a lettuce in the garden dreams as it looks up at the moon by night" (*Austerlitz*, 94). In this light, Austerlitz appeals to a pervasive emotional realm that includes human, animal, even plant.

supposedly of the herring, into the verbal narrative, which seems to have been reproduced from a scientific textbook or an encyclopedia entry (fig. 2). In so doing, Sebald subtly invites readers to imagine the abuse and torture inflicted on the herring and attempts to conjure readerly sympathy for this unfortunate natural species, which has been treated as the subject of experimentation.

Other than being exploited for its economic and scientific value, the body of a herring continues to suffer from insatiable human curiosity even after its death (like Aris Kindt's corpse in Rembrandt's Anatomy Lesson). One of the herring's peculiarities – the fact that its body begins to glow upon its death and that the glow lasts a few days until the fish decays – furthers humankind's perennial quest for light.[5] The enigmatic glowing of the lifeless herring has led to many scientific inquiries for both epistemic and practical reasons. One of those endeavors, as the narrator "read some time ago in a history of artificial light," is that two English scientists around 1870 strove to extract a formula from the luminous substance exuded from dead herring – "an organic source of light" that they believed "had the capacity to regenerate itself" and could be utilized to develop "projects for the total illumination of our cities" (59). Alongside the written account, a picture is provided presumably to illustrate the success of the light-generating project (fig. 3). In the picture, a massive cone of light, above a city street thronged with pedestrians "surging and receding like an ocean wave," bears a striking resemblance to the shape of the herring's back fin (or scale pattern) and, in a figurative sense, alludes to the fish's final offering to humans even in its death.[6]

As discussed above, the visual material that Sebald employs appears to augment the textual narrative as regards the man-made catastrophe being wrought on nature. However,

[5] The perennial quest for light indicated in this episode can be read together with the Somerleyton glasshouse and the all-night illuminated pier buildings by the Lowestoft bank (c. 2).

[6] Lise Patt, "Searching for Sebald," 58.

readers may begin to question this interpretation as they proceed through the text. Returning to the first image in the herring episode, which allegedly visualizes human exploitative fishing practices, readers may be bewildered when confronted with the ensuing verbal account of nature's astonishing fertility. In referencing an 1857 volume on the natural history of the North Sea, the narrator states that the herring's unhindered reproduction would have precipitated a "truly catastrophic glut of herring," when "vast shoals of herring were brought in towards the beaches by the wind and the tides and cast ashore, covering miles of the coast to a depth of two feet and more" (55). Although the local people could salvage only a small portion of herring on the shore, the remainder would rot within days, "affording the terrible sight of Nature suffocating on its own surfeit" (55). At this point, if the reader looks intently at the image, they may discover a caption, "A Morning Catch of Herring, Lowestoft," in the upper left-hand corner of the picture, which may have initially passed unnoticed. This image is thus likely to be a postcard rather than a still shot in the school film that the narrator once watched. The scene of men standing victoriously around an ankle-deep mound of fish no longer emblematizes overfishing but could now be perceived as having captured the moment when untold millions of herring were saved by the local people before their decay.

Contrary to the narrator's previous claim regarding nature's devastation as the symbolic and actual consequence of human intervention, such an alternative reading of the picture, coupled with the verbal discourse that follows, subvert a traditional understanding of nature as a benevolent world devoid of violence.[7] Combined with the fact that herring also fall prey to other

[7] Despite the prevalence of human catastrophes throughout the book, chapter 9 of *Rings* offers a specific example of natural destruction. As the narrator explains, in the aftermath of a hurricane "everything was turned upside down" (268). The "snowdrops, violets and wood anemones, ferns and cushions of moss," which once covered the forest floor, yield to huge mounds of "barren clay" after having been propelled upward from deep within the earth by the huge trees as they toppled. "All that grew in the hard-baked earth were tufts of swamp grass, the seeds of which had lain in the depths for goodness knew how long" (268). This scene, which uncovers nature's own 'sinister' side, raises doubts as to the extent of human accountability in natural destruction. Moreover, in line with nature's own

natural predators (such as dogfish or cod), as the text further relates, the natural historian's assumption that "humanity was responsible for only a fraction of the endless destruction wrought in the cycle of life" seems to be valid within this context (57). Accordingly, the narrator's preceding critique of humanity's unchecked exploitation of natural resources is tempered by a characterization of nature that can both produce and be consumed by itself. Perhaps humans, despite their penchant for overfishing, are no more or less culpable than other factors for the demise of the natural environment.

The second image in this sequence – a line drawing of the herring – turns out to be equally problematic. This picture is inserted directly after the narrator's characterization of the herring's "extremely intricate" body composition and follows a reference to the fish's sensitivity to fear and pain like that of "higher animals" (57). And yet, the image shows none of the herring's internal structure, allegedly consisting of "more than two hundred different bones and cartilages," but simply its external appearance, which is so ordinary that it somehow contradicts the narrator's tone (57). In this sense, this picture can be seen as demonstrating a scientific failure to probe into the herring's internal intricacy. After a moment's hesitation, the reader, upon turning the page, encounters a written account describing some of the herring's external features, which include a "powerful tail fin, the narrow head, the slightly prominent lower mandible" (58). The reader would be more perplexed had they returned to the picture to verify this description, since the species represented in the line drawing possesses a retracted lower

operating system, death and decay lay the world open to annihilation and simultaneously foster opportunities for self-renewal. Greg Bond in his article advises against regarding nature as symbolizing a benign and harmless world, remarking that "There is no alleviation to be found in nature, as the ideological view is discounted." See Greg Bond, "On the misery of nature and the nature of misery: W. G. Sebald's landscapes," in *W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, ed. J. J. Long and Anne Whitehead (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 39.

mandible, as opposed to a prominent one.[8] As such, one may speculate that the image delineates the specificity of a different species of fish.

The "mistake" that Sebald introduces with the image under discussion suggests that the herring's internal structure evades both human perception and knowledge. In fact, the narrator points out earlier in his text that fishermen experience errors as they encounter difficulties in ascertaining the herring's migratory routes. Although the varied light, prevailing winds, geomagnetic fields, or the shifting marine isotherms may have influenced the herring's wanderings, "none of these speculations has proved verifiable" (55). For this reason, fishermen can only rely on "their traditional knowledge, which draws upon legend, and […] their own observation of facts such as the tendency of the fish, swimming in even, wedge-shaped formations, to reflect a pulsating glow skyward when the sunlight falls at a particular angle" (55). Considering that human knowledge of a natural species is based on contingent encounters and inherited ideas which have been shaped by long stretches of time, errors, gaps, and misconceptions cannot be ruled out. In this light, the narrator's earlier remark that "the truth is that we do not know what the herring feels," as he takes issue with some natural historians' self-consolation that herring's peculiar physiology would spare them the feeling of pain, can now be taken as alerting the reader not to project human emotions, thoughts, and experiences onto another creature, although such projection may be well-intentioned. With respect to the herring's perceptual abilities, the narrator suggests that non-human experiences should not be defined in relation to an exclusive human position. Otherwise, the complexity of the natural world would have largely been reduced and seen through an anthropocentric lens.

[8] David Anderson notes in his book that this image in fact represents a red herring. The red herring, originally referring to a trick used to mislead others, now indicates something misleading or a fallacy. See David Anderson, *Landscape and Subjectivity in the Work of Patrick Keiller, W. G. Sebald, and Iain Sinclair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 160.

Given its proximity to the first two images, the third image in this series is likewise threatened by an interpretative collapse. On the page following the third image, the reader encounters a paragraph which declares the eventual collapse of the scientific project that seeks to harness the herring's self-powered luminosity. "The failure of this eccentric undertaking," the narrator continues, "constituted no more than a negligible setback in the relentless conquest of darkness" (59).[9] Upon reading this sentence, the reader may return to the preceding picture (fig. 3) – which they assumed depicts the accomplished project – and find that, in contrast with the immense cone of light that occupies the upper portion of the indistinct image, several towering street lamps appear to offer a considerable level of brightness to the thronging pedestrians on the city street.[10] From this perspective, the included picture no longer refers to mankind's conquest and exploitation of the herring but perhaps to the scientific discovery of the luminous material obtained from other non-human forms of life – for instance, phosphorescence, whose luminescent property had become generally known at the time.

Like humanity's incapability to ascertain the herring's migratory routes and perceptual experiences, the thwarted attempt at harnessing natural luminosity from the fish's dead body

[9] A Sebaldian turn of phrase occurs in the apt names of the two English scientists, "Herrington and Lightbown," that exhibit signs of a playful fabrication. The fictional nature of this anecdote proves to be more explicit in the German text. The English text reads: "Around 1870, […] two English scientists with the apt names of Herrington and Lightbown investigated the unusual phenomenon […]" (*RS*, 58-9). The German text reads: „Um 1870, […] *sollen* zwei englische Wissenschaftler rnit den seltsamerweise zu ihren Forschungen passenden Namen Herrington und Lightbown das absonderliche Naturphänomen untersucht haben […]" (Sebald, *Ringe*, 78, emphasis mine). The English translation omits "supposedly" (sollen), which in German signals a reproduction of indirect speech. "Sollen" could be translated as "it seems that," thus indicating the anecdote's fictional nature.

[10] In Grant Gee's film, *Patience (After Sebald): A Walk through The Rings of Saturn*, Lise Patt points to the fact that the reproduced picture represents the Boulevard des Italiens in Paris and is selected from Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Angela Davies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 117. Schivelbusch describes one of the outlandish chapters in humanity's "history of artificial light" that occurs during the transition (late 19th century) from gas to electric lighting in European cities. Working like a "small sun," the light that the arc-light cast "had a spectrum similar to that of daylight" (Schivelbusch, 118). The problem is that this "artificial sun" turns out to be so dazzling that it needs to be placed out of the direct field of vision (ideally high up, such as on large towers), so that, not only is the glare cut out, but a larger area is illuminated.

likewise reveals certain lacunae in our knowledge about this creature. This inexplicability with regard to the mechanism of the herring's bioluminescence can be read together with an earlier paragraph which describes how humans often marvel at the herring's striking external features: "The herring's dorsal area is of a bluish-green colour. The individual scales on its flanks and belly shimmer a golden orange, but taken together they present a metallic, pure white gleam. Held against the light, the rearward parts of the fish appear a dark green of a beauty one sees nowhere else" (58).[11] This sense of valuing an unfathomable, but expressive, specificity in the bodily coloration of the herring when alive is carried over into people's curiosity about its color change upon expiring ("Its back turns blue, the cheeks and gills red, suffused with blood"), as well as the emission of an idiosyncratic "glow" from its lifeless body, which in turn promotes scientific inquiries into the luminescence that the herring may have produced (58). It can be argued that, whether accounted for phenomenologically or scientifically, the herring's peculiar illuminating property inspires wonderment in humans. And yet, it keeps posing a challenge to our perceptual and intellectual capacities, and "still remains unexplained" (58).

In the instances discussed above, it becomes evident that every image in this sequence can be unbound from an expected reading which hinges on the spatial proximity of word and image, and can interact with the textual discourse in more ways than one. Importantly, this freedom to meander through Sebald's narrative is encouraged by his placement of the verbal and visual media. To reread the herring episode: assuming a linear structure within the text, the reader would gradually establish an expectation for the ensuing argument. When faced with the

[11] This sense of appreciating an unfathomable specificity appears elsewhere in *Rings*. For instance, Thomas Abrams remarks on the company of ducks: "I have always kept ducks, […] even as a child, and the colours of their plumage, in particular the dark green and snow white, seemed to me the only possible answer to the questions that are on my mind" (c. 9, 248). In Anne Hamburger's dream, "at a height the eye could hardly attain, the tops of palms swayed to and fro, their delicate, feathery, fan-shaped fronds of that unfathomable green" (c. 7, 190).

visual media, they would naturally adapt their understanding to the text that preceded it, while sometimes experiencing difficulties due to the blurry appearance and uncaptioned state of the reproduced image. Although an association could tenuously be established, readers would likely be surprised by the ensuing idea which deviates from, or directly conflicts with, the narrator's previous assumption. In a state of hermeneutic vertigo, readers finally realize that the image's meaning is altered through conversing with the newly emerged text(s). In a nutshell, contrary to traditional expectation, the structure of Sebald's image/text allows an image to frequently break from its surrounding text, which normally predicates how the image is read, and to acquire its meaning from multiple entry points into the textual narrative.

One may pose the following question: what is Sebald's intent behind formulating an unusual topographical layout such that the visual material maintains an ambiguous relationship to the textual discourse? As Silke Horstkotte puts it, unlike words, the image "doesn't contain any before or after, and […] necessarily interrupts the sequentiality both of the act of narration, and of its reception in acts of reading."[12] That is, the emergence of an image interrupts the linear chain of the text and throws the narrative out of its prescribed time, or into a different time, until a new layer of meaning can be generated.[13] Caught between two temporalities –"homogeneous" time versus "heterogeneous" time (i.e., the scientific or measured time versus the lived experience of time) – the reader still progresses from the book's beginning to its end, but the continuum between these two points is indefinitely remastered and extended. Since the image works in an extra-temporal manner within Sebald's intermedial dynamic, its reference to the associated text is deconstructed. Adrift in an indeterminate zone, the image can reconstruct its

[12] Silke Horstkotte, "Visual Memory and Ekphrasis in W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*," *English Language Notes*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2006), 127.

[13] Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 2013), 126 & 78.

relation to the narrative through communication with the text – at various junctures and to varying degrees – and generate varied interpretations that are unnecessarily compatible with a teleological comprehension.

In such a visual-verbal transaction, the image operates in a similar manner to the "reflexive reference," a term coined by Joseph Frank as he analyzes those literary works (e.g., James Joyce's *Ulysses*) intended to be apprehended "spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence." In their reading process, the reader is compelled to be "continually fitting fragments together and keeping allusions in mind until […] link[ing] them to their complements."[14] Likewise, in reading Sebald's image/text, the reader who views a picture is encouraged to interact with their object of inquiry as an associative node rather than as an entity that simply indicates a textual referent at a specific point in time. While some visual components cannot be fully understood as textual events sequentially unfold, the visual media can be recuperated and re-enter the meaning construction in contact with other narrative elements, whether textual or visual. In this light, Sebald's image/text not only emerges as a platform on which the reader can choose to follow different paths but also provokes them into creating a composite network, where heterogeneous components in the narrative – be they textual or visual – can be integrated into a meaningful whole.

Similar to the narrator's awareness of the barrier between empirical facts and true knowledge with respect to another natural species' internal structure, external appearance, perceptual abilities, and emotional experience, Sebald seeks to reiterate his skepticism toward dominant forms of literary historiography, which he finds epistemologically, aesthetically, and ethically insufficient. These problems, involved as they are in historical representation, prompt

[14] Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature: An Essay in Two Parts," *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (1945), 225 & 234.

Sebald to exploit the generative potential of visual material in order to open up new vistas, expand resources, and create new insights into the truth of the irretrievable past. Accordingly, the three images in the herring sequence – apropos the narrator's coastal walk south of Lowestoft – can be expanded from a single account of human aggression and profiteering of the North Sea herring (whether commercially, scientifically, or aesthetically), into a broad spectrum of catastrophes that fit into Sebald's wider scheme of decay and destruction throughout history. Respectively, these images can correlate with a section of natural history of the North Sea where the herring suffers nature's formidable force (fig. 1), an entry in the encyclopedia of fish physiology that indicates the invasive experiments inflicted on a species of fish (fig. 2), and a chapter of the history of artificial light during which other natural creatures were sacrificed to satisfy the human desire to penetrate darkness (fig. 3). Crucially, the alternative reading of an image does not subtract from or subvert the common understanding but guides the reader's attention to the tenuous associations yielded as the purpose of image is mystified by its non-correspondence with the words. Like the dim glow supposedly afforded by the expiring herring, Sebald's particular mode of historical inquiry aims to cast a gentle rather than a glaring light over its subjects, which, though sometimes risking being overlooked, can maintain a kind of "darkness, into which thought can withdraw."[15]

II. Photographs as Specters

Having left the North Sea beach, the narrator reaches a stone manor near the Benacre Broad lake, which was previously owned by a Major George Wyndham Le Strange. Le Strange served in the anti-tank regiment that liberated the concentration camp at Bergen Belsen on April 14, 1945, and returned to Britain to manage his family estate after the war. According to the

[15] Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night*, 134.

news article from the *Eastern Daily Press*, which Sebald reproduces and has his narrator repeat verbatim in the verbal account (fig. 4), Le Strange married his housekeeper, Florence Barnes. He left his entire fortune to Barnes upon his death, on the explicit condition that she dines with him "in absolute silence" for he was unable to process memories of what he had witnessed upon arriving at the concentration camp (62). Aptly indicated by his name, Le Strange manifested eccentric behavior in his postwar years, which is likely symptomatic of a post-traumatic stress disorder in reaction to his mind-crippling experience of war. The narrator learns that Le Strange discharged his household staff and laborers in the 1950s, left his estate overgrown and neglected, and withdrew gradually from all social contacts into such a state of solitude that he once dug a cave in his garden and "sat in it day and night like St Jerome in the desert" (62, 64). Local legend tells that Le Strange would dress in preposterous garments from bygone times and developed a fondness for "all manner of feathered creatures," so much so that upon his death his appearance even resembled that of his winged friends (skin olive-green, eyes pitch-dark, and hair raven-black) (64).

Nevertheless, in concluding his thoughts on Le Strange's odd appearance upon his death, the narrator comments that "[t]o this day I do not know what to make of such stories" (64). In fact, in the course of his narrative, the narrator has hinted at the unreliability of the stories that circulated in the village concerning Le Strange, as they drew on "the little that reached the outside world over the years, rumours from the depths of the estate that occupied the people who lived in the immediate vicinity" (62). These stories are reduced to hearsay "to which one can lend only a limited credence" (62). More unsettlingly, it turns out that while the *Eastern Daily Press* is a real publication, it has no record of the clipping that Sebald provides.[16] Both Le

[16] Adrian Daub, "Donner à Voir: The Logics of the Caption in W. G. Sebald's *Rings of Saturn* and Alexander Kluge's *Devil's Blind Spot*," *Searching for Sebald*, 322.

Strange and Florence Barnes are therefore most certainly fictional characters crafted by the author, and Le Strange's biographical account reported in the news archive is likely an invented story. As untrustworthy as those local anecdotes are, the story reveals very little of the historical subject – that is, the inhumane atrocities committed by the Nazis and the unspeakable pain and suffering inflicted on the victims of the Holocaust.

In line with Le Strange's silence – which suggests language's failure to formulate an appropriate response to the ghastly sight that Allied troops witnessed upon entering the concentration camp – Sebald expresses his discontent with language as a medium of art, stating that "[l]iterature today, left solely to its own devices, […] is no longer able to discover the truth."[17] His view is predicated on the fact that language is fictional by nature due to the arbitrary relation of the referent to the world and is, as Roland Barthes notes, "not […] able to authenticate itself."[18] Sebald's awareness of language's limits informs his decision to incorporate photographs in his works as a reliable form of historical representation, given photography's testimonial quality of "that-has-been."[19] According to the basic principle of photography, when the camera captures the reflection of light at a certain time and place, indexical traces of the photographed people and object are undeniably preserved. In this light, the photograph would strike the viewer with the most immediate effect of realism, by which the past can be seen "as certain as the present, [and] what we see on paper is as certain as what we touch."[20]

In *Rings*, Sebald is apparently inclined to treat photographs as authentic, documentary, and indexical forms of witnessing. All of the photographs inserted in the episodes discussed here

[17] W. G. Sebald, *Campo Santo*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2005), 108.
[18] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 85.
[19] Ibid., 77.
[20] Ibid., 88.

– whether they portray Roger Casement's final arrest and the entry in his notorious "black diary" (c. 5, 130, 132-33); Michael Hamburger's study, which is suggestive of his burdened past (c. 7, 183, 184); or Edward FitzGerald's desolate graveyard, ocean-going yacht, and his portrait (c. 8, 196, 203, 206) – provide an illustration of "an emanation of past reality."[21] The most exemplary case in this respect occurs in the latter half of chapter 3. Precisely between the verbal account of Le Strange's participation in liberating the Bergen Belsen concentration camp and that of his postwar life following his return to Britain, the reader is confronted with a double-page photograph that appears to show mounds of human corpses shrouded in tarps in a woodland (fig. 5). Despite the absence of direct explication or commentary, this inserted photograph functions to fill a vacuum in postwar witnessing by standing in for the utter failure of words in depicting Nazi crimes. As "a certificate of presence" of a past state,[22] this post-liberation photograph not only offers an overall depiction of the mass atrocity but can also effect the viewer's sentiment to "crystallize" around it.[23] As such, it can be affirmed that the most effective manner to remember historical trauma is "not to recall a story but to be able to call up a picture."[24]

Nonetheless, were the viewer to conduct cursory research on the historical background of this visual document, they would soon discover that Sebald removed the name of its creator, the British photographer George Rodger, and did not acknowledge the circumstance under which this image came to exist. This uncaptioned photograph, aside from being placed alongside Le Strange's brief biography, bears at best a tangential relation to the surrounding text and seems to drift in an indeterminate zone. As the indexical function of the photograph threatens to collapse, "[w]e know that what the picture shows has been, but we don't know 'what [...] it is that has

[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., 87.
[23] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2004), 80.
[24] Ibid., 76.

been."[25] That is to say, the photograph as a visual document still performs a role of witnessing, but the lack of its authorship, condition, date, origin, and provenance inevitably "introduce[s] a refractive element into the novel's ostensible 'reality.'"[26]

The utter absence of the picture's provenance, which seems to evidence Sebald's negligence at first glance, suggests his intent that viewers shall give greater prominence to the more immediate visual totality of the image – however partial that is – and deprioritize the photograph's credits (photographer, location, etc.). With respect to this picture ostensibly of the Bergen Belsen camp, the reason for Sebald to "unhinge" it from the image's real object may reside in his serious concern that other concentration camps, such as the Birkenau camp, "have not been similarly transplanted" onto the photographic medium.[27] By lending a relative instability to the picture's evidentiary status, Sebald tasks viewers to reconsider the predominance of very few images from the Holocaust archive, which have been repeated in the course of circulation, dissemination, and iconization so often that they have come to stand in for the vastness of atrocities committed by Nazi perpetrators at the concentration camps. Had the viewer developed their understanding of history solely on a limited amount of "exemplary" photographs, a broader spectrum of harrowing experiences that Holocaust victims underwent would be at the brink of vanishing forever from their consciousnesses and consciences.

Moreover, Sebald's deployment of such a blurred photograph may prompt a vigilant reader to wonder: among the many photographs taken on or around the day Allied forces liberated Bergen Belsen, why did Sebald choose this specific picture to introduce the most

[25] Majorie Perloff, "What Has Occurred Only Once: Barthes's Winter Garden / Boltanski's Archives of the Dead," *Writing the Image after Roland Barthes*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 36.
[26] Daub, "Donner à Voir," *Searching for Sebald*, 318.
[27] Ibid., 324.

traumatic aspect of WWII history? In comparison to most visual representations of wartime violence, where the grisly pictorial component of dead bodies frequently occupies the center stage, this image features several soaring trees at the forefront, which appear to be so large as to dominate two thirds of the picture and nearly block the viewer's gaze. Notably, such an aesthetic appearance and visual impact depends upon the manner in which Sebald controls the image's composition – in this case, how he crops the photograph to obtain his intended framing.[28] Because of Sebald's photo-editing style, the human corpses in the picture can easily be perceived as unidentifiable mounds on the ground had the viewer not scrutinized the picture. One may say that this photograph allows the viewer "to *enter* a site"; and yet, this invitation to enter is fused with "an aura of *exclusion*" (emphasis original).[29] Acknowledging the viewer's desire to see but unable to fully accommodate their perspective, this photograph stands less as a medium to replicate "the intractable" of the Holocaust than as a visual symbol of the very incompleteness of our knowledge about it.

Although the photograph under discussion delivers the pessimistic message that the objective of our memory is bound to be thwarted, the "particular dynamic" it possesses,[30] quite paradoxically, provides the means to address such a concern. To reconsider the "aura of *exclusion*" that inheres in this picture: on the one hand, it excludes the viewer from accessing the center of the picture on which they would otherwise focus their attention; on the other hand, it

[28] Given that the manner of cropping affects the photograph's aesthetic appearance and visual impact, Daub lays out in his essay different crops of this photograph in four editions of *Rings*: the original German-language edition by Andere Bibliothek (1995), a later German-language edition by Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag (1997), the English-language edition by Harvill (1998), and the American-language edition by New Directions (1998). See Daub, "Donner à Voir," *Searching for Sebald*, 320-1. Compared to the German original, in the English edition the visual portion of human legs in the foreground (the most discernible ones) are cropped out of the frame. Also, the visual impact of the forest canopy is enhanced.

[29] Ulrich Baer, "To Give Memory a Place: Holocaust Photography and the Landscape Tradition," *Representations*, No. 69 (Winter, 2000), 41.

[30] Daub, "Donner à Voir," *Searching for Sebald*, 322.

elicits their searching gaze, along the lines of extended branches and limbs, toward marginal portions of the image and even what could possibly lie outside its frame – for one, the military photographer of the Allied troops who was present to take the picture.[31] The viewer may be tempted to speculate: Who else besides the liberators shared the same perspective? Were the camp prisoners not murdered by the Nazi perpetrators? Once the killing was completed, were the victims' corpses not carried, or dragged, piled haphazardly on the ground, and unavoidably looked at by the German guards? Bearing in mind the visual limit marked by the frame, photographs prove highly problematic in showing remnants of mass killing as they, almost without exception, fail to frame the perpetrators who were present to commit the crime. If criminals are distanced from their actual acts of murder as such, the level of violence that the photograph intends to accentuate would have been grotesquely downplayed. In a nutshell, it is the very incompleteness of the picture, due to Sebald's particular manner of editing, that challenges the viewer to look away from the center of the picture and toward what is beyond the frame – the circumstance that preconditions this site of horror but is precluded from the picture.[32]

In addition, were the viewer to move their eye downward from the center to the lower left, this picture would prick them with an unnamable "detail" that speaks to the specificity of that unimaginable pain and suffering: below the tree branches lie what appears to be the legs of

[31] As Kracauer states, "[a] photograph, whether portrait or action picture, is in character only if it precludes the notion of completeness. Its frame marks a provisional limit; its content refers to other contents outside that frame; and its structure denotes something that cannot be encompassed – physical existence." See Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 19-20.

[32] Sebald's selection and treatment of the post-liberation photograph can be read in connection with the two photographs that depict Michael Hamburger's study (c. 7). Admittedly, the inserted photographs corroborate the effect of realism – that Hamburger was not a fictional character and that the narrator visited his house. However, the particular manner of cropping in those photographs reminds the reader of what has been left out of the frame. The first photograph (fig. 10), which seems as if it was cropped from a larger picture, provides a limited view of his study: the window takes up two thirds of the picture while the writing desk and chair only occupy the bottom portion. Piles of material on his desk likely symbolize the heaviness of the past that weighs on him and the difficulties with his writing, as he admits to the narrator. In the second photograph (fig. 11), although the stacked books in the foreground suggest his burdened memory, a half-open door leading to another room, due to which the inside of the room is rendered largely invisible, also reinforces the elusive sense of Hamburger's past.

emaciated (and possibly decomposing) human corpses, which were frozen in unnatural positions. Such a penetrative feeling, a kind of "optical trauma," is termed by Barthes as the *punctum.*[33] For Barthes, however much actuality a photograph seems to promise, the unbridgeable gap between the there-and-then and the here-and-now precludes any possible dialogue between two disparate temporalities. Hence, photographs approximate the aesthetic effect of a "flat death."[34] To initiate "the return of the dead,"[35] Barthes stresses the significance of the *punctum* which, as opposed to the *studium* (those qualities which are historically, socially, and culturally assigned to the photograph in advance), enacts a language-denying moment of visual contact with the photographed subject. This *punctum* can trigger an emotional response in the viewer. In such a manner, the visual component of skeletal human legs as shown in this photograph "wounds" and overwhelms the viewer. They are compelled to imagine the pain and suffering of Holocaust victims and realize the level of barbarity human beings are capable of reaching.

Whereas the visual element of human legs in the picture of the liberated camp may produce an emotional laceration (the *punctum*) in the viewer, the deliberately degraded quality of this Holocaust document seems to enforce a separation between the photographed subject and the viewer. Contrary to images presented to the viewer with the greatest clarity possible, the one Sebald selects is severely blurred, perhaps as a result of poor reproduction.[36] Specifically, the human corpses covered in tarps are minimally legible (in low contrast and with no detail) so that

[33] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27.
[34] Ibid., 92.
[35] Ibid., 9.
[36] Sebald was known for his particular process of reproducing pictures. Christopher Woodward, one of the interviewees in the documentary film *Patience (After Sebald)*, mentions that Sebald would repeatedly "photocopy and re-photocopy" photographs of colors "until they had that black smudgy grainy look." *Patience (After Sebald)*, directed by Grant Gee (New York: Cinema Guild / Spark, 2012), 16:16-16:26. Eric Homburger also remembers that Sebald was "an exacting customer at the University of East Anglia copy shop, discussing what might be done with his images, adjusting the size and contrast." "W. G. Sebald." *Guardian*, Dec. 17, 2001. https://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/dec/17/guardianobituaries.books1

those heaps of matter on the ground are no longer "like" what the photograph refers to in reality (i.e., remains of the unburied dead) but instead are "unlike" them. From a certain angle, the corpses even look more like small dirt mounds strewn throughout the woodland. For a hasty viewer, this after-image of a horrific crime could even potentially be perceived as depicting a forest landscape of pastoral calm. One may pose the following question: given that Sebald relies on photography to resurrect lost lives and recover forgotten memories, what would be his purpose of providing the viewer with an intentionally altered photograph that complicates what is shown in it?

It must be noted that the reason for Sebald to undo the "likeness" of this photograph is not at all to diminish the unspeakable agony that the Holocaust victims underwent or to mitigate "the shock, the mystery, and the sheer incomprehensibility" as the eyewitness confronts the aftermath of mass violence.[37] Rather, he attempts to alert viewers to the visual trap posed by the "likeness" of an image, which viewers might confuse with the real pastness of the photographed subject. By making the photographs "unlike" (or less "like") what they actually represent, Sebald seeks to exert an "estranging" or "defamiliarizing" effect upon the viewer who, in a moment of disorientation, is compelled to return to the scene of the crime for another look, so as to gain a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the image. To re-examine the above photograph that depicts wartime violence: as the viewer disbelieves what appears initially to be a forest landscape and confronts the horrendous scene again, they are likely to be struck this time by an unsettling contrast between the liveliness of nature – particularly those thriving trees soaring almost to the sky – and the lifelessness of the human corpses dumped and splayed out like trash on the ground. In the presence of the simultaneity of a pastoral landscape and the

[37] Daub, "Donner à Voir," *Searching for Sebald,* 324.

aftermath of a horrific crime, the visual content of human corpses signifies not only the final moment of the victims' life but, more emphatically, how their liveliness was slowly and painfully lost, until the dying individuals took their final breath (causes of death include, to name a few, starvation, disease, exposure, and the effects of physical torture). As stated above, it is exactly the quality of "unlikeness" unique to this photograph that returns the viewer to the site of disaster and, with each individual viewing, reopens the path for them to engage in the rediscovery and restoration of the traumatizing experience of those vanished lives. This ambiguous image, on the one hand, possesses the effect of the Barthesian (traumatic) *punctum*; on the other hand, it goes beyond that, for it haunts the viewer like a "post-traumatic" mark, a "scar" which does not heal over and "refuses to keep secret" an assault that the body suffers.[38]

To recapitulate the previous discussion, it is unmistakable that the limitation of language propels Sebald to add photographs – an allegedly objective and unmediated form of representation – to his narrative in the pursuit of a documentary-like veracity. However, Sebald is equally aware of the fact that the photograph has "long since eroded" due to the ever-increasing temporal distance between the creator and the viewer.[39] As the photograph traverses time, its evidentiary potential is bound to be undermined, despite the common conception that the photograph can inimitably retain the "that-has-been." Since the photograph as a visual device is not unconditionally of greater truth-value than its verbal counterpart, both image and language, in their respective ways, fall short of Sebald's effort of salvaging memories from the passage of time. In view of this fact, the post-liberation photograph of the Bergen Belsen camp included in

[38] Patt, "Searching for Sebald," *Searching for Sebald*, 51.

[39] M.[ax] S.[ebald] (W. G. Sebald), "Review of Franz Hubmann, Dream of Empire: The World of Germany in Original Photographs 1840-1914," *Journal of European Studies*, Vol. 3 (1973), 286, quoted in Clive Scott, "Sebald's Photographic Annotations," *Saturn's Moons: W. G. Sebald: A Handbook*, eds. Jo Catling and Richard Hibbitt (London: Legenda, 2011), 221.

*Rings* does not only bear unequivocal testimony to the Holocaust, but it also demonstrates a frustrated attempt to reveal the full and unvarnished reality.

In an effort to address the issue that the visual document serves not as a mimetic version of reality, but only as a constant reminder of the inaccuracies and inadequacies of our memory, Sebald adopts a number of techniques as he presents photographs in his text to challenge and destabilize any hackneyed interpretation of them. In a certain way, reductive interpretations of trauma would inflict the final indignity of false memories or total forgetfulness of victims. Equally if not more important is the fact that Sebald is guided at all times by a wish not to trespass on experience itself but instead "let the picture of the corpses, obviously only a partial, even miniscule view of the full horror, speak for itself."[40] As already stated, whether he removes it from the original context to maintain its anonymity, rearranges its compositional layout to induce a change of focus, or reproduces the picture to gain a high level of unclarity, Sebald seeks not to effect a complete understanding in the viewer's mind but rather produce an open-endedness by turning the viewer's searching eye toward the unfamiliar and the marginal and so investing their reading experience with a desire to test, prod, and cross a limit. Although this photograph of the liberated concentration camp at Bergen Belsen initially appears as a representational failure of the Holocaust (and is occasionally seen as an attempt at desacralization of the victims), it is through this epistemological indeterminacy unique to Sebald's aesthetic gesture that we are empowered to confront the most powerful areas of inquiry within histories that demand to be addressed.[41]

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[40] McCulloh, *Understanding W. G. Sebald*., 65.

[41] In *Rings*, another genocide under Sebald's scrutiny is the systematic persecution of Serbs, which was committed by the Croatian militia in complicity with the German Nazis during WWII. Similar to the episode concerning the Holocaust (c. 3), this episode also comprises a verb-visual accumulation. As the verbal account depicts the ghoulish methods that Croatian soldiers designed to expediate mass killings, such as "a kind of rudimentary cross-bar gallows" on which the victims "once rounded up, were hanged in rows like crows or magpies," Sebald incorporates a photograph to attest to the said atrocity (fig. 12). However, the picture appears to be

III. The Visual "Echospace"[42]

It is interesting that this black-and-white photograph taken at the Bergen Belsen concentration camp during WWII, which presents to the viewer a mass of corpses beneath tarps under a forest canopy, receives a striking visual echo in the same chapter – the image embedded in the herring episode that shows a group of fishermen parading their herring harvest (fig. 5, 1). Aside from the common lack of visual clarity, both pictures share a similar color contrast and compositional arrangement. To be specific, the dead bodies (human corpses and caught herring) are rendered as light elements and horizontally placed at the bottom of the image; in contrast, the living beings (trees and fishermen) are presented as dark elements and vertically positioned across the middle of the frame. Whereas Sebald's narrator refrains from spelling out the correlation between the herring fishery in the North Sea and the Nazi genocide in the concentration camp,[43] the visual correspondence of the two images allows the seemingly

so severely blurred that it becomes impossible to identify whether the objects hung vertically from the gallows are human victims or birds. Such an indistinction prompts the viewer to reflect on how the genocide as a premeditated and systematic violence comes to resemble an everyday routine. Moreover, the Croatian perpetuators described in the verbal narrative as "in the best of spirits" or "striking heroic poses" in the process of killing are also absent from the photograph. In order to stress the consequence of overlooking the perpetrator's presence (and criminal deeds), Sebald digresses to tell of the Kozara campaign against Tito's partisans, which caused thousands of people to die of execution, forced labor, and mass deportation (1942). A Wehrmacht officer, Kurt Waldheim, who administered the "resettlements" of the period, not only managed to conceal his past as an accomplice to murder and torture but also rose to the highest position in the postwar years as Secretary General of the United Nations – ironically, the bureaucracy of the world peacekeeping body dedicated to the ideals of human rights. He was even chosen to greet extraterrestrials on behalf of all humanity in a tape-recorded message, "together with other memorabilia of mankind, approaching the outer limits of our solar system aboard the space probe Voyager II" (99).

[42] Patt, "Searching for Sebald," 57.

[43] In fact, Sebald was explicitly aware of the commonality between the victimized animals and humans. In an interview with Silverblatt, Sebald mentioned that Virginia Woolf's description of a dying moth certainly gives an impression of the soldier who fought in the trenches of WWI. See Michael Silverblatt, "A Poem of an Invisible Subject," *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 80-1.

disparate events of destruction to constellate due to their shared significance of mass annihilation.[44]

The semiotic connection between the two images can be further corroborated by other images in the herring episode. Flipping pages back and forth, the reader would soon discover that the line drawing of a herring (fig. 2), which manifests how the fish suffers torture and mutilation to serve scientific experimentation, and the illustration of an illumination project (fig. 3), which would have been impossible without a self-powered light source converted from the extracts that scientists draw from the dead herring, can scarcely maintain their innocence in this "echospace." Both images suggest how a community of people, such as Jews, is targeted by – and inescapably exposed to – the regulation, surveillance, or persecution of Nazi regime whose agenda, in a sense, bases itself on an immoderate pursuit of instrumental rationality (ironically, one of the legacies of the Enlightenment establishment).[45] The three images in the herring episode, coupled with textual discussion of the herring fishery, gather momentum until they culminate in the astonishing finale – the systematic genocide – in the post-liberation photograph, which pays tribute to the catastrophic "pile of debris" that "grows skyward" in front of Benjamin's "Angel of History."[46] By creating such a sequence of "visually rhyming" images,[47] Sebald not only uncovers the commonality of the seemingly unrelated events of herring fishery and Nazi

[44] Notably, the textual correspondence of the discussed images adds more weight to the startling analogy between the herring and Jews. For instance, the annual amount of the herring catch estimated to have been "sixty billion" seems to replay the number of the Jews killed in WWII, approximately "six million." Also, after having been hand-gutted, sorted, and packed, the "restless wanderer of the seas" (the caught herring) will be transported by the railway goods wagons to "those places where its fate on this earth will at last be fulfilled" (54). Besides the fact that the Jews are historically known for their "wandering," the reference to railway wagons reminds the reader of the Jews having been transported by trains to concentration camps. Further, the cruel experiments that the herring suffer alludes to some of the most horrific experiments conducted by the Nazis on the concentration camp prisoners.

[45] Patt, "Searching for Sebald," *Searching for Sebald*, 57.

[46] Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 249.

[47] Crownshaw, *The Afterlife of Holocaust Memory*, 54.

genocide,[48] but, more importantly, fulfils his "ethical commitment to the victims of history" to the greatest extent possible by "mak[ing] "such an aching appeal to the viewer to witness the incomprehensible workings of trauma."[49]

The two kinds of mass killing gain a startling comparability founded on their visual resemblance. Nonetheless, this comparison turns out to be less comforting than troubling for Sebald's narrator. On his walk to Benacre Broad, near which stands Le Strange's manor home, the narrator claims that "I had long left the beach fishermen behind me" (59). As he proceeds to meditate on the surrounding landscape of the lake – a woodland dying "owing to the steady erosion of the coastline by the sea" – the narrator begins to believe that nature is most likely destined to its own destruction. Following this line of thought, he feels as if the world around him were "under a bell jar, until great cumulus clouds brewed up out of the west casting a grey shadow upon the earth" (59).

The sudden emergence of "great cumulus clouds" turns the sky dark and, concurrently, allows the narrator's thought to take a speculative leap. He states that, "[p]erhaps it was that darkening that called to my mind an article I had clipped from the Eastern Daily Press several

[48] Sebald's narrator reinforces the connection between the herring fishing and the Holocaust by introducing another "extermination" business – silk production (c. 10). As the narrator searches for the short film about North Sea herring fisheries, he happens upon a documentary of the silk manufacture in Germany, a little-known government project that was centered in Celle (not far from Bergen Belsen). In a fashion similar to how the two discussed events are visually reproduced in the book, everything related to the killing (the killer, the killed, and the killing method) in this film is rendered in "a truly dazzling brightness": "Men and women in white coats, in whitewashed rooms flooded with light, were busy at snow-white spinning frames, snow-white sheets of paper, snow white protective gauze, snow-white cocoons and snow-white canvas mailing sacks" (292). Unlike the brief introduction (in the herring episode) and the utter absence (in the Holocaust episode) of the killing process, the industrialized process of "the entire killing business" is described in detail here: "We see the hatching, the feeding of the ravenous caterpillars, the cleaning out of the frames, the spinning of the silken thread, and finally the killing, accomplished in this case not by putting the cocoons out in the sun or in a hot oven, as was often the practice in the past, but by suspending them over a boiling cauldron. The cocoons, spread out on shallow baskets, have to be kept in the rising steam for upwards of three hours, and when a batch is done, it is the next one's turn" (294).

[49] Anne Fuchs, *Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte: zur Poetik der Erinnerung in W.G. Sebalds Prosa* (Köln: Böhlau, 2004), 39. In her subsequent article, Fuchs for the first time reads Sebald's juxtaposition of the herring fishery and the Holocaust as a result of similar concept – "a cold and objectified biopolitics which disregards the value of life by means of a reductive interpretation of nature." See Anne Fuchs, "W. G. Sebald's Painters: The Function of Fine Art in His Prose Works," *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 101, No. 1 (Jan 2006), 173.

months before, on the death of Major George Wyndham Le Strange, whose great stone manor house in Henstead stood beyond the lake" (59). The infamous Sebaldian phrase "perhaps," which initiates a sentence that transitions from the North Sea herring to Le Strange's biography, reveals Sebald's mental indeterminacy as to whether or not a certain underlying logic between the overfishing and the Holocaust can be solidified. It is of critical importance that the narrator seeks not to deny a measure of comparability between the two historical events but instead works to circumvent the pitfall of obscuring their own singularity and specificity, which would have occurred had he treated the events as equivalent. From this perspective, the moment of "darkening" not only evokes an associative thought in the narrator's mind but also encourages the reader to reflect on what qualifies as an effective and ethical representation of a history fraught with decline, decay, and destruction. One major aspect of this undertaking is that our scope of investigation should not be restricted to how these historical events cohere but rather how they differ from each other in a world which were, as the narrator reminds us, "under a bell jar."

The narrator's unease over generalizing a kind of coherence from the two discussed cases of catastrophe is emphatically elucidated at the end of chapter 3. Standing atop the Covehithe cliff, the narrator casts his eyes down on the shoreline and is seized by "a sudden panic" at the glimpse of what appears initially to him as a beached, misshapen monster in its death throes. Upon close examination, he realizes that it is actually a copulating couple who "lay there, to all appearances a single being" (68). The grotesque image of the couple's entangling bodies, similar in appearance to a single being, directs his thought to Jorge Luis Borges' tale, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* (1940), in which the people of the planet Tlön "conceive the universe as a series of

mental processes that occur not in space but rather successively, in time."[50] This peculiar concept leads the incorporeal thinkers of Uqbar to consider the act of copulation (and mirrors) as "sinister" or "disturbing" for "they multiply the number of human beings" (70). In opposition to the way of thinking articulated in Borges' tale, it is the scene of "merging" bodies that "filled [the narrator] with consternation" because the conflation of disparate events and entities would have led to appropriation and absorption of their particularity and brought the broad spectrum of history back down to the "blind spot" that upset the hospitalized narrator in the beginning (68).

Although Sebald's narrator refrains at this point from articulating a solution to address his crisis of considering a variety of events as repeating the same theme or structuring around an arbitrary logic, the answer is alluded to in a text such as *Rings*, which consists almost entirely of digressions. Indeed, the sub-title of *Rings* ("English Pilgrimage") seems to promise a destination. However, the book possesses no central narrative plot but is comprised of numerous micronarratives that are strung together with subtle transitions. Taking chapter 3 for instance: at the beginning of the chapter, the narrator first leaves Lowestoft and walks south toward the beach, where he engages in a lengthy meditation on the history of herring fishery. Returning to his coastal walk, the narrator proceeds to the Benacre Broad lake and immediately launches into the story of Le Strange. Resuming his journey, the narrator heads toward the Covehithe cliff, during which he communes with a herd of swine and recalls a biblical narrative of God-sanctioned massacre. Again re-entering the narrative present of his journey, the narrator is disturbed upon seeing the copulating couple on the shoreline, which reminds him of Borges' tale

[50] Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Viking, 1998), 73. The absurd hypothesis that Uqbar thinkers espouse would also have concretized that "nine men who on nine successive nights experience a sharp pain […] had suffered one and the same pain," or, "all men who speak a line of Shakespeare are William Shakespeare." (Borges, 75-6)

"Tlön." And it is this tale that concludes the entire chapter with a reference to Browne.[51] While the artful transitions that occur as the text proceeds from one episode to another somewhat subdue the disparities among the presented material, "the accumulation of micronarratives always has the potential to disorientate or even alienate the reader."[52] Seen in this light, chapter 3 (and by extension, the entire text of *Rings*) seems to have failed to foreground a single message to the reader, as the extensive digressions come to overwhelm any teleological impulse.

Sebald's embrace of a poetics of digression is not to be confused with a tendency to forgo any sequence, structure, or logic that unifies various micronarratives, without which the entire narrative would threaten to disintegrate into complete meaninglessness. By presenting a narrative that is "not only spun out but is also clogged up" by the proliferation of narrative fragments,[53] Sebald's narrator maintains a delicate equilibrium between coherence and digression, a conjoining of absolute singularity and transhistorical generality. Specifically, on the one hand, the narrator seeks out correspondence and coherence among the facts that he has observed, gathered, and researched on his journey. The common point is that the facts are nearly all variations on the theme of decay and destruction throughout history.[54] On the other hand, by invariably digressing from the main road to the alternative paths (geographical and metaphorical), the narrator keeps his understanding and interpretation of every event open to

[51] In *Rings*, the sections of each chapter lay out the topical focus therein and provide the reader with a map to guide them through the text, but these different stages of narrative are not made visible as the text proceeds from one topic to the next through subtle but artful transitions. For instance, chapter 3's sections read: Fishermen on the beach – The natural history of the herring – George Wyndham Le Strange – A great herd of swine – The reduplication of man – Orbis Tertius.

[52] J. J. Long, *W. G. Sebald – Image, Archive, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 142.

[53] Ibid., 141.

[54] Claudia Albes notes the prevalence of a rich vocabulary of decay and destruction in *Rings*: 'stillgelegt,' 'erloschen,' 'ausgebrannt,' 'abgerissen,' 'entlassen,' 'verschlossen,' 'vernichtet,' 'verrostet,' 'zerfallen.' (shut down, abandoned, extinguished, burned out, demolished, boarded up, annihilated, rusted, decayed). See Claudia Albes, 'Die Erkundung der Leere: Anmerkungen zu W. G. Sebalds "englisher Wallfahrt" *Die Ringe des Saturn*', *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft*, Vol. 46 (2002), 286-7.

modification on an individual basis rather than treating them as "replicat[ing] both every other event and the wider process of history."[55] Bearing this in mind, Sebald's juxtaposition of the two disparate events – the herring fishery and the Holocaust – based on their visual resemblance aims not to articulate their equality but to associate one case with another, as a means to evoke unspoken and unspeakable histories that may have been eliminated. Only by illuminating both the singularity and generality among those destructive episodes in history can we avoid inflicting on the victims of catastrophe another violence – this time, a representational or rhetorical one.[56]

It is worth noting that Sebald's digressive poetics assumes another dimension in the book. In chapter 3, the narrator spots a herd of swine in a field near the Covehithe church. Only by "climb[ing] over" a low electric fence is he able to commune with them, which prompts his reflection on a biblical tale that tells of another historical mass annihilation.[57] This transgressive act also allows him to see beyond the superficial phenomena of fishermen on the North Sea beach, the total number of which seems to remain unchanged at all times, and reach deep into individual specificity – the comings and goings of every participant. The significance of this kind of poetic digression from the well-trodden road to idiosyncratic, unforeseen paths, which is alluded to by the narrator's act of border-crossing, resides in its potential to call up alternative

[55] Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, 143.

[56] In chapter 10, the narrator provides an extensive list of seemingly unrelated events that occurred on the same date, April 13, also the day on which the text is allegedly completed: the proclamation of the Edict of Nantes, the first performance of Handel's *Messiah*, Warren Hastings' being appointed governor of Bengal, the foundation of the Prussian Anti-Semitic League, the massacre of Amritsar, the fall of Celle to the advancing Red Army, and, finally, the death conceivably of the narrator's father-in-law. Although those events comprise "a long account of calamities," none of them can be regarded as being equivalent to one another (294-5).

[57] Heading toward the Covehithe cliff, the narrator spots a herd of swine beyond a low electric fence. These ponderous animals, like humans, possess eyes "fringed with light lashes," give the narrator an "enquiring look," and have a way of sighing as if "enduring endless suffering" (66). The narrator then thinks of a biblical tale drawn from St. Mark's Gospel of Jesus healing a maniac, "Legion," by driving the "unclean spirit" from his body into a herd of swine, which in turn drowned themselves in the sea (66). Troubled by this terrible story of exorcism, or the Lord's "error of judgement" in healing the Gadarene, the narrator speculates on the inexplicable human abjection of swine as unthinking and untidy animals, and suspects it is because diseased "human reasoning […] needs to seize on some other kind that it can take to be inferior and thus deserving of annihilation" (67).

worlds through the effect of what Brian McHale terms "ontological flicker."[58] In particular, as one's mind is rapidly diverted elsewhere in the process of walking, the physical world – in which the text appears to be grounded – would frequently open onto alternative spatial-temporal dimensions. Played out upon such a "permeability of contexts,"[59] an excess of alternate thoughts is induced in the narrator and a kind of distraction subsequently produced in the reader.

To revisit the main focus of this chapter's discussion, we find that Sebald's engagement with the visual form – viewing images either in dialogue with verbal discourse inside the represented world or *vis-à-vis* external reality – demonstrates how a state of continuous digression (and the "offshoots" generated therein) resists a definite and totalizing apprehension of history. In the herring series, each image that Sebald chooses refers to its surrounding text but this link can barely be specified with any certainty. Such a radical indeterminacy not only frees the image from the words' control but also opens up the potential for a liberated reading of history. As to the episode concerning the liberated concentration camp at Bergen Belsen, Sebald complicates what is shown in a visual document in order that the reader does not confuse visibility with authenticity. By doing so, Sebald keeps histories of irreducible complexity open to future remembrance. The prevalence of digression, while it is implied, in both interpretative modes of Sebald's image/text suggests a means of deconstructing and critiquing modernity's power/knowledge nexus, which is characterized by a drive toward achieving goals with maximum efficiency.

Before closing this chapter, it is worth noting that the co-existence of coherence and digression – a pair of centripetal and centrifugal forces – can be visualized as the quincunx, a net-like figure "composed by using the corners of a regular quadrilateral and the point at which

[58] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987), 134.
[59] Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, 138.

its diagonals intersect," which Browne claimed runs through various organic and inorganic forms of life in nature (fig. 6). Despite the reassuring certitude occasioned by the presence of the quincunx in "the order of things," an organizing principle weaving supposedly discrete and unrelated phenomena into a pattern, Browne was frequently frustrated by the elusive nature of "their innermost essence" and thus "often distracted from his investigations into the isomorphic line of the quincunx by singular phenomena that fired his curiosity" (19, 22).[60] In line with his deflection from repeated order to individual phenomena, not only did Browne create an imaginary space in his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* to accommodate outrageously anomalous creatures, but he also engaged in a kind of writing that "def[ies] all comparison" to avoid falsifying the unknown and unknowable by reducing diverse singularities and irregularities to abstraction and similitude (9). Browne closed his treatise with the lines cited by Sebald's narrator: "the constellation of the Hyades, the Quincunx of Heaven, is already sinking beneath the horizon, and so it is time to close the five ports of knowledge. We are unwilling to spin out our waking thoughts into the phantasmes of sleep; making cables of cobwebs and wildernesses of handsome groves" (21). Browne – and Sebald's narrator – thus leave us with a balanced indeterminacy between established pattern and unordered exceptions.

Browne's quincuncial model can also clarify the confusion occasioned by a grid pattern – for instance, the black netting over the hospital window (fig. 7), the cage that imprisons the Chinese quail (fig. 8), or a mass of electrical wires and fixtures spanning across the Netherlands

[60] In fact, Browne's "distraction" from generality to singularity is embedded in this lattice-like pattern: on the one hand, it sustains the enclosed layout of the five points arranged in the rhomboid form of a lozenge; on the other hand, the figure for the Roman numeral five (V), after rotating 180 degrees, can be doubled to form the letter X – the "decussation" that runs throughout the field of the rhombus. The X not only constitutes interconnected lines but also becomes "a figure of dispersal and, in more ways than one, excludes any sense of containment." In this light, the quincunx can be regarded as "a figure of inclusion and exclusion at once. Facing "the endless mutations of Nature," the observer must shuttle back and forth between framing and reframing, abstraction and representation, the known and the unknown (*RS*, 21). The order itself is to be forever confirmed and disturbed in each of its evocations. See Carol Jacobs, *Sebald's Vision* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 57-8.

landscape (fig. 9) – which lays suggestively over several images in the book. Collectively, they communicate Sebald's message to us: what we perceive of the world may be woven into some sort of pattern; however, it can only be regarded as a point of departure in that the formed pattern is subject to further discoveries – those "excursion, extraneous, exception, extremity" – that have not yet befallen us.[61] Any indiscriminate embrace of rationality and failure to heed those "irregularities" would eventually be turned into a kind of chain-link fence, barring our insight and knowledge.

[61] Jacobs, *Sebald's Vision*, 61.

## Chapter Eight

### The Intertextual Metempsychosis

In a monologue in Gao's *Soul Mountain*, the you-character expresses frustration with the futile attempt to achieve "a clear pure language" which transcends limits caused by logic, the subject-object binary, set phrases and sentences, as well as "images, metaphors, associations or symbols."[1] Writing practice thus becomes a burdensome and tortuous process for him: "Dragging weighty thoughts you crawl about in language, trying all the time to grab a thread to pull yourself up, becoming more and more weary, entangled in floating strands of language, like a silkworm spitting out silk, weaving a net for yourself, wrapping yourself in thicker and thicker darkness, the faint glimmer of light in your heart becoming weaker and weaker until finally the net is a totality of chaos."[2] From this perspective, the writer's literary production, like the silkworm spinning its silk thread into a cocoon, indicates less a process of creation than one of confinement, for language inevitably entraps its user according to the shared conventions of meaning. Feeling as if he were "falling into a quagmire and […] flounder[ing] helplessly," the you-character laments the difficulties he encounters in representing his life experience through "fixed patterns" of language.[3]

The comparability of the silkworm's self-spun cocoon to the arbitrary order imposed by language upon the writer in Gao's *Soul Mountain* resonates with the quincuncial pattern, "the

[1] Gao Xingjian, *Soul Mountain*, trans. Mabel Lee (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), 351.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.

order of things," which Thomas Browne endeavors to identify "in animate and inanimate matter" everywhere – for instance, "in the physical shapes of caterpillars, butterflies, silkworms and moths" (20-1). As "the son of a silk merchant," Browne regards those insects as one of the earth's myriad inhabitants, which he extensively studies and writes about. More importantly, he perceives in them a potential portal to access a world "far beyond" that still "remain[s] an unfathomable mystery" and moves people with its "invisibility and intangibility" (18). At the end of chapter 1, Sebald's narrator remarks, "Browne scrutinizes that which escaped annihilation for any sign of the mysterious capacity for transmigration he has so often observed in caterpillars and moths" (26). In turn, the narrator raises another question: among a variety of objects inside the sepulchral urns unearthed from the field near Walsingham, "[t]hat purple piece of silk he refers to, then, in the urn of Patroclus – what does it mean" (26)? This question, though never directly answered, emerges to guide the trajectory of the narrator's peripatetic wanderings and structure the subsequent narrative of *Rings*, which, on some level, provides an oblique answer.

I. The "Purple Piece of Silk"

The "purple piece of silk" found in Patroclus' urn was catalogued in Browne's *Hydrotaphia, or Urn-Buriall* (1658), a treatise on mourning practices and burial rites, in which he wrote, "in the *Homericall* Urne of *Patroclus*, whatever was the solid Tegument, we finde the immediate covering to be a purple peece of silk."[4] In his earlier text, *Religio Medici* (1642), Browne had already manifested his preoccupation with "the true theory of death" and endeavored to seek alternative perceptions of human mortality, for he believed that "the world drawes near its end, yet is neither old nor decayed, nor will ever perish upon the ruines of its owne principles."[5] In the opening chapter of *Rings*, Sebald's narrator incorporates a picture of

[4] Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici and Urne-Buriall* (New York: New York Review Books Classics, 2012), 133.
[5] Ibid., 51.

Browne's skull (supposedly stored in the museum of the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital), underneath which two copies of his *Religio Medici* are stacked on top of each other (11). The paired text underlines Browne's profound interest in unraveling the mysteries of the human body: "As a doctor, who saw disease growing and raging in bodies, he understood mortality better than the flowering of life. To him it seems a miracle that we should last so much as a single day" (24). Under the concern that "[t]here is no antidote, against the opium of time," Browne turned his inquisitive eye to sepulchral urns "unearthed from the field near Walsingham" in Norfolk – in the vicinity of the place where Sebald's narrator begins his walking tour – containing cremated human remains along with a variety of other objects (24). Ranging from an unscathed drinking glass to a "purple piece of silk," "things of this kind," Browne surmised, "unspoiled by the passage of time, are symbols of the indestructibility of the human soul assured by scripture" (26). For Browne, these cremated human remains and artifacts entombed in the urns, which have marvelously survived the destruction of time, "allegorize the lives to which they once metonymically belonged, […] [and] hold out hope for durability, transcendence, and even salvation."[6] While Browne's prospect of seeking the eternal within the material clearly exercises its presence over *Rings*, Sebald's narrator seems still to be puzzled by the significance of those historical relics – such as the funerary silk – asking, "what does it mean?"

It should be noted that silk (including silkworms and sericulture) stands as a recurring motif throughout diverse historical epochs and cultural milieus mentioned in *Rings*. These sporadic allusions scattered through the text are bundled into a dense metaphorical node in the final chapter, in which the narrator outlines the history of sericulture in Europe as an emblematic record of the history of humanity. Having been introduced to Europe in the sixth century from

[6] Richard T. Gray, *Ghostwriting: W. G. Sebald's Poetics of History* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2017), 315.

China, the birthplace of sericulture, silk production incentivizes several countries to plunge into this profitable enterprise. Yet, each endeavor contains a sinister dimension: to cite a few, silk cultivation in seventeenth-century France was vigorously promoted to the detriment of the local environment and rural labor; the eighteenth-century French Huguenot refugees torturously labored in the pre-industrialized silk manufactories of Norwich, England; and the revival of sericulture in twentieth-century Germany was partially intended by the fascists to indoctrinate young people. All these endeavors of sericulture to fuel economies or develop a national ethos, at various points in ancient and modern history, are almost invariably combined with references to exploitation, domination, and oppression in the service of a social mechanism linked with either imperialism or capitalism (283).

Furthermore, the figure of silk, which is culturally acclaimed for its "fabulous variety" or "indescribable beauty," becomes thematically bound to suffering and death in Sebald's text (283). Invoked at several places in *Rings*, silk itself has historically been employed as a tool to expedite killing, whether the lost lives are human or nonhuman. For instance, a fishing net made of coarse Persian silk is utilized to slowly suffocate the North Sea herring. Silken rope was used as a form of merciful execution to hang one of the ancestors of Earl Ferrers in eighteenth-century England and, half a century later, the remaining conspirators of Hung Hsiu-ch'üan, a quasi-Christian rebel in China. Consequently, the image of silk (especially silk that is dark in color) evolves into a symbol of mourning – whether for an individual loss (Joseph Conrad's family wear black silk as he and his mother join his father in Siberian exile) (c. 5, 106), or for our shared calamitous history (Le Strange wears a mourning robe of faded taffeta in the years following his having witnessed the unspeakable atrocity in the concentration camp during WWII) (c. 3, 64).

Indeed, Sebald's narrator begins his survey with an inquiry similar to that of Browne by conceiving of ancient relics as key repositories for preserving historical legacies, as evidence for the Christian faith in an afterlife, and perhaps as occasions of surviving hope. As the narrative progresses, the narrator imperceptibly but steadily shifts the focus of his attention from the material objects' generic testimonial function of humanity's existence toward their potential of revealing traces of death and destruction throughout history. The "purple piece of silk" thus poses a dilemma: on the one hand, as a material trace of history, it bears witness to that which has survived the destruction of time; on the other, it serves as a poignant reminder of those things that, once buried, can no longer be recovered or remembered. Guided by the thought that this silky object can be both a fragment and a sign of fragmentation, a historical relic and a trigger for memory, Sebald's narrator appears to have solved his conundrum – "what does it mean?" – and accordingly feels the ethical burden of unearthing the sum of uncountable missing fragments of history and restoring them in his writing.

II. The "Mysterious Capacity for Transmigration"

Apart from the connection of the funerary silk to events of death and destruction, Sebald's narrator draws a parallel between the figure of silkworms and the victims who have been sacrificed throughout calamitous history. In the central chapter of *Rings* (c. 6),[7] the narrator relates that while millions of Chinese people die of starvation and exhaustion in a catastrophic drought, the Dowager Empress Tz'u-hsi attempts to dispel her fear of losing power by observing silkworms raised inside her grandiose palace since "[o]f all living creatures, these curious insects alone aroused a strong affection in her" (151). In her eye, "[t]hese pale, almost transparent creatures, which would presently give their lives for the fine thread they were spinning, […]

[7] Since *Rings* contains 10 chapters and the narrator's account of his actual walk begins in chapter 2, chapter 6 can be seen as the central one in the whole text.

seemed the ideal subjects, diligent in service, ready to die, capable of multiplying vastly within a short span of time, and fixed on their one sole preordained aim" (151).

Half a century later, the Empress' regard for silkworms' obedience and industriousness is shared by the Nazi rulers in Germany, who view silkworms as perfectly docile creatures to raise and suitable subjects for a variety of experiments at every stage in their evolution, thus allowing themselves to be an ideal illustration for insect anatomy, domestication, and selection (c. 10, 294). In addition, the narrator recalls a documentary of the silk manufacture produced by the National Socialists in the late 1930s, which illustrates the silkworm's utility value by showing the hatching, feeding, silk-spinning, and finally the systematic killing of them, as cocoons are suspended in baskets over a boiling cauldron batch by batch, for upwards of three hours at a time, "until the entire killing business is completed" (294). In view of these two historical anecdotes, it can be perceived that the silkworm in *Rings* "signifies serfdom and bondage without recompense, a fatal self-entanglement in the service of commercial greed" and emblematizes, in broader terms, "the enslaved, victimized, persecuted, marginalized, and perishing."[8]

It is equally worthy of note that Sebald's narrator adds another layer of significance to the figure of the silkworm, which resonates with Browne's interest in the promise of a continued existence in a "life beyond death" (25). Despite Browne's conviction in "the indestructibility of the human soul" based on his study of the unearthed relics, Sebald's narrator wonders if Browne "perhaps secretly [had] doubts" about it (26). This skepticism likely led Browne to reflect upon the possibility of transmigration and the passage of human souls into the afterlife. In *Religio Medici*, Browne observes the silkworm's metamorphosis (a life cycle comprising four stages:

[8] Bianca Theisen, "A Natural History of Destruction: W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*," *MLN* Vol. 121. No. 3 (2006), 572.

egg, caterpillar, pupa, and moth), during which it is transformed into visibly different entities while maintaining its original substance. The very "mysterious capacity for transmigration" of the silkworm thus turns Browne's philosophy into divinity. He asserts, "[t]here is in those workes of nature, which seeme to puzle reason, something Divine, and that hath more in it than the eye of a common spectator doth discover."[9] From the silkworm's physiological mutations, Browne intuited a certain transcendent continuation into the afterlife, by which it can escape the fate of eventual annihilation because its central core, a soul, can maintain itself through alternative transformations.

Browne's abiding interest in the silkworm's "mysterious capacity for transmigration" inspires him to view this subject in the light of human experience and hence illuminate the idea of "metempsychosis": when "the soule of one man passed into another, opinions doe finde after certaine revolutions, men and mindes like those that first begat them. To see our selves againe wee neede not looke for *Platoes* yeare, every man is not onely himselfe; there have beene many *Diogenes*, and as many *Tymons*, though but few of that name; men are lived over againe; the world is now as it was in ages past; there was none then, but there hath been some one since that parallels him, and is, as it were, his revived selfe."[10] In brief, Browne speculates that two disparate individuals, irrespective of their spatial-temporal distance, could be two permutations of a central substance. In such manner, human death seems as if it can be counter-balanced by future reincarnation or resurrection.

Just as souls may transmigrate from body to body and era to era, only changing their outward appearance in each incarnation, literary accounts can similarly be transplanted from early texts to current ones, retaining their original qualities through a dynamic process that may

[9] Browne, *Religio Medici and Urne-Buriall*, 45.
[10] Ibid., 10.

be termed intertextual metempsychosis. In comparison with Browne's belief in metempsychosis, Sebald strips away its religious overtones and "infuses the idea of a recurrence of similar, if not identical minds with the more recent assumption that the writer's I is but a tissue of citations from other texts."[11] In constituting his narrative subjectivity "in the work of reading, writing and remembering,"[12] the narrator collects a multiplicity of instances of *déjà vu*, or *déjà lu* (the already read) and integrates them in his text,[13] so that he can enact an "archival redemption of the literary archive."[14] Remarkably, in his intertextual engagement, Sebald incorporates original accounts – from central phrase to entire passage – verbatim and, more importantly, seldom frames external sources by quotation marks, paragraph breaks, or typographical shifts,[15] to the extent that were the reader to open a page of *Rings* at random, it would be difficult to identify who the narrating 'I' is as they "[a]ll speak with the same archaic eloquence."[16] Having being invited to enter the narrative present, the stories and ideas in diverse literary texts are kept alive within Sebald's text as if they have achieved an allegorical rebirth.

Keeping in mind the likeness of silkworm to the group of people identified as the "enslaved, victimized, persecuted, marginalized, and perishing," the literary accounts that Sebald selects to weave into his narrative are mostly memoirs, autobiographies, and personal narratives that demonstrate how disaster and destruction are wrought on them. Navigating through the textual universe that he creates and curates, Sebald's narrator recalls the French writer, politician,

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[11] Theisen, "A Natural History of Destruction," 570.

[12] Russell J. A. Kilbourn, "'Catastrophe with Spectator': Subjectivity, Intertextuality and the Representation of History in *Die Ringe des Saturn*," *W. G. Sebald and the Writing of History*, ed. Anne Fuchs and J.J. Long (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007), 160.

[13] Roland Barthes, "Textual Analysis of Poe's 'Valdemar,'" *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge, 1981), 155.

[14] Deane Blackler, *Reading W. G. Sebald: Adventure and Disobedience* (New York: Camden House, 2007), 171-2.

[15] Interestingly, most of Sebald's incorporations of the original literary accounts are italicized in German text.

[16] Simon Cooke, *Travellers' Tales of Wonder: Chatwin, Naipaul, Sebald* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 149.

and historian, François-René vicomte de Chateaubriand (1768-1848), who fled to a remote English town, Suffolk, in the late eighteenth century to escape the terrors of the French Revolution. During his English exile, the Vicomte became acquainted with the vicar, Reverend Ives, who supervised the church of Ilketshall St. Margaret and lived with his family in the near Bungay. In referencing Chateaubriand's voluminous memoir, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* (Memoirs from beyond the Grave, 1849),[17] Sebald's narrator recounts the Vicomte's frequent visits to the Ives' family during the summer of 1795 and, more importantly, the special bond that formed between him and Reverend Ives' daughter, Charlotte. As they converse in French, read books, and practice music together, in Charlotte's eyes, "it was surely inevitable that the Vicomte, who was exiled from his homeland and undoubtedly surrounded by the aura of a romantic hero, […] took on the role of tutor and confidant as the weeks went by" (251). Chateaubriand was also aware that "their studies brought them closer every day, […] and remained irresistibly drawn to her" (251-2). The pastoral tranquility of country life and Charlotte's loving companionship certainly provided substantial comfort and consolation for the battle-weary, impoverished, and depressed exile of Chateaubriand.

As Chateaubriand foresees, however, their budding romance could proceed no further. On the final day of his stay, the reverend gentleman and his daughter withdraw after the farewell dinner, leaving Mrs. Ives to offer Charlotte's hand in marriage. Although the Vicomte, who has been struggling to eke out a miserable existence (like many fugitives from the Revolution), "desire[s] nothing so much as to be able to spend the rest of his life unknown to the world in the bosom of this solitary family," he is "thrown into the greatest conceivable inner turmoil" due to the impossibility of his situation: that is, he is married, although the marriage is "a mere

[17] François-René, vicomte de, Chateaubriand, *Memoirs from beyond the Grave: 1768-1800*. trans. Alex Andriesse (New York: New York Review Books, 2018).

formality" (252). In despair, the Vicomte turns down the generous marriage proposal and leaves that hospitable house at once with the resolution never to return.

When the two reunite twenty-seven years after "that ill-omened day," Chateaubriand, now the French ambassador in London, is firmly established in his diplomatic career and has long chosen to live a life that involves significant public duties (253). Charlotte, on the other hand, married Admiral Sutton three years after the Vicomte's departure. Upon meeting each other, the Vicomte recognizes her and, as the "tears swelled up in my eyes," sees her "exactly as she had been during that summer which had long sunk into the shades of memory" (253-4). He continues, recalling that with each "Do you remember? our past life rose more clearly from the cruel abyss of time" (254). By the chronicler's own admission, their reunion may have stimulated his memory and ignited his repressed longings for her, allowing him to realize that they "had meant far more to each other than I had admitted to myself at the time" (254). During their last meeting, Lady Sutton interrupts him as they are fondly reminiscing on their bygone days. She then requests his intercession on behalf of the elder of her two sons, who was seeking an imperial position. Having asserted that "[i]t was solely on account of this request, […] that she had come to London, and she must now return to Bungay," Lady Sutton bids the Vicomte farewell forever (254).

After their painful parting, the Vicomte "spent long hours shut away in my study at the embassy and, with repeated interruptions for vain reflection and brooding, committed our unhappy story to paper" (254). In the meantime, he was "troubled by the question of whether in the writing I should not once again betray and lose Charlotte Ives, and this time for ever" (254-5). His self-questioning prompts readers to reflect on the earlier scenes where the two lovers parted ways: while declining the marriage proposal, Chateaubriand claims that his marriage

status precluded him from pursuing a lifetime of happiness with Charlotte in rural England. As the two reunite two decades later, Charlotte is described by the chronicler as a married woman with two children, whose sole purpose to visit him in London was to request a favor for her son's future career. One may speculate: had it been legally possible for Chateaubriand to marry Charlotte, would he have accepted the marriage proposal? Had Charlotte remained single, would Chateaubriand have been willing to rectify the mistakes of the past by rejoining her, living out the rest of his years in rural Suffolk?

According to Sebald's narrator, in his memoir, Chateaubriand briefly contemplates "how it would have been if he had undergone the transformation and led the life of a gentleman chasseur in that remote English county" (253). However much he was romantically attached to Charlotte, to have married her and lived a life of happiness and peace in rural Suffolk would have consigned him to a secure but anonymous life as an English country gentleman. If that had been the case for Chateaubriand, "[i]t is probable that I should never have written a single word," and "[i]n due course I should have even forgotten my own language. How great would France's loss have been, he asks, if I had vanished into thin air like that?" (253). With this in mind, Chateaubriand's sense of personal destiny as a French nobleman and his need to "indulge a talent" as an aspiring writer convinced him not to follow his heart and settle in England but instead to "squander [his] chance of happiness" in order to fulfill the duty to his home country and spare the loss that would otherwise have been inflicted on French literature and culture (253). At this point, it can be perceived that the conflict between Chateaubriand's affection for Charlotte – including his regret after betrayal – and his aspiration to engage in public life sheds some light on his unrequited love affair, which remains obscure throughout his massive autobiography.

In reflecting on what the elderly Chateaubriand envisioned while walking in Hyde Park – "As if from afar, I watched the beautiful young English women with the same ardent bewilderment of my senses that I used to feel in an embrace" – Sebald's narrator walks toward the Ditchingham Lodge, the isolated house where Charlotte Ives lived for many years after her marriage to Admiral Sutton. He chances upon "an unusual sight" – "[a] woman in a white apron […] came out underneath the portico roof which was supported by two columns, calling a black dog that was running about in the garden. Apart from her there was not a soul in sight" (255, 259). As he proceeds to visit the Ditchingham churchyard, where Charlotte's elder son was buried, the nearby grave of a lady named Sarah Camell catches his attention, for it has round holes drilled on the upper edges of the gravestone. The narrator surmises, "[i]t was possible […] that the bereaved had had these holes bored into the stone in the eventuality that the dear departed in her sepulchre should wish once more to breathe the air" (260). This image of the breathing dead thus gives way to a broader sense of afterlife, not only of this buried woman, but also of those who may have been acquainted with her – the Ives family for instance. The narrator continues to contemplate that "it is probable that Charlotte, together with her parents, was present at the funeral and perhaps even played a pavane on the pianoforte at the Camells' home after the service" (260). Intriguingly, the "higher sentiments […] cultivated at the time in the circles in which Sarah and Charlotte moved," which are preserved in such words of Sarah Camell's epitaph as "esteem," "affection," "confidence," and "happiness," create an almost imperceptible shift from the poignant undertone pervading the thwarted romance in Chateaubriand's memoir (261).

In *Rings*, Sebald's narrator only focuses on the story of Charlotte Ives, "only a minute fragment" in the Vicomte de Chateaubriand's voluminous memoir, rather than his "personal

feelings and thoughts unfolded against the background of the momentous upheavals" during and after the Revolution (256). The disastrous event that receives perhaps the fullest account in Sebald's narrative is Belgium's colonization of the Congo in the nineteenth century. When Sebald's narrator approaches the East Anglian shoreline at Lowestoft, he recalls that Joseph Conrad probably departed from here on a coastal steamer in the summer of 1878. In his ensuing narrative that draws largely on Conrad's memoir, *A Personal Record* (1912),[18] Sebald's narrator outlines Conrad's traumatic childhood in exile with his family, his early seafaring career in France, and, ultimately, his voyage to explore the upper reaches of the Congo river after taking a charge from a Belgian trading company. From this point forward, the narrator's prose increasingly conflates Conrad's real-life journey up the Congo with the account provided in his semi-autobiographical *Heart of Darkness* (1902) through the eyes of his protagonist Charles Marlow, a British merchant seaman that Conrad invented as his alter ego in the novel.[19]

Upon his arrival in the Congolese colony, Sebald's Conrad finds that this place, "one of those remote destinations he had dreamt of as a child," is no longer "a white patch on the map of Africa" (117). Instead, the once "blank, uncharted land" had been filled in with details that mark railway lines, roads, and towns, and hence becomes "a place of darkness" (117-8). As he goes deeper into the Congo, Conrad begins to realize "the madness of the whole colonial enterprise" and is particularly appalled by the inhumane conditions there, under which enslaved Africans are forced to labor in chain gangs until they drop from physical exhaustion, maltreatment, starvation, and disease (117). In a passage drawn from *Heart of Darkness*,[20] Marlow chances upon a hellish gorge, where Congolese natives "who were racked by illness starvation and toil had withdrawn

[18] Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
[19] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 57.
[20] Ibid., 19.

to die. […] As if after a massacre they lay there in the greenish gloom at the bottom of the gorge" (119-20). Before he can further distinguish the gleam of the eyes of those "black shadows" as they creep off into the bush, Marlow notices that nearby, a pair of "sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly. And as this man, scarcely more than a boy, breathed his last," those who were not yet worn out, as he supposes, kept working nearly to death, building the Congolese railroad (120).

Having borne witness to the rapacious greed and sickening violence that characterize the Belgian colonization of the Congo, Conrad begins to grasp that "his own travails did not absolve him from the guilt which he had incurred by his mere presence in the Congo" (120). Such pangs of conscience turn him away in revulsion from the colonial enterprise, which he finds "antipathique,"[21] and drives his decision to escape the expanding system of exploitation in which he used to participate. A puzzling turn of events occurs here: without proceeding to describe what Conrad undergoes after he leaves the African colony, Sebald's narrative diverges to tell of the figure of Joseph Loewy, Franz Kafka's uncle, who boarded a Belgian steamship bound for Africa from the very port where Conrad had just returned to Europe. Unlike Conrad, who fled from his unbearable guilt, Loewy found that his life there "gradually became more tolerable" and managed to make regular sojourns back to European retreats (121). Alongside a slight shift in the narrative tone that qualifies Conrad's condemnation of the horrific atrocities committed by the Belgians, this interlude ends with the fact that Loewy, by then director of the entire trading

[21] Conrad's full sentence quoted by Sebald's narrator in *Rings* reads: "Tout m'est antipathique ici, […] les hommes et les choses, mais surtout les hommes. Tous ces boutiquiers africains et marchands d'ivoire aux instincts sordides. Je regrette d'être venu ici. Je le regrette même amèrement" (121). My English translation would be: "Everything is antipathetic to me here, people and things, but especially people. All those African shopkeepers and ivory merchants with sordid instincts. I regret having come here. I even regret it bitterly." See also Joseph Conrad, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. Vol. 1. ed. Frederick R. Karl, Laurence Davies, and Gene M. Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 59.

division, was awarded the Gold Medal of the Ordre du Lion Royal by King Leopold for his excellent service to the Belgian State in the opening and completion of the Congolese railway.

In this manner, Sebald's treatment of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which has widely been accepted as an attack on Europe's colonization of Africa in the nineteenth century, is brought to an inconclusive end. Without explicitly criticizing the human depravity and callousness of colonial exploitation that pervaded the Belgian Congo,[22] Conrad's "[t]ale-telling loses whatever redemptive or integrative function it may once have had" and only demonstrates an utter collapse of making good the catastrophes of history.[23] As Sebald's narrator suggests, Conrad's ineffective recollection and recapitulation of human atrocities can be understood in light of the "dark premonitions" that life is a "tragicomedy,"[24] which haunted Conrad since the beginning of his voyage to Africa. Additionally, Conrad's "protracted bouts of despair […] alternat[ed] with his writing" while he was waiting for his homebound trip to Europe (121). The wretchedness of Conrad's experience signals "an endlessly provocative and dismaying battle between stoical assumption of duty and perverse complicity in evil."[25] On the one hand, Conrad is filled with disgust at witnessing the manner in which enslaved Congolese are treated by the colonists as an inexhaustible resource of profit and pleasure; on the other, he shows a willful

[22] In Conrad's novel, Marlow asserts that "You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie, not because I am straighter than the rest of us, but simply because it appalls me. There is a taint of death, a flavour of mortality in lies – which is exactly what I hate and detest in the world – what I want to forget." As Marlow leaves Africa and returns to Europe (the "sepulchral city"), however, not only does he fail to publicize the human depravity and callousness of colonial exploitation that pervade the Belgian Congo, but he also lies to Kurtz's "Intended" that the last words Kurtz uttered before his death was her name, rather than his actual outburst – "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 30 & 89).

[23] Margaret Bruzelius, *Romancing the Novel: Adventure from Scott to Sebald* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2007), 183.

[24] Conrad's full sentence in *Rings* reads: "Life […] is a tragicomedy – beaucoup de rêves, un rare éclair de bonheur, un peu de colère, puis le désillusionnement, des années de souffrance et la fin" (116). My English translation would be: "Many dreams, a rare flash of happiness, a little anger, then disillusion, then years of suffering and the end." See also Joseph Conrad, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*. Vol. 1, 50.

[25] David Denby, "The Trouble with 'Heart of Darkness,'" Nov. 6, 1995 https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1995/11/06/the-trouble-with-heart-of-darkness

inability to confront – if not a yearning for forgetting – the historical specificity of destruction and violence that plague the European colonies, for he is implicated in the crimes he is witnessing. From this standpoint, the "darkness" in the novel's title alludes not just to the barbarism of the civilized European but, crucially, to an eyewitness' gloomy inability to recount the truths of colonial crime.

Conrad's complex stance toward European colonialism and the perhaps unfulfilled goal of his novel (i.e., to make known the crimes committed by colonizers against native Africans) galvanize Sebald's narrator into an ethical undertaking aimed at uncovering the horrors of imperial penetration into Africa. After the interlude about Joseph Loewy, Sebald's Conrad arrives in Brussels on his return to Europe and finds the grand architecture – the defining elements of European civilization – "bombastic," resembling "a sepulchral monument erected over a hecatomb of black bodies" (122). Moreover, all passers-by in the street seem to him to harbor the "dark Congolese secret" (122). Although Conrad himself must have realized that the grand monuments and buildings are funded with the profits acquired from colonial enterprises in Africa, it is Sebald's narrator who makes this connection explicit by reference to his own visit to Brussels (in 1964), a city that strikes him with "a distinctive ugliness […] dating from the time when the Congo colony was exploited without restraint" (122). The macabre atmosphere in Brussels emanates not only from the triumphant display of "all manner of African trophies," but also from "the strikingly stunted growth of the population" that he encounters, specifically, the unusually large number of hunchbacks and lunatics (123, 122). Their physical deformities and mental disorders are viewed by the narrator as probably a karmic consequence of their complicity in colonial crimes or a testament to how the suppression of the "dark Congolese

secret" (Belgium's brutal colonization of the Congo) can be potent enough to disfigure an entire population and infect their minds.

After a five-page digression that recounts his visit to the memorial site of the Battle of Waterloo in Brussels, "the very definition of Belgian ugliness" in his eye, Sebald's narrator concludes this episode by telling of his experience in a restaurant, where he glimpses "a hunchbacked pensioner" brutally cutting a piece of meat with a sharp knife (123). By suspecting that she "would have been born" at the time of the Congo railway's completion – a crucial event in King Leopold's African colony – the narrator suggests that this woman was likely nurtured by Belgium's colonial plunder and exploitation (127). The narrator in turn cuts into a historical anecdote: Conrad once confided to a London acquaintance that the oppression and exploitation of the Congo Free State were "things that he […] had long been trying to forget" (127). In contrast with Conrad's effort to displace his memories, Roger Casement, in his 1903 memorandum to the British Foreign Secretary, publicized "the nature and extent of the crimes committed against the native peoples in the course of opening up the Congo" (127). Tracing Casement's footsteps, Sebald's narrator discloses the truth of "The Opening of the Congo" as perhaps the most disturbing chapter of the entire history of colonialism. Even though the patron of this colonial project, King Leopold,[26] proclaimed that implementing colonial orders in Africa was meant to "break through the darkness" and "open up the last part of our earth […] untouched by the blessings of civilization," the alleged 'noble' cause of such a 'crusade' to "bring this glorious century of progress to the point of perfection" is revealed to be an unholy masquerade of ruthless exploitation of Africa (118).

[26] In Conrad's novel, Belgian King Leopold II is never mentioned by name. This courtesy is revoked by Sebald's narrator in *Rings*.

Whereas Sebald's narrator initially rectifies Conrad's silence and yearning for amnesia by foregrounding the full horror of "The Opening of the Congo," as the narrative progresses his accusatory stance against Belgian colonialism proves to be no less ambiguous than Conrad's. Casement is initially formed by the narrator as the hero of remembrance; however, the real reason behind his anti-colonial commitment toward the oppressed people in the Congo is less clear.[27] Analogous to Conrad's ambivalence when recollecting and recapitulating the casualties wrought by European colonialism, Sebald's invocation of Casement, who might be considered as an ethical counterpart to Conrad, similarly traces ways that the past risks fading into obscurity and oblivion. Thus, while enacting an aggressive attack on the European intervention in the Congo, Sebald's narrative generates a lingering effect of unease, like the indeterminate "horror" permeating Conrad's novel, which pushes the reader to further contemplate such an unfinished (and perhaps unfinishable) account of colonial trauma.

In addition to written reminiscences of earlier times that recount stories of disaster and destruction, Sebald's archival curiosity also encompasses contemporary works. As discussed earlier in this dissertation (c. 6), Sebald's narrator shares a special bond with his friend, Michael Hamburger, a Jewish refugee from Nazi persecution. On his way to visit Hamburger in the village of Middleton, the narrator recites an episode from Hamburger's memoir that delineates his struggle with restoring a stable connection to his Berlin childhood in the decades following his emigration to England in 1933.[28] As the chronicler looks back, the "whole monstrosity of changing countries under such inauspicious circumstances" is emblematized by the loss of his

[27] See this dissertation's fifth chapter for a detailed discussion of Casement's life story.

[28] Originally published in 1973 under the title, *A Mug's Game: Intermittent Memoirs 1924-1954* (Manchester, UK: Carcanet Press, 1973), Michael Hamburger's memoir was reissued in 1991 as *String of Beginnings: Intermittent Memoirs 1924-1954* (London, UK: Skoob Books, 1991). Rather than as a sequel, the second edition is limited in scope compared to the original edition.

grandfather's pair of budgerigars, when the entire family powerlessly witnessed their impoundment by British customs and never saw them again (177). The birds' disappearance also "marked the beginning of the disappearance of his Berlin childhood behind the new identity that he assumed little by little over the next decade" (177). In scanning the random and scarce memories he still possesses, Hamburger laments that very little "has remained in me of my native country" except for a few fragmented memories, which vaguely delineate his lost boyhood (177).

As stated in his memoir, Hamburger returned to post-war Berlin in 1947 in hopes of salvaging shards of his childhood memory before his emigration to Britain. Wandering about the ruined city "like a sleepwalker," Hamburger unexpectedly finds himself in front of the old flat where he lived and notes that the building "had escaped destruction absurdly, as it seemed to me" (178). As he enters the hallway, everything appears to have remained unchanged since the family emigrated. He feels that, as if "by some trifling mental exertion," he could "cancel the monstrous events," for instance, his grandmother Antonina having refused to leave with the family to England and "gone on that journey" (i.e., being transported to a concentration camp), and "reverse the entire course of history" such that his grandmother "would still be living in Kantstraße as before […] concerned about the wellbeing of her goldfish" (178). However much Hamburger is convinced that "[a]ll that was required was a moment of concentration, piecing together the syllables of the word concealed in the riddle, and everything would again be as it once was," he could "neither make out the word nor bring myself to mount the stairs and ring the bell of our old flat" (178-9).

Having left the building "with a sick feeling," Hamburger continues to walk aimlessly through the ruined city until coming upon "a cleared site where the bricks retrieved from the

ruins had been stacked" in a manner suggestive of "a token of expiation" possibly for the horrendous crime that Nazi perpetrators committed against the Jewish community, which resulted in the tragic loss of his grandmother (179). As Hamburger reflects in his memoir, this desolate place does not have a single human being present but "only bricks, millions of bricks, a rigorously perfected system of bricks reaching in serried ranks as far as the horizon, and above them the Berlin November sky from which presently the snow would come swirling down" (179). Faced with such "a deathly silent image of the onset of winter," Hamburger believes that he can hear the Freischütz overture played by a gramophone" (179). The image of an empty site filled with "bricks retrieved from the ruins" in a desolate landscape can carry the memoirist into the preparatory stage of remembering, but the memories thereby reconstructed are bound to be as unreliable as those which "may have originated in a hallucination" (179).

As Sebald's narrator informs us, Hamburger writes elsewhere that the retrieval of his childhood memories can occur in another setting, which is "reminiscent partly of the metropolis of Berlin and partly of rural Suffolk" (179). At one time, from an upstairs window of his English residence, instead of the familiar view of the Suffolk countryside featuring marshes and willows, Hamburger sees "from several hundred yards up, acres and acres of allotment gardens bisected by a road, straight as an arrow, down which black taxi cabs speed out of the city in the direction of the Wannsee" (179-80).[29] The memoirist's perception of looking down on his native city leads his mind to travel further to an unclear destination. Only hours later is he able to grasp that he returns from a long journey to his grandparents' flat in Berlin rather than his Middleton house in

[29] As Hamburger writes in his memoir, his grandfather had a villa in a village near the Wannsee (Hamburger, *A Mug's Game*, 16-7). Wannsee is also the lake at which Nazi leaders met in Jan 1942 to plan the "Final Solution," which was their code name for the systematic murder of European Jews. I am indebted to Mark Richard McCulloh for this knowledge. See Mark Richard McCulloh, *Understanding W. G. Sebald* (Columbia, S. C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 73.

rural Britain. Although his relatives and friends, both living and dead in his lifetime, all gather here, Hamburger feels that, strangely "[u]nseen by them," he walks through their midst until "at the far end of an imperceptibly sloping corridor, I come to the unheated drawing room," in which he sees his father, his grandmother, and through the window, "far off, […] a Silesian landscape" (181). It is at this very moment that he hears his father say, "[t]his is Myslowitz, a place somewhere in Poland" (181).[30] In such manner, the resplendent "Silesian landscape" outside the window offers an important conduit for Hamburger to establish certain key memories and to connect with his Jewish heritage in Poland.

Hamburger's latent, overlooked, and erased revelation is short-lived and dissipates as he sees "the white vapour that had carried his [father's] words lingering in the ice-cold air" (181). In replicating the image of a "vapour trail," which Sebald's hospitalized narrator notices from his framed window in the opening chapter of *Rings* and believes to be "the beginning of a fissure that has since riven my life" (c. 1, 18), the lingering "white vapour" here likewise precipitates Hamburger's departure from a certain manner of looking and remembering to another transitory state of mind. Reminiscent of the recollections of his chance-encounter with the brick-filled site during his visit to post-war Berlin in 1947, the view outside the window as Hamburger envisions Germany in his British residence appears to be a site of instability. The reason why "in reality […] memory fails us," as Hamburger contemplates, is that "[t]oo many buildings have fallen down, too much rubble has been heaped up, the moraines and deposits are insuperable" (177). Therefore, his effort to remember the past following any occurrence of "a shift in our spiritual life" produces "merely phantasms, delusions" (177).

[30] According to Hamburger's memoir, his father was born in "Upper Silesia, where his father was a school teacher in a small town or village called Myslowitz." (Hamburger, *A Mug's Game*, 8).

Given Hamburger's life experiences, the difficulty in retrieving his childhood memories may largely be ascribed to the dilemma of his identity as a German-born Jewish man. On the one hand, Hamburger yearns for a sense of belonging to his native country for the purpose of restoring a stable personal identity, which he had lost in the course of emigration.[31] On the other, the monstrosity of the events that occurred during WWII, such as the deportation and death of his beloved grandmother, looms over him to the extent that he is nearly paralyzed to remember and articulate events from his own childhood. For this reason, the fragments of memory that Hamburger has searched for and collected to rebuild his Berlin childhood can only constitute "a darkened background with a grey smudge in it, a slate pencil drawing, some unclear numbers and letters in a gothic script, blurred and half wiped away with a damp rag" (177-8).

Paradoxically enough, it is exactly this "vestigial image" – neither of the ruins themselves nor their original image, but the remaining trace thereof – that propels Hamburger to return repeatedly to the site of destruction in hopes of making whole his broken remembrance of the traumatic event. The blurred after-image is of particular relevance to the repeated failures that Sebald's narrator experiences while engaging in his intertextual metempsychosis. Whether Chateaubriand's romantic betrayal of Charlotte while exiled to Suffolk during the French Revolution, the subjugation and exploitation by European colonizers of African natives that Conrad witnesses, or the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of Jews by the Nazi regime that destroys Hamburger's family. Each of Sebald's attempts to redeem memories of those suffering victims, across time and space, achieves nothing in the end but a blurred trace of

[31] In his interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Sebald speaks of the "Jewish-German assimilation" by reference to a close identification between the Jewish population and the topography of the country, through their surnames, such as Frankfurt, Hamburger, or Wiener. Sebald remarks that since they were, in a way, identified with these places, "[i]t must have been extremely hard for them to abandon all this and to forget about it." See Eleanor Wachtel, "Ghost Hunter," *The Emergence of Memory*, 47.

memory that carries a lingering and affective resonance. Interestingly, this phenomenon is literalized in the present world "shrouded in some peculiar mystery" in Chateaubriand's eye, "the unchanging haze […] hung over the river" in Conrad's novel, or the "darkened background with a grey smudge" that haunts Hamburger's mind (255, 121).

In fact, it is Sebald's narrator who should be held accountable for his unsuccessful experiments to acquire the "mysterious capacity for transmigration" in his textual universe. In his intertextual engagements, the narrator deliberately teases out and amplifies the absences and ambivalences – in an implicit but decided fashion – in the original accounts of history. Moreover, he encourages the reader to suspect that it may well be the writers' unstable subjectivities – either latent, emerging, or already manifest in their written reminiscences – which lead to the deferred redemption of their memory. Such a heightened sense of how the writer's subjectivity determines the adequacy and accuracy of his memory not only guides the narrator through the process of reading but also proves central to his own practices of remembering and writing. This is particularly evidenced in his recuperative restaging of the European colonization of the Congo, which is preceded by his failed attempt to resurrect intertextually the colonial account in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. On the one hand, the narrator supplements his literary precursor's written remembrance with a wealth of historical materials he has read; on the other hand, the narrator refrains from privileging his alternative version that would cause it to replace the existing narrative and would impede further reflection. By admitting that his understanding of history is only personal and partial, the narrator seeks to repeat a kind of indeterminacy: namely, a stylistic antidote to the ultimate impossibility of historical understanding.

III. “The Melancholy of the Weavers”

As an astute observer of history, Thomas Browne speaks through Sebald’s narrator in *Rings* that “the history of every individual, of every social order, indeed of the whole world, does not describe an ever-widening, more and more wonderful arc, but rather follows a course which, once the meridian is reached, leads without fail down into the dark” (24). The only antidote to the fear of the eventual “descent into the dark,” Browne reckons, is that “the superior ingredient and obscured part of our selves […] will be able at last to tell us we are more than our present selves.”[32] He envisions, “the day of resurrection, when, as in a theatre, the last revolutions are ended and the actors appear once more on stage, to complete and make up the catastrophe of this great piece” (24). It should not escape our notice that Sebald’s narrator shares Browne’s view of the fatal process of history, and yet, he dissociates from an eschatological expectation of the transmigration of souls and reincarnation. In his interview with Sarah Kafatou, Sebald considers the idea of a pupa transforming into a beautiful butterfly, which emblematizes the soul’s conversion upon resurrection and ascension, as “rather trite. To me the really wonderful thing about these insects is the way they perish.”[33] From this perspective, within the world outlined by Browne as operating in accordance with a “continuous process of consuming and being consumed,” it is the basic phenomenon of death that fascinates Sebald’s narrator – i.e., “nothing endures, […] [o]n every new thing there lies already the shadow of annihilation” (23-4).

The narrator proceeds to introduce Baldanders, an enigmatic figure originally mentioned by Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen in his novel, *The Adventures of Simplicius Simplicissimus* (1669), and included in Borges’ collection of tales, *El Libro de los Seres Imaginarios* (The Book of Imaginary Beings, 1957). Aptly indicated by its name, “Soon-

[32] Browne, *Religio Medici and Urne-Buriall*, 131.
[33] Sarah Kafatou, “An Interview with W. G. Sebald,” *Harvard Review* (Fall 1998), 35.

another" or "At-any-moment-something-else,"[34] Baldanders embodies "the mutability of all worldly concerns": it can vary from "a stone sculpture lying in a forest," to "a scribe" who writes lines which the narrator includes in an image in the text,[35] and then to "a mighty oak, a sow, a sausage, a piece of excrement, a field of clover, a white flower, a mulberry tree, and a silk carpet" (23). Although it remains unclear whether this ever-morphing creature's transformation is random or not and why it transforms into what it does, each of its mutations illustrates a self-destructive act, which, paradoxically, promises a future iteration.

In fact, the similarity of a destructive tendency to a creative act reverberates throughout Sebald's text. For instance, the Ashbury sisters, who live on a neglected family estate in Ireland, painstakingly sew great quantities of remnant fabrics together but, shortly afterward, undo what they have produced. Reflecting on their efforts of constantly reworking varied fabrics into a piece of art, it is possible, as the narrator surmises, that "in their imagination they envisaged something of such extraordinary beauty that the work they completed invariably disappointed them" (c. 8, 212). As a counterpart to the Ashbury sisters, Thomas Abrams, a local farmer, engages in a decades-long project of constructing an accurate model of the Temple of Jerusalem (c. 9). Accompanied by his "increasingly accurate knowledge" about the Temple's architectural details, which he has drawn from extensive and ongoing research, this work is destined never to be completed, as it must be subject to further revision in order to adhere to his ambition for creating "the impression of being true to life" (245). Abrams' assemblage of knowledge can

[34] Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: Penguin Books, 1974), 26.

[35] The lines in the image read: „Ich bin der Anfang und das End und gelte an allen Orthen." ("I am the beginning and the end, and I am valid everywhere.") In her essay, Theisen points out that this sentence offers the instruction for decoding a secret message by taking the first and the last letter of each word in sequence. The deciphered text reads as a warning about the verisimilitudes of truth: "You may yourself imagine how each thing fared and then discourse about it and believe whatever seems like the truth, then you have what your foolish curiosity desires." See Theisen, "A Natural History of Destruction," 566-7.

further be correlated to the office of a dedicated Flaubertian scholar, Janine Dakyns (the narrator's late colleague), in which an ever-increasing mass of lecture notes, letters, and miscellaneous documents constitutes "a virtual paper landscape" (c. 1, 8). Although "the apparent chaos surrounding her" intensifies along with the continuous "evolution of [this] paper universe," Dakyns conceives of it as representing "a perfect kind of order, or an order which at least tended towards perfection" (9). Interestingly, all the figures discussed – whether an artisan, a craftsman, or a scholar – share the melancholic disposition of "the angel in Dürer's Melancholia, steadfast among the instruments of destruction" (9). While their ambitious projects are bound to be nowhere near completion – whether the Ashbury sisters' hand-sewn artworks, Abrams' replica of the Temple, or the order of materials inside Janine's office – they are invariably generated by a repetitive process of creation and destruction, which places them on an infinite trajectory toward perfection.

Most of the literary figures that Sebald's narrator brings to his text possess a melancholic temperament – for instance, Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909), an accomplished poet of the Victorian age. In lieu of a thwarted hope from his early youth of "dying a hero's death" on a battlefield, Swinburne "devote[s] himself unreservedly to literature […] to a no less radical form of self-destruction" (163). During his late years, Swinburne lived in the countryside to recover from his long-standing mental strain. The elderly poet, as one of his visitors describes, appears as if he were "the ashy grey silkworm, Bombyx mori" (165). The narrator foregrounds the physical fragility of the poet, who "eke[s] out [a] pallid afterlife," not to elicit a sympathetic reading of Swinburne but to point to the fact that the poet, after "munch[ing] his way through his food bit by bit," would slip into a snooze after the meal, then "abruptly awoke to new life, convulsed with electric energy, and, flapping his hands flitted about his library, like a startled moth" (165). The

physical transformation of the silkworm into a moth is thus commensurate with the poet's intellectual rebirth, as both moth and poet base their creative capacity (for silk production and poetic creation, respectively) on a radical proneness to self-destruction.

Unlike Swinburne's poetry, whose objective was mainly to rebel against the conservative values of his time, Sebald's curious and concerning eye is constantly directed toward the past. As the narrator's voice drops into that of Chateaubriand, he meditates on the importance of retrieving memories in general, declaring, "what would we be without memory? We would not be capable of ordering even the simplest thoughts, the most sensitive heart would lose the ability to show affection, our existence would be a mere never-ending chain of meaningless moments, and there would not be the faintest trace of a past" (255). For Chateaubriand (and Sebald's narrator), "writing is the only way in which I am able to cope with the memories" even if they "overwhelm me so frequently and so unexpectedly" (255). Notably, compared to Chateaubriand's regard for memory, on which one's personal identity or sense of selfhood is primarily founded, Sebald expands his horizon so much so that a history, from an individual to the global scale, can be encompassed and explored.

Sebald's persistent, laborious attempts at a remembrance and restitution of history stem largely from his ethical consciousness of the unspoken legacies of historical violence consistent across time and space and from a sense of responsibility to redeem them from oblivion. Returning to Borges' story of "Tlön," Sebald's narrator relates toward the end of the story that "[t]he labyrinthine construction of Tlön […] is on the point of blotting out the known world" by superseding history and nearly every other branch of learning (70-1). Rather than defying Tlön's invasion, which seeks to "invent secondary or tertiary worlds," the narrator retreats from it: "[i]n the peace and quiet of my country villa I continue to hone my tentative translation, schooled on

Quevedo, of Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial* (which I do not mean to publish)" (69, 71). Critically, this very "tentativeness" specific to the narrator' translation, as it is subject to refining revision, animates and sustains a sense of indeterminacy that enables readers to recognize the lacunae in our knowledge of history, limit crises while we reconstruct our memory, and thereby withstand the temptation offered by the fascist order Tlön, which promises a decisive answer that would probably lead to a fatal error.

As elaborated in this chapter's discussion, the narrator's practice of commemorating and grieving losses produces nothing close to a definite account of how victims have suffered historic catastrophes. Rather, the narrator's commemoration invokes a blurred, haunting trace of memory. For Sebald, it is precisely this vexing feeling, or a deep sense of poignancy when facing a failed "working-through," that can ensure the continuance of memory. In his *Mourning and Melancholia,* Freud describes the natural process of mourning as a successful transfer, investment, and establishment of the subject's ego-attachments from the deceased person to a new object of affection. Melancholy, conversely, indicates the failure of the subject's ego to transfer his libidinal attachment from the lost object to a new and present object.[36] In short, the libidinal object lost by the mourner has been internalized in the melancholic subject rather than being externalized in an outside object as in the case of the mourner. In the case of the writings about catastrophic events in history, the mourner at the end of the process of mourning can fully comprehend, identify, and accept the finality of the loss. Contrarily, such an acceptance of an ultimate closure, pieced together from fragmented memories into a coherent narrative, would be regarded by the melancholic subject, Sebald's narrator for example, as ethically insufficient. In longing for an otherwise irrecuperable past, the melancholic would retain his fixated gaze on that

[36] See Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *Modern Classics Penguin Freud Reader*, trans. Adam Phillips (London: Penguin Classic, 2006), 310-26.

past and mindfully trace the past through masses of ruins, all the while suspecting that "the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered.[37] The melancholy temperament, which allows the memorializing writer to repeat and progress, thus amounts to a counterforce against "[t]he iniquity of oblivion [that] blindly scatters her poppyseed" (24).

Additionally, it should be kept in view that the melancholic disposition proves to be as conducive to memorializing an individual loss as it is to a collective loss, regardless of the social classes, eras, or cultures of the deceased. From the Dowager Empress' last words on her deathbed – "Looking back, […] history consists of nothing but misfortune and the troubles that afflict us, so that in all our days on earth we never know one single moment that is genuinely free of fear"[38] – to Chateaubriand's lamentation in his memoir that "the highlights of history […] [stagger] blindly from one disaster to the next," these expressions of profound grief, invoked at various points and places in history, are in accordance with a darkened view that "our history […] is but a long account of calamities" (153, 256, 295). Consequently, the ethical and aesthetic

[37] Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 72.

[38] As opposed to the narrator's earlier characterization of the Dowager Empress Tz'u-hsi as a power-hungry, greedy, cunning, and ruthless ruler, under whose reign millions of people died of starvation and exhaustion during the great drought, and the Taiping rebels suffered cruel oppression, her lamentation here invites a different reading, that the Empress could similarly undergo pain and suffering. To name a few elements of her life: having been widowed at a young age, the Empress' only birth-child, T'ung-chih, died of smallpox at the age of nineteen. Her adopted son, Kuang-hsu (her nephew), after coming to the throne, gradually estranged from and eventually opposed her under the influence of the reform movement. As a female in the male-dominated court, the Empress' ascent to power evidently challenged patriarchal norms at the time, and her opinions often faced belittlement from male aristocrats and officials. She was a Manchu – an ethnic minority viewed by the Han majority as invaders – and the intense hostility between the two ethnic groups had long induced the Empress' fear of being conquered by the Han Chinese. Finally, as the paramount ruler of China, the Empress felt powerless to reverse the empire's decline in the face of heavily armed foreign powers. In this light, the Empress' life can be considered a pivot that links various misfortunes and troubles, due to which she knew not "one single moment that is genuinely free of fear" in her life. By presenting such conflicting views of the Empress, Sebald challenges the reader to reflect on any one-sided understanding of this historical figure. See more about the Empress' life story in Marina Warner's biography of her, a book which Sebald read while composing *Rings*. Marina Warner, *The Dragon Empress: the Life and Times of Tz'u-hsi, Empress Dowager of China, 1835-1908* (New York: Macmillan, 1972). The first biography of the Empress, J. O. P. Bland and E. Backhouse's *China under the Empress Dowager* (London: W. Heinemann, 1910) is also worth noting. While the book's historical integrity is questioned due to some forged diaries, it not only established western readers' initial view of the Empress as a demon but also exerted an outsized influence on Chinese historical scholarship. Both factors contribute to shaping our present-day negative image of the Empress.

demands of bearing witness to a collective truth of history that are imposed on the narrator become so intense that his resuscitative act of writing turns into a tortuous production.

With respect to the task of recapitulating memories for those afflicted with the talent of a writer, Sebald's narrator adopts Chateaubriand's perspective that witnessing the "interminable play performed upon the world's stage […] [takes] its toll on the privileged observer no less than on the nameless masses" (256). Accordingly, the chronicler, "who was present at these events and is once more recalling what he witnessed, inscribes his experiences, in an act of self-mutilation, onto his own body" (257). Such a bleak view of writing as an extremely arduous pursuit is elucidated by a parallel that the narrator draws between Huguenot weavers (the operators of silk looms in the eighteenth century) and writers: both share a common tendency "to suffer from melancholy and all the evils associated with it" (283). This is understandable "given the nature of their work, which forced them to sit bent over, day after day, straining to keep their eye on the complex patterns they created" (283).[39] Both are also frequently driven into the depths of despair, fearing that "they have got hold of the wrong thread" – the thread which would have impeded the artistic goal for the weavers' artworks and the possibility for the writer to provide a faithful, full account of a history fraught with violence and suffering.

Sebald's narrator ends the book on a decidedly melancholy note by linking back to Browne, the son of a silk merchant, who mentioned a funerary custom in the Holland of his time: "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" (296). In so doing,

[39] In his essay on Rousseau, Sebald states that "[o]f all the individuals afflicted with the disease of thought, […] the writer is perhaps the most incurable." See W. G. Sebald, *A Place in the Country*, trans. Jo Catling (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2013), 54. In his interview with Christopher Bigsby, Sebald also remarks that "people who tend to have rather blithe views of life often consider that writing is a form of self-therapy. I don't particularly think so. Rather, I believe the more you turn your mind towards things the more difficult it gets." See Christopher Bigsby, *Writers in Conversation* (Norwich: Arthur Miller Centre, 2000), 145.

"the soul, as it left the body, would not be distracted on its final journey, either by a reflection of itself or by a last glimpse of the land now being lost for ever" (296). The reference to mourning crepe recalls the narrator's question while reflecting on the Patroclus's scrap of silk – "what does it mean?" – which was raised at the outset and left lingering throughout the text. Browne's account seems to have answered this question by providing a comforting closure to an individual's pilgrimage through life. However, a final irony occurs: this reference to the soul's flight to heaven is included in "a passage […] that I can no longer find" in Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, a collection of common errors and mistaken beliefs (296). As the narrator concludes the book with an allusion to a superstition from an unidentifiable source, the image of the mourning silk hung over the mirror serves as a poignantly inspiring reminder for the departing souls – even on their final journey – of the irreducible complexity of what we term "history."

# Coda

## Walks Revisited

In her book *Wanderlust*, Rebecca Solnit ends her study of the history of walking by invoking a Benjaminian metaphor that lies at the center of this dissertation's critical method and its interpretive ethics: "Walking has been one of the constellations in the starry sky of human culture, […] whose three stars are the body, the imagination, and the wide-open world, and though all three exist independently, it is the lines drawn between them – drawn by the act of walking for cultural purposes – that makes them a constellation. Constellations are not natural phenomena but cultural impositions; the lines drawn between stars are like paths worn by the imagination of those who have gone before. This constellation called walking has a history, […] but whether it has a future depends on whether those connecting paths are traveled still."[1] By acknowledging the deep cultural roots of walking and its role as both a poetic and historical practice, Solnit's final words call her readers to action: keep walking, lest the intimate links between body, mind, and world be lost. In this light, both contemporary walking narratives explored in this dissertation – Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* and W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* – answer Solnit's call by serving as textual testing grounds for practices of wandering and wondering, opening new routes through which to encounter landscapes and literature, and inspiring spectral conversations that illuminate new points of entry into past and present, world and word.

[1] Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 290-1.

From 2020 to the present, Sebald's four major novels – *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn*, and *Austerlitz* – and his poetry collection, *After Nature*, have been successively translated in Chinese and published by Guangxi Normal University Press. Among Sebald's four novels, *Rings* has been received most engagingly by Chinese readers as a literary endeavor that teases out a history of death and destruction. Sebald has thus earned a high acclaim in China as a conscientious writer, who sought to condemn the oppressor and salvage memories of the oppressed groups of people throughout history. The reason behind Sebald's favorable reception in China is likely provoked by the sheer absence of profound reflection on (and proper representation of) major historical events in contemporary China – be they the invasion of the Eight-Nation Alliance, the second Sino-Japanese War, the civil war, and political upheaval and social unrests that immediately followed. Perceivably, it is the unsatisfied curiosity about historical truth in general and unsanctioned freedom to articulate their compassion for the victims (particularly in social events after the civil war) that drive Chinese readers to project their subjective world onto the literary space created by a foreign writer.

Given the literary control and strictures on publication in China, about which the censorship of Gao's *Soul Mountain* and his obscure status as a writer speak volumes, the tendency to moralize Sebald's works, common among Chinese readers, is certainly understandable. In the meantime, receptions of Sebald's work prompt us to further reflect on the possibilities of critical engagement. One of Sebald's committed readers, Grant Gee, conducts a captivating experiment on literary reception through his documentary film, *Patience: After Sebald*, in which he retraces Sebald's walking routes in *Rings* in search of those spectral sights, uncanny affinities, and textual connections that Sebald's text seeks to illuminate. Remarkably, Gee refrains from decoding or unraveling Sebald's writing in order to offer an authoritative or

evaluative reading. On the contrary, with "patience," he preserves the entire process of grappling with a literary text in his film by leaving ample room for feelings of frustration and fascination, confusion and revelation, as legitimate responses to the literary text. In an attempt to challenge the traditional manner of literary reception, which frequently drives toward coherence and closure, Gee's reading activates various alternative interpretations to interact with Sebald's work without forcing it into any rigid interpretive framework and opens *Rings* to further intellectual and emotional considerations. Gee's documentary, therefore, exemplifies a critical method of receiving a literary text also in the spirit of walking. Rather than persisting in searching out a singular "correct" route toward a preset destination, Gee's work operates as a point of departure for discovering a multiplicity of unexpected encounters and connections.

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## Appendix

Fig. 1 (*RS*, 54)

Fig. 2 (*RS*, 57)

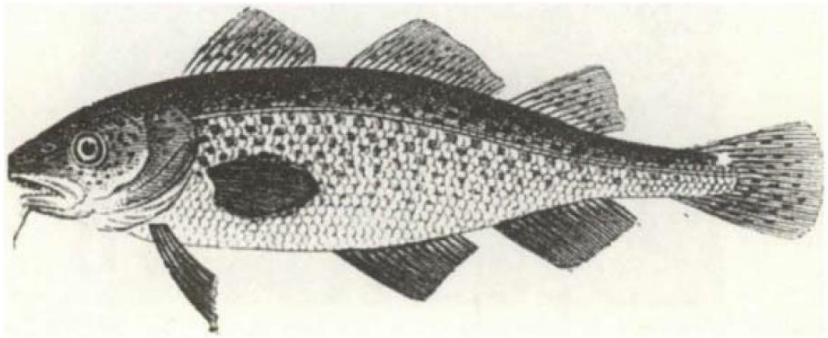
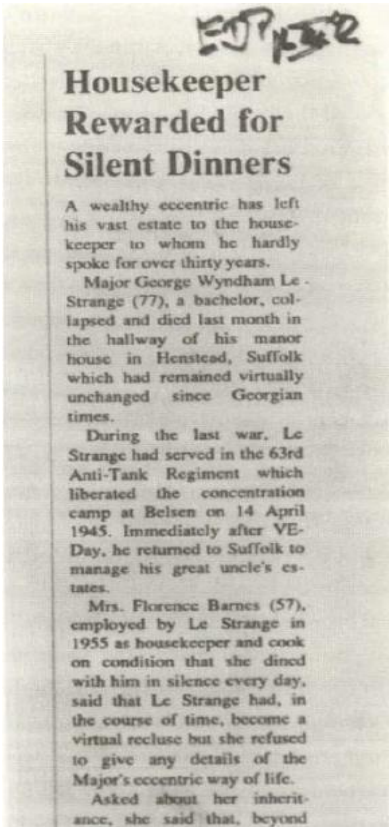


Fig. 3 (*RS*, 58)

Fig. 4 (*RS*, 63)



## Housekeeper Rewarded for Silent Dinners

A wealthy eccentric has left his vast estate to the housekeeper to whom he hardly spoke for over thirty years.

Major George Wyndham Le Strange (77), a bachelor, collapsed and died last month in the hallway of his manor house in Henstead, Suffolk which had remained virtually unchanged since Georgian times.

During the last war, Le Strange had served in the 63rd Anti-Tank Regiment which liberated the concentration camp at Belsen on 14 April 1945. Immediately after VE-Day, he returned to Suffolk to manage his great uncle's estates.

Mrs. Florence Barnes (57), employed by Le Strange in 1955 as housekeeper and cook on condition that she dined with him in silence every day, said that Le Strange had, in the course of time, become a virtual recluse but she refused to give any details of the Major's eccentric way of life.

Asked about her inheritance, she said that, beyond

Fig. 5 (*RS*, 60-1)

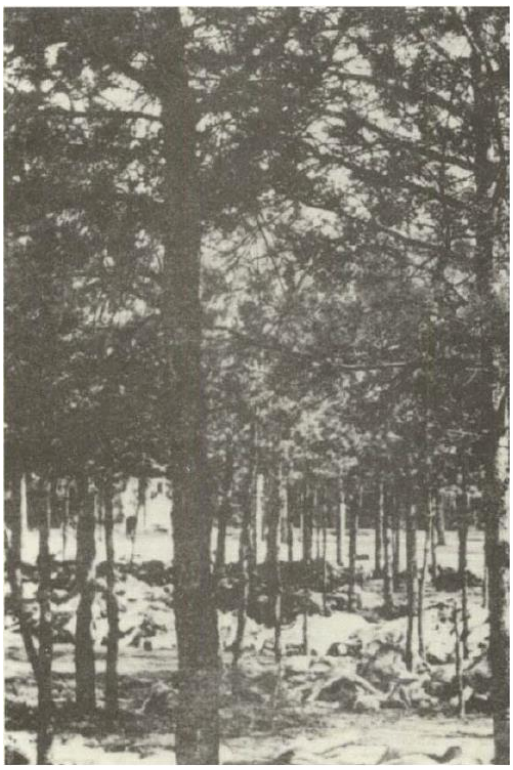


Fig. 6 (*RS*, 20)

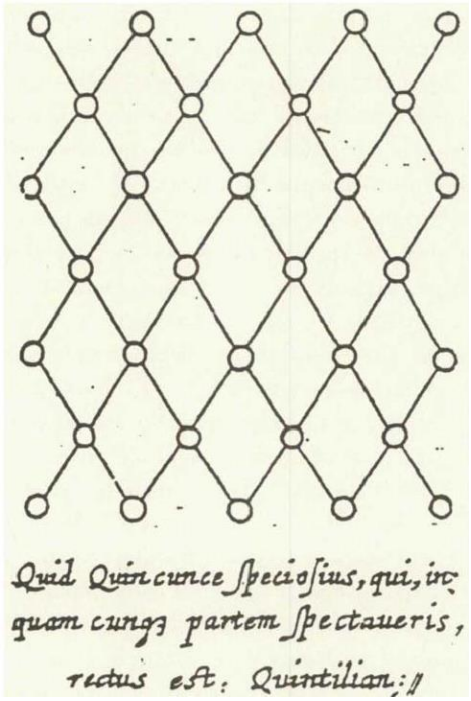



Fig. 7 (*RS*, 4)

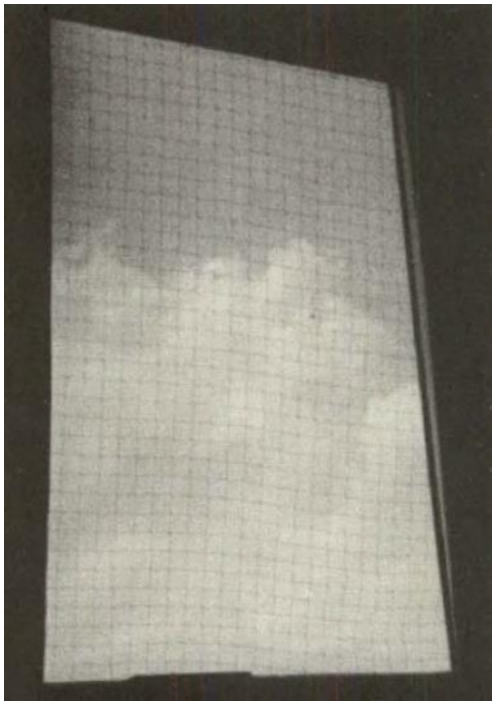


Fig. 8 (*RS*, 37)

Fig. 9 (*RS*, 91)

Fig. 10 (*RS*, 183)

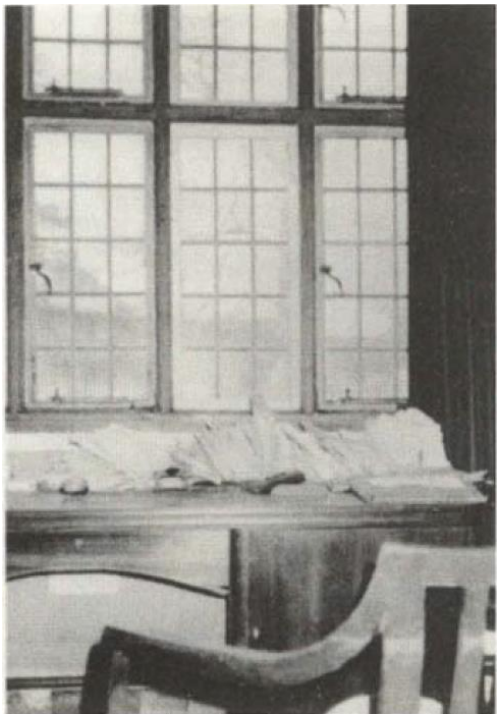


Fig. 11 (*RS*, 184)

Fig. 12 (*RS*, 97)