

NARRATIVE AS COMPLICITY
ATROCITY, CULPABILITY, AND FAILURES OF
WITNESSING IN W. G. SEBALD AND KAZUO
ISHIGURO

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the nature of complicity and its relationship to narrative in the novels of W. G. Sebald and Kazuo Ishiguro. The effects of atrocity have been addressed in a significant body of scholarship which focusses on victimhood and trauma; a strand of work identifying and examining representations of perpetrators is also emerging. However, comparatively little research exists on the representation of complicity, a central concern of both Sebald and Ishiguro, in literary texts. This thesis therefore seeks to address the ways in which complicity originates, and, drawing on the attempts to theorise witnessing and testimony conducted by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, the ways in which narrative may act to perpetuate or deny such complicities.

The thesis examines complicity on three levels. Firstly, it identifies the ways in which the authors' choice of protagonists permits an examination of complicity. Both Sebald and Ishiguro employ narrators who occupy intermediate positions, being subject to history, but possessing sufficient agency to contribute to the discourses and structures that shape the historical forces out of which atrocity grows. The use of first person narration also makes visible a second form of complicity, which is that of the protagonists' denials of culpability. Both writers are concerned with the way in which narrative may deny or obfuscate culpability in historical events, and their use of first person narration allows them to explore this potential. Finally, I argue that both authors display an awareness that complicity may be entered into through the acts of reading and interpretation, and as a result they employ narrative form to encourage reflexive and critical modes of reading, which in turn promote engagement with narrative as an ethical mode of witnessing.

Chapters One and Two examine Sebald's novel-length works, identifying the ways in which postwar subjects find themselves implicated in, and contributing to, the systems and discourses which have contributed to atrocity and suffering. In particular, I contend that Sebald is concerned with complicities embedded in all forms of representation, and that as a result he employs his narrating personae in ways that subvert and challenge hegemonic discourses. Chapters Three and Four trace the movement in Ishiguro's work from generally realist modes towards increasingly imaginative forms. I argue that the form of his narratives creates the potential for the reader to enter into empathic complicity with his protagonists, but that Ishiguro's

foregrounding of the act of inscription acts as a deterrent against such readings, hence encouraging a critical and ethical means of engaging with the texts.

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INTRODUCTION

The last three decades have seen a growing concern with memory, both in its commodification in popular culture and in academic scholarship.¹ If this ‘memory boom’ is manifest in a compulsion to look back, particularly to the limit-case events of the twentieth century, it has also involved an attendant ‘crisis of memory’, whereby the nature of recollection itself has been called into question.² Literary fiction has played its part in both of these trends, with writing both seeking to bear witness to historical atrocity while at the same time questioning the very means by which such witnessing can take place.

This thesis examines the novel-length works of W. G. Sebald (1944-2001) and Kazuo Ishiguro (1954-), both of whose work represents the inscription of memory while displaying unease with the nature of that inscription. Traumatic histories and atrocities, and in particular the events of the Second World War, figure heavily in their novels. However, as second generation writers,³ their concern is not solely the representation of the past; what comes to the fore in their writing is the way in which the knowledge of the past is transmitted and recorded. Each writer employs distinctive modes by which the acts of memory and forgetting are always visible in these narratives. Sebald’s texts, punctuated by grainy photographs and told through layers of narration, draw attention to the collection and assembly of stories about the past, and bring into question their value as evidence. Ishiguro’s style is likewise highly recognisable: his use of first person, retrospective narration characteristically betrays the self-deception of his narrators. As a result, his narratives carry a sense of the unreliable and biased nature of memory.

¹ Kerwin Lee Klein, ‘On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse’, *Representations*, 69 (2000), 127-50 (p. 127).

² Debates around the nature of memory have drawn attention to the political aspects of remembrance with Richard Terdiman, for example, arguing for the need to reconnect how we remember with how we interpret; similarly, Andreas Huyssen claims that ‘at stake in the current history/memory debate is not only a disturbance in our notions of the past, but a fundamental crisis in our imagination of alternative futures’. Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 346; Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 2.

³ Born during the war, Sebald can be classified as a member of what Susan Rubin Suleiman calls the ‘1.5 generation’. Regardless of such distinctions, however, Sebald’s writing displays an anxiety with transmission and mediation for one situated at a remove from the historical events that he seeks to represent. Susan Rubin Suleiman, ‘The 1.5 Generation: Thinking About Child Survivors and the Holocaust’, *American Imago*, 59 (2002), 277-95.

In selecting Sebald and Ishiguro as the focus of this thesis, I claim that their work is particularly important in its treatment of the issue of complicity. There has been an increasing shift in interest from the representation of victims to perpetrators in fiction and in its reception, and within this there have been increasingly nuanced attempts to address the issue of the morality of perpetrators.⁴ However, Sebald and Ishiguro are distinctive in that perpetrators and victims do not generally play a central role in their novels, and in some cases are almost entirely absent. Their first person narrators are academics, artists and professionals, and are thus generally situated within (as well as being products of) the hegemonic discourses that, their writing suggests, have in fact given rise to the atrocities at the core of these narratives.⁵ The complicity of these protagonists is thus not so much in their actions – they are not generally in the position to act as perpetrators – but in their failure to bear witness to events, that is, to construct narratives that acknowledge the full extent of their own and others’ culpability in the suffering of others.

These failures are thus related to the uses of narrative and representation, and, in this thesis, I argue that Sebald and Ishiguro address the relationship between narrative and complicity on three levels. The first of these levels is in their representation of culpability on the part of their protagonists. Acting at a remove from the centre of historical events, these protagonists nevertheless contribute, often in small ways, to the perpetration of atrocity or, more often, to the perpetuation of the discourses and systems of thought which help to create and justify these atrocities. It is in the relationship between discourse and action that narrative is related to complicity, with the stories that the characters believe and want to tell about the world influencing the ways in which they act.

⁴ For example, Stuart Taberner and Karina Berger write of the revelation of Günther Grass’s membership of the *Waffen SS* that it raises ‘the notion that it might be possible to be both complicit in the regime but also a victim of its brutalization, of circumstances at the time, or even of foolish self-deception’. Sebald’s essay ‘Air War and Literature’, also triggered a significant amount of debate on the status of Germans as victim. Examples of recent fictions which address German perpetrators include Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader* and Rachel Seiffert’s *The Dark Room*. Stuart Taberner and Karina Berger, ‘Introduction’, *Germans as Victims in the Literary Fiction of the Berlin Republic*, ed. by Stuart Taberner and Karina Berger (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2009), pp. 1-14 (pp. 3-4, 8); W. G. Sebald, ‘Air War and Literature’, in *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. by Anthea Bell, (London: Random House, 2004), pp. 1-105; Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, trans. by Carol Brown Janeway (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997); Rachel Seiffert, *The Dark Room* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2001).

⁵ The possibility of writing from minority or subaltern positions has been offered as a defence of postmodern writing, but the intermediate positions of Sebald’s and Ishiguro’s narrators places them in contrast with this trend. See Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, *Literatures of Memory: History, Time and Space in Postwar Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 77.

The second level of complicity is related to the distance from events at which the protagonists remember and write. Sebald's and Ishiguro's work also contains the sense that narrative itself may become a form of complicity, which has the capacity to carry out retrospective exculpations: not only do their characters tend to be guilty of such revisionist manoeuvres, but through self-reflexive and metafictional gestures, Sebald and Ishiguro also subject their own novels to this suspicion. Debates around the representation of perpetrators tend to centre on the limits of empathy for such fictional characters,⁶ but, while questions of empathy and morality arise in Sebald and Ishiguro due to their use of protagonists who are complicit with atrocity, their novels are, I suggest, more concerned with the kinds of stories that are told about the past, and the ways in which these stories are used to justify or hide these complicities.

The reflexive manoeuvres to which I have alluded above produce an awareness of a third level of complicity, which is that of the potential for reading to become a form of alignment with the same discourses which the texts hold up to scrutiny and which are shown to be culpable. I argue that these novels, by making visible the process of inscription as being inseparable from the act of interpretation, break down the distance between reading and writing. As such, they indicate ways in which interpretation, and hence reading, can enter into complicitous relationships with narrative. In particular, genre and related narrative forms can carry in them certain values and assumptions which contain their own biases and blind spots. I argue that both Sebald and Ishiguro alert us to this possibility, but warn us against it.

The potential for writing and reading to become aligned with the same discourses that have produced atrocity means that, with increasing layers of mediation, the potential for complicity increases. Combined with the way in which Sebald and Ishiguro problematize the boundaries between the categories of perpetrator and victim,⁷ attending instead to more widely applicable shades of culpability, their writing produces

⁶ For example, see Taberner and Berger, 'Introduction', p. 4, and Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'When the Perpetrator Becomes a Reliable Witness of the Holocaust: On Jonathan Littell's *Les bienveillants*', *New German Critique*, 31 (2009), 1-19 (p. 2).

⁷ Stephen Brockmann and Rebecca Walkowitz have both noted Sebald's inclusion of protagonists who can be seen as both perpetrators and victims in *The Rings of Saturn*; these are the Chinese dowager Empress Tz'u-hsi and Roger Casement respectively. Elsewhere, Walkowitz notes that, in Ishiguro's writing, 'no country looks like a victim or a perpetrator only'. Stephen Brockmann, 'W. G. Sebald and German Wartime Suffering', in *Germans as Victims in the Literary Fiction of the Berlin Republic*, ed. by Stuart Taberner and Karina Berger (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2009), pp. 15-28 (p.18); Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 109, 168.

a striking sense that the greater the distance from these historical epicentres, the greater the potential for complicity becomes. The traumatic nature of the past has often resulted in literary fiction which employs form to mimic, through fragmented and deformed narratives, the intrusive return of memory.⁸ However, Sebald and Ishiguro address the ongoing effects of suffering not through the representation of the psychological effects of trauma, but in the magnitude of its dissemination; a dissemination which, as I have suggested, may (and perhaps inevitably will) include the elisions and obfuscations by which later generations attempt to escape culpability.

The aim of this thesis is therefore to examine the nature and causes of complicity in the writing of Sebald and Ishiguro. In order to fulfil this aim, my textual readings will begin by focusing on the complicities of the protagonists, these primarily being the narrators. I identify their complicity as their failure in the role of the witness, and ask how and why failures of witnessing take place. This project also attempts to define, more broadly, the role that fiction can play as a mode of witnessing: it suggests that, through representing failures of witnessing as a form of complicity, Sebald and Ishiguro in fact undertake to make visible not only hidden aspects or effects of history, but the ways in which narrative and representation themselves are implicated in the effacement of these histories. As such, I address the modes of narration adopted by each writer, and argue that, while the creation of narrative form may be an act of complicity, form also creates the potential for complicity in interpretation, on the part of the reader; in this concern, I contend, lies the ethical thrust of both writers' projects.

This thesis first addresses Sebald's writing and then moves on to an analysis of Ishiguro's novels. I address Sebald's writing first, in Chapters One and Two, because of its use of testimony as part of its rhetorical mode. In doing so, I begin by building on the discussion of the relationship between testimony and fiction which follows in this introduction, examining the quasi-documentary style of Sebald's early texts, and describing the movement towards his more novelistic final work, *Austerlitz* (2001). Ishiguro's six novels to date all employ first person narration, generally from protagonists in some way implicated in atrocity. The exceptions to this trend are his first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), which describes the aftermath of the atomic attack

⁸ Roger Luckhurst argues that there is 'an implicit aesthetic for the trauma novel', which draws on traumatic dissociation, present in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*, Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments*, and Sebald's *Austerlitz*. Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 87.

on Nagasaki, and *The Unconsoled* (1995), a lengthy, dreamlike narrative set in an unnamed city in central Europe. Neither of these texts represents complicity, and as such they are omitted from this discussion. Complicity is a central concern of Ishiguro's four other novels, with his early writing employing recognisable historical referents; in his more recent writing these referents are not only effaced, but the whole mode of narrative turns away from historical verisimilitude towards fabulism.⁹ Where Sebald's writing allows an examination of the uses of testimonial features within fiction, Ishiguro's writing therefore suggests a role for fiction predicated on its imaginative possibilities.

In Chapter One, 'Omissions and Revisions', I discuss the effects of atrocity as witnessed from a generational distance in *Vertigo* (1999 [1990]) and *The Emigrants* (1996 [1992]). Integral to both narratives is a self-reflexive commentary on the nature of representation, in which the narrators signal the inadequacy both of the representations of history that they encounter and the representations that they themselves create. In particular, both texts suggest that representation and narrative tend to efface the specifics of past sufferings through omission and revision. These texts overwrite history in a way that is self-conscious and, at times, appears to be morally dubious. However, this overwriting has the ethical purpose of making visible the mediations by which knowledge of the past is transmitted into the present, and comes to be effaced or distorted in the process. I argue that *Vertigo*, in particular, adopts a sceptical stance towards any possibility of veraciously knowing or representing the past, and as a result the narrator adopts a position of resistance towards dominant discourses and modes of representation in an attempt to find an acceptable ethical stance from which the crimes of the past may be witnessed. In *The Emigrants*, the narrator's attempt to find an ethical form of witnessing is carried out by making visible the contingencies by which narratives of trauma and suffering have come to be collected by the narrator.

Chapter Two, 'Magnitudes of Suffering', discusses Sebald's later texts, *The Rings of Saturn* (1998 [1995]) and *Austerlitz*, in which atrocity features more explicitly. In these narratives, the effects of atrocity become more pervasive to the point of being all-consuming, although Sebald presents two different models by which this occurs. In

⁹ I use the term with Robert Scholes' definition in mind: 'modern fabulism [...] tends away from direct representation of the surface of reality but returns toward actual human life by means of ethically controlled fantasy'. Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana, Chicago and London: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 3.

The Rings of Saturn, the narrator's erudite gaze finds the traces of suffering in almost everything that he sees, and with this comes the knowledge of his own complicity with the systems and discourses out of which atrocities have been perpetuated. Notions of complicity and responsibility are thus radically expanded in both spatial and temporal terms; moving beyond categorisations predicated on direct involvement with atrocities, *The Rings of Saturn* sees history as process, and suggests the inevitability of degrees of complicity for those coming after. In *Austerlitz* the effects of atrocity are present in Jacques Austerlitz's trauma. The narrative therefore addresses the ongoing magnitude, across generations, of the effects of trauma on individual lives, although I suggest that the novel can also be read as a commentary on the way in which the Holocaust has entered into and acts upon cultural memory.

Chapter Three, 'The Consoled', discusses Ishiguro's second and third novels, *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), and *The Remains of the Day* (1989). Sharing a number of themes and narrative traits, these novels are often grouped together, with *A Pale View of Hills*, in criticism on Ishiguro. However, these similarities notwithstanding, the three novels also represent a gradual movement away from the traumatic historical referents on which the narratives centre and, in *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*, the historical referent of the Second World War becomes increasingly distant in each case. The protagonists' recollections are therefore subject to self-interested revisions more than they are to the effects of trauma. This is not to say that effects of atrocity are entirely absent from these later texts; but rather than being present in trauma or in the narrators' experiences, its effects can be traced in the domestic and social reconfigurations that follow the historical event. In both *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*, the narrators are presented as morally ambiguous, with the propriety of the language that they employ serving to elide or obfuscate their involvement and culpability in events that have taken place. Instead, they are generally more concerned with constructing narratives of continuity which allow them, post-disaster, to justify and situate themselves within societies that are attempting to come to terms with historical atrocity.

Ishiguro's early novels take the Second World War as their key historical referent, but he breaks with this tendency in *The Unconsoled* (1995), which is set in a hazily sketched city somewhere in central Europe. Following this, while historical reference is present in *When We Were Orphans* (2000), and *Never Let Me Go* (2005),

these novels employ more fabulist modes. Chapter Four, 'Imagined Worlds', therefore examines the turn to imagination and fantasy as a mode of witnessing. These fabulist narratives make clear the connection between narrative and vision, specifically in their concern with failures of witnessing resulting from forms of blindness. In *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go* witnessing is less about the paradoxes of recording aporetic, limit-case events than it is about knowing how to look. Very often, that which should be witnessed is visible, but remains unseen in plain sight due either to distortions of perspective caused by the narrators' interests (as is the case in *When We Were Orphans*), or due to their immersion within discourses which normalise abhorrent systems and therefore foreclose the desire or need to bear witness to the events taking place (*Never Let Me Go*). These failures result from an inability or unwillingness to transgress against the discourses in which the narrators are embedded, but it is these failures that prompt active and ethical readings: Ishiguro's use of fabulism creates story worlds in which the protagonists are immersed, but from which readers of these novels are distant, and I argue that it is through this distance that these failures become visible.

Before providing readings of the novels along these lines, the remainder of this introduction sets out the terms by which I discuss the way in which these fictions function in terms of witnessing. I begin by exploring the relationship between witnessing and representation, and the tensions between testimony and fiction, drawing primarily on *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*,¹⁰ co-authored by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. Laub's work in particular is grounded in Holocaust testimony, engaging with trauma and psychoanalysis, and, as such, his model of witnessing seeks to address the direct narrativisation of limit-case events. However, as I have already stated, Sebald and Ishiguro operate at a spatial and temporal remove from these limit-case events, and for this reason Felman's readings of Albert Camus' *The Plague* and *The Fall* provide a means of beginning to explore a role for postwar fiction. In discussing the possible uses of fiction as a means of representing the Holocaust and its aftermath, I also refer to Terrence Des Pres's essay 'Holocaust *Laughter?*'¹¹ and to the theories of M. M. Bakhtin on which it is based. I attempt to extend their insights beyond the scope of the Holocaust, and to propose a theoretical framework for fiction more generally, suggesting that Bakhtin's theorisation of the

¹⁰ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992).

¹¹ Terrence Des Pres, 'Holocaust *Laughter?*', in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. by Berel Lang (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1985), pp. 216-33.

novel as a subversive and relativising genre may also allow it to play an ethical role as a mode of witnessing. Finally, the thinking of Walter Benjamin provides two key tools for this thesis, namely his concept of the ‘optical unconscious’, and his notion of reading the past in terms of ‘constellations’, both of which are relevant to the way in which fiction addresses the past, and can make aspects of that past visible.

WITNESSING AND REPRESENTATION

Writing fiction at a remove from the limit-case events around which their texts circle, Sebald and Ishiguro are concerned with the way in which representation may hide or obfuscate atrocity. There is implicit in much of their writing the sense that representation is complicit with structures and discourses which have produced atrocity. Using these same discourses, then, to bear witness to the past is inherently problematic for both writers. This section therefore attempts to establish the role of representation in bearing witness to the past, and particularly at the kind of distance present in these two authors’ work.

My starting point for this discussion is Laub’s identification of three levels of witnessing in relation to the Holocaust experience. These are: ‘the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself’.¹² The second and third of these levels are of particular relevance to witnessing at a generational distance, and, therefore, to the writing of Sebald and Ishiguro. However, much of Felman and Laub’s discussion centres on the first of these levels. Furthermore, in addressing this first level, their focus on the Holocaust means that they do so in terms of limit-case events and traumatic experience. For example, Laub describes witnessing of the Holocaust as the ‘ultimate annihilation of a narrative that, fundamentally, *cannot be heard* and of a story that *cannot be witnessed*’.¹³ His link between aporia, trauma and witnessing has been taken up by Cathy Caruth, whose work has informed much of the recent literary scholarship on trauma. Her description of trauma’s ‘enigmatic core’

¹² Dori Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival’, in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 75-92 (p. 75).

¹³ Dori Laub, ‘Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening’, in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 57-74 (p. 68).

which consists of the ‘delay or incompleteness in knowing, or even in seeing, an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely true to the event’¹⁴ echoes Laub’s concerns in its focus on the near-impossibility of narrativising limit-case events.

If Laub’s and Caruth’s comments indicate the difficulty of giving narrative form to traumatic events, the proscriptions of writers of testimony seem to place further ethical constraints on narrative possibilities. Primo Levi, for example, in stating his intention to use the ‘calm sober language of the witness’¹⁵ employs a rhetoric of objectivity as a means of laying a claim to authenticity in his account, while Elie Wiesel displays scepticism towards fiction in his claim that ‘a novel about Auschwitz is not a novel – or else it is not about Auschwitz’. Stating that he feels ‘unable to tell the story of this event, much less imagine it’,¹⁶ his comment acknowledges the difficulty of representing an event of such extremity, but combines this with a sense of the appropriateness or otherwise of generic forms by which this may be attempted. These concerns are echoed by theorists: Adorno’s admonition on poetry after Auschwitz is often quoted and debated,¹⁷ and Lawrence Langer is openly antagonistic towards fiction when he warns of the ‘seductive powers’ of the literary, and argues that ‘oral testimony is distinguished by the absence of such literary mediation: it avoids the interference of art’.¹⁸

Comments such as those that I have cited seem to leave little room for fiction as a mode of bearing witness to extremity. However, there are two points from which these views can be challenged, and from which the possibilities for fiction can be explored. The first of these is an assumed opposition and mutual exclusivity between testimony and fiction; this is apparent most clearly in the quotation from Langer. This opposition, I suggest, breaks down when subjected to detailed examination. If this point is a refutation of the criticisms of fiction, the second point by which these comments can be challenged is in acknowledging the imaginative possibilities of fiction.

¹⁴ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 5.

¹⁵ Primo Levi, *If This is a Man / The Truce*, trans. by Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus Books, 1987), p. 382.

¹⁶ Elie Wiesel, *Day*, trans. by Anne Borchardt (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), p. x.

¹⁷ Adorno returned to this theme a number of times over the years. In *Negative Dialectics*, he wrote that, ‘after Auschwitz, our feelings may resist and claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims’ fate’. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 361.

¹⁸ Lawrence Langer, ‘Interpreting Survivor Testimony’, in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. by Berel Lang (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1985), pp. 26–40 (pp. 30, 32).

A number of studies on testimony have called into question the idea of there being any absolute distinction between testimonial and literary writing. Hayden White, for example, takes issue with Levi's disavowal of rhetorical style, and citing passages from *If This is a Man*, argues that his writing is in fact 'consistently (and brilliantly) figurative throughout'.¹⁹ Countering the idea of poetic or literary language as obfuscation, White argues that Levi's text 'constitutes a model of how a specifically literary mode can heighten both the referential and semantic values of a discourse of fact'.²⁰ This is not to say that testimonial writing should be read in the same way as fiction, but rather that 'literariness' may feature in testimonial accounts. James E. Young echoes these observations, and identifies ways in which literary or figurative language has been used in testimony to construct what he calls a 'rhetoric of fact'.²¹

Accepting arguments such as these, Susan Rubin Suleiman therefore sees the distinction between fiction and testimony as being 'conventional, not textual': she claims that both modes of writing may employ formal properties of the other, but that it is the extra- and para-textual qualities of each which dictates the reception of the text.²² Thus it is not the formal properties of the text itself, but the way in which it is marketed, packaged and reviewed, that dictates the 'contract' of expectations between author and reader.²³ Significantly, Suleiman refers to Sebald in this discussion, suggesting that his inclusion of photographs problematises and highlights these distinctions; however, this also indicates that her emphasis on the paratextual elements in determining the 'contract' between text and reader is somewhat overstated, as the photographs are part of the text itself, and therefore problematize generic expectations as reading takes place. The implication is that fiction, and literary fiction in particular, may be in a position to play on these expectations as the text progresses, and as the reader is forced to reinterpret and reevaluate that with which they are confronted. This process of making visible the terms of the discourse that they employ is one of the ways in which both Sebald and Ishiguro create an ethical form of witnessing in narrative.

¹⁹ Hayden White, 'Figural Realism in Witness Literature', *Parallax* (2004), 113-24 (p. 115).

²⁰ White, 'Figural Realism in Witness Literature', p. 116.

²¹ James Young, 'Interpreting Literary Testimony: A Preface to Rereading Holocaust Diaries and Memoirs', *New Literary History*, 18 (1987), 403-23 (p. 421).

²² The 'paratext' is Gérard Genette's term. He and Marie Maclean define it as 'the reinforcement and accompaniment of a certain number of productions, themselves verbal or not, like an author's name, a title, a preface, illustration' which accompany the text itself. Gérard Genette and Marie Maclean, 'Introduction to the Paratext', *New Literary History*, 22 (1991), 261-72 (p. 261).

²³ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 192. Suleiman is also drawing on Phillipe Lejeune's seminal work on the autobiographical pact.

The notion that fiction has greater licence to test or blur generic expectations than testimony or other factual genres brings me to the question of the imaginative possibilities of fiction. Distinctions between fiction and factual genres notwithstanding, the question of whether there are specific features of fiction which make it a privileged means of representing the past is one which I seek to answer in this thesis. The articles by White and Young that I have cited above have examined testimonial genres, and have ascribed to them the qualities of the literary; in doing so, they may answer the question of what is literary about testimonial writing. However, one question raised in this thesis is: what is testimonial about fiction, and how and why can fiction contribute to the witnessing of extremity and atrocity in historical events? In order to answer this, I turn now to attempts by Des Pres and Felman to work out a role for fiction in witnessing the Holocaust.

In response to the type of ethical proscriptions that I have noted above, Terrence Des Pres used his 1985 essay ‘Holocaust *Laughter?*’, to outline three principles that he sees as setting the ‘limits to respectable study’ of the Holocaust. The first of these is that the Holocaust should be represented as unique; the second is that representations should be ‘as accurate and faithful as possible to the facts and conditions of the event without change or manipulation for any reasons – artistic reasons included’; and the third is that it should be approached as a ‘solemn’ or ‘sacred’ event.²⁴ Des Pres asks of Wiesel’s comment on the novel, ‘does he mean that, in this special case, fiction cannot cope? Or does he mean [...] that in the presence of this awful godlike thing, no graven image is permitted?’ From this point, his essay proceeds to contest this orthodoxy, and to attempt to identify a role for fiction which treats the Holocaust with the utmost seriousness, yet does so without remaining in thrall to a need for solemnity and sacralisation.

Des Pres’s argument is built on an examination of texts that employ laughter and the comic.²⁵ Arguing that ‘laughter is hostile to the world it depicts and subverts the respect on which representation depends’, he contrasts its antimimetic mode with tragic modes that preserve ‘a reverent regard for the burden of the past’.²⁶ He suggests that laughter opens up the possibility for examining not the facts of the event itself, but the potential communal responses to those events, which include the subversive and the carnivalesque. In doing so, he cites Bakhtin, and identifies the potential for a

²⁴ Des Pres, ‘Holocaust *Laughter?*’, p. 217.

²⁵ These are Tadeusz Borowski’s *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, Leslie Epstein’s *King of the Jews*, and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*; he also makes reference to Emmanuel Ringelblum’s *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*.

²⁶ Des Pres, ‘Holocaust *Laughter?*’, pp. 219-20.

‘communal underlife that opens the possibility for a comic enactment of life against death’.²⁷ This notion of communal response is relevant to the collective way in which discourses are created and perpetuated, which is a concern central to both Sebald and Ishiguro. Furthermore, the stifling propriety of the discourses in Sebald and Ishiguro, and the way that this apparent civility masks a host of past wrongs, indicates that transgression may be a necessary factor in any ethical form of witnessing. I address the potential for the novel to play transgressive and subversive roles in my discussion of Bakhtin, below. However, because the texts that Des Pres examines remain very close to the event of the Holocaust itself, and therefore differ from the distance present in Sebald and Ishiguro, I first explore the implications of temporal distance, through Felman’s essays on Camus.

Two of Felman’s essays in *Testimony* constitute an important attempt, through readings of Camus, to propose a role for fiction as a mode of witnessing. Throughout *Testimony*, Felman and Laub remain close to the concept of witnessing as aporia, understandably so given their scholarship on the Holocaust and their involvement with the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies held at Yale University Library.²⁸ This closeness can be seen in particular in Felman’s main claim for the role of fiction as a mode of testimony. She asks why it is that Camus employs metaphor when he could instead have addressed historical events literally, and in answer to this, she states that the event’s disappearance is part of its occurrence: ‘Camus’ testimony is not simply to the literality of history, but to its unreality, to the historical vanishing point of its unbelievability’.²⁹ It is on this basis that Felman sees the use of literature as a means of addressing historical extremity. For her, an imaginative medium is required to address the unimaginable.³⁰

However, this argument is most relevant when applied to fictions that address Laub’s first level of witnessing, that ‘of being a witness to oneself within the experience’.³¹ It seems, however, to be less pertinent to fictions which represent protagonists situated at a distance from limit-case events, as they are in Sebald’s and

²⁷ Des Pres, ‘Holocaust *Laughter?*’, p. 223.

²⁸ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, ‘Foreword’, in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. xiii-xx (p. xiv).

²⁹ Shoshana Felman, ‘Camus’ *The Plague*, or A Monument to Witnessing’, in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 93-119 (pp. 101-3).

³⁰ Felman, ‘Camus’ *The Plague*’, p. 105.

³¹ Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness’, p. 75.

Ishiguro's work. Even when at their closest to historical extremity – in the narratives of *Austerlitz* and *A Pale View of Hills*, which circle around the extremity of Theresienstadt and Nagasaki respectively – Sebald's descriptions of family albums and journal entries, and Ishiguro's use of domestic settings mean that the content of their writing is more familiar and recognisable than it is unimaginable.

This is not to say that Felman's arguments are of no relevance, and in fact they are useful with regard to the aims of this thesis because, by addressing the movement from *The Plague* (1947) to *The Fall* (1956), they begin to explore the effects of temporal distance between the event and its later representation. The first of Felman's essays, 'Camus' *The Plague*, or a Monument to Witnessing' reads the novel as an allegory for the Holocaust, and the second, 'The Betrayal of the Witness: Camus' *The Fall*' provides a reading which centres on the notion of a missed event, and the consequent failure of witnessing. Together, for Felman, the two novels exemplify 'the way in which traditional relationships of narrative to history *have changed* through the historical necessity of involving literature in action'.³² Specifically, Felman argues that, in the movement from *The Plague* to *The Fall*, Camus shifts his focus from a site of the recording of history to a site of its non-recording.³³ This involves a corresponding shift in the narrative voice from that of the physician Rieux, who is present throughout the plague and whose role is resistance and preservation, to that of Clamence, who misses the central event of *The Fall* (a woman's plunge from the Pont Royal into the Seine), and whose position as a lawyer requires of him the persuasive mediation of events through language.³⁴

Particularly pertinent to this thesis is Felman's claim that, in this movement and change in role of narrators, *The Fall* 'revisits contemporary history as a story not of resistance but of complicity', premised on her observation that it addresses 'not the magnitude of the event but, on the contrary, its minimisation that allowed it to occur through systematic deafness, silence and suppression of information'.³⁵ Complicity, for those at a spatial and temporal remove from events, is thus not in the perpetration of events, but takes place either in failures to tell, or in failures to find suitable narratives

³² Felman, 'Camus' *The Plague*', p. 95. Emphasis in original.

³³ Shoshana Felman, 'Camus' *The Fall*, or the Betrayal of the Witness', in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 165-203 (p. 168).

³⁴ Felman, 'Camus' *The Fall*', p. 197.

³⁵ Felman, 'Camus' *The Fall*', pp. 190-2.

by which events can be witnessed in their fullness. In this thesis, I argue that it is precisely minimisation of this nature, that is the tendency to revise, omit and obfuscate in order to deny culpability in the past, that characterises the writing of Sebald and Ishiguro. Their narrators' stories are therefore failures of witnessing that are a form of complicity entered into by later generations, and of those acting in the aftermath of atrocity.

Felman's key argument on the presence of complicity in *The Fall* is an important one. However, in attempting to schematise the different forms of witnessing in *The Plague* and *The Fall*, and also to an extent as a result of her concern with Camus' biographical details, Felman reads the two novels as allegorical comments on the Holocaust. In doing so, she does not fully address the causes of failures of witnessing in *The Fall*, and in particular the way in which these failures stem from the distance between the narrator, Clamence, and the events that he describes. This tendency is most evident in her analysis of Clamence's description of Amsterdam, which she quotes thus:

For we are at the heart of things here. Have you noticed that Amsterdam's concentric canals resemble the circles of *hell*? ... When one comes from the outside, as one gradually goes through these circles, life – and hence its crimes – becomes denser, darker.³⁶

Coming shortly after a reference to the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam, Felman identifies Clamence's words as an attempt to refer to a historical referent which cannot be named, and, in reading this passage against Camus' quarrel with Sartre (who was at that point sympathetic to Stalin), she argues that this is 'not merely a *concentric* but a *concentrationary* hell'.³⁷

Yet perhaps the most revealing element of Felman's quotation is the elision that it contains. The ellipsis marks where Clamence elaborates on his metaphor, and what he actually says is: 'Have you noticed that Amsterdam's concentric canals resemble the circles of hell? The middle class hell, of course, peopled with bad dreams'.³⁸ Clamence refers to the seventy-five thousand deportations and murders as a 'clean up', suggesting that middle-class bad conscience is a result of the minimisation of the evidence of past atrocities. In fact, Clamence's comments immediately prior to this reference explicitly

³⁶ Felman, 'Camus' *The Fall*, p. 186.

³⁷ Felman, 'Camus' *The Fall*, pp. 187-8. Emphasis in original.

³⁸ Felman, 'Camus' *The Fall*, p. 283.

tie the trappings of middle class, professional life to this tendency: “Do you want a good clean life? Like everyone else?” You say yes, of course. How can one say no? “OK. You’ll be cleaned up. Here’s a job, a family, and organized leisure”.³⁹

Felman quotes Camus’ Nobel Prize acceptance speech, in which he argued that the writer ‘cannot serve today those who make history; he must serve those who are subject to it’,⁴⁰ and the possibility of giving voice to those in marginal positions has in fact been offered as a defence of fiction in the postwar context.⁴¹ Yet Camus chooses middle class professionals, a doctor and a lawyer, as his narrators. They are therefore in the intermediate position of being both subject to history, but also its makers: while they do not shape history on a grand scale, they do so in their construction and perpetuation of the discourses and frameworks that dictate the terms of social and civil life. ‘Style, like sheer silk’ says Clamence, ‘too often hides eczema’:⁴² it is these discourses and frameworks that contribute to the ‘cleaning up’ of the past, that is, to the minimisation of atrocity in which those same middle classes are partly culpable.

An ethical witness would attempt to rectify this tendency to minimisation. However, Clamence’s position indicates the difficulty of doing just this. ‘I shouldn’t say *their* organisation,’ he says, ‘It is *ours*, after all: it’s a question of which will clean up after the other’.⁴³ In other words, the discourses by which this minimisation takes place are also his own, and stepping outside these in order to find a position to bear witness to this process is therefore no easy task. The extent to which he is embedded in this process of minimisation is further suggested by the fact that he lives on the site of what used to be the Jewish quarter.⁴⁴ Felman argues that this minimisation takes place through silence which is ‘systematic’, and which, in her use of ‘suppression’, is implied to be a conscious and deliberate exercise of power from above; however, I see Clamence’s complicity – as well as that of Sebald’s and Ishiguro’s protagonists – as being a result of self-interest and of failures to question and challenge the discourses in which those who are in a position to bear witness are embedded.

³⁹ Albert Camus, ‘The Fall’, in *The Plague, The Fall, Exile and the Kingdom, and Selected Essays*, trans. by Justin O’Brien (New York, London and Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), pp. 273-356 (p. 279).

⁴⁰ Felman, ‘Camus’ *The Plague*’, p. 96. The quotation is also used as one of the epigraphs to *Testimony*.

⁴¹ Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 77.

⁴² Camus, ‘The Fall’, p. 278.

⁴³ Camus, ‘The Fall’, p. 280.

⁴⁴ Camus, ‘The Fall’, p. 281.

While Felman's claim for fiction as a means of bearing witness to the 'unreality' and 'unbelievability' of limit-case events applies to Laub's first level of witnessing, the way in which *The Fall* reflects on the 'cleaning up' of the past is therefore a reflection on the process of bearing witness, notably on the difficulties of and failures in doing so. In other words, it performs the third level of witnessing defined by Laub, that of bearing witness to the process of witnessing itself. I argue in this thesis that it is this level which Sebald and Ishiguro address in the greatest depth, removed as they and their protagonists are from extreme historical events.

Clarence figures middle class complicity through minimisation in terms of propriety. Professional and social roles, and the discourses of civility in which they operate, are what allows the minimisation of history to take place. His own voice belongs to this discourse, but also subverts it: his interpellation of the reader is an invitation into the values of his linguistic register (values which the invitation assumes that we share), but which also produces a discomfiting sense of the hypocrisy of those values. Clarence's subversive presence therefore indicates that, where Des Pres suggests a role for the comic and transgressive in the representation of atrocity, there is an equally pressing need for transgression in later representations, as a means of puncturing the discourses that obscure and minimise the events of the past.

The extent to which their protagonists are embedded in discourse is a central feature of Sebald's and Ishiguro's writing. Often, the crucial question with regard to the moral and ethical positions of the protagonists is whether they are able to step outside or transgress against these discourses. A significant difference between the two writers lies in the answer to this question: Sebald's self-reflexive narrators find ways of challenging the modes of representation within which they operate, whereas Ishiguro's narrators, for all of their self-centred ruminations, are generally incapable of being able to challenge the terms of discourse that their roles and positions dictate. Both writers, however, convey the sense that their own narratives cannot easily escape the same shortfalls, as the two following examples illustrate.

In the latter stages of *Austerlitz*, Jacques Austerlitz searches for evidence of his parents' fates, but his search grinds to a halt in the streets of Paris and the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale. Instead, the closest that the narrative comes to a direct representation of the events of the Holocaust is the passage in which he scrutinises video footage of the Theresienstadt ghetto:

In the end the impossibility of seeing anything more closely in those pictures, which seemed to dissolve even as they appeared, said Austerlitz, gave me the idea of having a slow-motion copy of this fragment from Theresienstadt made [...] and indeed once the scant document was extended to four times its original length, it did reveal previously hidden objects and people. (p. 345)

The outstanding feature of this passage is the mediated nature of the narrator's encounter with Theresienstadt: his knowledge of the event is gained only through several layers of narration (initially those of Jacques Austerlitz and Věra Ryšánová) and through a bogus film, created to dupe the Red Cross, of the 'model' ghetto of Theresienstadt. This passage indicates that, not only is the mediation of memory as important as its content, but that the nature of this mediation is such that it is not necessarily to be trusted.

Writing at a distance, both spatial and temporal, Sebald is able to explore instead the transmission of memory and in particular the idea, suggested by Felman, that knowledge of the past can only be transmitted by narratives 'whose legibility becomes transmissible only within a network of complicity'.⁴⁵ Sebald's narrator does not offer a rectification of the distortions and falsehoods present in the video of Theresienstadt, but instead brings this form of representation into contact with a number of other discourses, and the forms of knowledge that these discourses provide. The differences between the modes of access to the past granted by video, photography, verbal testimony and archival research are therefore detectable in the narrative; and it is the narrator, as the organising presence, who allows the reader to see these differences. While the narrator himself is not, in this case, explicitly subversive, his presence is what allows the reader to see discourse as discourse, and from this point to trace the ways in which these representations have conspired to efface the past.

Ishiguro is similarly concerned with the mediation of memory, and the complicities which arise in this process. Early in *Never Let Me Go*, the narrator, Kathy H., describes caring for another donor. In her professional role, she agrees to tell him stories about her idyllic childhood in Hailsham:

What he wanted was not just to hear about Hailsham, but to *remember* Hailsham [...] that's what he was doing: getting me to describe things to him, so they'd

⁴⁵Felman, 'Camus' *The Fall*, p. 193.

really sink in, so that maybe during those sleepless nights, with the drugs and the pain and the exhaustion, the line would blur between what were my memories and what were his. That was when I first understood, really understood, how lucky we'd been (pp. 5-6).

Present here are Ishiguro's concerns with the malleability of memory, and the tendency to tell the stories that we want to tell rather than those which accurately represent the past. Yet, as is very often the case in Ishiguro, what remains unsaid is more important than that which has been explicitly articulated. In this case, Kathy's claim to understand how lucky she has been implies that her donor has experienced a significantly less pleasant childhood than her own. However, in failing to provide any further details of his suffering, she is guilty of the type of minimisation of which Felman writes, and it is the inadequacy of Kathy's own mediation of events that prompts the reader to identify the limitations of her representation of the past.

In creating their own narratives, Sebald's and Ishiguro's narrators are not innocent of deception themselves. At times, they are cynically economical with the truth, and at others their elisions acts as defence mechanisms; more often, they are unaware of the ways that they obfuscate the past, so embedded are they in the discourses of civility that have a vested interest in failing to acknowledge atrocity and suffering. In contrast to trying to imagine the unimaginable, as may be the case in fictions which deal with limit-case events, Sebald and Ishiguro deal with discourses which are so imaginable as to become conventional, routine, and hence invisible.

METHODOLOGY

As my comments above indicate, I see the fictions of Sebald and Ishiguro as engaged in an attempt to make visible the ways in which narrative and representation are culpable in hiding histories of suffering and trauma. Issues of visibility (and its inverse, blindness) are therefore central to my examination of Sebald and Ishiguro. However, as they are writing at a temporal distance from the events that they describe, visibility is often inseparable from questions of memory, and in particular the ways in which discourse is a manifestation of memory. In this section, I outline some of the key theoretical contributions on memory and visibility that I use in discussing Sebald and Ishiguro. In

particular, I draw on Walter Benjamin's thinking in order to examine the nature of memory and visibility in these texts. The practice of reading history against the grain proposed by Benjamin in 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' parallels the kind of resistant or transgressive readings that I argue Sebald and Ishiguro prompt, and his concepts of constellations and unconscious optics are also useful tools for describing how the formal properties of Sebald and Ishiguro make visible that which has become invisible. Within this discussion, I touch on the question of trauma, and the way that its presence complicates the act of memory, but suggest that, in contrast to many narratives which deal with limit-case events, normality and continuity dictate the form and language of the texts under discussion. Finally, I use Bakhtin's theorisation of the novel as a relativising and potentially subversive form as a means of examining the ways in which Sebald and Ishiguro attempt to question discourse and the complicities they see as being present within it.

Benjamin calls for reading history against the grain by disrupting the notion of the past as 'homogenous, empty time'. This takes place through the act of exploding the continuum of history, by grasping 'the constellation which [one's] own era has formed with a definite earlier one'.⁴⁶ These constellations are present in the narrative forms employed by both Sebald and Ishiguro. Sebald's technique is to present layers of narrative, originating at different geographical and temporal points, and to mediate these through the narrator. Ishiguro's narrative technique also creates these constellations through the repeated signposting, through revisions and inconsistencies, of the retrospective nature of these first-person narratives. This is not to say that these narrators are necessarily fully aware of the relationship between the past and the present, that is, in the way that their present determines their construction of the past: writing of the 'secret heliotropism' by which the present orients itself to the past, and describing this as 'the most inconspicuous of all transformations',⁴⁷ Benjamin suggests that the values and norms established in and by the past act in continuous but subtle and unseen ways on the present. For him, there is an ethical and political imperative to challenge this process and to 'wrest tradition from a conformism that is about to overpower it'.⁴⁸ However, it is from within this conformism that Sebald's and Ishiguro's narrators write,

⁴⁶Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1992), pp. 245-55 (p. 255).

⁴⁷Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 246.

⁴⁸Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 247.

and it is this which makes them blind, at times, to the biases present in their own representations of the past.

The need for self-preservation on the part of Ishiguro's narrators leads them to correct and revise their own versions of events. In each such revision, the way in which their narratives create pasts that are 'filled with the presence of the now'⁴⁹ becomes apparent not for the protagonists, but for readers who recognise the nature of this constellation. Similarly, even Sebald's narrators, who at times exemplify the knowledge that the 'cultural treasures' of civilization cannot be observed without horror at their origins, write from within the very tradition that gives rise to those horrors. While their erudition does not, therefore, allow them to escape the pull of this 'secret heliotropism',⁵⁰ the form of Sebald's narratives does at least allow the reader to identify its effects. These features of Benjamin's thinking are thus pertinent to my examination of these novels, but they do require elaboration on two main points.

The first of these is the nature of the constellations that Benjamin describes. In calling for the historian to grasp 'the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one',⁵¹ Benjamin leaves us to grapple with the abstraction 'era' as the starting point for this process of understanding history. However, Sebald and Ishiguro tell stories of personal histories, often in domestic settings. Their constellations are not, therefore, formed by the recognition of the relationships between eras on a grand scale, but through local, specific and personal connections with previous generations. These connections are often realised through material encounters: in Sebald, in particular, artefacts, locations and family photographs are loaded with personal memory. In Ishiguro, the tension between the present and the past often becomes visible when the characters are forced to revise personal and often petty concerns related to professional standing and domestic relationships, and these are often very much related to the material reality of those characters: their concerns are the prestige of owning a house in a particular location and how to dress for a drive in the country.

The second point on which Benjamin requires elaboration with regard to reading Sebald and Ishiguro is on the question of agency. Benjamin's assertive language suggests that agency rests with those who, by force of will, are able to make the 'tiger's

⁴⁹ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', pp. 252-3.

⁵⁰ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 246.

⁵¹ Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 255.

leap into the past'.⁵² However, Ishiguro's narrators tend to display a misplaced assertiveness in their attempts at self-justification, when in fact they are only producing harmful fictions about their lives. These attempts could be seen in terms of Marianne Hirsch's influential concept of 'postmemory', which she defines as 'distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection [...] its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation'.⁵³ Ishiguro's characters either tend to be incapable of this 'imaginative investment and creation', or otherwise employ it towards a self-deceptive revision of the past, in which case it often becomes another source of falsehood and delusion rather than the type of generational connection that Hirsch figures in generally positive terms. In contrast, in Sebald it is the past which acts with compelling power on the protagonists, a mysterious and almost magical agency suggested by the way in which his narrators often find themselves rendered mute or paralysed. In his work, the narrators attempt to find perspectives of the past that are not bound up in dominant discourses, but the effort of achieving this means that they are only able to maintain these positions for short periods.

I have outlined above some of the difficulties of finding ethical modes of representation, and it might be expected that these are compounded and complicated by the presence of traumatic memory. The inscription of memory is central to the narrative forms employed by Sebald and Ishiguro, and given that the memories represented in their novels are related to or grow out of instances of historical extremity, they have a relationship with trauma. Yet, and despite Sebald's *Austerlitz* having been identified as a paradigmatic example of the use of narrative form to mimic traumatic memory,⁵⁴ I argue that, in the main, the writing of Sebald and Ishiguro is in fact characterised by continuity rather than the ruptures associated with trauma.

Felman and Laub employ language which evokes rupture and discontinuity. This tendency is evident, for example, in the fact that Laub, despite his awareness of increasingly vicarious levels of witnessing, remains largely concerned with the problems of the first of his three levels, that of the experience of the event. Furthermore,

⁵² Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 253.

⁵³ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 22.

⁵⁴ Roger Luckhurst argues that, in *Austerlitz*, Sebald 'explicitly embraced the organizing notion of traumatic dissociation and recovered memory to explore post-Holocaust subjectivity'. I engage with Luckhurst's reading of *Austerlitz* in Chapter Two. Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 87.

he primarily addresses witnessing of traumatic events, and the sense of rupture that they create, in writing of events ‘beyond the limits of human ability (and willingness) to grasp, to transmit, or to imagine’.⁵⁵ Many of the same terms and concepts are employed by Cathy Caruth, whose punctual model of trauma is characterised by the intrusive return of memory,⁵⁶ and which has been the dominant model for explorations of trauma in literary studies.

However, as I have argued, the nature of complicity in Sebald and Ishiguro is related to discourses of normalisation, and hence of continuity. Their writing does not generally include the representation of those who have directly experienced extreme events, that is, Laub’s first level of witnessing. The only major character who is an exception to this rule is Etsuko in *A Pale View of Hills*; even Jacques Austerlitz, despite exhibiting the symptoms of trauma (and the novel’s use of form to evoke these symptoms) is absent from the event of his parents’ deaths at the hands of the Nazis, having escaped to England on a *Kindertransport*. Because Sebald’s and Ishiguro’s characters operate (and write) from within discourses of continuity and normality, a punctual model is not the best tool for a discussion of these texts. Furthermore, this punctual model describes the psychological symptoms of trauma, one of which is the intrusive return of unmediated memory. However, as I have noted, one of the characteristics of the narratives of Sebald and Ishiguro is their highly mediated nature. In Ishiguro these mediations are generally visible as the narrators consciously construct their narratives to meet their own ends; in Sebald, the narrators’ self-consciousness with regard to representation gives his texts a metafictional aspect. Dominick LaCapra draws a distinction between ‘writing trauma’ and ‘writing about trauma’, situating the former as part of a process of acting out and / or working through, and describing it as a performative means of giving voice to the past. This is in contrast with writing about trauma, which does not have the same performative function, and is instead part of a historiographical process.⁵⁷ Given the mediated nature of memory that forms the

⁵⁵ Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness’, p. 85. This rhetoric of rupture is particularly prevalent in discourse on the Holocaust, and is typified by Claude Lanzmann writing of an ‘abyss’ between events and their origins. Claude Lanzmann, ‘The Obscenity of Understanding: An Evening with Claude Lanzmann’, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 200-20 (p. 206).

⁵⁶ Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, pp. 4-5. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁷ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 186. LaCapra draws this distinction in part because of his unease with the somewhat loose application of psychoanalytical language in a range of contexts, which leads him to warn of the ‘dubious pathologization of historical processes’. Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 23, 180.

narratives in Sebald's and Ishiguro's novels, I see their writing as the latter. In identifying the presence of trauma in their work, I therefore focus on the process of inscription not as a literal manifestation of traumatic memory, nor as an attempt to mimic its symptoms, but as a mediation in which the ongoing effects of trauma can be traced.

For these reasons, the vocabulary of psychoanalysis is not one of my main tools for examining the texts under consideration. Instead, I draw on Roger Luckhurst's elucidation of trauma as a cultural phenomenon. One of the significant achievements of Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question* is its tracing of the movement from trauma's use in the fields of medicine and psychology into the cultural sphere. Discussing the way in which trauma spans and is constructed across a number of disciplines, he analogises it as 'a conceptual knot whose successful permeation must be understood by the impressive range of elements that it ties together'.⁵⁸

Luckhurst's description of trauma as a 'hybrid assemblage',⁵⁹ provides a useful basis for an examination of trauma in Sebald and Ishiguro because, while its psychic effects are present in, for example, *Austerlitz*, it also acts in a number of other ways. Trauma can, for example, be seen as a factor impinging on professional and domestic life (*An Artist of the Floating World*, *When We Were Orphans*), as a factor to be disavowed in the social apparatus of the state (*Never Let Me Go*), or as a trace visible in art, artefacts, and the landscape (*The Rings of Saturn*). Caruth suggests that literature can give voice to traumatic ruptures when she writes of the possibility of the voice being released through the wound.⁶⁰ In contrast, Sebald and Ishiguro create narratives in which discourse works to reconfigure itself around those ruptures.

Within these reconfigurations, it is the tendency to normalise traumatic histories that results in failures of witnessing. These failures are not necessarily a result of trauma or atrocity being hidden: rather than the object being obscured or buried, normative discourses render the subject incapable or unwilling to see. Ishiguro represents

⁵⁸ Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, p. 14.

⁵⁹ Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, p. 14. Luckhurst is acknowledging the influence of actor-network theory at this point, and in particular the work of Bruno Latour, whom he cites a number of times. Latour's actor-network theory attempts to provide a means of describing objects of knowledge which accounts for their hybridity. The notion of hybridity involves a refutation of what Latour sees as a mistaken division of culture (and its attendant discourses) and nature. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 6.

⁶⁰ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 2-3.

protagonists who exemplify these failings; Sebald's narrators tend to have more self-awareness, but their own representations tend to fall into the same traps of minimisation. However, I argue in this thesis that the failings of these protagonists contribute to the writers' larger projects of attempting to find an ethical form of witnessing through narrative that avoids complicity in the minimisation of traumatic histories. Central to any form of ethical witnessing is the ability to see, and crucially, the ability to see in the right way. Hence, in this section, I outline the way in which the fictions of Sebald and Ishiguro promote this form of vision. In doing so, I use the notion of 'unconscious optics', first posited by Benjamin in relation to photography and more recently glossed by Marianne Hirsch, and extend this, through Derrida, into my examination of writing.

Benjamin describes the way in which a frame of photography is capable of capturing, in a moment of arrest, that which is invisible to the naked eye. From this, he creates an analogy between photography and the process of psychoanalysis, arguing that 'photography makes aware, for the first time, the optical unconscious, just as psychoanalysis discloses the instinctual unconscious'.⁶¹ Hirsch applies the notion of unconscious optics to her analysis of photography and family relationships, arguing that the apparently natural formation of the family depends on the invisibility of its structuring elements.⁶² This invisibility is important in Sebald and Ishiguro. I have written above of the way that their protagonists are embedded in discourses and systems of value, and are unable to find a position outside of these. The result is that an ethical gaze, outside complicity, is almost impossible to possess. The reason for this difficulty is the near impossibility of identifying the structuring elements of discourse that dictate interpretation and representation: Hirsch draws attention to their action on the family and its representation in photography, but similar structuring elements dictate professional and institutional relationships in Sebald and Ishiguro, and the production of representation itself. The possibility that, in a moment of arrest, these structuring elements become visible, suggests that if a work of art is capable of producing such moments, it may form part of a process of witnessing by which these structures can be challenged.

⁶¹ Walter Benjamin, 'A Short History of Photography', *Screen*, 13 (1972), 5-26 (p. 7). See also Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations* ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1992), pp. 211-244.

⁶² Hirsch, *Family Frames*, p. 117.

Benjamin and Hirsch use the optical unconscious in relation to photography, so the concept requires some modification for its use in an examination of fiction. Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind*,⁶³ permits an extension of these arguments into writing because it acknowledges the way in which the act of inscription necessarily involves both sight and representation, and hence breaks down the boundaries between the two. Derrida brings together these two facets of witnessing through his use of the term 'aspectus', which 'is at once gaze, sight, and that which meets the eyes'.⁶⁴ He employs the term to discuss the limitations of sight, two of which are of relevance here. The first of these is that, at the moment at which the inscription is made, that inscription itself is not yet visible.⁶⁵ The second is that the *trait*,⁶⁶ once inscribed, acts only as a border and as such can never be seen in the same way again: 'only the surroundings of the *trait* appear – that which the *trait* spaces by delimiting and which thus does not belong to the *trait*'.⁶⁷

It is for these reasons that 'the witness cannot see, show, and speak at the same time', and it thus follows for Derrida that 'witnessing substitutes narrative for perception'.⁶⁸ These are, therefore, inherent deficiencies in any representation or inscription, and it is these deficiencies which create elisions in the forms of representation and hence failures of witnessing. Hirsch argues for an ethics of photography which 'as Benjamin insists, should inscribe its own inability to represent'.⁶⁹ Sebald and Ishiguro, I argue, perform this inscription in their fictions. Furthermore, and in doing so, both make visible the way in which the acts of remembering, interpreting and writing come together in the moment of inscription.

Where the observer in Benjamin's historical materialism 'takes cognizance'⁷⁰ of moments of arrest in which the relationship between the present and the past becomes visible, it is precisely this which the narrators often fail to do, but which a critical distance allows the reader the opportunity to achieve. The unseen power of the structuring elements of discourse is such that, before identifying the nature of the

⁶³Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

⁶⁴Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 44.

⁶⁵Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 45.

⁶⁶The French *trait* preserved in the English translation, can denote 'a range of meanings from trait or feature to a line, stroke, or mark'. Translators' note in Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 2.

⁶⁷Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 54.

⁶⁸Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 104.

⁶⁹Hirsch, *Family Frames*, p. 135.

⁷⁰Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 254.

relationship with the past, ethical witnessing must first identify the nature of the discourses which dictate that relationship.

Discourse, as a structuring element in the way the past is viewed from the present, normalises itself and hence makes itself invisible. Because of this, ethical witnessing needs first to reveal the nature of discourse and the way in which it acts. A resistant stance towards discourse is required to achieve this, and where discourses of propriety are employed (as they are in Sebald and Ishiguro) as part of this normalisation, a degree of transgression and subversion is a prerequisite for such resistance. In outlining the forms of transgression and subversion present in Sebald and Ishiguro, I now turn to Bakhtin's work on the novel, and in particular his identification of the function of the carnivalesque.

Des Pres refers to Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque as a mode of transgression, and this is relevant to an ethics of witnessing in the novel. Bakhtin sees novelistic discourse as a relativising, subversive force. In contrast with the way in which professionalised, generic languages 'involve specific forms for manifesting intentions, forms for making conceptualisation and evaluation concrete',⁷¹ the novel resists and subverts such closures, denying 'the absolutism of a single and unitary language [... and refusing] to acknowledge its own language as the sole verbal and semantic centre of the ideological world'.⁷²

It is this ambivalence that allows the novel to bear witness to the past in ways other than those offered by testimony. If the novel involves a suspension of judgement, and 'inserts into [...] other genres an indeterminacy',⁷³ then its role may be more exploratory than testimonial genres. When inscription takes place within a genre that is orientated towards closure on fact or truth, this orientation dictates that it must remain within the specific, professionalised forms of genre-bound language by which this closure can be achieved: it is this embeddedness in pre-defined discourses which

⁷¹ M. M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259-422 (p. 289).

⁷² Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', p. 366. It is notable that other writers for whom history weighs heavy share this view. Milan Kundera, for example, sees the novel in the same terms, writing of the courage required to take, in the novel, 'the world as ambiguity, to be obliged to face not a single absolute truth but a welter of contradictory truths (truths embodied in *imaginary selves* called characters), to have as one's only certainty the *wisdom of uncertainty*'. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. by Linda Asher, (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), pp. 6-7, 17-8.

⁷³ M. M. Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press), pp. 1-40 (p. 7).

produces an inevitable complicity for Camus' narrators, and which is also present in Sebald's and Ishiguro's protagonists. However, if, as Bakhtin argues, the novel can be defined as 'a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even a diversity of language) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organised',⁷⁴ then this suggests that formal properties of the novel itself have the potential to operate outside, or at least subvert, such constraints.

Bakhtin identifies three carnivalesque roles through which novelistic relativisation takes place: these are the clown, the rogue and the fool. The fool's function is 'the very aspect of not grasping the conventions of society [...] not understanding lofty, pathos-charged labels, things and events'; the rogue's is that of 'cheerful deceit'; and the clown has licence to 'maliciously distort languages that are acceptable'. Bakhtin argues that, in performing these roles, the clown, rogue and fool have the right to 'rip off masks',⁷⁵ and in doing so have the ability to challenge the kind of conventionality through which the minimisation of history occurs.

However, the presence of the carnivalesque is not immediately apparent in Sebald and Ishiguro, and rarely does either represent the riotous and subversive carnival world of Bakhtin's Rabelais. In fact, where Des Pres argues that, in the carnivalesque, 'bodily existence is emphasised and disaster is absorbed by the community at large',⁷⁶ this bodily aspect is often ignored or treated as an object of disgust by the protagonists in Sebald's and Ishiguro's texts. Instead they turn away from the bodily aspects of trauma and atrocity and towards discourse. In the decent and civilized surfaces of this discourse, the traumatic aspects of the past are elided, and hence cease to be visible. The tragedy of Ishiguro's narrators is their absolute and hyperbolic stiffness. In their case, the failure to transgress the propriety of the discourses in which they are embedded contributes to their personal tragedies. Sebald's narrators attempt to subvert the scholarly discourse from within which they write; however, the source of ethical difficulty for them lies in the fact that this discourse is also the source of their learnedness, and the means by which they have come to the knowledge that they need to attempt this subversion.

⁷⁴ Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', p. 279.

⁷⁵ Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 84-258 (pp. 162-3).

⁷⁶ Des Pres, 'Holocaust *Laughter?*', pp. 222-3.

In addition to stating that the role of carnivalesque figures is to rip off masks, Bakhtin also notes that these characters are themselves masked: they are not acting according to their true nature, but are performing these roles. Crucially for my discussion of Sebald and Ishiguro, Bakhtin extends this concept of masking to the role of the author of the novel.⁷⁷ The transgressions needed to puncture the discourses that contribute to a minimisation of history do not take place in Sebald and Ishiguro through the inclusion of explicitly subversive protagonists. The subversion lies instead in the use of the narrator as a mask for the author: the inclusion of narrators reveals the workings of the discourses that they employ. As such, the reader does not feel the ethical imperative to take them at their word in the same way that would be felt under the contractual pact offered by testimony. Instead, the moment at which the reader notices the self-deception, bias, or partiality of the narrator's representation serves to give the reader pause, and acts as the moment of arrest and as the type of freeze frame that allows the optical unconscious to be revealed. In this case, what is revealed are the mechanics of narrative, and the values that they carry. Such moments of revelation are, I argue, what allow a form of witnessing that challenges the same discourses that the protagonists have no choice but to employ.

While the relationship of the fiction of Sebald and Ishiguro to atrocity has been acknowledged, the reception of their work has not substantially attended to the question of witnessing, or to the role of fiction in this process. In the remainder of this introduction, I therefore outline the ways in which I build on existing work on these two writers in order to explore the central themes of this thesis.

RECEPTION: SEBALD

Meta-critical articles by two of the leading scholars on Sebald, Richard Sheppard and J. J. Long, have found that the dominant concerns of critics are the nature and poetics of memory, Sebald's writing as Holocaust literature, and photography and the image / text relationship.⁷⁸ Another emerging trend is in the use of Sebald's annotated library, held

⁷⁷ Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel', pp. 159-61.

⁷⁸ J. J. Long, 'W. G. Sebald: A Bibliographical Essay', in *W. G. Sebald and the Writing of History*, ed. by Anne Fuchs and J. J. Long (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2007), pp. 11-30; Richard Sheppard, "'Woods, Trees, and the Spaces in Between": A Report on Work Published on W. G. Sebald 2005-2008',

at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv (DLA), an approach which is advocated by Sheppard in particular.⁷⁹ In terms of my own project, there is some relevant work on witnessing, but a lack of detailed analysis of complicity, and it is this which I intend to address. Using existing critical insights into the nature of representation and vision, I identify in Sebald a failed politics of resistance which combines the commonly cited melancholic elements of his writing with its often overlooked subversive and carnivalesque tendencies.

Sebald's subject position is crucial to his concern with witnessing, and to the attempts at subversion that his narrators undertake. He has been identified as a specifically German writer in two contexts. The publication of 'Air War and Literature', the content of which was originally delivered as a series of lectures, initiated a debate on the status of Germans as victims, and thus located Sebald squarely in the context of German war memory; and while *Austerlitz* certainly revolves around the events of the Holocaust, as his final novel it has perhaps retrospectively tinted the reception of his other works.⁸⁰ In addition, Peter Morgan calls for recognition of Sebald's location within the longer tradition of German writing, arguing that 'a pervasive imagery of apocalypse [...] situates [Sebald's work] clearly in a particularly German literary-cultural continuum'.⁸¹ However, Mark M. Anderson has persuasively argued against the kind of narrow focus that results in Sebald being labelled a 'Holocaust author',⁸² and Long concurs, claiming that Sebald's concern is with the 'meta-problem of modernity',

Journal of European Studies 39 (2009), 79-128. Sheppard is less than flattering with respect to much of the academic work published on Sebald, arguing that in many cases 'the length of publications on Sebald is normally so disproportionate to their substance that most could easily be cut by a third to a half' (p. 80).⁷⁹ Sheppard, 'Woods, Trees, and the Spaces in Between', pp. 83-4, 91. The DLA has also been employed by Richard T. Gray, and by Dora Osborne to identify examples of Freud's influence in Sebald's writing. Dora Osborne, 'Topographical Anxiety and Dysfunctional Systems', in *The Undiscover'd Country*, ed. by Markus Zisselberger (Rochester, N. Y.: Camden House, 2010), pp. 300-21; Richard T. Gray, 'Sebald's Segues: Performing Narrative Contingency in *The Rings of Saturn*', *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 84 (2009), 26-58.

⁸⁰ The relatively short space of time in which the English translations of his novels were published may also account for this in part. *Austerlitz* was published in both German and English in 2001, but there was a lag between publication in German and English for his earlier novels. As a result, the English versions of four texts examined in this thesis appeared in a condensed period between 1996 and 2001. Stephen Brockmann summarises the debate surrounding the publication of 'Air War and Literature', suggesting that, for Sebald, the notion of Germans as victims is 'always accompanied by the problem of Germans as perpetrators'. Brockmann Stephen Brockmann, 'W. G. Sebald and German Wartime Suffering', in *Germans as Victims in the Literary Fiction of the Berlin Republic*, ed. by Stuart Taberner and Karina Berger (Rochster, New York: Camden House, 2009), pp. 15-28 (pp. 16-17).

⁸¹ Peter Morgan, 'The Sign of Saturn: Melancholy, Homelessness and Apocalypse in W. G. Sebald's Prose Narratives', *German Life and Letters*, 58 (2005), 75-92 (p. 76).

⁸² Mark M. Anderson, 'The Edge of Darkness: On W. G. Sebald', *October*, 106 (2003), 102-21 (p. 104). However, I do feel that Anderson underplays the concern with atrocity in Sebald somewhat when he identifies 'existential exile' (rather than 'mass killing') as the master trope of Sebald's work. Moreover, *The Rings of Saturn*, as I argue in Chapter Two, is centrally concerned with magnitudes of suffering and the ongoing effects of atrocity.

although he notes that there is an ‘inescapable’ relationship between the nature of the Holocaust and ‘the technological rationality and bureaucracy characteristic of modernity itself’.⁸³ Moreover, and notwithstanding the fact that he spent over thirty years of his life in England, the content of Sebald’s literary texts explicitly raises the complexities of his identity. In general, his writing is highly, and internationally, intertextual: he refers to, among others, Stendhal, Kafka, Balzac, Borges, Nabokov and Thomas Browne. Furthermore, and to give a specific example of the uncertainty surrounding Sebald’s identity, the title of the final section of *Vertigo*, in which the narrator returns to Germany, is ‘Il ritorno in patria’. His use of Italian calls into question the identity of his *patria*, and its allusion to Claudio Monteverdi’s *Il ritorno d’Ulisse in patria* suggests that he locates himself within a broader European tradition of writing and art. Moreover, Sebald’s narrators often figure Germany as distant or strange, and this sense of estrangement and distance is typical of the way Sebald’s narrators attempt to arrive at unusual perspectives in order to witness the past from outside dominant discourses.

A number of critics have suggested that the frequently recognised concern with memory in Sebald’s work comments on the ethics of seeing and representation on which witnessing relies. For example, Lynne Sharon Schwartz argues that Sebald’s writing echoes ‘the lingering state of shock that is our legacy’. She notes that his narrators often play the role of listeners, and that it is their distance from the events whose legacy they are party to that allows them to do so.⁸⁴ Distance from historical events is not always read as an obstacle to understanding the past, with Wilfred Wilms distinguishing between the ‘unmediated knowledge’ of victims, and the mediated knowledge of survivors and those on the outside; for Sebald, he argues, artificial distance is required for those on the outside to comprehend eyewitness accounts.⁸⁵ J. J. Long also addresses the issue of witnessing from a distance, and in noting the connection between postmemory and prosthetic memory he suggests that it is perhaps

⁸³ J. J. Long, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 1-3.

⁸⁴ Lynne Sharon Schwartz, *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), pp. 9, 16-7.

⁸⁵ Wilfred Wilms, ‘Taboo and Repression in W. G. Sebald’s *On the Natural History of Destruction*’, in *W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, ed. by J. J. Long and Anne Whitehead (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), pp. 175-88 (pp. 175-7). Wilms cites Levi and Wiesel, and therefore takes as his starting point the arguments about the impossibility of truly bearing witness that I have outlined already in this introduction.

only in subsequent generations and through its material traces that trauma can be witnessed and worked through.⁸⁶

In Chapters One and Two, I therefore attempt to take these observations, and to relate them to the issues of seeing and witnessing in Sebald's writing. For example, Rebecca Walkowitz notes that Sebald employs both 'panoramic' and 'microscopic' perspectives, arguing that neither is privileged over the other.⁸⁷ Jan Ceuppens takes a similar line, writing of both 'wide angle' and 'close up' passages in Sebald. Ceuppens, however, also links these perspectives to the belatedness of the gaze that operates in Sebald, noting: 'that which remains to be witnessed is merely the vestige, the ruin, the trace, or, in general terms, the letter (since these vestiges are always already artistically manipulated).'⁸⁸ Both of these insights reveal how, in Sebald's prose, it is representations, whether textual or visual, that function as the prosthetics by which the past can be known and accessed. However, it is the inadequacy or partiality of these representations with which I am concerned. As Long notes, Sebald's narrators tend to seek stable perspectives from which to view the world, but are generally all too aware of the inadequacy of any perspectives to which they have access,⁸⁹ and as I have suggested in the previous section, I will explore the ways in which the tension between this awareness and the inability to find an adequate perspective allows the narrators' implication with atrocity to become apparent.

Others, such as Markus Zisselberger, have addressed the way in which blindness occurs through the partiality and inadequacy of representation, less with regard to the individual episodes related in Sebald's texts than in a more general sense, arguing that blind spots tend to result from the imposition of *a priori* schema.⁹⁰ Eric Santner also raises the issue of blindness in Sebald's texts, writing that, with regard to empathy in Sebald, 'one is not so much trying to see the world from someone else's point of view as to register the blind spots in that point of view, and to unpack the stresses contained in this blindness'.⁹¹ As my comments on optics earlier in this introduction indicate, I am

⁸⁶ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 117.

⁸⁷ Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style*, p. 155.

⁸⁸ Jan Ceuppens, 'Tracing the Witness in W. G. Sebald', in *W. G. Sebald and the Writing of History*, ed. by Anne Fuchs and J. J. Long (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2007), pp. 59-72 (pp. 60, 65).

⁸⁹ J. J. Long, 'Sebald's Miniature Histories', in *W. G. Sebald and the Writing of History*, ed. by Anne Fuchs and J. J. Long (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2007), pp. 111-20 (p. 111).

⁹⁰ Markus Zisselberger, 'Introduction', in *The Undiscover'd Country: W. G. Sebald and the Poetics of Travel*, ed. by Markus Zisselberger (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2010), pp. 1-29 (p. 4).

⁹¹ Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 58.

using sight and blindness in broad terms which are related to the positions from which the narrators write and in which they are embedded.

While the critics cited above form part of a body of commentary on the nature of vision and representation, these responses have less frequently been extended into any sustained examination of the nature of complicity in Sebald's work. Anne Whitehead is an exception to this tendency, suggesting that his fiction shows the ways in which all are implicated in the after-effects of the Holocaust.⁹² However, it is J. J. Long's identification, in *Image, Archive, Modernity*, of the relationship between the structures and processes of modernity to forms of power that provides the basis of many of my readings of Sebald's texts. Following Foucault, Long identifies in Sebald a concern with the way in which modernity has produced 'a reorganisation of relations between knowledge, power and the body'.⁹³ Long thus identifies the way in which power grows out of disciplinary structures and related modes of representation, including narrative. However, Long's readings tend to posit a 'top-down' model of power, and it is in this that I diverge from his analysis, suggesting that 'bottom-up' forms of complicity also exist in Sebald's work.

In writing of a 'top-down' model of power, I do not mean to over-simplify the way in which disciplinary power operates. Foucault argues that 'people are never the inert or consenting targets of power; they are always its relays': the state ensures that power operates from within the social body, rather than from above (as was the case with older models of sovereign power).⁹⁴ Long notes that 'power thus conceived is not purely repressive; it is also productive',⁹⁵ and this comment is suggestive of ways in which the self-interest of subjects might cause them to enter into complicitous relationships with state power. Yet Foucault's analysis remains centred on the apparatus of the state, as does Long's, which focuses on the ways in which collections, archives and photography all contribute to the functioning of disciplinary power. However, in my analysis, I argue that Sebald's texts are also concerned with the individual subjectivity of the narrators and protagonists. Thus, when I write of 'bottom-up' forms of complicity, it is from the indeterminate agency of those who are largely subject to structures of power, and their limited exercise of agency within that position, that I

⁹² Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 138.

⁹³ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 13.

⁹⁴ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France*, trans. by David Macey, ed. by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 29.

⁹⁵ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 14.

begin my readings of Sebald. If the narrators and protagonists are relays of power, this relay takes place, in part, through narrative and through the transmission of memory, and I attempt to identify where complicity exists in these processes.

Given the relationship between complicity and forms of representation in Sebald, subversion and transgression have a role to play in any ethical form of representation. Because of this, I argue that the frequently noted melancholic tenor of Sebald's work masks more playful and subversive aspects of his writing. Where critics have related issues of vision and perspective to the notion of witnessing, they have overwhelmingly tended to do so through an identification of melancholy as contributing to a politics of resistance.⁹⁶ Amelia Scurry, for example, argues that in *The Rings of Saturn*, the text itself is 'a material trace born of melancholic witnessing',⁹⁷ while for Mary Cosgrove both Sebald's narrators and the representations of history that they produce are categorised as melancholic.⁹⁸ However, while there is certainly a melancholic tenor to Sebald's body of work, I argue that this is not his sole mode of operation, and when Richard Sheppard writes that 'there was something of the 'Schelm' ('rogue' / 'trickster') in Max',⁹⁹ I argue that this is visible in some of the misdirection he employs through his narrators. Thus, while I agree with Peter Morgan's identification of 'cultural pessimism of religious dimensions'¹⁰⁰ in Sebald's work, I argue that this is not always manifest in a melancholic aesthetic. Where his melancholia has been identified as having a political and resistant dimension, little criticism (Deane Blackler is a notable exception) has identified and examined the means by which carnivalesque elements in Sebald's writing

⁹⁶ Roger Luckhurst goes as far as to label Sebald the 'last traumatophile'. Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*. p. 111. The theme of melancholy as resistance is usually identified as having its roots in Benjamin's conception of '*linke melancholie*' ('leftist melancholy'). See Long, 'W. G. Sebald: A Bibliographical Essay', p. 21; Ignasi Ribó, 'The One-Winged Angel: History and Memory in the Literary Discourse of W. G. Sebald', *Orbis Litterarum*, 64 (2009), 222-62; Morgan, 'The Sign of Saturn', pp. 75-92; Mary Cosgrove, 'Sebald for Our Time: The Politics of Melancholy and the Critique of Capitalism in his Work', in *W. G. Sebald and the Writing of History*, ed. by Anne Fuchs and J. J. Long (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2007), pp. 91-110; Anne Fuchs, 'Ein Hauptkapitel der Geschichte der Unterwerfung: Representations of Nature in W. G. Sebald's *Die Ringe des Saturn*', in *W. G. Sebald and the Writing of History*, ed. by Anne Fuchs and J. J. Long (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2007), pp. 121-38.

⁹⁷ Amelia Scurry, 'Melancholy and History in W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*', in *Remaking Literary History*, ed. by Helen Groth and Paul Sheehan (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), pp. 15-22 (p. 17).

⁹⁸ Cosgrove, 'The Politics of Melancholy', p. 91.

⁹⁹ Richard Sheppard, 'Dexter-Sinister: Some Observations on Decrypting the Mors Code in the Work of W. G. Sebald', *Journal of European Studies*, 35 (2005), 419-63 (p. 441). Sebald went as 'Max' in his personal affairs.

¹⁰⁰ Morgan, 'The Sign of Saturn', p. 91.

contribute to a politics of resistance.¹⁰¹ This resistance, while not always successful, takes the form of a puncturing of the representations that the narrators encounter, and the norms that they encapsulate.

Sebald indicates how normative discourses, and the propriety through which these are perpetuated, are largely responsible for failures to see the presence of atrocity. Sebald's project is therefore, in part, to make visible not only atrocity, but also the ways in which discourse (constructed through representation and normative aesthetics) works to keep such events invisible and unacknowledged.

RECEPTION: ISHIGURO

As is the case with Sebald, the body of work comprising the critical reception to Ishiguro is now of a sufficient volume to have produced meta-critical responses. The most thorough of these is Sim Wai-Chew's recent (2010) survey, which identifies four major strands of responses to his work. These strands focus on: style and narrative theory; multicultural Britain and postcolonial studies; psychoanalytical criticism; and Ishiguro as an international writer.¹⁰² Perhaps surprisingly, given the roles of many of Ishiguro's narrators, their complicity has not been a major theme in the criticism: while it tends to feature as a factor in discussions of other themes, the nature of this complicity and the means through which it occurs are not generally foregrounded. Several essays in the recent (2011) collection edited by Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis suggest that complicity is becoming more prominent in reception,¹⁰³ and I discuss some of these

¹⁰¹ Blackler argues that Sebald's texts invite active, 'disobedient' readings, whereby carnivalesque and playful strategies bring the metafictional aspects of his writing into view. Richard Sheppard addresses the question of the extent of Sebald's melancholia explicitly, and in response to the question of whether or not Sebald himself was melancholic, he answers: 'increasingly yes'. Deane Blackler, *Reading W. G. Sebald: Adventure and Disobedience* (Rochester, N. Y.: Camden House, 2007), p. 3; Sheppard, 'Dexter-Sinister', p. 448.

¹⁰² Sim Wai-Chew, *Kazuo Ishiguro* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁰³ For example, Caroline Bennett describes the blindness towards atrocity of several of Ishiguro's protagonists, while Lydia R. Cooper discusses 'moral culpability' in *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go* and, making reference to the Eichmann trial, identifies Ishiguro's interest in the 'necessity of moral choices even when the choice itself is limited'. Caroline Bennett, "'Cemeteries are No Places for Young People': Children and Trauma in the Early Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro", in *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, ed. by Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 82-92, Lydia R. Cooper, 'Novelistic Practice and Ethical Philosophy in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*', in *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, ed. by Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 107-17 (pp. 107-8).

contributions below. In the main, however, the relationship between Ishiguro's novels and atrocity has more commonly been seen in terms of trauma.

Those critics who have addressed trauma in Ishiguro's novels tend to see it as a driver for narrative and form. Cynthia Wong, for example, argues that the stories told by Ishiguro's characters are often a form of catharsis following traumatic loss as they struggle 'to bring to the surface painful events and to find a language that can adequately express the unending trauma of their affliction'.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Brian Shaffer argues that each of Ishiguro's novels describes a 'vast web of personal and historical traumas',¹⁰⁵ and in an article on his short fiction is more explicit, arguing these works reveal Ishiguro's 'obsession' with trauma, and that they can act as 'a key to understanding the psychological trauma [...] at the heart of all Ishiguro's narratives'.¹⁰⁶ Justine Baillie and Sean Matthews also explicitly label Ishiguro as a writer primarily concerned with trauma, arguing that the narrators of his early novels (up to *The Remains of the Day*) reveal 'the traumatised, fragmented sense of self of the narrators themselves'; and they accurately note of *A Pale View of Hills* that 'the trauma of [Etsuko's] time in Nagasaki becomes present after the fact, but in a reconstructed and displaced form, not as the direct experience of the event itself'.¹⁰⁷

Atrocity is therefore at the centre of Ishiguro's novels, but psychoanalytic criticism has tended to be employed in commentaries on the formal properties of Ishiguro's writing, rather than in any sustained and explicit attempt to discuss the representation of trauma in his novels. This is because, with the exceptions of Etsuko in *A Pale View of Hills* and Diana Banks in *When We Were Orphans*, there is little direct representation of traumatised protagonists. Instead, it is usually through ongoing domestic, artistic and political reconfigurations that trauma's effects are visible. It is for this reason that, as I have outlined above, my approach to trauma is to view it in terms of its effects across a number of spheres.

¹⁰⁴ Cynthia Wong, *Kazuo Ishiguro* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2005), p. 2.

¹⁰⁵ Brian Shaffer, *Reading the Novel in English 1950-2000* (Malden, MA, London and Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), p. 158.

¹⁰⁶ Brian W. Shaffer, "'Somewhere Just Beneath the Surface of Things': Kazuo Ishiguro's Short Fiction", in *Kazuo Ishiguro*, ed. by Sean Matthews and Sebastian Groes (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), pp. 9-19 (pp. 18-9).

¹⁰⁷ Justine Baillie and Sean Matthews, 'History, Memory, and the Construction of Gender in *A Pale View of Hills*', in *Kazuo Ishiguro*, ed. by Sean Matthews and Sebastian Groes (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), pp. 45-53 (p. 45).

Frederick M. Holmes uses psychoanalytical criticism in ways similar to those outlined above, but extends discussion into trauma, arguing that the fictional worlds of Ishiguro's first three novels lie between 'historically veridical realism' and 'fabulism'. Through this form, he argues, 'the selective, frequently distorting, impressionistic memories of all [the narrators of the first three novels] testify to their inability to come to terms psychologically with the trauma of the Second World War'.¹⁰⁸ Notably, then, his focus on trauma is tied to a concern with the means of inscription, and therefore fits LaCapra's definition of 'writing about trauma'. Holmes' reading of Ishiguro therefore mirrors my own approach, outlined in the theoretical framework section of this introduction, in regarding these fictions as a contribution to the historiography of these events (even in their counterfactual nature), rather than as a performative expression of trauma.

However, the connection between trauma and complicity has not been thoroughly examined. For example, Wong's notion of catharsis implies that Ishiguro's protagonists have been subject to some form of traumatic experience which requires working through. However, as I have argued, continuity and conformity are the defining characteristics of the narratives created by Ishiguro's narrators, and it is in (and perhaps because of) their unwillingness to fully acknowledge the extent of the ruptures they have experienced that complicity resides. I therefore agree with Peter Childs' view when he states that Ishiguro 'explores themes of loss, trauma, dislocation, failure and memory', but argues that his central theme is his narrators' self-deception.¹⁰⁹ However, I see this self-deception not simply as an internal factor driving narrative form (the looping, self-correcting first person narratives that Ishiguro employs), but also as being manifest externally as part of these characters' complicity with wider events. However, these complicities are generally indirect. Groes and Lewis label Ishiguro a *Nachkriegskind*, that is, a member of the generation who 'had no active role in – or made no direct contribution to – the atrocities perpetrated during [the Second World War], but [who] struggle to live as the inheritors of those tragic events'.¹¹⁰ For Ishiguro, questions of perpetration and generational trauma are only present within the question

¹⁰⁸ Frederick M. Holmes, 'Realism, Dreams, and the Unconscious in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro', in *The Contemporary British Novel*, ed. by James Acheson and Sarah C. E. Ross (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), pp. 11-22 (pp. 12-3).

¹⁰⁹ Peter Childs, *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction Since 1970* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), p. 129.

¹¹⁰ Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis, 'Introduction', in *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, ed. by Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 1-10 (pp. 5-6).

of complicity, and the convenient fictions by which such culpabilities are denied or obfuscated.

A number of responses to Ishiguro, in particular in the early criticism, were also concerned with Ishiguro's identity and the 'Japaneseness' or otherwise of his writing.¹¹¹ Other readings have responded to these by attempting to define his identity in terms more nuanced than nationality: Rebecca Walkowitz has sought to situate Ishiguro as an 'international' or 'cosmopolitan' writer, and has criticised the use of national clichés in readings of Ishiguro's work, arguing for example that he employs suicide simultaneously both as a Western orientalist myth and as 'a form of nostalgic citation' for Japanese audiences.¹¹² While my thesis does not engage in detail with debates about national or cosmopolitan identities, these observations are useful in that identities become culturally active and transmissible tropes which, as shortcuts to signification, may themselves act to obscure the specificities of historical events, and specifically the atrocities in which the protagonists are implicated. In arguing that Ishiguro's use of critical distance means that 'no country looks like a perpetrator or a victim only',¹¹³ Walkowitz suggests that the messiness and contingency of identity is visible in the narratives that his protagonists construct.

Where the reception to Ishiguro has examined complicity, it has usually been implicit in discussions of other characteristics of the novels, and of the protagonists' behaviour. For example, Caroline Bennett writes of Ishiguro's narrators that 'for an adult to be childishly innocent in the face of atrocity is to turn a blind eye to atrocity'.¹¹⁴ Ishiguro's protagonists' blindness to the atrocities in which they are complicit stems from failures to transgress against the discourses in which they are embedded. The

¹¹¹ Sim Wai-Chew lists a number of these discussions, expressing his irritation at the persistence of this trend even into readings of *The Remains of the Day* as a 'paean for a lost way of life', in which the foregrounding of national identity produces what he sees as a 'kitschification' of the novel. A representative example of such arguments is Rocio G. Davis's identification of Ishiguro's style with 'the extreme suggestiveness of Japanese poetry', and the more dubious and generalised claim that 'through the recollections of the protagonist's, Stevens's, years of service at Darlington Hall, Ishiguro will reveal essential aspects of the Japanese character'. Sim Wai-Chew, 'Kazuo Ishiguro', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 25 (2005), 80-115 (p. 102); Rocio G. Davis, 'Imaginary Homelands Revisited in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro', *Miscelánea*, 15 (1994).

¹¹² It is also notable that, according to Motoko Sugano, the Japanese translation of *A Pale View of Hills* removed a number of references which would have placed the novel within debates around Japanese artists' wartime responsibility. Motoko Sugano, "'Putting One's Convictions to the Test": Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* in Japan', in *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, ed. by Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 69-81 (pp. 78-9).

¹¹³ Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation*, p. 109.

¹¹⁴ Bennett, 'Children and Trauma', p. 87.

reason for such failures is suggested by Victor Sage in his identification of ‘failed rites of passage’, whereby the challenges faced by Ishiguro’s protagonists do not serve to assure their separation and autonomy from the social orders in which they are embedded, but instead bind them more tightly to their rigid (and complicit) professional roles.¹¹⁵ Sage’s observations raise the question of the degree of agency that the protagonists possess, and other responses to Ishiguro’s novels suggest that the structures of power in which the protagonists are involved work to reduce their agency, or to create situations in which no ethical choice is available: Alyn Webley’s identification of double-binds in *When We Were Orphans* and Anne Whitehead’s discussion of the relationship between care and culpability in *Never Let Me Go* both address such reductions of agency, and I elaborate upon both of these discussions in Chapter Four.¹¹⁶

The interpretations cited above are the starting point of my identification of the causes and nature of complicity on the part of Ishiguro’s narrators. However, this thesis also attempts to identify the ways in which narrative itself can be a type of complicity, and as such I also address the role of narrative form as a means of denying culpability. As Groes and Lewis note, many of Ishiguro’s narrators never quite reach the moment of anagnorisis, ‘that moment of insight or self-recognition that would allow them to steer their lives in different directions’,¹¹⁷ yet Ishiguro’s narrators also tend to employ narrative more deliberately as a form of rewriting aspects of their pasts, and I discuss the (uncertain) extent to which the narrators can be seen as deliberately manipulating narrative to these ends. Christine Berberich and Meghan Marie Hammond have both suggested that Stevens is guilty of emplotment of this sort in *The Remains of the Day*,¹¹⁸ and I apply the same suspicions to the narratives of Ishiguro’s other narrators.

¹¹⁵ Sage discusses Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World*, Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*, and Kathy H. in *Never Let Me Go*. Victor Sage, ‘The Pedagogics of Liminality: Rites of Passage in the Work of Kazuo Ishiguro’, in *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, ed. by Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 31-45 (pp. 40-1).

¹¹⁶ Alyn Webley, ‘“Shanghai’d” into Service: Double Binds in *When We Were Orphans*’, in *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, ed. by Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 184-95; Anne Whitehead, ‘Writing with Care: Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*’, *Contemporary Literature*, 52 (2011), 54-83.

¹¹⁷ Groes and Lewis, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

¹¹⁸ Christine Berberich, ‘Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*: Working Through England’s Traumatic Past as a Critique of Thatcherism’, in *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, ed. by Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 118-30; Meghan Marie Hammond, ‘“I Can’t Even Say I Made My Own Mistakes”’: The Ethics of Genre in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*’, in *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, ed. by Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 95-105.

Moreover, I argue that there is a sense in which narratives can carry with them complicities insidiously, through the expectations (and resulting blind spots) created by their form. In Ishiguro, this occurs principally through genre which, as Bo G. Ekelund argues, is ‘a cultured form that, on entering the novel, brings a complicitous history in its baggage’. As a consequence, Ekelund asserts that *The Remains of the Day* contains ‘complicity inherent in the very form it relies upon for the disclosure of the theme’.¹¹⁹ The possibility that such complicities may also exist in Ishiguro’s other novels are raised by readings of *Never Let Me Go* which contrast it with the rebellion that characterises science fiction,¹²⁰ and by discussions of the conservatism of detective fiction with regard to *When We Were Orphans*.¹²¹ With reference to these observations on Ishiguro’s use and subversion of genre, I argue that his novels create the possibility of complicitous readings, in which empathy with the narrator and acceptance of their emplotment of events may lead to blindness towards the atrocities obscured by the narrative. This potential is described with regard to *The Remains of the Day* in Meera Tamaya’s observation that ‘the intimate tone of the narrative beguiles the reader into a curious complicity with Stevens’ point of view’;¹²² I suggest that this potential exists across Ishiguro’s body of work. However, I also argue that Ishiguro leads the reader away from such readings, primarily through his foregrounding of these narratives as acts of inscription, which serves to collapse the distance between reading, writing and interpretation, and directs the reader to respond reflexively and critically to the narrators’ inscriptions of events.

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¹¹⁹ Bo G. Ekelund, ‘Misrecognising History: Complicitous Genres in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*’, *The International Fiction Review*, 32 (2005) <<http://journals.hil.unb.ca/index.php/IFR/article/view/7801/8858>> [accessed 4 October 2012] (para. 1 of 55).

¹²⁰ See Leona Toker and Daniel Chertoff, ‘Reader Response and the Recycling of Topoi in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*’, *Partial Answers*, 6 (2008), 163-80; Mark Jerng, ‘Giving Form to Life: Cloning and Narrative Expectations of the Human’, *Partial Answers*, 6 (2008), 369-93.

¹²¹ Hélène Machinal, ‘Kazuo Ishiguro’s *When We Were Orphans*: Narration and Detection in the Case of Christopher Banks’, in *Kazuo Ishiguro*, ed. by Sean Matthews and Sebastian Groes (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), pp. 79-90 (p. 84); Tobias Döring, ‘Sherlock Holmes - He Dead: Disenchanted the English Detective in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *When We Were Orphans*’, in *Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective*, ed. by Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen (New York: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 59-86.

¹²² Meera Tamaya, ‘Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*: The Empire Strikes Back’, *Modern Language Studies*, 22 (1992), 45-56 (p. 50).

Having set out the main theoretical tools that I am employing in this discussion, this thesis begins with an examination of Sebald's *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*. These are two novels in which the historical atrocities of the Second World War are addressed obliquely, through layers of secondary narrative and through the narrators' encounters with other forms of memory, including photographs, artefacts and sites of memory. These encounters permit a self-reflexive examination of the nature and ethics of representation. In particular *Vertigo*, Sebald's first novel, establishes his use of the persona of the narrator as a means of representing history and trauma, while at the same time challenging the same terms from which that representation is constructed. This chapter will therefore establish, through readings of these two works, the importance of the narrator with regard to the nature of complicity; this will in turn provide a framework for discussion in the remaining chapters of the thesis.

CHAPTER 1. OMISSIONS AND REVISIONS: *VERTIGO* AND *THE EMIGRANTS*

INTRODUCTION

In the foreword to *On the Natural History of Destruction* (2004 [1999]), Sebald writes: ‘born in a village in the Allgäu Alps in May 1944, I am one of those who remained almost untouched by the catastrophe unfolding in the German Reich’.¹²³ That village is Wertach im Allgäu, the ‘W.’ which features in *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*. Its inclusion in these texts points towards German complicity in the crimes of the Third Reich. However, in describing himself as being ‘almost untouched’ by the events of the Second World War, Sebald suggests that he (and by implication those of his generation) were not directly involved as perpetrators or victims, and nor were they even in the position of bystanders or first-hand witnesses. The relationship of Sebald’s generation to the ‘catastrophe’ of the Second World War is therefore one of belatedly attempting to come to terms with its implications and ongoing effects, amongst which is the recognition of the involvement and complicity of their compatriots, friends and families.

Yet this is not to say that in *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants* Sebald is solely concerned with the Nazi regime and its crimes. As Mark M. Anderson argues, Sebald’s concern is ‘the long *durée* of European history from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment to the present, not just [...] the twelve years of the Hitler regime’.¹²⁴ This long *durée* stretches in *Vertigo* from Pisanello’s fifteenth century paintings to the story of Kafka’s visit to Riva, while *The Emigrants*’ sweep is wider still, ranging from the biblical sites around Jerusalem to echoes of twentieth century writers and British pop songs of the sixties.

This broad canvas allows Sebald to represent atrocities not in isolation, but in their connectedness. While Nazi atrocities sit at the centre of these narratives, they are connected with and form part of modernity. This is not to say that Sebald draws straightforward causal arrows between different moments in the evolution of modernity (between, say, the modes of warfare employed by Napoleon as described in the early

¹²³ W. G. Sebald, ‘Foreword’, in W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. by Anthea Bell, (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. vii-x (pp. vii-viii).

¹²⁴ Anderson, ‘The Edge of Darkness’, p. 104.

sections of *Vertigo* and the mechanised murder of the Nazi regime); in fact, his narrators are conspicuously wary of attributing causality to the stories that they collect and reproduce. Instead, it is through the re-telling of events on a small-scale, through the narratives of individual lives, rather than presenting the broad sweep of history, that he shows how attitudes and discourses in which the perpetrators were already embedded often lead to complicity in atrocity. The events closest to his own life – those of the Second World War, and particularly those perpetrated by Germans of his parents’ generation – are shown to be the result of habits and discourse, and an unwillingness to remove the mask of civility in order to expose the barbarism being perpetrated.

When, in *On the Natural History of Destruction*, Sebald argues that ‘a basic stance of opposition and a lively intelligence [...] could easily turn into more or less deliberate attempts to conform’, he indicates ways in which even intelligent and free-thinking individuals find themselves in positions of conformity whereby they adopt the logic of the powers that they serve; he goes on to add that someone in the public eye ‘would therefore have to adjust his presentation of his career, through tactful omissions and other revisions’.¹²⁵ Sebald thus moves away from the issue of perpetration to his main concern, which is that of the way in which representational omissions and revisions function as a belated form of complicity.¹²⁶

The relationship between representation and complicity takes two forms in *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*: firstly, the inclusion of others’ narratives of their own roles in and around violent periods of history often minimise complicity in persecution, and secondly, self-reflexive gestures indicate that the narrators’ own accounts may in fact be repeating these same sins of omission and revision. Both forms of representational

¹²⁵ Sebald is actually making specific reference to the writer Alfred Andersch at this point, arguing that Andersch is representative of the ‘half-consciousness or false consciousness’ exhibited by postwar German authors. Sebald, ‘Foreword’, pp. ix-x.

¹²⁶ In the introduction, I have noted that novels such as Bernhard Schlink’s *The Reader* and Rachel Seiffert’s *The Dark Room* employ perpetrators as their protagonists. Responses to *The Reader* have tended to praise Schlink’s attempt to nuance the figure of the perpetrator, but have been increasingly concerned that his use of an illiterate protagonist, Hanna Schmitz, is a form of exculpation: William Collins Donahue has, for example, influentially argued that the novel addresses the ‘perpetrator’s tangle of motivation’, but remains concerned that Hanna’s illiteracy serves as a kind of ‘alibi’. However, in focusing on the character of Schmitz, such responses tend to ignore the significance of the other perpetrators in the novel, her co-defendants, who exploit her illiteracy in order to exonerate themselves. Thus, when Sarah Liu argues of *The Reader* that illiteracy serves as a metaphor for ethical blindness, what also needs to be said is that literacy is not necessarily a means of understanding the crimes of the past, but can also (and more often, perhaps) be used to obfuscate and elide these events. William Collins Donahue, ‘Illusions of Subtlety: Bernhard Schlink’s *Der Vorleser*’, *German Life and Letters*, 54 (2001), 60-81 (p. 62); Sarah Liu, ‘The Illiterate Reader: Aphasia After Auschwitz’, *Partial Answers*, 7 (2009), 319-42 (p. 336). See also Martin Swales, ‘Sex, Shame and Guilt: Reflections on Bernhard Schlink’s *Der Vorleser* (*The Reader*) and J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*’, *Journal of European Studies*, 33 (2003), 7-22.

complicity often take place through conformity, and through the tact to which Sebald refers in *On the Natural History of Destruction*. Sebald's narratives do not generally represent limit-case events, but tell personal and family histories using the language of propriety. Both texts present the civilized surfaces that discourse constructs after the event; what Sebald's erudite narrators know is how to read the traces of atrocity and suffering in these surfaces. Taking this one step further, however, Sebald is also fully aware that discourse is both a symptom and a perpetuation of the conformity that hides atrocity. As creators of discourse themselves, his narrators attend not only to recognising the atrocity in what they read, but to how their own writing may itself serve to obscure the traces of atrocity that persist.

The ethical drive of *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants* is therefore to bear witness to the past in ways that avoid the omissions and revisions which obscure culpability in the past, and it is in this light that a number of critics have identified the role of the narrators as listeners and interlocutors for those at the margins, allowing previously unheard histories to be told.¹²⁷ However, the way in which Sebald's texts combine fictional elements with apparently factual information raises a number of questions with regard to his ethics of representation. Firstly, if Sebald's project is predicated on a scrupulous ethics of remembering, why does an author who is so self-conscious about the nature of representation include a number of instances of the very kind of 'trespass' and appropriation that he warns against, perhaps most notably in the concluding passage of *The Emigrants*? Secondly, and perhaps more fundamentally, why, if Sebald writes elsewhere of the need for 'precision and responsibility', and argues for the primacy of historical sources and the 'informative character of such historical documents, before which all fiction pales',¹²⁸ does he produce four novel-length works in which the factual content is repeatedly undermined and destabilised by imaginative interventions and deliberate falsehoods?

The answers to these questions, I suggest in this chapter, lie in the fact that there is no simple representational antidote to the faults of omission and revision; in fact, the metafictional aspects of Sebald's writing often point to the inherent presence of both of

¹²⁷ Lynne Sharon Schwartz, 'Introduction', in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. by Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), pp. 1-17 (pp. 16-17); Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, pp. 112-3.

¹²⁸ Sebald, 'Air War and Literature', pp. 52-3, 61. 'Air War and Literature' was based on an essay delivered in 1997, in other words in the midst of Sebald's literary career, and before his final work, *Austerlitz*, which is also his most novelistic.

these faults in narrative and in other forms of representation. As Mary Cosgrove argues, Sebald ‘acknowledges the blind spots of established and limited epistemological frameworks [which make] it so easy to forget victims’.¹²⁹ However, Sebald is also aware of the difficulty of stepping outside of these epistemological frameworks, and for this reason his narrators generally remain within dominant discourses, and always risk slipping into a conformity that would amount to complicity with the discourses that they have shown to be implicated in the perpetration of atrocity. Conformity to established genres of communication and an accompanying sense of propriety are therefore often responsible for the insidious complicity of the ‘tactful omissions’ of later representations, carried out within dominant discourses.

In examining *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*, my discussion of each text begins with an identification of the ways in which complicity is present in representation. This occurs, as I have suggested above, both in the representations and stories that the narrators encounter, and also in their own narratives. Sebald’s writing often prompts readings that see past referential or allegorical signification, and which read representations as evidence of the translations and mediations by which they have come to be present in his own narratives, a process of reading that Rebecca Walkowitz refers to as ‘unassimilation’.¹³⁰ In other words, Sebald’s inclusion of mediated representations encourages us to read them both in terms of their semiotic content, and also in terms of their place in chains of production and interpretation which are also implicated in atrocity.

After discussing representation and the types of complicity that it may contain, I address forms of resistance to this complicity. Both *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants* contain a number of instances in which protagonists attempt to distance themselves from the dominant discourses that they see as contributing to obfuscations of atrocity. In identifying these instances, I draw on Bakhtin, suggesting that Sebald’s writing contains often neglected hints of carnivalesque subversiveness. However, I also argue that Sebald’s outlook is more pessimistic than Bakhtin’s, and that in Sebald, these acts of resistance generally fail or exhaust themselves.

Finally, I argue that, while the protagonists that Sebald represents often fail in their efforts at resistance, his own writing attempts to subvert from within the dominant

¹²⁹ Cosgrove, ‘The Politics of Melancholy’, p. 150.

¹³⁰ Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style*, p. 160.

discourses that he sees as being implicated in atrocity and suffering. This subversion is carried out through his narrators. Long argues that close reading of and research into Sebald's writing reveals deliberate and detectable falsehoods and distortions, and therefore undercuts the ostensibly documentary character of these narratives; he argues that Sebald's mode of writing can therefore provide a drive for the reader to find the 'invisible within the visible'.¹³¹ As I have suggested above, Sebald at times appears to contradict his own ethics of representation: there is a strong sense in *Vertigo*, for example, that in retelling the lives of Beyle and Kafka, he is also guilty of conducting his own rewriting of the past, while the narrator's passive response to the narratives that he collects in *The Emigrants* seems to entail silence where much more could be said. However, I argue in this chapter that these apparently counter-ethical modes of representation are instances of the distortion of languages which serve to relativise the values carried and perpetuated by these discourses. Sebald's employment of persona is therefore a subversive and destabilising tool, through which he attempts to find an ethical form of witnessing.

VERTIGO

Complicity: Overwriting History

Vertigo is an obtuse and generically indeterminate novel, which describes the journeys of Henri-Marie Beyle, Franz Kafka, and the narrator himself. The first section, 'Beyle, or Love is a Madness Most Discreet', summarises Beyle's life, while the third section, 'Dr K. Takes the Waters at Riva' describes Kafka's visit to the sanatorium at Riva in 1913. These sections are interleaved with the narrator's accounts of his own travels through the same areas, 'All'estero' and 'Il ritorno in patria', in which he follows in the footsteps of the earlier writers. Although the narrator never explicitly gives his reasons for retracing their journeys, he appears to be well-versed in the details of their lives, and the narrative therefore contains a good deal of apparently factual information concerning the personal histories of Beyle and Kafka as well as documentation of his own later presence at the same sites. However, despite these documentary elements, this

¹³¹ J. J. Long, 'W. G. Sebald: The Anti-Tourist', in *The Undiscover'd Country: W. G. Sebald and the Poetics of Travel*, ed. by Markus Zisselberger (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2010), pp. 63-91 (p. 82).

is not an objective summary of these journeys or a straightforward travelogue, containing as it does a number of dream-like sequences and passages in which the narrator records his paranoid fantasies.

What *Vertigo* is, or even what it is about, is therefore difficult to say; and the purpose of the juxtaposition of the narrator's journeys with those of Beyle and Kafka is not immediately apparent. However, there are two features of the text that make it relevant to a discussion of ethics of witnessing in Sebald. The first of these is the suggestion of complicity in Nazi crimes that is suggested by the narrator's description of his home town, 'W.', and the second is the examination of the failings of representation that is conducted largely by the 'Beyle' and 'Kafka' sections. Furthermore, by juxtaposing these two features in an interleaved structure, *Vertigo* asks us to read for the origins of Nazi atrocities in the earlier histories, and to apply the reflections on the failings of representation from the earlier episodes into the narrator's return to W.

Atrocity is introduced belatedly in *Vertigo*, and it is only in the final section of the novel, 'Il ritorno in patria', in which the narrator returns to 'W.', that its presence is suggested. The narrator passes by the former site of a gypsy camp, and recalls that his mother would pick him up and carry him each time they passed. This textual description is followed by a single photograph, taken by his father while serving in Slovakia, which shows a gypsy woman behind barbed wire (p. 184), and this juxtaposition ties the suspicion of the locals in W., and Sebald's own family, to the wider and more actively perpetrated atrocities committed in the name of the Third Reich. The delayed introduction of the historical referent of the Second World War parallels the narrator's belated realisation of the significance of the villagers' behaviour and of his father's photograph: he writes of the gypsies that:

where they came from, how they managed to survive the war, and why of all places they had chosen that cheerless spot [...] are questions that occur to me only now – for example, when I leaf through the photo album which my father bought as a present for my mother. (p. 184)

The narrator's realisation encapsulates the situation of the second generation witness: he has inherited an embedded, tacit relationship with this history, and is only now attempting to find an extradiegetic position from which to question his own role (and

those of his family and compatriots) within that past and in its continued effects on the present.

The narrator refrains from making any explicit connection between this photograph and Nazi persecution of the gypsies, or indeed to any of the other atrocities committed during the war. The limit-case events of genocide are therefore absent referents from *Vertigo*, and are only indicated. However, because the narrator passes the site of the gypsy camp before re-entering W., and because the lingering presence of the Second World War is reinforced by his route through the site of the last skirmish before entering the village, the narrator's description of the villagers' behaviour cannot avoid being coloured by readers' wider knowledge of the missing referents of deportations and detentions.

The narrator's portrait of life and behaviour in W. is therefore not a description of those directly involved in the perpetration of events. However, these connections with the persecution of gypsies and with memory of the war hint that the behaviour of the villagers of W. may in some ways have contributed to the larger acts of persecution and genocide perpetrated within this passage of history. The nature of this contribution is suggested through Sebald's representation of W. as a place of secrets and silence in which outsiders are treated with suspicion: in addition to recalling that the locals never spoke to the gypsies (p. 184) he describes a number of other episodes involving suspicion and exclusions: Dr. Rambousek, with his 'Levantine' and 'foreign-seeming features' (p. 229) struggles and fails to establish himself within the community, and the Ambrose family are dismissively referred to as 'the Tyroleans' whenever they are believed to be at fault (p. 199).

Long's readings of Sebald address the 'regulation, discipline and control of populations'.¹³² As I have noted in my introduction, Long's analysis is based on Foucault's conception of disciplinary power, which describes the way in which power has come to pervade all strata of society, and is perpetuated through processes of normalisation, classification and centralisation.¹³³ The tendency towards suspicion on the part of W.'s inhabitants is part of an exclusionist, if not racist, mentality, but the normative discourses that underpin this are represented in *Vertigo* as being produced less by the centralised apparatus of the state than they are as present in the insidious,

¹³² Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 2.

¹³³ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, p. 180.

day-to-day exchanges of civil life. This form of oppression is evident in the silences that persist around the events in W's history as described by the narrator. For example, he only discovers the cause of Rambousek's death after overhearing a whispered conversation (p. 234). Similarly, when Sallaba destroys his own bar following the barmaid Romana's tryst with the hunter Hans Schlag, Frau Sallaba is found sobbing amongst the wreckage, suggesting unspoken desires and relationships (pp. 238-9). Also kept hidden under the propriety of everyday life in W. is the pain of the landlady of the Engelwirt, who begins drinking heavily after the birth of her second child, and listens to the young narrator reciting his prayers while sitting with 'a glass and bottle of Kalterer wine on the marble top of the table beside her, expressions of pain and relief crossing her face in turn' (p. 199). W. is thus represented as a claustrophobic society, in which conformity and apparent civility are in fact forms of indirect complicity with the discourses that have produced atrocity and – more pressingly for a narrator belonging to a later generation – which serve to elide and obfuscate those events.

If omission in the form of silence is a mode of complicity, speech or narrative would seem to be means of rectification, and of ethical witnessing. However, the difficulty of finding a position from which to provide any such rectifying narratives is revealed by *Vertigo's* examination of representation. The events of the Second World War are shown to be part of a continuum of discourse and values for which there is no identifiable, discrete beginning. This is indicated by hints and echoes of atrocity that the narrator sees elsewhere, and is particularly evident in his use of imagery which is highly suggestive of the Holocaust, but which is also part of the landscape of modernity. For example, in Vienna, after having walked past the Jewish community centre, the narrator falls asleep with the words 'heaps of shoes and snow piled high' (p. 37) echoing in his mind. Similarly but even more obliquely, he describes his view from the train to Innsbruck as follows: 'across on the other side were the silver ribbons of the rails. The rain turned to snow. And the heavy silence lay upon the place, broken only by the bellowing of some nameless animals waiting in a siding to be transported onwards' (p. 81).

Prior to the narrator's return to W., the first three sections of *Vertigo* serve to indicate some of the problems inherent in narrative and representation, and hence why they do not necessarily rectify the silence of complicity. *Vertigo* contains a number of passages which self-reflexively examine the nature of representation, but it is the first

section, 'Beyle, or Love is a Madness of Discreet', which conducts this examination in such density that the subject matter, that is, the biography of Beyle, becomes almost a footnote to his observations on representation and its dangers. Before the narrator has properly announced himself or embarked on his journeys, this section cycles through many of the concerns with representation that have driven modernist and postmodernist reactions against naturalistic modes of representation. Most notably, it addresses the ways in which representation has the capacity not only to distort, but also ultimately to replace, organic memory. Beyle is described coming across a picture of an engraving of a town in a newspaper, and on seeing it 'was obliged to concede that his recollected picture of the town was nothing but a copy of that very engraving'. The narrator proceeds to repeat Beyle's advice not to purchase engravings 'since before long they will displace our memories completely, indeed one might say destroy them' (pp. 7-8).

In addition, the inevitability of schematisation is implied through the inclusion of the uncaptioned image of Angela Pietragrua, the object of Beyle's affections, which accompanies the textual description. The image appears to be a sketch, but has a square grid superimposed upon it (p. 12). The narrator does not give the source of the image and hence we have no idea by whom the grid has been imposed. As Long notes, the purpose of such grids was to allow images to be reproduced prior to photographic technologies,¹³⁴ and an apparently naturalistic representation could therefore be reproduced by means of the schematisation and division of a flat space. It is thus not only in the creation of representations, but also in their reproduction and transmission that schematisation takes place.

The ways in which these inherent shortcomings contribute to representational omissions and revisions are rehearsed in the remainder of the text. Markus Zisselberger argues that blind spots in Sebald result from *a priori* schema,¹³⁵ and the narrator himself appears to create such blind spots in his description of the paintings of Pisanello. Despite expressing a wistful admiration for the sense that every feature seems to be 'granted an equal and undiminished right to exist' (p. 73) in his art, the narrator in fact undercuts his own admiration for Pisanello's egalitarianism by himself opting not to include the whole of the painting described, and to include instead images only of the eyes of Saint George and the woman whom he is about to leave in order to fight the

¹³⁴ The grid, as Claudia Öhlschläger's research has revealed, was in fact added by Sebald himself in this case. Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, pp. 94-5.

¹³⁵ Zisselberger, 'Introduction', p. 4.

dragon (pp. 75-6). This therefore seems to be a tacit admission of the inadequacy and partiality of all representation, and these difficulties are more candidly acknowledged later in the narrative when the narrator writes of ‘the questionable nature of painting as an enterprise in general’ (p. 210).

These passages suggest that, while representation may be an alternative to silence, the danger of overwriting is, to an extent, ever-present. The kind of ‘tactful omissions and other revisions’ that Sebald condemns in *On the Natural History of Destruction*, and the kind of ‘wrongful trespass’ that his narrator warns against in *The Emigrants* (p. 29), are therefore always and inevitably present, to an extent, in representation. These revisions are not always crude and deliberate attempts to overwrite history, but, as the use of the grid to overlay a portrait suggests, may occur inherently as part of the process of reproduction and dissemination.¹³⁶ Processes such as this may go unnoticed because they have become normal, and because the artefacts that they produce are in alignment with (and in fact form part of) the dominant discourses of the day. To be able to read these images as the material results of such processes is the starting point for identifying the means by which these representations contribute to complicities in atrocity.

This relationship between representation, complicity and atrocity is not immediately apparent in the early sections of *Vertigo*, but begins to become evident on the narrator’s return to Germany. When he writes that it seems as if the countryside has been ‘straightened out and tidied up’ (p. 253), the narrator seems to suggest that it is as if the orderliness of the German landscape itself conceals the messy evidence of past bloodshed. Similarly, when he notes that the Engelwirt inn, which used to be ‘a hostelry of disrepute where the village peasants [...] often drank themselves senseless’ now presents itself ‘in the pseudo-Alpine style [...] as a house offering refined hospitality to its patrons’ (p. 186), these overwritings are therefore part of a discourse of civility, through which a sense of propriety overlays and hides the evidence of past atrocities.

This is, however, also a discourse in which the narrator himself is deeply embedded. For example, on his return to W., he takes a room at the Engelwirt which he believes to be more or less on the same spot as where his family’s living room had

¹³⁶ Again, the omissions present in this inadvertent form of reduction and schematisation can be contrasted with the top-down exercise of power present in the type of ‘airbrushing’ of history described, for example, in the opening passages of Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. by Aaron Asher (New York: HarperCollins, 1999).

previously been: again, the past is overwritten, physically in this case; long gone are the family's trappings, which, 'as the unwritten rule required, had to conform in every detail with the tastes of the average couple representative of the emerging classless society' (p. 193). These include furniture, crockery, and cutlery, a bone china tea set which is never used, and a never-read set of classics. The family have bought into values in which civility and taste must be signified and displayed; but what has allowed them to purchase this status is the narrator's father's promotion in the army.

An officer in the German army populating his living room with unread copies of Shakespeare is on the same continuum of propriety as the hushed conversations in which the sufferings of inhabitants of W. are alluded to but never quite addressed, and by which the tacit agreement to ignore the gypsy camp on the edge of the village is reached. If conformity and propriety are both the tools and carriers of the discourses by and from which persecution and atrocity are born, this suggests that any resistant stance towards them requires an element of transgression. In the following section I identify instances of such transgressions, often carnivalesque in nature, throughout *Vertigo*, and note the difficulty of sustaining such resistant positions.

Resistance: Carnival Exhausted

Passing through the Tyrol on his return to W., the narrator observes a group of down-and-outs at Innsbruck station. In contrast to the constrained language that the narrator encounters in the respectable spaces of W. and elsewhere, he describes each of these dropouts as having 'something of the philosopher or even of the preacher about him', and notes that they 'were holding forth on current events or even the most fundamental questions' (pp. 172-3). The license to speak these profound and transgressive languages is granted by the marginal status of these alcoholics, and is in stark contrast to the silences and oppressive civility that the narrator comes across as he approaches and revisits the locales of his childhood.

If this incident suggests an ethical role for transgressive language, the presence of other carnivalesque incidents in *Vertigo* reinforces the sense that subversive behaviour may be a necessary antidote to the discourses of civility discussed above. However, these episodes also indicate the difficulties of maintaining such subversive

positions. The way in which transgression should operate is suggested by the narrator's friend Lukas when he recalls his role as the carnival jester, in which he had stuck his fool's staff up women's skirts, giving them 'the fright they were hoping for all along, though they would never admit as much' (p. 213). Here, his memory of his carnivalesque role is a happy one, part of a shared transgressive occasion, after which normal routines are resumed. Another instance of spontaneous and communal subversion which seems to occur outside licensed boundaries and thus present a more authentic challenge to figures and discourses of authority occurs when, in Desenzano, the narrator watches as a policeman who has parked in a no-parking zone is spontaneously upbraided and finally forced to drive elsewhere by a mob of taxi drivers (p. 87). However, as Roger Sales notes, carnival has the potential to be 'Janus-faced': while it is a form of social protest, the exceptional nature of the carnival chronotope at the same time renders it a 'method for disciplining that protest'.¹³⁷ This form of transgression, in its temporary and licensed nature, therefore has an inbuilt conservatism, and takes place only under the expectation of a reversion to norms.

As a result, the high cost of sustaining transgressions is evident throughout *Vertigo*. Lukas, for example, relates his escapades while bemoaning his current state, in which he is 'laid up on his sofa', and 'frequently assailed by dark moods', and in which his past role as the carnival jester now seems to be 'unthinkable' (p. 212). This sense of exhaustion is foreshadowed in the episode following the narrator's loss of his passport when he finds himself among the robbed and otherwise dispossessed in the German consulate in Milan. There, he comes across a troupe of artistes, whom the narrator feels are 'straight out of the 1930s' (p. 112). As the disconsolate troupe wait their turn, one of their number fidgets with his hat, causing the narrator to claim that, 'from the precision of his movements one knew that preparing an omelette on the high wire [...] would have been mere child's play for this grounded tightrope-walker whose true home, one felt, was the freedom of the air' (p. 112). This grounded performer, and the rest of the troupe, have been wrenched out of the carnival space in which they are accustomed to performing. Their presence at a location where regulation dictates behaviour suggests that any means of escape from such structures and systems of order is only fleeting, and that the network of representations, legal frameworks and material documents will bring even the most determinedly flighty to heel.

¹³⁷ Roger Sales, *English Literature in History 1780-1830: Pastoral and Politics* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), p. 169.

Long reads this episode as evidence of Sebald's concern with the apparatus of disciplinary power, noting that passports and other forms of registration, as part of that apparatus, become most visible at the moment of their failure or loss;¹³⁸ however, as I have argued above, oppression is not simply a function of state or religious power, but as often arises from within the populace through a desire to conform, and the difficulty of escaping the draw of this conformity is evident in the narrator's dilemmas with regard to action and representation: now possessing the 'newly issued proof' of his freedom, he proceeds to wander the streets of Milan (p. 115), but is only able to do so by reintegrating with the discourses which regulate his movement.

This sense of the exhaustion of carnivalesque possibilities is partly a result of the knowledge that the cost of transgression is always high to the point of being unsustainable, and in *Vertigo* tends to result in incarceration or madness, or both. The narrator's friend, Ernst Herbeck, personifies the dangers of transgression, having spent much of his life incarcerated in mental institutions. His parting gesture, a sweep of his hat which seems both 'childishly easy and an astonishing feat of artistry,' reminds the narrator of some who had 'travelled with a circus for many years' (p. 49), but Herbeck has succeeded in retaining a perspective outside of dominant discourses only through his insanity. Where carnival normally returns to order, the cost of sustaining such a subversive or aberrant position is this kind of exhaustion, and it is one that places Herbeck, and the narrator, outside the kind of communal experience and shared joy that characterise Lukas's carnival pranks.

The dangers of transgression are further signalled by the presence of the Organizzazione Ludwig, two brothers responsible for a string of murders in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Theirs is a lifestyle of transgression against their respectable upbringings and jobs which has spiralled out of control, and the two are arrested at a carnival, while wearing clown's outfits. When the narrator's friend Salvatore suggests that 'they were like brothers to each other and had no idea how to free themselves from their innocence' (p. 131), this seems to suggest that transgression reaches a crisis point: either transgression ceases and normal order resumes, or else this behaviour passes a point of no return. Unlike Lukas, who plays his role as the carnival fool for the prescribed time before returning to his position in society, the Organizzazione Ludwig choose the latter option, which leads them into permanent and harmful transgression.

¹³⁸ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 76.

Regression into the incomprehension which is the defining trait of Bakhtin's fool is thus not a sustainable option for this narrator, and the weight of his knowledge therefore remains his burden. Yet neither is inaction an acceptable ethical option for the narrator, given the silences and complicities that he observes in *W.* and elsewhere. The narrator must therefore tread a fine ethical line: he understands the need for a resistant and transgressive mode of representation which can make visible the blindnesses inherent in dominant discourses, but at the same time is aware that there is no position outside these discourses from which he can speak.

Subversion: Aberrant Perspectives

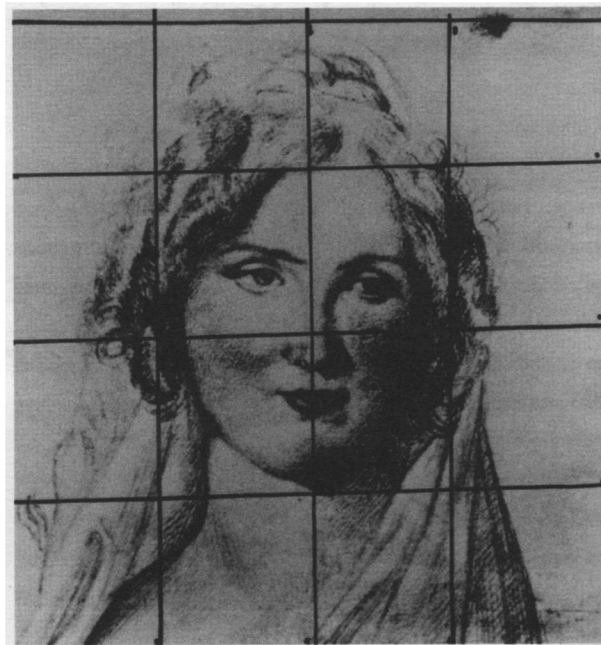


Figure 1

I have quoted a number of passages from *Vertigo* in which a sense of carnivalesque subversion is suggested. However the narrator himself is also a carnivalesque presence who is central to Sebald's project of ethical seeing and witnessing. To describe the way in which he operates as such throughout *Vertigo*, it is necessary to return to the sections which comment on representation and its dangers, and specifically to the sketch of Angela Pietragrua (figure 1). As noted above, the grid superimposed on the sketch

serves as a means of schematising and then reproducing the image. However, an examination of the image reveals the grid to be somewhat clumsily drawn, and as a result the squares are imperfect and uneven. In many ways, this addition encapsulates the narrator's mode: inserting himself into an established discourse, and apparently adopting an established form of representation, he skews it slightly. By doing so he makes visible to an attentive reader the tension between an otherwise taken-for-granted (and hence invisible or unseen) form of representation, and its employment in the narrator's text. Thus, without having to step outside the dominant discourses in which he is embedded, the narrator is able to hold them up to question. In this section, I therefore examine the narrator's role in detail, first delineating in more depth the representational dilemmas that he faces, and then describing his route out of this impasse.

Like the image of Angela Pietragrua, the narrator presents himself straight-faced, as a persona of the author and academic Sebald. However, reading between the lines of tightly controlled prose, and remaining attentive to the narrator's actions and others' responses to them (rather than how he chooses to represent these) reveals a man who is going off the rails. Away from his wife, and having broken with his normal routine of gardening and writing (p. 33), he is to be found drinking a glass of Fernet at the Hotel Sole (p. 97), a double in the station bar at Verona (p. 116), another double, this time on the rocks, a little later (p. 127), half a litre of Tyrolean wine at the Hirschwirt Inn in Unterjoch (p. 180), 'one glass of Kalterer after another' in the Engelwirt Inn back in W. (p. 205), and is ordering by the bottle a week or so later in the Engelwirt when he helps himself to a second while attempting to assemble his recollections (p. 215). This, then, is not the same persona who in *The Rings of Saturn* claims to have an allergy to alcohol (p. 182-3), but it is certainly one whose controlled representation of events is at odds with the actions that he commits.

The narrator's behaviour, in that it forms a break from his normal routine, places him outside the circulation of normative values and discourses. His determination to avoid being dictated to by dominant discourses leads him to discover and occupy a number of esoteric and liminal spaces throughout the narrative, at which points he is able to transcend momentarily the whirl of discourse. He takes a night time boat trip with a man named Malachio, for example, during which the two look across at the

Inceneritore Comunale (p. 61).¹³⁹ In the attic of the Alpenrose, the narrator comes across a jumble of objects removed from their day-to-day use (p. 222), and an object likewise removed from circulation is the book called *The Seas of Bohemia*, read by a young woman in the carriage of the train bound for Holland. The woman recites a poem from the book, which transforms the German landscape outside, but as the narrator records the text is ‘not listed in any bibliography, in any catalogue, or indeed anywhere at all’ (p. 256). A similarly mysterious site is the London underground station at which, the narrator claims, ‘no one ever embarked or alighted’ and into which he doesn’t dare to go (p. 258).

The episodes which describe the narrator’s journey through Germany towards Holland and the unnamed underground station are both prompted by train journeys. While on these journeys, fleeting moments of dreamlike freedom are possible; however, the same vehicles also oblige the narrator to return to the normal circulation of discourse at the journey’s end. The narrator is similarly unable to escape preordained patterns when walking, recording his experience of walking the streets of Vienna as follows: ‘every morning I would set out and walk without aim or purpose [... and] later, when I looked at the map, I saw to my astonishment that none of my journeys had taken me beyond a precisely defined sickle- or crescent-shaped area’ (p. 33). Citing this passage, Zilcosky has argued influentially that Sebald’s writing is often about the impossibility of getting lost: unlike the Romantic traveller who deliberately relinquishes control in order to realise his or her apprehensions, in Sebald’s writing we ‘might always know where we are, whether we like it or not’.¹⁴⁰

Zilcosky thus understands this passage psychologically, in terms of uncanny return. However, Long questions this reading, arguing that ‘there is no identifiable psychological content that is here being repeated’.¹⁴¹ I favour Long’s interpretation because I see (dis)orientation in *Vertigo* as being predicated on discourse and its material manifestations, which serve to locate the individual in space and time. Long suggests that the sense of disorientation present in *Vertigo* is connected with the repetitive presence of ‘non-places’ which he notes, citing Marc Augé, are locations at

¹³⁹ Although the narrator still appears to be married (to ‘Clara’, the persona consistently used as the narrator’s wife across his body of work), both Santner and John Zilcosky suspect that the narrator meets Malachio in a gay bar. Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p. 168; John Zilcosky, ‘Sebald’s Uncanny Travels: The Impossibility of Getting Lost’, in *W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, ed. by J. J. Long and Anne Whitehead (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), pp. 102-20 (p. 108).

¹⁴⁰ Zilcosky, ‘Sebald’s Uncanny Travels’, pp. 103-4.

¹⁴¹ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 102.

which ‘identity is suspended, and human beings are reduced to pervasive similitude’.¹⁴² For Augé, ‘non-places’ create ‘solitary contractuality’ (as opposed to the ‘organically social’ of anthropological places).¹⁴³ These are ‘defined partly by the words and texts they offer us’, in other words, by discourses which define the conditions and rules of use of these spaces.¹⁴⁴ However, for the narrator of *Vertigo* these ‘non-places’ often do assume individual and subjective significance, precisely because of his resistance to the discourses that construct and define their purposes. Notably, he leaves a number of these sites in panic, departing the buffet at Santa Lucia station after detecting the gaze of the two young men on him (pp. 68-9), and fleeing the pizzeria in Verona in a similarly paranoid state (p. 80).

These incidents suggest that the narrator’s resistant perspective does not allow him to sit easily within such conformist spaces. At times he does seek to orient himself, such as on arrival in Milan when he asks: ‘how many city maps have I not bought in my time? I always try to find reliable bearings at least in the space that surrounds me’ (p. 107). His desire for these reliable bearings is, however, in part, a result of the desire to stray from the beaten track: this requires knowledge of the path to be deviated from. The narrator manages such a deviation on his arrival to Milan, walking on ‘the wrong side of the station’ (p. 108). However, this digression immediately results in his being mugged, and he quickly returns to structures of power and control, and in this case both the discourses that sustain them (he takes a licensed taxi) and the physical apparatus by which this discourse is sustained and enforced (the driver’s window is protected by a metal grille), and then has to plead his case with the landlady of another cheap hotel as a result of his missing passport (pp. 109-10).

The narrator’s mugging in Milan is one of a number of episodes in which he attempts, but fails, to remove himself successfully from within the dominant discourses that he seeks to question. The reason for this failure is that, unlike Bakhtin’s carnivalesque figures, Sebald’s narrator does not have license to speak languages that are other, or indeed the right even to be other. As Sebald’s persona, he is a bookish academic, and for all that he may be socially marginal, he is embedded within (and is in fact a creator of) the dominant discourses that he seeks to resist. As such his attempts at

¹⁴² Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 101.

¹⁴³ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. by John Howe (London and New York: Verso, 1995), p. 94.

¹⁴⁴ Augé, *Non-Places*, p. 96.

resistance place him at odds with the world. This leads him at times to exhibit the incomprehension characteristic of Bakhtin's fool, but rather than doing so as part of a shared, transgressive experience, this leads to moments of social awkwardness. For example, his insistence on taking photographs results in Verona in his incurring a 'screed of savage curses' and to be eyed by another tourist 'with a distrusting and even hostile air' (pp. 125-7). These tendencies reach their most extreme in the passage on the bus from Desenzano to Riva, on which the narrator approaches the parents of two teenage boys who resemble the young Kafka. Despite his awareness of the impropriety of these overtures, he persists with his request to the parents to send a photograph of them to England. The parents, of course, refuse: the narrator retreats, convinced that they have identified him as 'an English pederast travelling Italy for his so-called pleasure' (pp. 89-90).

In contrast to the communal transgression in which Lukas participates, the absurd humour in the passages cited above is at the narrator's expense, leading him into a solitary and paranoid position. In performing this subversion of norms, the narrator seems to be at risk of cutting himself loose from any framework that would allow him to return to a pre-transgressional space. In his suspicion towards all forms of representation, he is left groundless, and drifting towards madness. This is the reason that the narrator's feeling of vertigo, which is also associated with the hallucinogenic, nautical passages that punctuate the text, recurs throughout, and seems to be experienced by the narrator alone. Long summarises these incidences, arguing that 'these metaphors transfigure the mundane topography of familiar settings, but constitute a central device by means of which similarities are constructed between disparate elements and locations'.¹⁴⁵ Massimo Leone elaborates on this transfiguration, noting that water is traditionally the element of dreams, and that it conveys 'the idea of the existence of a different reality, contiguous to the reality of dry land, and sometimes visible from it, but governed, at the same time, by a completely different set of rules'.¹⁴⁶ The latter part of Leone's observation encapsulates the sense of subversion present in *Vertigo*, and ties it to the question of visibility which is central to the narrator's role and Sebald's desire to locate an ethical position from which the witnessing of history can take place.

¹⁴⁵ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p.105.

¹⁴⁶ Massimo Leone, 'Textual Wanderings: A Vertiginous Reading of W. G. Sebald', in *W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, ed. by J. J. Long and Anne Whitehead (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), pp. 89-101 (p. 98).

This sometimes-visible other reality is what Sebald's narrator strives for, seeking another perspective, even if he is only able to achieve this in glimpses before his momentary freedom from dominant discourses and structures is once again snuffed out. However, if the narrator's attempts to remove himself from the discourses that he regards as suspect are what lead to this sense of vertigo, the *gefühle* of the German title,¹⁴⁷ there are other tendencies at work which produce a sense of *schwindel* (which can also refer to vertigo or dizziness, but has the additional meaning of a swindle or confidence trick) and it is these moments which work more radically as a means of creating a representation that encourages ways of looking and reading that are not implicated in the established discourses that Sebald sees as being guilty of omissions and revisions of the past.

It is significant that the narrator seems to have the greatest degree of empathy with other outsiders and renegades: he documents the travels of Beyle and Kafka, and is interested in the libertine Casanova. He also shares moments of empathy with Ernst Herbeck who, as has been noted, has spent much of his life in mental institutions, and from the point of his meeting with Herbeck onwards, the 'All'estero' section is narrated from a decidedly bizarre perspective. For example, the photograph of Herbeck, provided as a supplement to a descriptive, biographical passage, cuts off the head and shows the portion of his body between his neck and his knees (pp. 38-9), thus pointing out while subverting the usual metonymy of the head for the whole.

This tendency continues on the following page, on which there is a photograph of what appears to be a garden ornament in the form of some sort of building, in the 'garden' of which can be seen growing several cacti. In fact, this is a model of Burg Greifenstein, which the narrator describes as 'a medieval fortress that plays a significant part not only in my own imagination but also, to this day, in that of the people of Greifenstein' (pp. 40-1). Again, the choice of image, in this case a tacky copy (figure 2) rather than the castle itself (figure 3), is an odd one, and there is no reflective voice to justify this decision. The repeated use of such strange selections indicates a deliberate strategy to adopt aberrant perspective, and hence a refusal to play by the rules of the representational game.

¹⁴⁷ *Vertigo* was originally published in German as *Schwindel. Gefühle*.

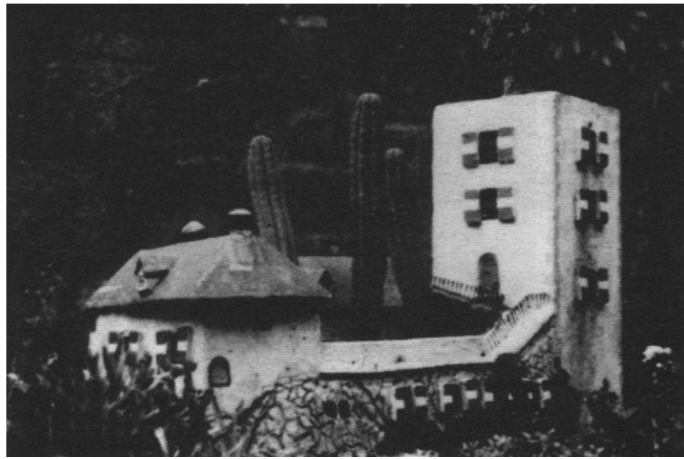


Figure 2



Figure 3¹⁴⁸

This perspective does not seek to propose a different, better, or more ethical mode of discourse, but it does serve to make visible those rules and the ways in which representations usually follow them. Unable to sustain a position outside these discourses, the narrator instead positions himself within them, but he constantly shifts between forms and twists the generic expectations of each, giving his profession throughout the narrative variously as a journalist and writer of crime stories (pp. 94-5), a historian (p. 115), a ‘foreign correspondent’ (p. 192); and he suspects that he might even be identified as a salesman before concluding that others most likely view him as belonging to a ‘more dubious profession’ (p. 252). Unlike Bakhtin’s carnivalesque figures, he does not have the licence speak in languages that are otherwise unacceptable,

¹⁴⁸ Photograph © Bwag / Wikimedia Commons.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Burg_Greifenstein,_S%C3%BCdwestansicht.JPG>. [Accessed 26 September 2012].

but in these chameleon-like shifts, he continually adopts different masks, each of which serves to relativise and question the other discourses at work within the text. I am therefore in partial agreement with Massimo Leone when he writes that ‘Sebald is not simply a writer, he orchestrates a multiplicity of voices and text-types in order to produce his own coherent discourse’.¹⁴⁹ My agreement is only partial, however, because while I think Leone is right to identify the multiplicity of voices at work, I read Sebald as resisting, or at least attempting to resist, any coherent discourse. Indeed, by refusing even the mask of the novelist, he disavows an identity as an author of the sole genre identified by Bakhtin as resisting ‘the absolutism of a single and unitary language’.¹⁵⁰

Rather than attempting to create a coherent discourse, the only option remaining to the narrator is to write from within the bounds of professionally prescribed roles and their languages, but to distort these in a clown-like way in order to relativise and make visible their values and complicities. When he places a grid over a sketch of Angela Pietragrua, he indicates its status as discourse, and the means by which that discourse functions. The grid thus serves to allow us to look beyond the image as an instance of mimesis and to read it as the product of its own mode of production and norms of representation. However, it is in skewing that grid that the narrator inscribes his statement of intent: it makes visible his own inscription as inscription, and as an overwriting of the original work. In doing so, he asks how we might see such a representation in other terms or from another perspective, and what other forms representation could take.

The narrator introduces these reflections on representation early in the text, and in overwriting the lives of first a realist and then a modernist writer he seems to be subjecting all modes of representation to the same critical gaze. However, once these questions have been raised, it is in the narrator’s final return to Germany, in ‘Il ritorno in patria’, that they begin to function fully as part of an ethical mode of witnessing. Thus the narrator’s wry recollections of the tea service and unread books in his family home serve not only as a synecdoche of growing prosperity under the Third Reich, but also as the concrete evidence of the means by which that wealth was acquired, and of his family’s participation in it. Likewise, the photograph of the interned gypsy woman is not simply a symbol for the larger atrocities perpetrated at that time: it is an index of not

¹⁴⁹ Leone, ‘Textual Wanderings’, p. 91.

¹⁵⁰ Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel’, p. 366.

only his father's involvement, but also of the means by which that involvement has come to be known. Furthermore, the inclusion of a single image points as much to the scale of what is missing from this history as what is present, and hence serves to indicate what is absent, that is, what has not yet come to be known or what has been forgotten through failures to look closely and critically at the evidence available.

Vertigo suggests that representation, in its conventionality, hides the means of its own construction and the discourses governing its modes of signification. Where Hirsch argues that unconscious optics 'disrupt and disturb our conscious acts of looking',¹⁵¹ and can therefore puncture these conventional surfaces, in *Vertigo* it is the presence of the narrator which disrupts the semiotic content of the historical referents and allows them to be read instead against the grain, as evidence of barbarity. The narrator's presence also disturbs any reading of the text as document, and calls into question any straightforward referentiality between the text and the real.

The somewhat unhinged narrator of *Vertigo* in some ways sets the pattern for forms of resistance in Sebald's following three novels. Certainly, the use of a persona allows Sebald to make visible the complicities present in representation. However, this persona loses some of his eccentricity in his later writing. *The Emigrants* is centred more squarely than *Vertigo* on its historical referents, which are the Second World War and emigration. As a result, the narrating persona's purpose appears to be clearer, and he is a researcher of family and personal histories. However, as I argue below, *The Emigrants* shares many of the same concerns regarding representation and complicity with *Vertigo*, and the narrator attempts to reveal and resist this complicity through his own forms of subversion.

THE EMIGRANTS

Representation: The Embarrassment of Suffering

The Emigrants, like *Vertigo*, is concerned with making representational omissions and revisions visible. In doing so, however, it raises the stakes by bringing to the foreground explicitly traumatic histories, and particularly those related to the Holocaust.

¹⁵¹ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, p. 117.

Furthermore, in bringing to light personal histories that would otherwise remain unpublished, *The Emigrants* pins more on its documentary status, and hence is on riskier ground when this rhetoric of fact is undercut.

The Emigrants is comprised of four stories which describe profound suffering. The first two, 'Dr. Henry Selwyn' and 'Paul Bereyter', end in suicides. Ambros Adelwarth's apparently willing submission to a programme of electric shock treatment that he knows is killing him could be added to these. The structure of the text is therefore similar in form to *Vertigo*, in that its four sections build up layers of narrative and significance. It also shares with *Vertigo* a concern with German complicity in the Second World War, with Sebald employing autobiographical elements more heavily in his representation of W. and other parts of Germany.

However, this is not to say that all sufferings in *The Emigrants* are the results of Nazi atrocity. As Anderson notes, 'of the four stories in *The Emigrants* – widely reviewed as a "Holocaust book" about "Jewish" exile – only two concern Jewish victims of Nazi aggression, and one of these (the teacher Paul Bereyter) was "three-quarters Aryan", served in the Wehrmacht, and felt himself to be "deeply German"'.¹⁵² The reasons for the sufferings represented across the four stories are therefore varied, and are also difficult to determine as the narrator tends to efface himself at the junctures where an explicit causal judgement could be made. As I have suggested at the outset of this chapter, without making direct causal connections, Sebald preserves the interrelatedness of these sufferings and the wider context in which they occur.

For Long, the varied backgrounds of these protagonists are evidence that Sebald is less concerned with addressing specific historical incidents in isolation than he is with the processes and effects of modernity.¹⁵³ The continuities in disciplinary power, and related forms of top-down oppression identified by Long, rarely produce direct representations of violence. The exceptions to this are the brief descriptions of anti-Jewish violence in 1934 in the Paul Bereyter section, a series of incidents described in blunt terms but occupying only around a third of a page (pp. 54-5), and Dr. Abramsky's description of the physical effects of electric shock treatment (pp. 111-2). Generally, however, the forms of power and oppression present in *The Emigrants* are insidious and messy, problematising distinctions between victim, perpetrator and bystander.

¹⁵² Anderson, 'The Edge of Darkness', p. 105.

¹⁵³ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 1.

Moreover, and as I have suggested with respect to *Vertigo*, persecution in *The Emigrants* also arises from within the population as a whole, from the bottom up.

That violence and persecution have taken place at some time, and have in some way contributed to the emigrations and consequent suffering described in the narratives, is not in question, but this violence is largely absent from the narratives encountered by the narrator. Moreover, there is a notable lack of violence in the language he employs in the telling of these histories. The language of his own narrative, as well as the stories to which he listens, exhibits a need to preserve a sense of propriety; at the same time, however, the juxtapositions created by the narrative reveal the ways in which discourses of civility and propriety contribute to complicity with oppression.

The need to preserve propriety is most evident in the way that suffering, whether described by victims, bystanders, or later witnesses, is often associated with embarrassment. For example, Lucy Landau recalls how, during the persecution of the Jewish population in 'S', Paul Bereyter's mother was asked to stop frequenting her usual coffee house because 'the presence of a lady who was married to a half Jew might be embarrassing to [the owner's] respectable clientele' (p. 50). If this indicates the use of a discourse of propriety on the part of persecutors, it is notable that similar language is employed by victims: Paul Bereyter describes his first suicide attempt as an 'embarrassment' (p. 44), and Max Ferber recalls how his Uncle Leo was the only one to speak openly about the persecution undergone by the family, but records that this was met with disapproval by the rest of the family (p. 183). Even at a further remove from suffering and from the loaded significance of Nazi atrocities, a sense of embarrassment informs the terms in which suffering is discussed, with the narrator, when trying to find out the circumstances of Ambros Adelwarth's death, recalling how a receptionist in Ithaca pales in horror when the narrator makes enquiries about a '*private mental home*' (p. 108).

The belated telling of the four emigrants' narratives, enabled by their collection and inscription by the narrator, is suggestive of the presence of trauma. Max Ferber, for example, describes the impact of his own emigration as follows: 'the fact is that that tragedy in my youth struck such deep roots within me that it later shot up again, put forth evil flowers, and spread the poisonous canopy over me which has kept me so much in the shade and dark in recent years' (p. 191). The metaphor of a late-blooming plant seems to be a direct evocation of trauma and Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, in this case

as a result of Ferber's forced emigration from Germany in his childhood during the Second World War, and his belated realisation of his parents' deaths. Trauma results in silences in some cases: Ferber's father is reticent regarding his six weeks interned in Dachau following *Kristallnacht*, saying 'not a word' about it (p. 186), and Henry Selwyn conceals his background from his wife for a number of years (p. 21).

However, causality is not straightforward in *The Emigrants*. For example, although Henry Selwyn's suicide also appears to have its causes in trauma, given that he tells of the 'blinding, bad time' of the war and the decades following (pp. 20-1), his misery also has earlier roots in his family's emigration from Lithuania in 1899, when he was aged seven (p. 18). Similarly, a number of reasons appear to contribute to Paul Bereyter's suicide, including his being prohibited to teach under the Third Reich due to his being one quarter Jewish, and the probable deportation of his lover, Helen Hollaender, to Theresienstadt (pp. 49-50). Ambros Adelwarth's death is the most complex in terms of its causes: he is killed by a course of electric shock treatment, undertaken as a result of his inability to recover from the death of his companion and employer, Cosmo Solomon. Wrapped up in this is the question of Adelwarth's homosexuality, never openly admitted (he is 'of the other persuasion [...] although the family always ignored or glossed over the fact', p. 88), and the increasingly oppressive sense of propriety and professional rigidity which characterises the latter stages of his life.

That these stories are told, albeit belatedly, suggests that trauma and suffering do not necessarily produce the kind of 'ultimate annihilation of a narrative' that Laub describes as resulting from limit-case events.¹⁵⁴ In fact, there is a suggestion here that the tactful silences that persist around the events of the past may in fact be a contributing factor in the later disintegration of those who have been subject to these events, rather than symptoms of traumatic memory. Silence is present in the strategies of avoidance that are evident throughout the four sections of the text, with the young Max Ferber relieved, in a way that he later realises is 'quite terrible', when the letters from his parents stop arriving. When he says of his parents' disappearance that he is still not sure if he has 'really grasped it to this day', the belatedness of trauma is present, but at the moment of realisation it is the immediate avoidance of unpleasantness that determines his behaviour: perhaps only semi-consciously aware of this at the time, he

¹⁵⁴ Laub, 'Bearing Witness', p. 68.

nevertheless describes writing to his parents, still trapped in Nazi Germany, as a ‘chore’ (pp. 190-1). Trauma here is not a vanishing point of representational possibility, but is a more mundane unpleasantness to be avoided.

Silence is thus more often figured as a means of avoiding or absorbing the disruptive potential of trauma on familial and civil life. Throughout the four sections, the various layers of narrative all exhibit a sense of propriety regarding suffering of various degrees of extremity. It is out of this propriety that silences and revisions occur, and from which the numerous failures of witnessing in *The Emigrants* take place. At times, the motivation for these silences is shown to be the desire to avoid any sense of culpability. For example, Lucy Landau talks of the ‘systematic thoroughness with which these people kept silent in the years after the war, kept their secrets, and even, I sometimes think, really did forget’ (p. 50), and Paul Bereyter’s obituary mentions his persecution under the Nazis only ‘by way of an aside’ (p. 27). More explicitly, when the narrator writes of ‘the mental impoverishment and lack of memory that marked the Germans, and the efficiency with which they had cleaned everything up’ (p. 225),¹⁵⁵ he returns to the twin failings of omission and revision in later generations.

However, it is notable that omissions and revisions punctuate the narratives of victims and sufferers as often as they do those of perpetrators. Max Ferber, for example, reflects on how, in the years of increasing persecution, there was an unwillingness to articulate the sufferings being endured: ‘of those things we could not speak’, he relates, ‘we simply said nothing. Thus, for example, all my friends and relatives remained largely silent about the reasons why my grandmother Lily Lanzberg took her own life’ (p. 183). The seductiveness of silence is encapsulated by Luisa Lanzberg’s comment on the Allgäu that ‘the scattered villages were so peaceful it was as if nothing evil had ever happened anywhere on earth’ (p. 217). Yet, knowing what we do of the persecution carried out and suffering endured, Luisa’s perception of the landscape as a place of silence and peace is clearly deceptive. It is also notable that narrativisation of memory, often associated with working through as a means of coming to terms with trauma, is not figured as a liberating process in *The Emigrants*. The narrator’s Aunt Fini recalls that although Ambros Adelwarth ‘plainly felt a great need to talk about his life, he could

¹⁵⁵ The language here of course recalls the passages of *The Fall* that I have cited in the introduction, in which Clamence speaks of being ‘cleaned up’.

no longer shape a single sentence' (p. 103), and shortly afterwards he leaves for the sanatorium where he eventually dies.

The reason for victims failing to fully give voice to their experiences has much to do with their embeddedness in the same discourses from which their victimisation and sufferings have arisen. The sense of tact and discretion which elides suffering is evident even in German buildings, with the narrator describing, in a way that echoes the description of the Engelwirt in *Vertigo*, a hotel in Kissingen which has been renovated in the neo-imperial style and which 'discreetly covers up with light shades of green and gold leaf the lapses of taste committed in the postwar years' (p. 219). However, this same discretion infects the discourse of those who attempt to give voice to victims' experiences. Lucy Landau, following her vitriolic judgement on the townspeople of S. with regard to the persecution of the Jewish population, quickly returns to a normal mode of discourse, resuming 'a more factual tone after the little outburst she had permitted herself' (p. 50). The 'most respectful courtesy' employed by Theo Bereyter, Paul's father, in serving his customers at the family emporium, is also part of the same discourse of manners that allows persecution to be swept under the carpet (p. 52); and Ambros Adelwarth's inability to 'permit anything to ruffle his composure' contributes to his psychological disintegration, as probably does the failure to fully acknowledge his homosexuality (p. 88). Similarly, although Max Ferber's father does not speak of Dachau, he is outspoken regarding the effrontery of the 'uncouth manner' in which the family's possessions are stolen (p. 186). As these examples show, even where the victims and those who have suffered speak about atrocity, they may nevertheless unwittingly perpetuate the discourses out of which these atrocities have been committed, and by which the same events are elided. This tendency to adopt a civilized and polite mode of discourse indicates the strength of the need to reconfigure a coherent social order after or around the disruptive presence of trauma.

Such reconfigurations often involve a reversion to familiar discourses and their related values, and the protagonists' embeddedness in these discourses often forecloses any attempt at subversion or resistance. For example, Professor Fahnstock's sanatorium is described by the narrator as resembling 'one of those immense pinewood lodges stuffed with trophies that Austrian archdukes and princes built all over their hunting grounds' (p.109), thus locating it within the 'long *durée*' of modern history, as Anderson argues, and showing it to be another structure of power in the mode identified by Long.

Psychiatry has thus replaced feudalism as the means of control, and one by which Ambros Adelwarth is reduced to a state of docility, which Fahnstock takes as evidence of the success of his treatment (p. 113) but within which any attempt to narrate and hence bear witness to his own suffering is extinguished.

This embeddedness dictates the terms of the discourses employed in the later representation of events. Conversely, there is also a more fundamental sense that the actions of the protagonists, prior to any attempt to narrativise their own situation and experiences, are dictated by these discourses. This tendency is perhaps clearest in the character of Adelwarth, who is described as having been reduced to a ‘shell of decorum’ (p. 99). As a butler, his conduct is dictated to an extreme degree by the expectations and rules of society, and the discourses of civility that underpin these conventions.¹⁵⁶ The case of Ambros Adelwarth is therefore an extreme example of *déformation professionnelle*, the tendency to allow one’s profession to dictate the terms in which the world is interpreted. The term can also be employed to describe the physical changes undergone as a result of repeated actions or labour, and this tendency is taken to a literal and bodily extreme when Max Ferber tells the story of a photographic lab assistant ‘whose body had absorbed so much silver in the course of a lengthy professional life that he had become a kind of photographic plate, which was apparent in the fact [...] that the man’s face and hands turned blue in strong light, or, as one might say, developed’ (p. 165). Whether or not Ferber’s anecdote is true (and the narrator’s response suggests he doubts it), Ferber’s interest is possibly the result of his own process of *déformation professionnelle*: employing a mode of painting which involves repeatedly applying then scratching off thick layers of paint, and through which, it appears to the narrator, that ‘his prime concern was to increase the dust’ (p. 161), he finds himself confined to hospital with pulmonary emphysema, probably a result of having inhaled dust throughout his career (p. 231).

If the demands of professional and generic language dictate the terms of discourse and hence give rise to the silences and revisions by which failures of witnessing take place in *The Emigrants*, this suggests that any ethical form of witnessing would need somehow to step outside or challenge these discourses in order to puncture their stifling conformity. The following section describes the attempts on

¹⁵⁶ Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* also explores the role of a butler’s *déformation professionnelle* in securing his complicity, in this case through Stevens’ unwavering loyalty to a master sympathetic to the Nazis: I discuss this in Chapter Three.

the part of the protagonists in *The Emigrants* to do just this, although these are attempts which generally fail.

Resistance: Nomads

As in *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants* contains suggestions of people and places removed from the normal circulations of value and hence outside or on the margins of dominant discourses and systems. Nomadic figures appear regularly: the probably unlicensed Wadi Halfa café in Manchester is run by a former Maasai chieftain, who cooks with an ‘incomparable stylish apathy’ (pp. 162-3), and having rented a house outside Istanbul, Ambros and Cosmo Solomon observe ‘peasants with baskets of vegetables, charcoal burners, gypsies, tightrope walkers and bear trainers’, with the lack of vehicles causing Ambros to question whether they have fallen out of time (pp. 131-2). There are other suggestions of people operating outside the dominant systems of value, such as Elaine, the maid in the Selwyns’ house, whose appearance recalls that of an asylum inmate, and who occupies the hidden and parallel world of the servants’ passageways (p. 10). The school in Margate to which Max Ferber is sent teeters on the verge of anarchy, policed as it is (or failed to be so) by teachers recruited from ranks of failed actors according to the predilection of its headmaster, Lionel Lynch-Lewis (p. 190).

In addition, the journeys undertaken by the emigrants of the title have removed them from a previous set of norms and values. However, there is also a sense that this stance of removal has become a deliberate one, and one which functions to place distance between themselves and the circulation of dominant discourses and values. Henry Selwyn, for example, describes himself as a ‘kind of ornamental hermit’ in his garden (p. 5), and Paul Bereyter more deliberately tries to place himself outside of the sites that perpetuate dominant discourses, teaching a quarter of his lessons off-syllabus, and outside the school when possible (p. 37). Ambros Adelwarth travels Europe and the Holy Land with Cosmo Solomon who declines the social invitations secured as a result of his outrageous luck at roulette and his skill on the polo field (p. 92), and Max Ferber spends his days secreted in a studio in the Manchester docks, continuing to work as he always has, despite his work now commanding high prices and articles on him appearing in Sunday supplements (p. 177).

However, as in *Vertigo*, these episodes of transgression seem doomed to exhaust themselves with the effort of remaining outside dominant discourses. At times, the results of this exhaustion are relatively inconsequential, and are figured as inevitable occurrences in the continuing process of degeneration that Sebald sees in civilization. This is the case, for example, when he returns to Manchester to find that the Wadi Halfa no longer exists, and when he describes how Margo Solomon's 'tasteless indiscretions' come to an end after the death of her husband (p. 100). However, where the protagonists are concerned, the consequences of attempting to sustain these positions are more profound. If the cost of such resistance in *Vertigo* is incarceration or madness, in *The Emigrants* it seems to be higher still: Selwyn's solitude ends in suicide, as do Paul Bereyter's small acts of rebellion. The escapades of Cosmo and Ambros in the casinos of Europe grind to a halt as their mental health disintegrates, and even Max Ferber, who seems to be succeeding in his stubborn refusal to leave his studio, only does so at the physical cost of developing pulmonary emphysema, an irreversible and degenerative condition.

Furthermore, *The Emigrants* carries a sense that, although transgressive behaviour may be a form of resistance to dominant discourses, such transgressions also contain their own risks. For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque is an inherently democratic force, its relativising potential working to counteract the closed and oppressive worlds created by authoritative discourses. Yet, as others have argued, the carnivalesque is not inherently a force for liberation; Peter Stallybrass and Allon White note that anti-Semitic actions have been carnivalesque in nature.¹⁵⁷ In *The Emigrants*, *Kristallnacht* is represented in these terms, with the 'free bazaar' of goods taken by schoolchildren from destroyed Jewish shops (pp. 54-5); the burning of books in Würzburg (p. 184) is similarly an inversion of the normal rules of respect and order, here employed to destructive and vindictive ends. The result of the regime at the school in Margate attended by Max Ferber, which is free of any regular school timetable or other form of order, is that 'it did bear fruit for some [...] but others ran disturbingly wild' (p. 190). This encapsulates the need for balance between order and entropy, and indicates the potential for a dark side of the carnivalesque.

¹⁵⁷ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, N. Y. : Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 53-5. Also, in an argument that mirrors my comments regarding the bottom-up nature of oppression and complicity in Sebald, LaCapra argues that Bakhtin 'does indulge at times in naïve populism that ignores the possibility that an egalitarian community, as well as an authoritarian elite, can in fact turn to scapegoating and violence'. Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 296f.

The narrator is of course himself an emigrant, and therefore shares with the other protagonists an unrootedness which contributes to a questioning and resistant stance. As in *Vertigo*, the narrator is acutely aware of his position and his responsibilities as a producer of discourse, but behaves (and hence writes) in a less explicitly subversive mode. However, as my comments above suggest, the narrator remains aware of the need for transgressive narrative moments as a means of puncturing the discourses of propriety which elide atrocity and suffering, and I turn now to the strategies by which such moments are included in *The Emigrants*.

Subversion: Wrongful Trespass

The narrator of *Vertigo* writes of the ‘questionable business of painting’, and a similar nausea towards the creative process in *The Emigrants* is evident in the narrator’s comment on the ‘questionable business of writing’. He arrives at this insight after recording how, in working on his account of Max Ferber, he ‘covered hundreds of pages with [his] scribble, in pencil and ballpoint. By far the greater part had been crossed out, discarded or obliterated by additions’ (p. 230). This process, it seems to him, is fundamentally flawed, and produces representations inherent with falsehoods. Like *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants* is self-conscious with regard to its own modes of representation, and as such it draws attention to the potential for the creation of narratives and other forms to fall into discourses that are complicit with the perpetration of atrocity and persecution. The narrator is not entirely pessimistic about the possibility of achieving a form of representation, as indicated by his comment on Max Ferber’s process of painting, which involves a similar process of overwriting and erasure, and in which ‘the few fine lines and shadows that had escaped annihilation, had created a portrait of great vividness’ (p. 162).

Given this self-consciousness, there are two features of *The Emigrants* which, surprisingly, seem to render the narrator ethically inconsistent. The first of these is his apparent passivity, manifest in a general unwillingness to speak in his own voice at the moments of greatest ethical significance, preferring at such times to reproduce, without comment, the narratives of others. The second of these is his contrasting tendency to include moments of appropriation of the experiences and voices of those whose histories he describes.

The passivity of the narrator in *The Emigrants* seems, at first sight, to result in partial failures in his role as witness. At times he is an active seeker of facts, travelling to America to research Ambros Adelwarth's background, returning to Manchester to rectify his failure to fully investigate Max Ferber's past, and revisiting his home town of W. to find out more of Paul Bereyter's life. However, when it comes to translating this research into his narrative, he seems to be fatally passive in bringing out the connections between atrocity and suffering. In particular, he does little to resolve the ambiguities and mysteries that remain despite his research: he adds nothing to the bare bones of the narrative provided by Henry Selwyn, instead concluding the first section with the resolution of the story of Johannes Naegeli's life. The conclusion of 'Paul Bereyter' is likewise unresolved, and where we might expect a rectification to the inadequate obituary that the narrator describes, he concludes this section with Lucy Landau's comment that 'in the end, it is hard to know what it is that someone dies of' (pp. 61-2) which hangs, uncontradicted, over the end of the section. This indeterminacy is also present in the Ambros Adelwarth narrative. The apparently willing submission to the regime of electric shock treatment that eventually kills him is not explicitly explained; and his companion Cosmo Solomon is described as having 'faded away' (p. 98). The section is concluded with a summary of Adelwarth's diary entries in the Holy Land to which, again, the narrator declines to add or elaborate upon. There seems, then, to be little effort on the narrator's part to understand, and to create the kind of causal narrative that might make events comprehensible.

Rather than reading as a causal narrative, *The Emigrants* can therefore be seen as a collection of elements and stories. Long notes the prevalence of collections as content in Sebald's work, and draws on anthropological approaches to identify the functions of collection as, firstly, the removal of objects from the circulation of use value; secondly, the assignment of other forms of value; and thirdly, the incorporation of the collected objects into schemes of classification.¹⁵⁸ In addition, I suggest, this 'process of decontextualisation and recontextualisation' also describes the form of the text and the narrator's mode of representation. The lack of the causal logic which would normally be employed by a narrator in order to construct a coherent and comprehensible narrative means that the elements brought together in *The Emigrants* therefore read as a series of

¹⁵⁸ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 27-8.

juxtapositions, with more in common with a collection than a complete and unified narrative.

This strategy of collection, realised through Sebald's use of a researcher / narrator, is a deliberate one which performs two important functions with regard to an ethical form of witnessing. The first of these is that it draws attention to the mediation by which these narratives have come to be placed within their collected context in *The Emigrants*. Memory is transmitted by a number of means in *The Emigrants*, through various forms of representation, sites and other material forms of memory, and through tacit practices. Narrative is not, therefore, a privileged form; and where memory is transmitted by purely narrative means, it tends to take place through face-to-face encounters, such as those with Henry Selwyn, Lucy Landau, Dr Abramsky and Max Ferber. Narrative in *The Emigrants* therefore never emerges *ex nihilo*: the contingencies by which other narratives come to be present in the narrator's own text are always signalled, and the fault lines between the different modes of discourse that they employ are therefore visible. The narrator is similarly meticulous when it comes to documenting the means by which his own narrative is constructed. Narrative is always therefore identifiable and traceable as a product of the rules of discourse and modes of production out of which it has been created.

The second reason for the narrator's use of this strategy of collection is that it allows him to employ juxtaposition rather than narrative resolution. In doing so, and in avoiding causal emplotment and resolution, the narrator exhibits something similar to the fool's right 'not to grasp', or even the kind of 'deliberate stupidity' that Bakhtin describes.¹⁵⁹ Rather than employing a particular discourse to his own ends, and achieving resolution by and within that discourse, the narrator relativises the generic languages (and other representations) from which his own narrative is constructed. For example, on his arrival in Manchester, his landlady's description of the teasmade in his room as 'an *electrical miracle*' is bracketed by the narrator's reflective and sombre language (he recalls his 'deep sense of isolation'), which thus ironises the language of wonder, surely borrowed from a contemporary advertisement, used by Gracie Irlam in her description of this piece of technology (pp. 154-5). Furthermore, this passage is placed shortly after the narrator's description of the wastelands of Manchester, a city which itself had been 'one of the nineteenth century's miracle cities', but which is 'now

¹⁵⁹ Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', p. 403.

almost hollow to the core' (p. 151). The juxtaposition of these two passages therefore locates the mundane object encountered by the narrator within the longer continuum of technological progress. Thus, without the recourse to judgement or even to the causality that characterises comprehension, the narrator creates a constellation of points in which a tension between the present and the past is visible and traceable by an alert reader.

Glimpses of humour, such as in the passage above, are produced by the narrator's use of parataxis. However, these juxtapositions often teeter on the edge of darker tones, and the weight of history has the potential to cause laughter at the absurd to collapse into pathos or horror. For example, in a passage that echoes Lucy Landau's anger towards German complicity in persecution, he describes how 'the local people found [the American troops'] moral conduct in general – to judge by comments sometimes whispered, sometimes spoken out loud – unbecoming in a victorious nation' (p. 70). In describing their disdainful attitudes towards a nation whose womenfolk wore trousers and dropped cigarette butts in the street, and who failed to put window boxes on their balconies, the narrator's voice adopts the same discourse of manners as the citizens of W. However, when he employs their voice in commenting that, 'as for those negroes, no one knew what to make of them' (p. 70), and brings this discourse of (apparent) civility into contact with the stories of persecution and suffering that he collects and re-tells, he is performing here one of the malicious distortions that Bakhtin describes as being the role of the clown. In doing so, he draws attention to the way in which the civility of polite language tends to mask darker tendencies towards persecution; and this whole episode in fact serves to point towards the absent historical referent of Nazi persecution of minorities.

In this case, the ethical purpose of the narrator's distortions is clear enough, as his malice is directed towards those he sees as seeking to elide their own culpability in the events of the war. However, other passages in *The Emigrants* are more problematic as they seem to contain the very types of omission and revision that Sebald elsewhere warns against. The most striking example of this tendency is the closing passage of Max Ferber's narrative (and therefore of *The Emigrants*). Having made the associative leap from Manchester to Lodz, the narrator then recalls a set of photographs taken of the Litzmannstadt ghetto by an accountant named Genewin, and later recovered from an antique shop in Vienna. Recalling in particular one photograph of three young women, he describes it in the following terms:

The young woman in the middle is blonde and has the air of a bride about her. The weaver to her left has inclined her head a little to one side, whilst the woman on the right is looking at me with so steady and relentless a gaze that I cannot meet it for long. I wonder what the three women's names were – Roza, Luisa and Lea, or Nona, Decuma and Morta, the daughters of night, with spindle, scissors and thread (p. 237).

Critics have found this passage problematic, with Anne Whitehead questioning the ethics of the appropriation of the identities of the three women in the picture, and arguing that passages such as this raise 'problems of identification and generalisation'.¹⁶⁰ These concerns about his passage are echoed by Ruth Franklin, who warns against the dangers of the 'illusory workings of art against memory.'¹⁶¹

This certainly seems to be a moment of trespass, undertaken firstly by appropriating the women as a synecdoche of Jewishness before further abstracting them by identifying them with the three Fates. It therefore seems to be a counter-ethical moment on the narrator's part, and one that is foreshadowed by the opening to the Paul Bereyter section. The top part of the first page of this chapter is occupied with an uncaptioned photograph of a railway line, viewed from ground level and looking along the tracks themselves. In this case the relationship of the image with the text appears to be straightforward, illustrating the description of Bereyter's suicide: 'a short distance from S., where the railway track curves out of a willow copse into the open fields, he had lain himself down in front of a train' (p. 27). However, as Long notes, the focus of the photograph included at this point in fact reverses Bereyter's chronic myopia, as it blurs the foreground while the more distant elements are in focus (figure 4).¹⁶²

Long argues that the images in *The Emigrants* should be read not necessarily as a form of reference to an external, prior reality, but against each other as a form of 'reflexive reference'.¹⁶³ Yet in both of the cases that I have discussed (the photograph of the tracks, and the description of the weavers) the connection between the referent and an external event seems to be much stronger than any internal structure of reference, so the problem of these apparently counter-ethical moments of appropriation and elision in

¹⁶⁰ Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, p. 139.

¹⁶¹ Ruth Franklin, 'Rings of Smoke', in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. by Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), pp. 119-144 (p. 142).

¹⁶² Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 124.

¹⁶³ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, pp. 124-6.

The Emigrants does not go away, and in fact becomes more pressing the more that the image is examined.

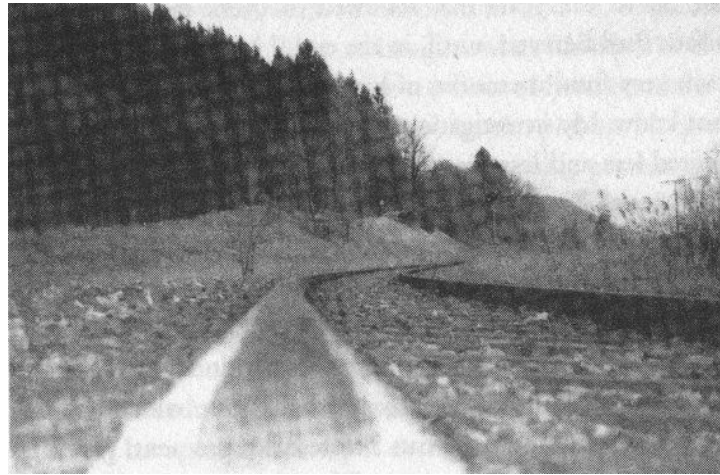


Figure 4

The reverse myopia identified by Long draws attention to the mechanics of the photograph itself, and the techniques by which it was taken: either the narrator found the exact spot of Bereyter's suicide at a later date, placed his camera on the rails, and took his photograph (in which case the sense of trespass becomes even more marked) or he found another suitable spot to stand in for the actual location (in which case the photograph acquires a sense of distortion and falsehood).¹⁶⁴ In a similar way, the moment of appropriation at the end of Max Ferber draws attention to itself as appropriation: the narrator describes how the inhabitants of the Litzmannstadt ghetto were allowed to look up from their work 'purposely and solely for the fraction of a second that it took to take the photograph', thus making visible the context and process by which the photograph came into existence. Furthermore, in describing how the women seem to be looking at him, as he is 'standing on the very same spot where Genewin the accountant stood with his camera' (pp. 236-7), the narrator reveals how the photograph is not a 'natural' or 'authentic' snapshot of normal life, but is instead structured first by Genewin's gaze, and later by the narrator's own.

¹⁶⁴ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 124. Long notes that the three mountains mentioned in the passage of text which accompanies the photograph are not visible, so this may in fact be the case.

In both cases, the apparent ethical dubiousness of these passages prompts us to read backwards along a chain of translation from the inclusion of these images and narratives in *The Emigrants*, through all of their prior stages of existence. This type of reading is what Walkowitz refers to as ‘unassimilation’, in that it uncontracts the history of these narrative elements.¹⁶⁵ Crucially, it also reveals the history not only of their transmission, but also the way that they have been employed as elements of genre-bound discourse. From the moment when Genewin stands in the Litzmannstadt ghetto, the image of the three Jewish weavers is already and inextricably caught up in motivated, dialogically oriented discourse. As Long notes, the process of collection removes material from its original mode of circulation and hence detaches it from its use value,¹⁶⁶ and so the inclusion of Genewin’s photograph in a personal collection places it within a different discourse, with a rhetorical value attached to preservation. Its later existence as part of an exhibition again changes its rhetorical use, and although details of the exhibition are not given, its location in Frankfurt suggests that it is now employed as part of a discourse of evidence of German guilt. The narrator’s appropriation of the three Jewish weavers is the final instance of the photograph’s use, and this time their rhetorical value is as synecdoche and symbol. However, in abstracting the subjects of the photograph, and thus employing them in a discourse that removes them from the specifics of their historical fate, this clumsy and ethically problematic moment in fact acts to make visible this process of translation and the discursive motivation acting upon each stage, with greater or lesser degrees of visibility.

The Emigrants works hard to establish what I have referred to as a ‘rhetoric of fact’ through the inclusion of autobiographical elements, historical and familial research, and images that seem to act as ‘authenticating discourse’¹⁶⁷ for the narrative. However, the juxtapositions created by Sebald’s narrator result in the relativisation of the discourses from which the narrative is constructed, and also perform a thoroughgoing subversion of his own role as author. Through these juxtapositions, *The Emigrants* encourages a mode of reading which traces the means and motivations by which the past comes to be present in discourse and representation.

¹⁶⁵ Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style*, p. 160.

¹⁶⁶ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 27.

¹⁶⁷ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 124.

CONCLUSION

Visibility is central to Sebald's ethics of representation. The visibility of the historical referent remains important, and his inclusion of personal and small-scale histories in both *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants* addresses this. However, what is more important for Sebald is to make visible the nature of our later relationship with these historical referents, and in particular the way that the discourses we use can serve to erase any sense of culpability. These texts thus encapsulate the position and problems of the second generation witness in being, in Dori Laub's words, 'a witness to the process of witnessing itself'.¹⁶⁸

To read history as myth, that is, to allow the big symbols of history-writ-large to obscure the agencies by which they came to act as symbols, is a mode of reading and representation that Sebald's fiction attempts to avoid. I therefore disagree with Peter Morgan's claim that 'Sebald's texts are a late manifestation of the transformation of Auschwitz from history into myth'. Morgan cites the description of the weavers in the Litzmannstadt ghetto in support of his assertion, arguing that 'Auschwitz has become a myth of destruction in personal as well as historical terms'.¹⁶⁹ As my comments above suggest, however, this reading of the presence of the Holocaust as myth does not register the importance of the narrator's subversive function. I therefore agree with Michael Niehaus when he argues that 'Sebald does not want the ruins, ossuaries, and large numbers to become nothing but allegorical signs',¹⁷⁰ and with Rebecca Walkowitz when she argues that Sebald's avoidance of writing history as myth is achieved by his use of 'not yet relevant' details, and by retracing already known histories.¹⁷¹ I would add to the comments of Niehaus and Walkowitz the rejoinder that it is pervasive subversions present in these texts that allow Sebald to achieve this.

The layers of narrative present in both texts create the type of constellations that Walter Benjamin perhaps envisaged, and certainly the process of addition and increasing retrospective significance produced by this layering sustains an awareness of the presence of the now in the images of the past that Sebald shows us. Furthermore,

¹⁶⁸ Laub, 'Bearing Witness', p. 75.

¹⁶⁹ Morgan, 'The Sign of Saturn', p. 237.

¹⁷⁰ Michael Niehaus, 'Sebald's Scourges', in *W. G. Sebald and the Writing of History*, ed. by Anne Fuchs and J. J. Long (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2007), pp. 45-58 (p. 56).

¹⁷¹ Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style*, p. 155.

Benjamin writes of the need to ‘wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it’,¹⁷² and the subversiveness of Sebald’s texts is an attempt to puncture the conformity by which, through omissions and revisions in representation, elements of the past cease to be concerns of the present.

I have used Bakhtin’s conception of the carnivalesque to illustrate some of the strategies employed by Sebald, and in particular his use of the narrator. Bakhtin’s definition of the novel as an inherently heteroglossic form¹⁷³ suggests that the relativisation of these generic languages takes place within language alone, and purely within the confines of the novel; like the carnivalesque, the novel is a transgressive space, but one whose own boundaries delimit the extent of that transgression. To return to the notion of genre as defined by contract, the novel’s contract is that transgression may take place within its boundaries. However, the generic indeterminacy of Sebald’s texts tears up this contract. He breaks the frame of this generic limitation in his appropriation of a rhetoric of fact and his use of materials other than narrative; that this is the case is evident in the uncertainty of reception of his work, and in particular the need felt by respondents to follow extra-textual leads in order to identify the nature of his work.¹⁷⁴ Sebald’s work is not simply a subversion of different speech types, but a subversion of the notion of genre itself. Although there is a playful element in the means by which Sebald achieves this, there is a serious ethical purpose overarching these texts, which is a desire to prompt critical and attentive readings, and to make visible complicities that occur in the mediation of narratives and memory.

Vertigo and *The Emigrants* allow these mediations to be traced, by simultaneously conducting a novelistic relativisation of all sources of external authority, by refusing to cede privilege to any meta-language, and by denying the stability of any generic contract. The moments at which the reader pauses to examine the falsehoods and distortions employed by the narrators are moments at which a critical interrogation of the terms of the discourse is needed. Walter Benjamin writes ‘where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallises into a monad.’¹⁷⁵ The juxtapositions created in *The Emigrants* form such constellations, not from abstract points in time and space, but from

¹⁷² Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, p. 247.

¹⁷³ Bakhtin, ‘Discourse in the Novel’, p. 262.

¹⁷⁴ By ‘extra-textual’ I mean the use of his marginalia, the tendency to re-trace his journeys, and the use of biographical knowledge in reading his work.

¹⁷⁵ Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, p. 254.

the material manifestations of thinking, made concrete as texts and representations; and it is their relativisation that preserves the tension of which Benjamin writes. In the case of Sebald's writing, the tension which permits an examination of the past in light of the present, is one which reveals the continuation of values, discourses and systems of thought implicated in the more horrific aspects of that past.

However, the first part of Benjamin's formulation, his assertion that such constellations become invisible and hence subject for examination 'when thinking stops' is more problematic. Benjamin perhaps suggests that the point at which thought stops can provide a visceral experience, outside of the language and conceptual thought that always colour the present's view of the past. In Sebald, however, there is no position outside these frameworks, and the narrator (and by extension, the reader) are very much embedded within them. Being brought into contact with these constellations makes the reader aware of their embeddedness in discourses complicit with atrocity. At this point, thinking thus begins; and so, with it, does an examination of the process of witnessing.

CHAPTER 2. MAGNITUDES OF SUFFERING: *THE RINGS OF SATURN* AND *AUSTERLITZ*

INTRODUCTION

One of the central tenets of this thesis is the counterintuitive notion that, the greater the distance between event and representation, the greater the sense of complicity becomes. The two texts under consideration in this chapter, *Austerlitz* and *The Rings of Saturn*, exemplify this tendency in markedly different ways. *The Rings of Saturn* explodes the temporal and spatial scales employed in most fiction, with a scope encompassing generations and spanning continents. These expansions serve to reveal the complex and pervasive nature of complicity: the text suggests that the lingering aftereffects of atrocity are not only present in memory, but that they continue to circulate in language, representation and capital, still acting on and implicating those who employ these forms even many years after the event. In *Austerlitz*, on the other hand, a sense of complicity is largely absent in the first half of the novel, which focuses on the personal history of Jacques Austerlitz. It is only in the later stages, when Austerlitz's search requires engagement with archives, books, photography and other forms of representation, that the concerns with complicity that are present in Sebald's other three texts can be seen.

Literary fiction concerned with the representation of limit-case events has frequently used form to evoke the intrusive return of memory that characterises trauma.¹ In other words, formal properties have been employed to produce inward-oriented texts concerned with return and repetition. Yet the centripetal return of private memory exists alongside the centrifugal dissemination of public forms of memory. In this chapter, I begin the section on *The Rings of Saturn* by arguing that this text oscillates between these centripetal and centrifugal energies. The form of the novel, predicated on the narrator's walk through Suffolk, allows the text to achieve this: the digressions prompted by the narrator's encounters with various individuals, sites, and artefacts

¹ As discussed in the introduction, Luckhurst identifies a canon of literary works which have employed form in this way. Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, p. 87.

allow him to narrate personal histories in depth and detail while also encompassing expansive scales of space and time.

These expansions of scale produce a logic of the infinite in *The Rings of Saturn*, which works to expand complicity beyond categories of victim and perpetrator, and thus calls for a form of witnessing that acknowledges the complexity of ongoing implications in past wrongs. I argue, in the second section on *The Rings of Saturn*, that this complexity lies in the notion of mutual reliance, and that complicity exists in relationships that can be seen as forms of symbiosis. In the third and final section, I argue that much of the text's significance lies in the juxtapositions between the digressions present. In *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator's strategy of incomprehension echoes that of *The Emigrants*, creating juxtapositions rather than explicit causal connections, and hence requiring an active reader to identify parallels and connections between ostensibly unrelated episodes. The text therefore prompts a form of reading which bears witness to the way in which systems of value and representation responsible for atrocity or suffering in one place and time have persisted and continue to be used in another part of the planet, generations later.

The generic indeterminacy of *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants*, and *The Rings of Saturn* means that there is no clearly offered contract under which these texts can be read. Philip Schlesinger argues that this element of undecidability allows him to 'engage in a game of bluff' in terms of his work's reception; he suggests that the question 'how do you read me?' is always implicit in Sebald's writing.² In contrast, *Austerlitz*, Sebald's final work, has generally been received as a novel. Despite its fragmented form, it presents the narrative of the life of a single protagonist, telling the story of Jacques Austerlitz's arrival in Britain aboard a *Kindertransport*, followed by his attempts to research his parents' final movements. As such, it largely performs the type of centripetal examination of memory that I have described, and in the first section on *Austerlitz*, I examine the way in which this centripetal drive results in shrinkage to moments of ineffable experience.

The centrality of Jacques Austerlitz causes Schlesinger to distinguish *Austerlitz* from Sebald's other work, arguing that it 'is plainly to be read first and foremost as a

² Philip Schlesinger, 'W. G. Sebald and the Condition of Exile', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 21 (2004), 43-67 (p. 49).

novel,' and in this he is in agreement with the majority of critics.³ However, this is not the only way in which *Austerlitz* can be read, and in the second section of this chapter, I offer an interpretation in which the narrator is an active and subversive presence. Such a reading, I argue, de-emphasises the novel's status as an examination of traumatised subjectivity, and instead brings it into focus as a commentary on the way in which the Holocaust is understood and represented by those reading and writing at a generational distance.

Furthermore, the later sections of the novel, which deal with Austerlitz's search for traces of his parents, show the protagonist reading narratives, studying photographs, and searching archives. In these sections, *Austerlitz* shares with Sebald's other texts the same concerns with the way that representation is implicated in atrocity; although there is no suggestion that Austerlitz is himself in any way complicit, he has no choice but to engage with the discourses and systems of representation that have, in some ways, contributed to the genocide that claimed his parents. In other words, the centripetal drive of the first half of the novel is followed by a centrifugal movement as Austerlitz attempts to trace his parents by engaging with material forms of memory. My final section on *Austerlitz* therefore describes the ways in which the modes of representation and archival structures by which Austerlitz researches the history of his parents are themselves part of the systems of thought implicated in the genocide that claimed their lives.

THE RINGS OF SATURN

Magnitude: The Carbon Cycle

The narrator of *Rings of Saturn*, like those of *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*, traces the way in which the sufferings of the past act in the present. Like these earlier narratives, *The Rings of Saturn* describes personal histories which, but for their inclusion by the narrator, might have remained unknown. However, it differs in the radical expansion of scale – both temporal and spatial – that it performs, moving as far back in time as Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial* (1658) and as far afield in spatial terms as China and the Congo.

³ Schlesinger, 'W. G. Sebald and the Condition of Exile', p. 54.

The Rings of Saturn therefore attempts to address both the specificities of individual instances of suffering and the scale of the events within which these instances occurred. The nature of this relationship is suggested by the entry from the *Brockhaus Encyclopaedia* which serves as one of the text's epigraphs:

The rings of Saturn consist of ice crystals and probably meteorite particles describing circular orbits around the planet's equator. In all likelihood these are fragments of a former moon that was too close to the planet and was destroyed by its tidal effect (→ Roche limit).

The Roche limit is the distance at which centripetal and centrifugal forces are in equilibrium around an object, and its inclusion here suggests that the text mediates between the centrifugal energies produced by magnitudes of suffering, and the centripetal drive to return to the memory of these events, and to address them in detail.

The form of *The Rings of Saturn* permits an oscillation between digression and return: rather than being anchored by a single event, the narrative is held together by the thread of the narrator's walk through Suffolk. From the encounters that take place on this walk, the text is propelled outwards, encompassing the scale of historical events. Yet these digressions are also detailed narratives of individual lives. Where individual histories are narrated, these range from those with power and influence, such as the Chinese Dowager Empress T'zu-hsi and Joseph Conrad, to those who are unlikely to leave a significant mark on history, such as Thomas Abrams, who spends his days constructing a model of the Temple of Jerusalem in his barn. More often, the narrator describes those who possessed a degree of power and influence within their lifetimes, but whose legacies are fading, such as Roger Casement and Morton Peto.

This concern with fading legacies is a product of the cyclical view of history present in *The Rings of Saturn* which I describe in more detail later in this chapter. Sebald generally prefers to linger on the downswings of these cycles, and the narrator's interest in dissolution and disappearance in *The Rings of Saturn* is what allows him to act effectively as a belated witness: it is only through an awareness of these processes that the mediation of past sufferings into the present can be traced.

However, in addition to gentle downward arcs described in these personal histories, *The Rings of Saturn* describes the broader effects of history, usually in terms of calamity and destruction. The text reads at times like a litany of massacres. The

narrator records, for example, that during the Taiping Rebellion in China, ‘more than six thousand citadels were taken by the rebels and occupied for a while; five provinces were razed to the ground in battle after battle; and more than twenty million died in just fifteen years’ (p. 140); we are also told of the loss of ‘seven hundred and thirty-two thousand tons of bombs [... and] almost nine thousand aircraft and fifty thousand men’ during the allied bombing of Germany (p. 38); of the ‘between seven and twenty million people’ who starved to death in the Chinese famine of the 1870s (p. 150); the half-million victims, yearly, of the Belgian colonisation of the Congo (p. 119); of the six thousand pheasants gunned down every year at the hands of the British upper classes in the decades before the First World War (p. 223); and even of the fourteen million hard-leaf trees that fell victim to the 1987 hurricane in England (p. 265).

Both Walkowitz and Jan Ceuppens note that the movement between specificity and magnitude requires shifts in scale and perspective. For Walkowitz, the destabilisation of perspective achieved by these shifts results in the avoidance of reification of history into myth.⁴ These shifts in perspective are often performed by the narrator’s alternating concern between fine, dust-like substances, and the concrete and reified artefacts that he encounters on his walk.

The way in which bones are employed throughout the text indicates how these shifts in perspective function. Initially, the solidity of bones seems to lend them relatively weighty significance, as can be seen in the fact that it is the narrator’s search for Thomas Browne’s skull in the Norfolk and Norwich hospital which provides the starting point for the whole narrative. The signifying force of the bones in the tomb of St Sebolt is indicated by their presence at the heart of a mass of historical and biblical signification, materialised in the iconography of the tomb itself (pp. 85-8; figure 5). The tombs in Ditchingham churchyard likewise prompt meditations specific to the remains of those buried underneath (pp. 259-60).

However, when the narrator also discusses the significance of bones underneath the battlefield at Waterloo, they lose their specificity in this case, being heaped together and therefore abstracted to an extent (p. 125). Moreover, when the narrator repeats Thomas Browne’s question, ‘who is to know the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried?’ (p. 11) he seems to be ascribing to human remains a position closer to that

⁴ Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style*, p. 155; Ceuppens, ‘Tracing the Witness’, p. 60.

of ash and dust which occupy a more indeterminate position in Sebald's pantheon of substances and one in which they are part of a longer process of circulation. In fact, Browne's suggestion of reburial introduces the view of history as cycle, whereby the capacity for return permitted by the novel's form allows the narrator to show how substances repeatedly go through processes of formation and dissolution.

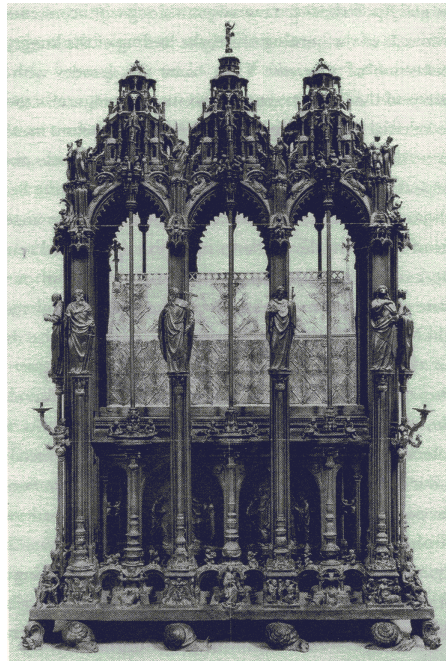


Figure 5

Santner argues that 'Sebald's entire project is to tease out the testimony of dust and ash, to see in such material deposits the very "matter" of historical depositions'.⁵ Yet as the examples above indicate, the nature of the testimonies provided by these substances differs. Reified substances such as bones, where they have been preserved, testify to specific histories and individuals. Finer substances, on the other hand, generally lack the same signifying power with regard to specific histories, but evoke instead the magnitude of the histories within which these stories have taken place.

The presence of these fine substances is evidence of the entropy that the narrator detects in all historical and natural processes. In particular, his uses of carbon and the process of combustion evoke a view of human history as part of a continuous and

⁵ Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p. 102.

cyclical process. The narrator's historical perspective is at its broadest when he writes of the fate of the European forests over centuries that 'whatever was spared by the flames in prehistoric Europe was later felled for construction and shipbuilding'. He combines this sense of magnitude with his view of history as cycle when he writes that 'our spread over the earth was fuelled by reducing the higher species of vegetation to charcoal, by incessantly burning whatever would burn', and concludes that 'from the earliest times, human civilization has been no more than a strange luminescence growing more intense by the hour, of which no one can say when it will begin to wane and when it will fade away' (p. 170).

Implicit in this expansion of magnitudes is a corresponding potential for the infinite regress of signification. In this, Sebald echoes the 'Carbon' chapter of Primo Levi's *The Periodic Table*. Carbon, Levi shows us, is present in everything. Writing as a chemist, Levi tells us that an atom of carbon 'could tell innumerable other stories, and they would all be true: all literally true [...] one [atom] could always be found whose story coincides with any capriciously invented story'.⁶ This suggests that there is no anchor to meaning, and no absolute means of arresting the infinite deferral of meaning that takes place within this movement of matter.

Levi's body of work encapsulates such shifts in scale, from his initial testimony of his experiences in Auschwitz in *If This is a Man* (1947), to the highly digressive *The Periodic Table* (1975); he then returns to the subject matter of the Holocaust in the more reflective *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986). In Levi's writing, there can, therefore, be seen the same oscillation between centripetal and centrifugal movement that I have described in *The Rings of Saturn*, with outward movements punctuated by retrograde moments; even within the parable of carbon, which describes the potential for infinite digression, he is compelled to return to the singularity of his experiences at Auschwitz. Levi suggests that it is human agency which acts to arrest the centrifugal energies inherent in language and thus to produce the gravitational centres around which meaning can be made:

[Carbon] migrates, knocks at the door of a nerve cell, enters, and supplants the carbon which was part of it [...] and the cell in question, and within it the atom in question, is in charge of my writing [...] and] it is that which at this instant,

⁶ Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, trans. by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Michael Joseph, 1985), p. 232.

issuing out of a labyrinthine tangle of yeses and nos, makes my hand run along a certain path on the paper mark it with these volutes that are signs: a double snap, up and down, between two levels of energy, guides this hand of mine to impress on the paper this dot, here, this one.⁷

The re-assertion of agency in the closing passage of *The Periodic Table* provides a useful means of reading Sebald. In this moment, the infinite potentialities of signification are arrested and meaning is reified through the act of inscription, itself a product of human agency. Levi thus indicates that order and associated values are projections of human agency onto an entropic world, and Sebald sees representation in similar terms: he is particularly concerned with the forms that such impositions of order take in representation and discourse and, crucially, with the question of what these forms may obscure or justify.

The narrator is certainly concerned with identifying the ways in which the systems of order and meaning imposed on the world obscure atrocity. Yet, within such an expansive view of history, this becomes a Sisyphean task, and the narrator's erudition seems more a curse than a blessing. Within a view of the world as an infinite and circulatory system of matter, traces of destruction can be detected in everything that the narrator encounters. His friend Janine Dakyns' comment that, 'for [Flaubert], every speck of dust weighed as heavy as the Atlas mountains' (p. 8) also summarises the narrator's view, and is one which takes Benjamin's notion of the barbarity inevitably present in civilisation and extrapolates it to the infinite degree. In this interconnected view, a substance as innocent as sugar is revealed to be implicated still in an economy created by the slave trade (p. 194), an ornamental train across a river in Suffolk stands as evidence of colonial brutality in China (pp. 138-44) and the mute landscape of Dunwich Heath is an index of a history of destruction that reaches as far as Borneo and the Amazon, and spans the history of civilization (pp. 149-50).

To find the invisible within the visible, and to trace the suffering and barbarity still present in the reified artefacts of civilization requires an unremittingly interrogative gaze, and one that is aware of the values imposed by and carried in discourse and representation. John Beck argues that '*The Rings of Saturn*, as the deforming power of

⁷ Levi, *The Periodic Table*, pp. 232-3.

representation, is the carrier of catastrophe and also its historian,⁸ and as such, the difficulty is finding an extradiegetic position from which this interrogation can take place. We are hopelessly entangled, Sebald suggests, in systems which blind us to the very suffering that they produce. This relationship, I suggest in the following section, is one of symbiosis.

Complicity: Symbiosis

The model of history as process and the expansion of scale performed by *The Rings of Saturn* problematise any simple categorisations with regard to perpetration and victimhood, guilt and innocence, and hence the possibility of finding a position from which ethical witnessing may take place. The narrator, reflecting on the view of Europe from the air, remarks that the whole of humanity is ‘tied into networks of a complexity that goes far beyond the power of any one individual to imagine’ (p. 91). The complexity of these networks and of the causalities that they involve contributes to the difficulty of arriving at any neat categorisations.

Complicity is often represented as a kind of inherited entanglement in which culpability is less the result of action (whether malevolent or otherwise) than it is the result of inaction stemming from ignorance or blindness. Complicity of this nature is present throughout the text, but is most notably a feature of how the narrator reads history in the several country houses that he visits. Three of these, Somerleyton and Henstead in Suffolk, and the Ashburys’ seat in Ireland, cling on to existence in varying states of decay, while Boulge Hall, the former home of the FitzGerald family, has already been destroyed. These estates are generally described in melancholic terms, with the narrator lamenting their decline and contrasting their current decrepit states with their former glory, but they are nevertheless shown to be the products of exploitation and, in some cases, atrocity.

For example, in providing a history of Boulge Hall and the FitzGeralds, the narrator notes that the Anglo-Norman family’s wealth is the result of the ‘ruthless subjugation of the local people’, which results in their amassing ‘vast land holdings in

⁸ John Beck, ‘Reading Room: Erosion and Sedimentation in Sebald's Suffolk’, in *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, ed. by J. J. Long and Anne Whitehead (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), pp. 75-88 (p. 88).

Ireland [...] and hosts of peasants who were effectively no more than their serfs' (p. 197). However, when the narrator's focus shifts from the broad sweep of the FitzGerald's history to the specific, he finds in the writer Edward FitzGerald someone with whom it is possible to sympathise: he grew up, we are told, in terror of his own mother, and came to develop an aversion for his own class and its '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' (pp. 202-3).

The Ashburys are similar to Edward FitzGerald in that they come to occupy, through no choice of their own, a site that is embroiled in a continuing history of exploitation. The Ashburys inherit their estate near the Slieve Bloom Mountains in Ireland unexpectedly, along with the political ramifications of being landowners during the Troubles. Although their own house escapes the destruction inflicted on some two or three hundred properties during the civil war, they are left with what has become an unsellable property which inevitably slides into decline, and which they hope to support through their forlorn attempts to turn it into a bed and breakfast business. In this, the Ashbury family's crimes are not the perpetration of atrocity, but an ignorance of the causes and circumstances of the political climate into which they have moved: Mrs Ashbury states that 'she had had not the slightest notion of Ireland's Troubles [when they inherited the estate], and to this day they remained alien to her' (p. 214).

As I have suggested with regard to *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*, and as my comments on the inherited nature of complicity for the FitzGerald's and the Ashburys indicate, Sebald also addresses the ways in which complicity emerges from within groups and populations. In *The Rings of Saturn* there is, perhaps even more than in Sebald's other novels, a profound and fundamental sense of the 'always already' quality of our entanglements, a sense encapsulated by the notion of symbiosis, and introduced in a description of the weavers of Norwich:

Increase of light and increase of labour have always gone hand in hand [...] a great number of people, at least in some places, spent their lives with their wretched bodies strapped to looms made of wooden frames and rails, hung with weights and reminiscent of instruments of torture or cages. It was a peculiar symbiosis which, perhaps because of its relatively primitive character, makes more apparent than any latter form of factory work that we are able to maintain

ourselves on this earth only by being harnessed to the machines we have invented (pp. 281-3).

Notably, the narrator argues that weavers are similar to scholars and writers in that they 'sit bent over, day after day, straining to keep an eye on the complex patterns they have created'. Creation in any form is an imposition of order on the world, but one that then causes these creators to be 'pursued, even into their dreams, by the feeling that they have got hold of the wrong thread' (p. 283). Once agency has been exercised to weave patterns of order, the creators find themselves shackled to these forms, bodily bound to ongoing and unforeseen effects.

The difficulty of finding a form of representation which can be disentangled from any implication in atrocity is demonstrated by the narrator's comments on a picture in Somerleyton. Amid the collection of African masks and other exotica, he notices 'a number of family portraits painted perhaps some time between 1920 and 1960 by an artist not untouched by Modernism, the plaster-coloured faces of the sitters mottled with scarlet and purple blotches' (pp. 35-6). The narrator's scathing verdict on this artist's tilt at Modernist technique aside, the presence of this portrait is representative of the way in which even Modernism, in spite of its radicalism, quickly becomes subsumed by the dominant structures of power and, in this case, put to use in a form of portraiture that in fact perpetuates the age old and oppressive systems of feudalism and primogeniture.

The Rings of Saturn thus sees art and representation as being fundamentally implicated in atrocity, but the scales of time and space encompassed in the text act to alter the significance of art in order to make visible the nature of this implication. Rather than artworks being monumental works of signification that last across the ages, they instead become only fleetingly significant, and part of a process of the transformation of matter. This process is best illustrated by the role that silk plays throughout the text, in that it appears in a number of guises in different locations and times. When the narrator writes of Browne that he 'scrutinises that which escaped annihilation for any sign of the mysterious capacity for transmigration he has so often observed in caterpillars and moths', (p. 26) this provides an indication as to how silk signifies in *The Rings of Saturn*. Sebald is not so much interested in transmigration as a theological concept, the 'indestructibility of the human soul as assured by scripture', as he is in identifying it as a universal phenomenon. It is in the survival and transformation of matter across space

and time, and through the creation and destruction of form, that the narrator traces patterns of complicity.

The final section of the narrative gives a brief history of silk cultivation, which begins with a description of how caterpillars produce silk from proteins extracted from the foods they ingest, spinning these threads into cocoons (p. 275). He describes how this physical process, once harnessed by the Chinese, proved to be an almost inexhaustible source of wealth (p. 276), and how the process eventually migrated to Byzantium, and then to France, where it became caught up in the political machinations of the French court. Later, in England, silk is part of the burgeoning industrialisation of the economy, and this brief history ends with its implication in the industrial processes of the Third Reich (p. 292-3).

As the narrator's tour of silk cultivation shows, silk passes continuously between raw matter (from the innards of a caterpillar and the brute fact of the silkworms' inability to survive in the German climate), into discourse (where it is employed rhetorically by the Duc de Scully as a corrupting substance, and one which would promote in the French 'laziness, effeminacy, lechery and extravagance', p. 280), into economies of wealth and production, and from there back into forms of power and coercion that ultimately returns silk to the physical. These uses are bracketed by its employment by both Browne and Sebald in poetic terms as a figure for the capacity of transmigration. Any act of creation is, then, only a momentary arrest of matter and form within a continuous and endless process of weaving and unweaving, making and unmaking of patterns of order; unpicking the threads of these patterns, as the narrators' research shows, inevitably leads to the atrocities created by the same systems of order.

The ubiquity of the symbiosis between artistic representation and atrocity is made most explicit during the narrator's conversation with Cornelius de Jong in the bar of the Crown Hotel in Southwold. De Jong describes how 'the capital amassed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through various forms of slave economy is still in circulation [...] still bearing interest, increasing many times over and continually burgeoning anew,' and he adds that 'one of the most tried and tested ways of legitimizing this kind of money has always been patronage of the arts' (p. 194). Art has, perhaps inadvertently, profited from a slave economy, and these profits have been disseminated and inherited by those who had no direct role in the creation or perpetuation of that system. Not only has this capital continued to accumulate, but the

use of the art industry to legitimise the wealth generated by this slave economy created the cultural climate, institutions and markets which served as enabling conditions for artists to work and prosper. De Jong concludes his train of thought on this instance of symbiosis with an image that concretises Benjamin's notion of the relationship between civilisation and barbarity, giving voice to his feeling that it is as if 'all works of art were coated with a sugar glaze or indeed made completely of sugar' (p. 194).⁹

The ethical creation of art is, therefore, not just a matter of finding the right way (or even of finding a better way) of writing, or of doing art, as if art and representation exist in a realm separate to nature, industry, politics and all the other spheres through which silk (and all substances) transmigrate. *The Rings of Saturn* instead suggests that an ethical act of inscription should acknowledge and work with this symbiosis between representation, systems of order, and the sufferings that those systems of order produce.

Resistance: Remnants

De Jong's evocation of sugar-glazed works of art is a counterfactual and counterintuitive image, but is one that produces a reading of these artworks against the grain of their explicit semiotic content and intended symbolism, and which reveals the traces of barbarity in their creation and circulation. De Jong's stance towards these works of art is the result of knowing how to look in a way which allows him to identify their existence within networks of complicity. The same can be said of the narrator's readings and interpretations throughout *The Rings of Saturn*: he is concerned to make visible the connections and causalities by which we are implicated in atrocities perpetrated at different times and in different places.

However, this is not to say that the narrator does not attempt to write from a position of resistance. As Beck notes, 'the interrogation of the authority of constructed worlds and how representations shape, influence and legitimate material facts and events – how narratives make and unmake the world – is a direct confrontation with the technology of linguistic power in the modern world', and in this section I identify this

⁹ Susie O'Brien notes that the Booker Prize, itself instrumental in Ishiguro's success, was originally sponsored by Booker McConnell, a company responsible for the exploitation of sugar plantation workers in Guyana. Susie O'Brien, 'Serving a New World Order: Postcolonial Politics in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 42 (1996), 787-806.

interrogation as taking place through three strategies performed by the narrator.¹⁰ The first of these is to attempt to remove himself from the systems of order and to place himself outside the circulation of values that these perpetuate. However, the multitudinous and invisible connections by which the presence of barbarity continues to be manifest even in the most well-intentioned acts make any such move extremely difficult. These attempts at removal do, however, make visible the means by which the presence of atrocity and its ongoing effects are often hidden by modes of representation. The second is in the disjunction between the erudite discourse employed by the narrator and his physical actions. The third is his employment of a form of incomprehension which recalls the rhetorical function of Bakhtin's fool; in *The Rings of Saturn*, the narrator's unwillingness to explicitly draw causal links prompts an active mode of reading to draw together the relationship between different digressive strands of the narrative.

The narrator's scepticism towards systems of order is evident in his interest in objects that have escaped dominant systems of value. In addition to Thomas Browne's skull and the collection at Somerleyton, the train that once served the Chinese court has ended up in Suffolk albeit still bearing the traces of a symbolism that has no use in England; and in Orfordness a whole site, itself built on the detritus of a river, is now surplus to the requirements of the military. Furthermore, many of the people described are eccentrics at the fringes of society, or are rootless and outside any grounded identity. For example, the narrator's friend, Michael Parkinson, is described as being 'remarkable for the modesty of his needs, which some considered bordered on eccentricity' (p. 6). Others who figure more centrally, such as Conrad and Casement, are wanderers, between national identities.

Extraneous to hegemonic systems of order, these outsiders are remnants. That the narrator himself employs this status as a form of resistance is suggested by Long's comments on his walk (and hence the resulting form of the narrative) as 'deliberately inefficient and, one might say, anti-disciplinary'.¹¹ In entering Somerleyton over a wall and a pig field over a fence, the narrator has, Christian Moser argues, removed himself

¹⁰ Beck, 'Reading Room', p. 80.

¹¹ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 140.

from the circulation of value and exchange;¹² these are whimsical digressions from his route, which do not engage with the economies of value and consumption of which they are a part. However, if the notion of an anti-disciplinary stance suggests a locus of power against which the narrator can orient himself, my comments on symbiosis should indicate that the possibility of even identifying such a locus in *The Rings of Saturn* is doubtful.

Although the narrator is unable to maintain a position from which he is able to resist disciplinary structures, he does his best to make visible the structures of power that he finds himself within. Zilcosky, citing the passage on Dunwich Heath in which the narrator finds that he has inadvertently walked in a circle, employs a psychoanalytical reading to argue that *The Rings of Saturn*, like *Vertigo*, is about the impossibility of getting lost.¹³ However, in describing a walk through Suffolk in the 1990s, the narrator is unlikely to enter entirely uncharted territory; and as if to prove the point, his later description of his visit to Orfordness is accompanied by a map of the area. Although the narrator's knowledge of Orfordness is gleaned from the careful study of material representations and other narratives, such as the Ministry of Defence file on Shingle Street, rumours spread by locals, and perhaps most importantly, the fact of his being there (pp. 231-33), it is notable that this site on which secret weapons were supposedly tested is in fact in plain sight of the general population: it is 'perfectly visible' from the town of Orford itself (p. 233). Despite this visibility, half-truths and obfuscations occur due to its history being mediated into the present only through classified information, unreliable rumours, and hearsay.

The narrator's mode of inscribing his own experience of Orfordness within his narrative, however, ensures that it does not become subsumed in the dominant discourses that shape representation. Like the image of Angela Pietragrua in *Vertigo*, a grid is superimposed on the image of the map and, as in *Vertigo*, the grid on the map in *The Rings of Saturn* betrays something of the values and discourses in the service of which the image has been produced. In this case, the grid is part of the original image, and contributes to the Ordnance Survey's disciplining of the landscape. Long draws attention to the 'political aspects of cartographic rhetoric' of which the grid on the map

¹² Christian Moser, 'Peripatetic Liminality: Sebald and the Tradition of the Literary Walk', in *The Undiscover'd Country: W. G. Sebald and the Poetics of Travel*, ed. by Markus Zisselberger (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2010), pp. 37-62 (p. 45).

¹³ Zilcosky, 'Sebald's Uncanny Travels', pp. 109-10.

is a part, and which contributes to this rationalisation of space.¹⁴ The narrator again indicates his resistance to this rationalisation though his own addition to the image, which in this case is an arrow pointing towards an apparently empty section of the map which he labels 'Orfordness' (figure 6). The narrator's resistance to the forms of power that dictate the form of the map are, as Long argues, present in his investing the location with 'symbolic power',¹⁵ likening it to 'a penal colony in the far East' (p. 233), prehistoric tumuli (p. 236) and a 'mysterious isle of the dead' (p. 237).

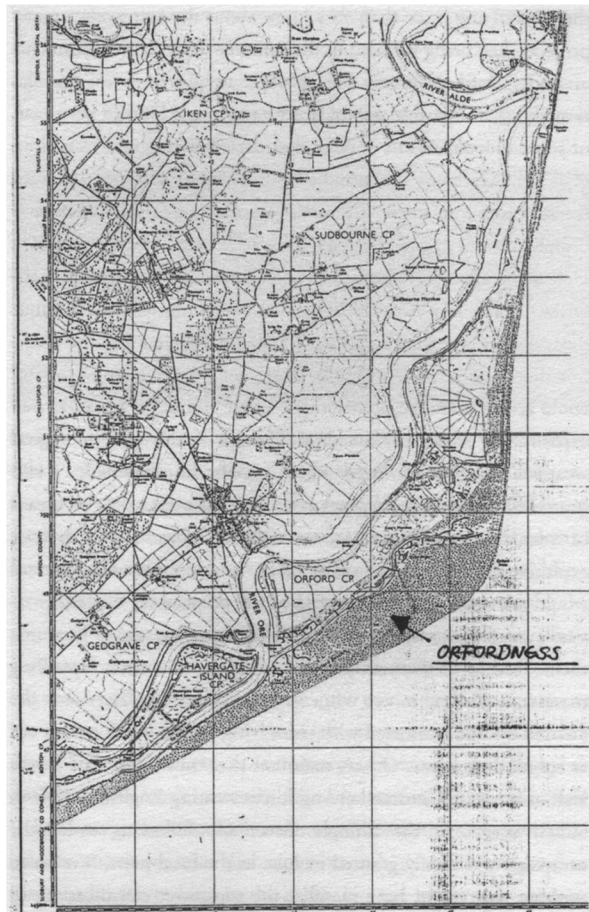


Figure 6

¹⁴ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, pp. 130-1. Long also notes that, while public footpaths may appear to be a democratic and open use of space, they at the same time restrict and guide the movement of the public. As such, their role parallels the way in which carnival permits a degree of freedom while at the same time regulating that right, as discussed in Chapter One.

¹⁵ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 135.

The Dante-esque images of the locals' folklore (they tell of military experiments involving petroleum infernos in the sea, and of 'charred bodies, contorted with pain, lying on the beach', p. 231) evoke secret forms of state power. The narrator, however, draws attention, through his inclusion and alteration of the map, to the pervasive and invisible forms of power that structure daily life. He strives to avoid complicity with such forms of power in his own representation: as Long notes, the usual features of maps go unnoticed due to their having become 'naturalised conventions of Western cartography', and a correlation between cartographic features, the landscape itself, and textual description is to be expected.¹⁶ However, by pointing an arrow towards a blank space on the map of Orfordness, and by investing his textual description with a series of jarring symbolic references, the narrator does not allow this correlation to go unquestioned.

Moreover, it is only his having been present at that site that allows the narrator to invest Orfordness with a symbolism of his own as opposed to the blankness offered by the officially sanctioned map. His esoteric knowledge allows him to seek out and locate the 'undiscovered country' of Orfordness, and thus to place himself outside the circulation of discourses which normally dictate the function and mode of reading of a map. However, as in *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*, this resistant stance comes at a cost. Once in this space, which has an 'extra-territorial quality about it', the narrator finds himself becoming 'both utterly liberated and deeply despondent' (p. 234). This increasing sense of isolation culminates in a strange moment of empathy with the hare which seems to be the only other inhabitant of the island:

I see the hare leaping out of its hiding place with its ears laid back and a curiously human expression on its face that was rigid with terror and strangely divided; and in its eyes, turning to look back as it fled and almost popping out of its head with fright, I see myself, become one with it. (p. 235)

The narrator empathises with the hare only in its terror and incomprehension. Cut off from the mainland with its comforting artefacts and surfaces of civilization, he is left in a void. This produces in him a prophetic kind of gaze, in which he sees the future in 'the remains of our own civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe,' and the past in 'the sails of long-vanished windmills turning heavily in the wind' (p. 237).

¹⁶ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 131.

Having broken out of the systems of circulation that tie him to the present, the narrator is thus able to locate himself within a long continuum of human and natural history. His escape, however, is only momentary, and produces in him a despair resulting from the solitary nature of this condition.

When forced to reintegrate with the modern world, the narrator's resistant stance result in an antagonistic relationship with its trappings. For example, when he drinks a Cherry Coke – the shop, for some reason, is out of the mineral water that he would prefer – the name of the product sits as awkwardly as a profanity, and indeed the narrator relates draining it 'at a draught, like a cup of hemlock' (p. 176). He has a similarly unpleasant encounter with the contemporary in Amsterdam, which he relates thus: 'I bought a carton of chips at McDonald's, where I felt like a criminal wanted worldwide as I stood at the brightly lit counter' (p. 81).

Yet it is this same sense of criminality and awkwardness that makes visible the discourses with which the narrator engages, and from which he constructs his narrative. Long notes that the digressive form of *The Rings of Saturn* has been widely discussed, but that the body of the walking narrator himself, which of course produces this form, has drawn scant critical attention.¹⁷ The disturbing physicality of the narrating persona is suggested by Beck's description of him as a 'monstrous mirror reflection of an inaccessible "real" Sebald', and to read for how this persona acts, rather than how he represents, produces a jarring disjunction which serves to throw a critical light on the discourse that he employs in his narrative.¹⁸ For example, in one episode he finds himself accidentally witnessing a couple having sex on a beach below the Clovehithe cliffs, a coupling which he describes as resembling 'the last of a prodigious species, its life ebbing from it with each breath expired through its nostrils'. He goes on to relate how the location then seems 'fearsome' to him (p. 68). If we take the narrator at his word, this episode is seen through the same melancholic filter that causes him to see in everything evidence of the continuous process of destruction, and to write that 'the East stands for lost causes' (p. 159). However, to read past this discourse reveals a voyeuristic 'Sebald' who is first alone on a cliff, indulging in the childhood game of tipping his head back as far as possible until he can see the horizon, then crouching

¹⁷ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 133.

¹⁸ Beck, 'Reading Room', p. 84.

down to watch the couple on the beach, before staggering off. Stripped of his musings, and seen in action only, this is a slightly absurd, if not sinister figure.

The passage on Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* produces a similar disjunction. This is one of the most commonly cited passages in *The Rings of Saturn*, and the criticism generally takes the narrator at his word, accepting this as an approving gloss on Rembrandt's critique of the 'Cartesian rigidity' which he sees as dictating the behaviour of the surgeon and his audience. Long, for example, sees the dead figure of Kindt as an example of the 'disciplined body'.¹⁹ Christian Moser also reads this passage as a 'rectification', which functions by reinstating the suffering body through the disfigurement of a realistic representation,²⁰ and Russell Kilbourn concurs, situating this passage within a broader diagnosis of *The Rings of Saturn* as employing 'an epistemology predicated on an ethical critique of modernity'.²¹ However, while such readings see the narrator's sympathy with Kindt's suffering as part of a greater need to reinstate the body as an antidote to the crushing forces of rationality, they miss two key disjunctions produced by the physical action of inscription carried out by the narrator.

The first of these is that, in addition to the textual gloss provided, the narrator's actions are also visible in the reproduction of Rembrandt's painting. In the text, it is first reproduced in full, across a two-page spread (figure 7), then on the following page a much smaller section which the narrator identifies as the 'exact centre point' of the painting's meaning, namely Kindt's deliberately distorted hand, is displayed again (figure 8). This strategy echoes the partial reproduction of Pisanello in *Vertigo*, and in the same way acts to prompt a realisation of the partiality of the narrator's own account. In *Vertigo*, the narrator's enthusiasm for Pisanello's egalitarian mode of painting is somewhat undercut by his selective reproduction of the image; in *The Rings of Saturn*, even as the narrator criticises the dehumanising logic of Cartesian thinking through his reading of Rembrandt, his selective reproduction of the image effaces those who overlook the dead body of Kindt, and thus erases the audience upon whom the painting's dynamics of visibility and spectatorship rely.

¹⁹ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 135.

²⁰ Moser, 'Peripatetic Liminality', pp. 50-2.

²¹ Russell J. A. Kilbourn, 'Catastrophe with Spectator: Subjectivity, Intertextuality and the Representation of History in *Die Ringe des Saturn*', in *W. G. Sebald and the Writing of History*, ed. by Anne Fuchs and J. J. Long (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2007), pp. 139-61 (p. 143).

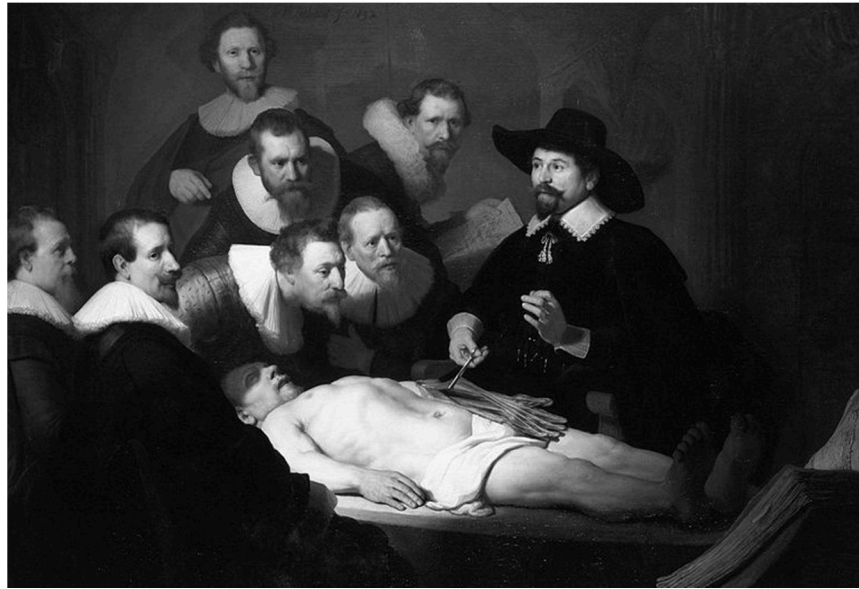


Figure 7²²



Figure 8

Secondly, this passage is immediately followed by the narrator's description of his own suffering body in the Norfolk and Norwich hospital. However, where Rembrandt's surgeons are the manifestation of the dehumanising forces of modernity, the narrator's own body is subjected to no such schematisation or erasure. His nurses, Katy and Lizzie, are rendered in warm and very human terms, and despite the euphoric state he experiences while under the 'wonderful influence' of the prescribed painkillers, he is able to retain snatches of their conversation, such as an anecdote about a holiday in Malta (pp. 17-8). An overarching, grand-narrative critique of modernity would be the

²² Rembrandt, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, oil on canvas, Mauritshuis, The Hague. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Anatomy_Lesson.jpg> [accessed 19th October 2012].

same kind of reductive schematisation that the narrator resists throughout *The Rings of Saturn* (and throughout the whole of Sebald's body of work), and in this and other cases, the disjunction between the explicit content of the narrator's textual representation, and his acting, physical body reveals the partiality of such schematisations.

These disjunctions prompt an attentive mode of reading that always questions both the veracity of the reported events, and the values of the discourses from which the narrative is constructed. In addition to these disjunctions, one of the most striking aspects of the narrator's digressions is his tendency to protest his incomprehension following one of his many descriptions of atrocity or mass suffering, and in this he recalls the rhetorical function of 'deliberate stupidity' identified by Bakhtin as a subversive feature of the novel, and often present in the character of the fool.²³ For example, he writes of the sea battles of the seventeenth century that 'the agony that was endured and the enormity of the havoc wrought defeat our powers of comprehension' (p. 78); he feels that we are 'tied into networks of a complexity that goes far beyond the power of any one individual to imagine' (p. 91); he is 'unable to grasp the meaning' of the documentary on Casement that he watches (p. 103); he follows an enumeration of the dead in the Taiping Rebellion with the somewhat trite formulation that 'the bloody horror in China at that time went beyond all imagining' (p. 140); and he repeats with implicit approval his friend Michael Hamburger's assertion that 'intuitively we know that we shall never be able to fathom the imponderables that govern our course through life' (p. 182).

In addition to these explicit statements of incomprehension, the narrator more commonly uses juxtaposition as a means of avoiding the narrative tools normally employed to ensure comprehensibility, namely linear temporality, cohesion and causality. However, this lack leaves space for the reader to make connections across the digressive episodes of the novel. Thus, when the narrator's description of Somerleyton, which includes 'a camphorwood chest which may once have accompanied a former occupant of the house on a tour of duty of Nigeria or Singapore [and which] now contains [...] copper kettles, bedpans, hussars' sabres, African masks, spears, safari trophies, hand-coloured engravings of Boer War battles' (p. 35), no explicit connections are made between the presence of these trophies in the estate and the suffering and exploitation involved in their acquisition. However, in the case of Somerleyton, these

²³ Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', p. 403.

connections are suggested in echoes of these passages contained in two other digressions in the text.

Firstly, in a later section the narrator recounts the histories of Joseph Conrad and Roger Casement and their involvement in the Congo, and in this passage, the construction of a railway link to the upper reaches of the Congo is mentioned (p. 120). Somerleyton is in fact built on the back of a fortune accumulated largely through railway construction, including that which takes place in colonial territories. Although the narrator does not ascribe the estate's wealth outright to colonial exploitation, the connections are there to be made by an alert reader. This is not an isolated incident, and similar echoes throughout the text allow Long to identify a general concern in *The Rings of Saturn* with the way in which the features of modernity (such as industrialisation, the exploitation of natural resources, and the spread of transport networks) are employed as forms of control. In the case of the Belgian Congo, this control enables one of the most horrific periods of colonial exploitation.²⁴

Secondly, any innocence that the camphorwood chest and its contents may have had is tarnished by associations introduced in later passages of the narrative. In this case, the solitary Chinese quail which is 'evidently in a state of dementia' (p. 36) acts as an upsetting memento of the colonisation of parts of Asia, but this only gains its full significance belatedly, through the passage describing the destruction of the palace of Yuan Ming Yuan by British and French forces in 1860. The razing of this 'magic garden [...] with its countless palaces, pavilions, covered walks, fantastic arbours, temples and towers' results in the fact that 'much of the removable ornaments and the jewellery left behind by the fleeing court, everything made of jade or gold, silver or silk, fell into the hands of the looters' (pp. 144-5). For Long, this episode exemplifies the relationship between imperial power and collections which, he argues, act as a synecdoche of imperial territories and serve to 'bring home' the colony.²⁵ However, it should be noted again that in order to identify this relationship, the reader is required to make the connection across two separate digressive episodes of the text.

A similar juxtaposition takes place around the narrator's description of the tomb of his namesake, St Sebolt. He lingers on the symbolism of the sarcophagus, his eye roaming over the complex iconography before coming to rest on the reliquary in which

²⁴ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, pp. 2, 80-3.

²⁵ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, pp. 42-3.

'lie the bones of the exemplary dead man, the harbinger of a time when the tears will be wiped from our eyes and there will be no more grief, or pain, or weeping and wailing' (pp. 86-8). Yet, as with the echoes of colonial theft between the sections on Somerleyton and Yuan Ming Yuan, the reader is left to make the connection between an apparently innocuous episode and a later reference to historical extremity. In this case, the reference to barbarity is one of the most explicit in *The Rings of Saturn*, which is the description of the 'so-called cleansing operations' that took place in Bosnia in the 1940s. The narrator describes a photograph which shows a 'severed head with a cigarette between lips still parted in a last cry of pain', and on the next page an image appears to reproduce what he describes as 'a kind of rudimentary cross-bar gallows on which the Serbs, Jews and Bosnians [...] were hanged in rows like crows or magpies' (pp. 96-7). When the narrator claims that the Croatian militia responsible for the massacre had 'its hand strengthened by the Wehrmacht and its spirit by the Catholic church' (p. 97) this acts on other passages of the text: not only does the Catholic Church's complicity in the Balkan massacres render absurd the promises of redemption and freedom from suffering that the symbolism of the tomb evokes, but it also contaminates the terms of the aesthetic order employed by the church and which also serve to sustain its power and legitimacy.

These terms, of course, are not confined to the reified sites and monuments created specifically for such purposes, but pervade the language used by the narrator, and in fact inform much of his thinking. Commenting, for example, on the miracle of St. Sebolt lighting a fire with icicles, the narrator ponders whether 'inner coldness and desolation may not be a precondition for making the world believe, by a kind of fraudulent showmanship, that one's own wretched heart is still aglow' (p. 86): the Christian imagery of apocalypse and redemption associated with the dead saint is appropriated by the narrator and put to use in the melancholy tenor that colours the whole text.

The juxtapositions used by the narrator involve a refusal to draw explicit causal and temporal connections. These can therefore be seen as abnegations of understanding, and they place Sebald on risky ethical ground at times, most notably in the passage in which a description of herring fishing, which includes the numbers caught and killed, is followed shortly after, in an apparent juxtaposition, by a textual reference to Bergen Belsen and a double-page photograph of dead bodies in a forest (pp. 59-61). For Long,

this is part of an ‘archival’ structure which produces equivalences rather than hierarchies, and ‘which results in a reduction of qualitative difference to mere quantitative difference and thwarts the attempt to determine which textual events are more important and which are less’. Long goes on to argue that ‘this aspect of *The Rings of Saturn*’s narrative form hints at a profound crisis in the ethics of representation’.²⁶ However, like the instances of juxtaposition and appropriation in *The Emigrants*, these apparently counter-ethical moments are integral to Sebald’s form of witnessing.

There are two points on which the notion of juxtaposition as a reduction to quantitative equivalence can be contested. The first of these rests on the question of who it is who draws these equivalences. If Long is correct in his assertion that ‘the text itself offers no criteria according to which either of these events – the killing of herring for food and the murder of the Jews – can be privileged over the other’,²⁷ then the (quantitative) criteria by which these two events are deemed to be equivalent to each other is an imposition from the reader. If, as I have argued, Sebald leaves it to us to make connections between a Chinese quail at Somerleyton, and the razing of Yuan Ming Yuan, or between St Sebolt’s tomb and the massacres in the Balkans, then the reader’s agency is what projects order and equivalences onto the juxtaposed passages on herring and Bergen-Belsen.

Secondly, Long is right to identify a reading that privileges the quantitative similarities as a ‘reduction’, because reading passages as straightforward equivalences in Sebald is to read their textual representations as the isolated, independent and reified symbols of a historical event. However, as my comments on magnitude earlier in this chapter have suggested, *The Rings of Saturn* acknowledges the interconnectedness of events and histories. As such, Sebald’s concern is not only with the event itself, but is also with the history of that knowledge, and with the rhetorical orientation of the mediations by which those events have come to be present in the narrative. To reduce herring fishing and Bergen-Belsen to numerical equivalences is itself a significant act of interpretation, and one that asserts one form of order by stripping away the details provided by the narrator. Reading in this way thus elides the information about the employment of herring fishing as an economic necessity, as a rhetorical exemplar of

²⁶ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, pp. 143-4.

²⁷ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 143.

‘mankind’s struggle with the power of Nature’, and as a tool in scientific progress (pp. 53-7). It also disregards the mediations that occurred between Major George Wyndham Le Strange’s participation in the liberation of Bergen-Belsen in 1945, the presence in Sebald’s narrative of the photograph presumably taken by Le Strange, and the article from the Eastern Daily Press, which the narrator relates, and which describes how the Major spent his life dining in silence with the housekeeper to whom he left his entire fortune (pp. 57-63). These details and mediations occupy significantly more space than their articulation in terms of the numbers of dead; while recognising equivalences and connections across different sections of the narrative is necessary in order to trace the effects of atrocity, reading *The Rings of Saturn* also needs to remain attentive to specificities as well as scale if ethically dubious impositions of order, through the act of interpretation, are to be avoided.

This balancing act between scale and specificity creates the oscillation between centripetal and centrifugal energies that I have described. *The Rings of Saturn* demands an active form of reading that remains alert to the connections between different episodes within the text, to the historical processes behind that which is immediately visible, and also to the way in which interpretation itself is an imposition of order, another stage in the circulation of signification. The text takes the awareness of the relationship between representation and complicity explored in *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*, and subjects it to the logic of infinite regress, with the identification of connections and patterns a necessary aspect of meaning-making, but also one that always risks eliding or misrepresenting past sufferings. *Austerlitz*, in contrast, seems to retreat from this exploration, dealing as it does with the life story of a single, central protagonist. However, as I argue in the following section, *Austerlitz* does in fact have much to say on the uses of representation and on narrative as a form of complicity with atrocity.

AUSTERLITZ

Magnitude: Vanishing Points

I have characterised Sebald’s first three novel-length works as attempts to arrive at an ethical form of witnessing that addresses the ongoing implication of those alive now in

the events of the past, and in particular I have outlined the ways in which narrative and the creation of representation often act to de-emphasise or obfuscate these relationships. I have also argued that Sebald employs a narrating persona to ethical ends, as a means of subverting the discourses that he sees as being implicated in the perpetration and later denial of atrocity.

Austerlitz, Sebald's final work, seems to undertake a somewhat different project. It can be contrasted with *The Rings of Saturn* in terms of the form employed to examine the magnitude of the effects of suffering. *The Rings of Saturn*, as I have argued, performs an oscillation between the centrifugal energies of dissemination, and the centripetal drive into the specific histories of individual subjects. While the structure of digression and return in *The Rings of Saturn* permits this oscillation, *Austerlitz*'s focus on a single protagonist means that it tends towards the latter, showing as it does the process of a collapse of identity in a traumatised subject. This is how the text has generally been received, but in this chapter I propose that the centripetal drive of the first half of the narrative is followed by a centrifugal movement in the second half, addressing the mediation of the knowledge of atrocity as Austerlitz engages in a search for evidence of his parents' fate.

Austerlitz's use of a protagonist who is more fully fleshed out than those of Sebald's previous texts has resulted in its reception as a novel rather than as a generically indeterminate mixture of documents and travelogue. In Sebald's first three novels, the sum total of our knowledge of the protagonists is available through the stories that the narrators unearth or are told. In contrast, Jacques Austerlitz seems to exist more or less autonomously of the narrator's research, and his appearances throughout the text over the course of decades provide a coherent arc of development. The character of the narrator is still a mediating presence in *Austerlitz*, and, as I suggest in the second section of my discussion, can be read as central to the text's ethics of witnessing. However, the central thread of the novel is the life story of Jacques Austerlitz and most criticism on the text reads him in these terms: for Schlesinger, he is 'Sebald's most fully formed protagonist';²⁸ Long argues that the text can be read as an 'archive of Austerlitz's subjectivity';²⁹ and Karin Bauer's identification of *Austerlitz* as

²⁸ Schlesinger, 'W. G. Sebald and the Condition of Exile', p. 62.

²⁹ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 163.

an ‘inversed *Bildungsroman*’ similarly places Austerlitz’s subjectivity at the centre of her reading.³⁰

The prolonged examination of a single, traumatised subject therefore sets *Austerlitz* apart from Sebald’s other texts, and produces a centripetal drive in the narrative. Suffering in *Austerlitz* does not, therefore, produce the infinite magnitudes present in *The Rings of Saturn* (at least initially), but is of such an extremity that it causes all acts of memory to tend towards a vanishing point at which conventional conceptions of identity, temporality and language collapse. In Sebald’s other texts, his narrators find themselves already entangled in discourses and in the forms of representation that perpetuate them, and are trying to find a way out of this impasse: the passage on Orfordness in *The Rings of Saturn* which I have cited above exemplifies this tendency. In contrast, *Austerlitz* presents a number of experiences which are represented as ineffable, and attempts to translate these experiences into any form of representation are shown to be inadequate.

Trauma seems to be responsible for the collapse of language and of the conceptual frameworks that it employs, with Austerlitz’s story being centred on his breakdown and recovery. Prior to the search for his parents, the denial of a section of his own past creates a central void so overwhelming that the strain it places on Austerlitz eventually results in the collapse of his mental defences. At the point of his breakdown, he realises that he had ‘always tried to recollect as little as possible, avoiding everything which related in any way to [his] unknown past’ (p. 197). Following this realisation, his research into his own past begins. This is a highly personal search which can be seen in centripetal terms, in that it is an inward-oriented process which results in the destabilisation of Austerlitz’s sense of self.

The realisation that he has been avoiding sections of his own past firstly results in a collapse of identity. Austerlitz describes himself, on entering the Ladies’ Waiting-Room at Liverpool Street, as being ‘like an actor who, upon making his entrance, has completely forgotten not only the lines he knew by heart but the very part he has so often played’ (p. 189). The resurfacing of the memory of his childhood radically disrupts the adult identity to which he has become accustomed, and as such his

³⁰ Karin Bauer, ‘The Dystopian Entwinement of Histories and Identities in W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*’, in *W. G. Sebald: History, Memory, Trauma*, ed. by Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), pp. 233-50 (p. 235).

childhood self is presented in extradiegetic terms, as a boy sitting on the bench, and whom the adult Austerlitz would not have recognised if it was not for the rucksack that he was carrying. The sense of instability created by the emergence of this newly-recalled past persists, with Austerlitz commenting, for example, during his approach to Tereziín: ‘I could not imagine who or what I was’ (p. 262). This collapse of identity is not resolved by the first steps in his attempts to trace his parents, and the initial breakdown which precedes the re-emergence of memory at Liverpool Street is followed by a second incident, on his return from Bohemia, in which he collapses during a fit and experiences three weeks of ‘mental absence’ (p. 322-3).

This collapse of Austerlitz’s identity also disrupts his conception of time, destroying any sense of linear temporality. He therefore reports to the narrators that, ‘certain moments had no beginning or end, while on the other hand the whole of his life had sometimes seemed to him a blank point without duration’ (p. 165); Austerlitz later claims that it is ‘as if all the moments of our life occupy the same space, as if future events already existed and were only waiting for us to find a way to them at last, just as when we have accepted an invitation we duly arrive at a certain house at a given time’ (pp. 359-60). Amir Eshel reads these comments as a challenge to ‘modernity’s deification of standardized, controlled time’, and as part of a somewhat ‘rushed’ and ‘obsolete’ critique of the totalising logic of modernity.³¹ However, Austerlitz’s assertion that he sometimes feels ‘the current of time slowing down in the gravitational field of oblivion’ (p. 359) renders this disruption to temporal linearity as a centripetal force, and hence as a result of specific and traumatic personal circumstances rather than as part of the critique of modernity that Austerlitz offers elsewhere.³²

Time and identity are inextricably tied to narrative: both are predicated upon it, while also being the tools and components from which narrative is constructed. It is therefore unsurprising that collapses in time and identity in *Austerlitz* are accompanied by collapses in its protagonist’s use of language, and in describing his mental collapse, Austerlitz states that ‘the entire structure of language, the syntactical arrangement of parts of speech, punctuation, conjunctions, and finally even the nouns denoting ordinary objects, were all enveloped in impenetrable fog. I could not even understand what I

³¹ Amir Eshel, ‘Against the Power of Time: The Poetics of Suspension in W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*’, *New German Critique*, 88 (2003), 71-96 (p. 89).

³² In Austerlitz’s initial conversation with the narrator, his comments on the architecture of Antwerp station quickly expand into a critique of modernity, and in particular of Belgian colonialism (pp. 9-14).

myself had written in the past – perhaps I could understand that least of all’ (p. 175). In contrast to Sebald’s earlier texts, in which silence is an inherent part of the discourses of normality by which suffering is often denied or kept hidden, at this point in *Austerlitz* it is figured as a traumatic symptom, as indicated by the protagonist’s comment on his loss and sudden subsequent recovery of Czech, that language is ‘something which, out of fear, stops its noise and falls silent whenever one tries to listen to it’ (p. 195).

Austerlitz’s denial of the missing part of his own history means that language inevitably collapses under the strain of working around this void in his chronology and identity. The collapse of all of the tools and concepts upon which a sense of self is founded – identity, temporality and language – followed by the return of his memories of childhood in the Ladies’ Waiting-Room at Liverpool Street station, are the central events of Austerlitz’s trauma, and provide the narrative drive of the text. Luckhurst argues that Sebald’s texts ‘hold to a model of history that coincides exactly with the idea of traumatic occlusion and the belated recovery of memory,’ and the collapse of subjectivity in *Austerlitz* contributes to Luckhurst’s reading of the novel as ‘a culmination of the trauma fiction genre’.³³ This reading of *Austerlitz* exemplifies the tendency in the criticism to see the text as an examination of traumatised subjectivity, in thrall to the gravitational pull of a central traumatic event and the return of memory. Such an interpretation would suggest that *Austerlitz* is significantly less concerned than Sebald’s earlier writing with the themes that I have outlined as being central to Sebald’s and Ishiguro’s writing: namely, the idea of the indeterminate nature of complicity of later generations, the increasing sense of complicity for these later generations as spatial and temporal distances stretch, and the relationship between narrative and complicity. However, I suggest that *Austerlitz* also shares with Sebald’s other texts a concern with the complicity present in representation.

As Long notes, from around the mid-point of the novel (that is, following the return of Austerlitz’s childhood memories at Liverpool Street Station), the text ‘is structured around a series of visits to archives by means of which Jacques Austerlitz hopes to reconstruct his past and retrieve his putatively buried memories’.³⁴ In other words, from the point of Austerlitz’s mental collapse onwards, the text describes an outward movement in which he engages with the archives which allow him to create a

³³ Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, pp. 111-2.

³⁴ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, pp. 158-9.

narrative of his parents' final movements. The ineffable experiences that punctuate *Austerlitz*, and which suggest the intrusive return of traumatic memory, therefore exist alongside the centrifugal movement of the text as Austerlitz encounters and interprets mediations of memory.

Significantly, a number of moments of shrinkage occur as the result of Austerlitz's sustained study and interrogation of material representations during the search for his parents. For example, his search results in him locating a video of the Theresienstadt ghetto, produced by the Germans in order to hoodwink the Red Cross. However, his minute examination of the video does not reveal any trace of his mother and when, with behaviour bordering on obsession, Austerlitz hits upon the idea of slowing down the video to better see the pictures, they seem only 'to dissolve even as they appeared'. Instead of making the footage more intelligible, the slowed down film blurs the boundaries of the people visible, and renders the audio track incomprehensible and, in Austerlitz's words, 'grotesque' and 'nightmarish'. Rather than allowing Austerlitz to construct a narrative of his mother, the double page spread of the video footage, in which the physical imperfections of the tape become visible, reveals only the materiality of the medium rather than any truth that it might have been thought to contain (pp. 346-9). This episode does not, therefore, represent the intrusive return of unmediated memory, but the protagonist's encounter with a highly mediated form of material memory.

In these encounters, it seems that the closer one looks, the less comprehensible the picture becomes. Sebald's earlier works invite the reader to subject them to the process that Walkowitz has labelled 'unassimilation', that is, to uncontract the history of these narrative elements,³⁵ and in doing so to undertake a form of witnessing that is aware of the role that discourse plays in denying or obfuscating networks of complicity with the past. In contrast, Austerlitz explicitly performs this task of unassimilation on his own history, but doing so provides no such clarity or moments of realisation. Instead, passages such as these have led Santner to argue that Sebald is concerned with 'the task of bearing witness to that which exceeds our hermeneutic grasp of historical experience'.³⁶

³⁵ Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style*, p. 140.

³⁶ Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p. xx.

However, *Austerlitz* does not close on these moments of muteness and of ineffable sensory contact. It is significant that, even at the moment when the gravitational pull of Austerlitz's own past reaches the critical point at which comprehensibility collapses in on itself, there remains an outward-oriented desire for expression as suggested by his likening language to the tentacles of sea creatures which 'grope blindly through the darkness enveloping us' (p. 175). Yet, with the desire for the calibration of experience through language comes a suspicion towards representation that echoes the nausea of *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*, to the extent that language is subjected to a process of fragmentation *ad infinitum*:

I could see no connections any more, the sentences resolved themselves into a series of separate words, the words into random sets of letters, the letters into disjointed signs, and those signs into a blue-grey trail gleaming silver here and there, excreted and left behind it by some crawling creature, and the sight of it increasingly filled me with feelings of horror and shame. (pp. 175-6)

The narrative of *Austerlitz* does not end with the breakdown of its protagonist, and is in fact chiefly concerned with the aftermath of that collapse, and the reconfigurations that this involves. From the vanishing point of language, time and identity in the house on Alderney Street, *Austerlitz* describes the mediation of experience into language – the centrifugal energy of dissemination – which, it is suggested, inevitably becomes the kind of excretion evoked in this passage; from that point on language and representation hence become subject to the same interrogation to which Sebald subjects them in his earlier texts.

Emplotment: A Game of Patience

From the point at which Austerlitz's existence shrinks to its solitary, nocturnal nadir, the return of his childhood memories impels him to orient himself outwards once more. In doing so, he is required to work within discourses, and hence to re-engage with language. The latter sections of *Austerlitz* thus describe a re-engagement with the mediation of memory through representation, and hence with discourses that are complicit with genocide. I describe the nature of this complicity in the third section of my discussion of *Austerlitz*. However, before doing so, I address the role of the narrator.

The centrifugal movement in the second half of *Austerlitz* can be seen as sharing with Sebald's earlier texts a concern with Laub's third level of witnessing, that of bearing witness 'to the process of witnessing itself'.³⁷ A concern with the process of witnessing necessarily involves a concern with the mediation of memory and, in this section, I argue that the narrator has a crucial role to play in this process of mediation, and one which affects the way in which the text comments on the relationship between representation and complicity.

The apparent effacement of the narrator in *Austerlitz* has led many to read the novel as the story of Jacques Austerlitz's trauma and the recovery of his memory. Long thus reads it as a 'psychodrama',³⁸ while for Luckhurst the text is symptomatic of Sebald's being 'interested only in the psychology of melancholic entrapment'.³⁹ The inverse aspect of this focus on the character of Austerlitz is that the narrator is read as being almost entirely passive. He is effaced to the extent that he is barely identifiable even as a persona of Sebald, and in contrast to the other narrators, who are active in their research and their travel, this narrator seems only to respond to Austerlitz's invitations and to act as an almost entirely mute listener. This passivity has led Brad Prager to see the narrator's role as being similar to that of a psychoanalyst, giving others the opportunity to tell their stories to him, and to 'make room for testimony, or to allow the victims to speak for themselves'.⁴⁰ Schlesinger ascribes slightly more agency to the narrator of *Austerlitz*, arguing that he has three roles. These are, firstly, to record others' testimony; secondly, to bear witness to ongoing suffering; and thirdly, to take on the responsibility of mourning. He concludes that 'the narrator of *Austerlitz*, in short, is there to accept the burden of Jewish remembrance as enacted through the exilic figure of Austerlitz'.⁴¹ Both Prager and Schlesinger therefore see the narrator as enabling Laub's first level of witnessing by acting at the second level, that of bearing witness to others' testimonies.

If, as Luckhurst argues, this narrator is 'virtually effaced, becoming only an invisible repository, an archive for collected information,' the emphasis remains with the character of Austerlitz and a form of witnessing that seeks to fill missing passages of

³⁷ Laub, 'An Event Without a Witness', p. 75.

³⁸ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 153.

³⁹ Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, p. 111.

⁴⁰ Brad Prager, 'The Good German as Narrator: W. G. Sebald and the Risks of Holocaust Writing', *New German Critique*, 96 (2005), 75-102 (p. 92).

⁴¹ Schlesinger, 'W. G. Sebald and the Condition of Exile', p. 55.

time with forms of prosthesis which provide a veracious picture of the past.⁴² This takes place, according to Long, through material traces, and in particular through the archive, serving as a substitute for memory.⁴³ Yet there are compelling reasons to read *Austerlitz* as addressing Laub's second level of witnessing more comprehensively than Luckhurst's reading suggests, and also as pertaining to his third level, by conducting an examination of the way in which testimony is created and preserved.

Foremost amongst these are a number of hints within the text which suggest that this narrator is a more active and disruptive presence than he initially appears to be. Long, for example, notes the confusing status of the photographs in *Austerlitz*. The presence of these photographs, which have real, extra-textual referents, is produced by the fictional character Austerlitz, who has no such corresponding referent. As a result, he argues that this inconsistency contributes to a 'profound ontological confusion that is only inadequately concealed by the text's narrative devices'.⁴⁴ There are also moments at which Sebald seems to insert himself more assertively into the text, notably in the inclusion of a photograph ostensibly taken by Austerlitz in Terezín, but in which Sebald's reflection is visible (p. 276; figure 9). This also occurs through the inclusion of an inscription on the wall of Fort IX at Kaunas in Lithuania, described in Dan Jacobson's *Heshel's Kingdom*. By coincidence, the inscription was created on the date of Sebald's birth, and its writer also shares his initials (p. 415).⁴⁵

If these moments prompt us to remember that this is a mediated representation of a fictional character, there are reasons for the narrator's presence producing a more fundamental shift in the way that *Austerlitz* can be read. In particular, the sheer implausibility of the meetings between Austerlitz and the narrator, most of which occur by chance, stretches the fictional contract offered by the text to breaking point. Following their initial chance encounter in Brussels' Centraal Station in 1967, their relationship continues not through any attempt to maintain contact, but through a series of coincidences. The narrator describes their meetings in 1967 as follows: 'our paths kept crossing in a way that I still find hard to understand, on all my Belgian excursions at that time, none of them planned in advance [...] on all subsequent occasions, we simply went on with our conversation, wasting no time on commenting on the

⁴² Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, p. 112.

⁴³ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 152.

⁴⁴ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 150.

⁴⁵ Dan Jacobson, *Heshel's Kingdom* (London: Penguin, 1999), p.161. The inscription reads: 'Max Stern, Paris, 18.5.1944'. Sebald went by Max in his personal life.

improbability of our meeting again' (pp. 36-7). Even more remarkably, following their loss of contact for nearly twenty years, they run into each other at the Great Eastern Hotel in London, where they recommence their conversation at the point at which it had been left off at the end of their previous meeting (pp. 54-7).



Figure 9

If we read *Austerlitz* on the terms of the contract that it appears to offer to us, that is, as a novel which represents a more or less consistent and coherent protagonist, these coincidences stretch poetic licence to the bounds of credibility. However, given Sebald's propensity to inscribe himself into his texts, and given the subversive strategies employed by his narrators in his earlier texts, should these coincidences alert us to some form of narrative mischief going on? And when the narrator records that Austerlitz, on their re-acquaintance in 1996, tells of his need for a listener and continues by stating that 'contrary to all statistical probability, then, there was an astonishing, positively imperative internal logic to his meeting me here in the bar of the Great Eastern Hotel, a place he had never been before in his life' (p. 60), just how suspicious should we be?

These incidents pique Long's instincts, and he notes Austerlitz's 'implausibly easy moment of success' in finding the correct address at the first attempt in Prague, and the 'serendipitous emergence' of two photographs from Austerlitz's childhood in

the pages of the *Colonel Chabert*, a story about a man who returns from the dead and attempts to reclaim his identity (pp. 256-8).⁴⁶ To these could be added the miraculous return of Austerlitz's Czech on his return to Prague (p. 219), and even smaller details such as the bus which appears 'out of nowhere' to whisk Austerlitz away from the otherwise deserted town of Terezín (p. 281). Eshel is also on the narrator's scent, and, crucially, makes the observation that the inclusion of the photographs in the text is enabled by Austerlitz granting him access to the Alderney Street house. As a result, 'it becomes clear that the plot is not simply the result of Austerlitz's narration, but in addition, if not more so, the product of the narrator's emplotment'.⁴⁷

The notion of emplotment brings the narrator to the foreground as an active presence in the text, and as a consequence, a second type of contract for reading *Austerlitz* emerges. Julia Hell suggests that 'Sebald writes two stories: that of documentary literature and its artificial gaze, and that of the postwar subject, who lives with the images of a destruction that he has never experienced'.⁴⁸ The first of these, focusing on documentary recording and its use in the recovery of memory is Jacques Austerlitz's story, but the second of these becomes possible if we attend more closely to the role of the narrator. The continuous nature of the text in *Austerlitz*, combined with a lack of quotation marks, makes it difficult to determine where Austerlitz's speech ends and the narrator's begins. The result of this is that the narrator's status remains indeterminate and subject to a range of possible interpretations. At one end of the spectrum, he is almost entirely effaced, the 'invisible repository' that Luckhurst suggests, and this is how he generally seems to have been received given that the majority of critical attention is directed towards Austerlitz's subjectivity and experience of trauma.⁴⁹ The other end of the spectrum is, however, suggested by Eshel's comments on the narrator's emplotment of Austerlitz, and is taken a step further by Frances Restuccia's suggestion that 'Sebald-as-author invents Austerlitz so that Sebald-as-narrator can bear witness to an unforgettable forgotten wound, and so that we, in turn, can witness the gaping wound in twentieth-century German history'.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 159.

⁴⁷ Eshel, 'Against the Power of Time', pp. 79-80.

⁴⁸ Julia Hell, 'Eyes Wide Shut: German Post-Holocaust Authorship', *New German Critique*, 88 (2003), 9-36 (p. 30).

⁴⁹ Luckhurst, *The Trauma Questions*, p. 112.

⁵⁰ Frances L. Restuccia, 'Sebald's Punctum: Awakening to Holocaust Trauma in *Austerlitz*', *European Journal of English Studies*, 9 (2005), 301-22 (pp. 316-7).

This reading offers us a second contract under the terms of which *Austerlitz* may be approached. This contract disposes of the tacit acceptance of the character of Austerlitz as a coherent, albeit fictional, entity, and instead sees the Austerlitz of the text as a construction of the narrator. In such a reading, the ‘psychodrama’ of the narrative, which relies upon Austerlitz possessing a consistent and veracious interior life, becomes secondary to the means by which the narrator constructs this character, and hence to the process of inscription through which the narrative is created. It is not, in this case, the narrator who is effaced, but Austerlitz who begins to flicker and become indistinct in the same way as the ghosts that he describes: the uncertainty of the contract that we are being offered by this text also renders Austerlitz’s ontological status ambiguous, and the notion that he is a consistent and coherent subject is called into question. This shift in focus has the consequence of inviting readings which interpret the text not as an attempt to bear witness to the trauma produced by the Holocaust, at Laub’s first level of witnessing, but instead functions at Laub’s third level, as a commentary on the types of stories that we – those who come after, and who, in Hell’s words, live ‘with the images of a destruction [...] never experienced’⁵¹ – feel impelled to tell.

Within such a reading, and following its logic through, the moment at which Austerlitz entrusts the narrator with his photographs in Alderney Street becomes the moment at which the concept of a character named ‘Jacques Austerlitz’ emerges for the narrator; and Austerlitz’s game of ‘patience’, in which he repeatedly shuffles and deals his photographs in different configurations, now becomes a metafictional moment at which the narrator weighs up the possibilities for creating a narrative from the materials that he has available to him. If we treat Austerlitz not as a coherent character, but as a figment inscribed by the narrator within the text, the narrator’s travels are now seen to be undertaken alone: all of the chance meetings between the two, so improbable as to stretch the fictional contract to its limits, instead become instances where the narrator engages with the history that he uses Austerlitz to represent. Reading in this way, we can follow the solitary figure of the narrator, tracing the process by which he becomes increasingly compelled to seek out and record the episodes of history described in the text.

The narrator’s trajectory begins with him oblivious to the history of the Holocaust, a symptom of his education at the hands of the academics whose careers had

⁵¹ Hell, ‘Eyes Wide Shut’, p. 30.

begun under National Socialism and who ‘still nurtured delusions of power’ (p. 43). His first meeting with Austerlitz can be read as his first encounter with the history of the European Jews, something which he stumbles upon by accident while occupied with other research; still ignorant of the full story of Austerlitz’s past, this encounter nevertheless prompts his interest in this history to the extent that he visits Breendonk. The Belgium meetings are followed by twenty years without contact, after which their unlikely reunion in London reveals to the narrator the fleshed-out narrative of Austerlitz’s past, a period of latency which suggests a belated cultural and collective response to the Holocaust. It begins, therefore, to become clear that reading in this way does not so much illuminate Jacques Austerlitz as a figure of postwar Jewish identity, as it brings the narrator into relief as a synecdoche of postwar consciousness of the Holocaust for those not directly involved, such as those writing a generation later.

The process of increasing awareness continues: the narrator’s knowledge of Jewish suffering, the specifics of which he comes to know through Austerlitz’s story, is gained in the house on Alderney Street. In this location, the narrator falls asleep listening to a mysterious radio, from which voices from all over Europe can be heard and to which Austerlitz attaches the notion of ‘voices moving through the air after the onset of darkness, only a few of which we could catch’ (p. 234), suggesting that the narrator has, at this point, become attuned to the frequencies on which these voices can be heard; he is learning, in other words, how to listen to the ephemeral stories which might otherwise vanish. Austerlitz’s research in the archives of Prague and Paris can now be attributed to the narrator and, the bulk of Austerlitz’s story having been told in London, his invitation to the narrator to meet him during the next phase of his search may be read as the need to know acting with such compelling force that it drives the narrator to travel overseas in order meet the need. As he writes, it is suggested, this history continues to exert a fascination on the narrator, as he returns to Breendonk, now run as a museum, and begins to read Jacobson’s *Heshel’s Kingdom*, which itself follows the centripetal movement from the Jewish diaspora back to its European roots.⁵² If the trajectory of the narrator’s research can be taken as representative of the growing and evolving postwar consciousness of the Holocaust, the existence of museums as a form of memorialisation, and the publication of second generation memoirs from the Jewish

⁵² Jacobson was born in Kimberley, South Africa, but his text describes his return to Lithuania to search for the history of his grandfather, the Heshel of the title, whose sudden death was an inadvertent salvation for the rest of his family as it caused their emigration.

diaspora are two significant contributing factors to the increasingly pervasive awareness of these events.

Luckhurst suggests that Sebald ‘overloads Austerlitz’s condensation of the history of trauma – a recovered memory “survivor” in the 1990s, with a traumatic secret from the Holocaust in the 1930s and 1940s, who breaks down in Paris and is admitted to the Salpêtrière, home to the elaboration of traumatic neurosis in the 1880s’.⁵³ To accept a contract in which Austerlitz is taken as a coherent character, he is, as Luckhurst argues, implausibly overloaded with the signifiers of trauma. However, reading him as the inscription of a second generation narrator who has not himself experienced any of the events that the history of Austerlitz touches upon, this overloading takes on a different logic, indicating the tendency of those who come after to understand the past in terms of the symbols by which it is recognised. The image of Austerlitz laying his photographs on a table in innumerable different configurations can be seen, in the narrator’s being entrusted with the keys to the house, as the moment at which the narrative begins to emerge from the symbols available. The ‘astonishing, positively imperative internal logic’ (p. 60) that Austerlitz ascribes to his meetings with the narrator is therefore the internal logic of narrative coherence; it is the logic of the narrator, absent from the events about which he writes, and knowing only what he knows, telling the only story about the Holocaust that he is able to tell.

Hell argues that *Austerlitz* raises the question of how a non-Jewish, German narrator can represent the Holocaust.⁵⁴ I suggest that *Austerlitz* is not an attempt to represent the Holocaust, but to represent the process of witnessing as it takes place for those at a remove from those events. Laub writes of ‘the imperative to tell’, with reference to his first level of witnessing, that is, as the need for those who have experienced events first hand to give voice to those experiences. *Austerlitz* suggests that this imperative also exists for those located at a distance from those same events, and that this imperative acts with increasing force as the years pass and as the knowledge contained in memoirs, archives, photographic records, and other forms of memory continues to circulate.

However, this imperative is not without its dangers. Santner suggests that there is a degree of ‘narratophilia’ present in Sebald’s work, that is, the desire to write himself

⁵³ Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, p. 114.

⁵⁴ Hell, ‘Eyes Wide Shut’, p. 16.

into others' stories.⁵⁵ As my reading of *Austerlitz* suggests, I see Sebald absolutely as inscribing himself into the histories that he represents, but as doing so deliberately and with explicit ethical purpose. What *Austerlitz* reveals is that we ourselves make the story of the other, and we are always already implicated in that story whether we like it or not; this fact becomes visible, and disavows us of any illusion of things being otherwise, if we retain while reading *Austerlitz* the faint mirror image of Sebald, shuffling his deck.

Complicity: Bound to the Archive

Ontological uncertainty surrounds the character of Jacques Austerlitz, and the reading that I have offered above is only one possibility in terms of how we approach this text. However, this reading does raise the question of what exactly it is that we encounter in the layered narratives and images of *Austerlitz*; and the consequent possibility that this is the narrator's emplotted inscription, rather than a faithful transcription of Austerlitz's story, must also be acknowledged. This question also brings into focus the mediations by which the elements of the text have come to be present in the published work and as such encourages readings which conduct the unassimilation – the unpicking of these chains of mediation – which makes visible these processes.

The second half of the novel, in which Austerlitz conducts his research into the deaths of his parents, contains a number of gestures which echo the suspicion towards representation evident in Sebald's earlier texts. However, *Austerlitz* supplements an awareness of the general and inherent problems of representation with the historically specific issues of the problems of knowledge garnered from archives and systems that were implicated in the genocide that killed his parents. In the remainder of my discussion of the novel, I outline the way in which the novel addresses both problems, beginning with the general before moving to the historically specific.

Austerlitz's inability to function either as a writer or as a reader is partly a result of his trauma, and partly the product of a mistrust of representation which itself involves the threat of an infinite regress of meaning. His mistrust is evident in his description of the 'awkward falsity' and 'inadequacy' of his words. It is this sense which causes his

⁵⁵ Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p. 178.

writing to grind to a halt, and from this point a creeping paralysis overtakes him to the extent that ‘even the smallest task or duty, for instance arranging assorted objects in a drawer, can be beyond one’s power’ (pp. 172-3). Alongside this enervating distrust of language, the potential for an infinite regress of meaning is shown by Austerlitz’s studies which, by the time of his early retirement, have already proliferated in their volume, covering thousands of pages gathered into ‘bundles of papers’ and ‘endless reams’ (p. 171). He is soon overwhelmed, however, by the potential for dissemination of meaning inherent in language itself, writing of the ‘endless possibilities of language’ which ‘became a conglomeration of the most inane phrases’ (p. 173).

At this point, the problem of infinite regress, while evoking a logic of the infinite similar to that present in *The Rings of Saturn*, does not involve any form of complicity. However, the problems inherent in representation become a more pressing concern with regard to witnessing in the second part of the novel, in which Austerlitz engages with archives and representations in order to attempt to discover his parents’ final movements. In this section, the specific historical circumstances of the creation of the representations that he encounters and interprets become visible. Whether it is Jacques Austerlitz or the narrator who constructs the story, these representations exist, with some exceptions, only as a result of their preservation by and availability in archival structures. Moreover, and unlike Sebald’s narrators, Austerlitz cannot afford to adopt a resistant stance towards dominant discourses, because it is these which provide him with access to the material that allows him to reconstruct his own and his parents’ pasts.

In a sentence that echoes the critique of representation in *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*, Austerlitz’s description of the German landscape as being comprised of ‘trim towns and villages, neat yards around factories and industrial buildings, lovingly tended gardens, [and] piles of firewood tidily stacked’ (p. 312) suggests a decorous covering up of past wrongs. However, *Austerlitz* goes much further than the earlier texts in specifically implicating discourse and representation in the Holocaust. These forms of complicity become apparent in the details of the confiscation of Jewish property in Paris in 1942, which are given by Austerlitz’s interlocutor, a librarian called Henri Lemoine, at this point. Lemoine describes the involvement of:

... an army of no fewer than fifteen hundred removal men [...] the sometimes rival staffs of the occupying power and the financial and fiscal authorities, the

residents' and property registries, the banks and insurance agencies, the police, the transport firms, the landlords and caretakers of the apartment buildings, [all of whom] must undoubtedly have known that scarcely any of those interned in Drancy would come back. (pp. 401-2)

This passage makes clear the prevalence of complicity of those in bureaucratic roles. In addition, and in an echo of Cornelius de Jong's linking of the atrocities and art in *The Rings of Saturn*, Lemoine goes on to describe the employment, in order to sort and categorise these spoils, of 'over five hundred art historians, antique dealers, restorers, joiners, clockmakers, furriers and couturiers brought in from Drancy and guarded by a contingent of Indo-Chinese soldiers' (p.402). There is, here, a spectrum of complicities ranging from those who, it is implied, are coerced into performing their task of sorting these spoils, through the Indo-Chinese soldiers, who it seems likely are at once colonised subjects and the enforcers of state power, to the truck drivers and financiers whose day-to-day employment becomes part of a process of atrocity.

The logic of classification and preservation which allows the creation of archives is, therefore, also that which contributes to the perpetration of atrocity: as Long argues, the archives which allow Austerlitz to trace his own history to the residence in Prague are part of the same logic and archival practice that form an 'enabling condition of genocide'.⁵⁶ The connection between archival practices, state power, and atrocity, is made clearest in the passages which describe the increasing persecution of the Jewish population in Prague, culminating in the deportation to Theresienstadt of Austerlitz's mother, Agáta. Her story is told to Austerlitz, on his return to Prague, by Věra Ryšanová, the family's former neighbour. The arc of the story follows the increasing persecution of the family, and encompasses the departures of his father, Maximilian, to Paris, and Austerlitz's own to England. The means by which this persecution takes place, however, combines the infinite logic of totalitarianism with a warped rationalism which comes to pervade the systems and structures that shape civil life. Maximilian, for example, speaks with foreboding of 'the corporate bodies and other human swarms endlessly proliferating under the new regime' (p. 236), and sure enough, as Agáta states, she and others 'had to watch as the SS pervaded the economy of the entire country' (p. 249). While this whole passage describes the bureaucratic moves by which this pervasion was achieved, the connection between archival thought and systematised murder is at its

⁵⁶ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, pp. 158-9.

strongest at the moment when Agáta receives her deportation orders: her papers instruct her, ‘down to the very smallest detail’, what possessions she is to bring; and having been rounded up, numbered, and classified as deported or ghettoized, the confiscated property is ‘valued, then washed, cleaned or mended as necessary, and finally stored’ (pp. 250-55).

I have argued that complicity, in Sebald, often takes an insidious, bottom-up form, and I have used this to supplement Long’s Foucauldian model of the centralised disciplinary practices present in modernity. In *Austerlitz* the presence of archives and related practices maps, at times, more squarely onto Long’s model, and there is a disturbing continuum from the archival logic of the Nazi regime to the way in which the new *Bibliothèque Nationale* exemplifies the disciplining of memory, and of the spaces in which access to that memory takes place. Yet Austerlitz’s visit to this and other archives demonstrate that he is also bound to the apparatus of the same logic which produced the conditions for his parents’ murders: although Long argues that an archival lack is the foundational element of the narrative of Austerlitz’s life, noting several instances in which he and others are unable to find any information whatsoever about his past, that the text exists at all is a result of knowledge obtained through archives and preserved as a result of archival practices.⁵⁷

Austerlitz and / or the narrator are therefore in positions similar to Sebald’s other narrators in that they find themselves occupying positions in which they have no option other than to engage with and employ the same discourses that they know to be the tools of atrocity. This awareness produces in Austerlitz moments of wistfulness in which he imagines escaping from these systems, such as his imagining readers in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* as ‘members of a wandering tribe encamped here on their way through the Sahara or the Sinai’ (p. 390), or when he comes across a circus improbably located beyond the Gare d’Austerlitz, where he hears ‘extraordinarily foreign nocturnal music conjured out of thin air, so to speak, by the circus performers with their slightly out-of-tune instruments’ (p. 383). His sympathies for those with a counter-rational perspective are shown in the episodes which describe figures such as Evan, the cobbler in Bala, who is known for his tendency to see ghosts (pp. 74-5), and James Mallord Ashman, who is

⁵⁷ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 152.

described as having fired his rifle at the clock on his estate in rage at the inexorable passing of time before he is made to leave for preparatory school (p. 153).⁵⁸

However, the need to employ archives in his search for his parents means that Austerlitz is able to align himself only momentarily with these figures before resuming his task. By the end of the narrative his search has also become subsumed into the archival system, and having trawled through records in Prague and Paris, he travels to Gurs in the foothills of the Pyrenees, the last known location of his father. Austerlitz is thus doubly bound to the archival and disciplinary structures with which he is forced to engage: his personal circumstances are such that his engagement with them precludes acts of subversion and resistance, but it is also suggested that Austerlitz's own system of thought is a product of the same lineage of thinking as has produced those archives (his own study on architecture is initially intended to be either a 'systematically descriptive work' or a 'series of essays' on clearly delineated subjects, p. 170).

I have posited two possible 'contracts' by which *Austerlitz* may be read: the first takes Jacques Austerlitz as a coherent subject, and accepts him as interacting with a story world constructed of historical referents. The second sees the narrator as the constructor of the text, and of Austerlitz, and in such a reading Sebald's persona is the only coherent subject available. Reading the text according to both contracts, much of the information from which the past is known is the product of archival practices, and has been preserved only as a result of the exercise of state power. If we accept the first contract, however, there are moments at which the narrative escapes from these complicities: when Věra relates Agatá's request, just before her deportation, to walk sometimes for her in the Stromovka Park (p. 253), and when Austerlitz, in the company of Marie de Verneuil, takes a photograph of a family of fallow deer, staring at the camera, in her words '*à travers une brèche d'incompréhension*' (pp. 368-9), these instances of empathy seem to exist outside the structures of power present elsewhere. However, if we accept the second contract, and view the novel as the product of the narrator's emplotment, constructed from the elements he has available to him in the form of photographs and documents, the fabric of the whole text is of the same archival logic that has contributed to genocide, and the narrator's fabrication of Austerlitz, Věra,

⁵⁸ This episode recalls the anecdote related by Walter Benjamin in 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in which he recalls that, in the July Revolution, 'the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris.' Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 253.

Agatá, Marie and others is the fabrication of synecdochic symbols from the material that has survived and been subjected to a disciplinary logic in the archive.

The possibility that the story told by the narrator is the product of his archival research means that the potential exists for there to be no element of the narrative outside these systems and structures. Such a possibility collapses the distinction between reading and writing: if the inscription of the text involves the collection of the material traces of memory from a number of archives, then this act of inscription is as closely related to the researching, reading, and interpretation of material as it is to the imaginative act of the creation of new stories. *Austerlitz* therefore also causes us to question what forms of logic and power we tacitly accept when we read, and posits the possibility that innocent or well-intentioned acts of reading, or of attempting to access the past, may also be caught up in modes of thought that have contributed to genocide.

Although *Austerlitz* has, as I have noted, often been interpreted as a novel, I have suggested here that it is in fact as radically indeterminate as Sebald's other texts. Furthermore, what we do with this indeterminacy has a profound effect on the way in which we read the text. There is nothing in the text that allows the reader to settle on either of the contracts that I have outlined (or even to rest at some midpoint on a spectrum between the two), and as such reading *Austerlitz* produces ontological uncertainty with regard to the status of the document that we have in our hands, and with regard to the elements of which it consists. In the relationship between Jacques Austerlitz and the narrator, the text appears to comment on Laub's first two levels of witnessing: the presence of the narrator as a listener serves to allow Austerlitz to address his own experiences of the events of his childhood. However, the uncertainty surrounding his status, combined with the knowledge of the implication of systems of representation in atrocity, also means that reading *Austerlitz* is to wrestle with questions of what it is to know the past, and what complicities doing so may involve: these fundamental questions therefore allow the text to address Laub's third level, that of bearing witness to the process of witnessing itself.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that, in *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*, Sebald is feeling out, in his writing, an ethical mode of witnessing for those distanced from atrocity. *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz* continue this process, but do so in more ambitious terms. The importance of *The Rings of Saturn* lies in the expansion of scale that it performs, which also radically stretches notions of complicity, and problematises any straightforward notion of perpetration. *Austerlitz*, despite initial appearances to the contrary, is also centrally concerned with the inscription of narratives of histories of which we have no first-hand experience.

Long, in concluding his study of Sebald's relationship with modernity, notes that 'one of the thematic constants of Sebald's work is the waning of natural memory and the subject's increasing dependence on extra-individual mnemonic mechanisms.' He does so as part of a discussion regarding the centrality or otherwise of the Holocaust to Sebald's work, arguing that 'while *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz* address the role of mnemotechnical supplements in the service of post-Holocaust remembrance, *Vertigo* shows that it is an ongoing problem that is not limited to the transgenerational transmission of trauma'.⁵⁹ However, if we come to regard the notion of witnessing as central to Sebald's project, the question of the extent to which his work is about the Holocaust becomes somewhat less vexed because another thematic, or rather formal, constant in Sebald's work is the presence of a mediating narrator. The narrators have differing characteristics across the four texts examined here, and should not necessarily be conflated, but they share the status of being at a remove of a generation or more from the histories related in these texts, whether these histories are those of the Holocaust (*Austerlitz*), of the Jewish diaspora over the last century and more (*The Emigrants*) or of sufferings borne across the globe (*The Rings of Saturn*).

The 'extra-individual' mechanisms of which Long writes are therefore the necessary means of witnessing at a distance. These mechanisms are the discourses and representations by which memory is transmitted. An ethical mode of witnessing is therefore one which is attentive to the values carried, often invisibly, by and within these discourses. The historical content of Sebald's work across these four texts is never

⁵⁹ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 170.

artificially separated from the gaze that examines it: in scrutinising his object, the narrator always reminds us of his own subjectivity, and of the biases and blindness that this entails. At times, this prompting takes place through more or less explicit passages of ekphrasis, while at others it is performed in the resistant and subversive strategies adopted by the narrators. In all cases, however, an active and reflective reader is required to complete the risky process of bearing witness to that from which we were absent.

In Sebald's writing, propriety often involves failures to challenge or subvert dominant structures and discourses which are implicated in atrocity, and therefore becomes a form of complicity. However, while propriety in Sebald tends to be an inadvertent form of complicity present in representation and narrative, the starched manners of Ishiguro's narrators tend to mask more concrete involvements in political systems which perpetrate atrocities, particularly in his early novels. In Chapter Three, I examine the nature of these complicities in Ishiguro's writing, beginning with a discussion of the way in which the desire for consolation contributes to the retrospective creation of narratives which conduct the minimisations of history against which Felman warns.

CHAPTER 3. THE CONSOLED: *AN ARTIST OF THE FLOATING WORLD* AND *THE REMAINS OF THE DAY*

INTRODUCTION

The complicities represented in Ishiguro's second and third novels, *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*, are more palpable than those present in Sebald's writing. In the case of *An Artist of the Floating World*, Masuji Ono's paintings help to create the imperialist climate in which the Japanese invasion of China and entry into the Second World War take place. Within both of these events, Japanese troops were responsible for a number of atrocities which have been attributed in part to nationalism and which were often notable for their savagery.¹ In *The Remains of the Day*, the butler Stevens strives to work out the extent of his own culpability in his service to Lord Darlington, a Nazi sympathiser, and his role in the dismissal of two Jewish maids.

The years following the Second World War are the backdrop against which Ishiguro explores the themes of culpability and denial that are central to my own examination of narrative as complicity.² When Meera Tamaya writes that 'for the majority of us who do not play leading roles on the world's stage, history is not experienced as "history", but as it affects the fabric and texture of personal relationships',³ she identifies in Ishiguro's work the concern with the personal and domestic spheres within which these protagonists' complicities occur. The post-war setting of these novels is the moment at which these small-scale actions begin to crystallise into 'history', and at which Ono and Stevens find themselves in the position of having to justify the contribution of their actions to the wrong side.

This process of realisation and of coming to terms with the past is represented in both novels through the use of unreliable first person, retrospective narration. The

¹ John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), pp. 42-4.

² Ishiguro's first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*, is set in post-war Japan, but explores the themes of trauma and memory in a gothic mode. Its protagonist, Etsuko, is a victim of the atomic attack on Nagasaki and while the evasions present in her narrative are similar in many ways to those employed in *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*, its protagonist is not complicit in atrocity. For this reason, I have not included it in this discussion.

³ Tamaya, 'The Empire Strikes Back', p. 54.

narratives constructed by Ono and Stevens are looping, digressive and inconsistent, and are Ishiguro's attempt to create what he has called the 'texture of memory'.⁴ In *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*, the workings of memory operate within a more or less realist framework: the characters are psychologically consistent, and the historical fields against which these figures act function as recognisable historical settings.⁵ As such, they are distinct from Ishiguro's later novels, in which memory and desire begin to act with such strength that the narratives break free of a realist mould (*The Unconsoled* and *When We Were Orphans*) and take place in recognisably fictional settings (*Never Let Me Go*): for these reasons, I see *The Unconsoled* as a major point of transition in Ishiguro's oeuvre, and address his work from this point onwards in Chapter Four.

The workings of memory within the narratives of *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day* cause three layers of complicity to become visible. The first such layer, which is relatively easy to identify, consists of the contributions made by Ono and Stevens to abhorrent causes, through their art and service respectively. The second layer of complicity consists of the denial of culpability. Felman identifies the minimisation of events in their later representation as a form of complicity on the part of those who write afterwards, and the temporal structure employed by Ishiguro in these two texts allows this form of complicity to become visible: in the gap between events and their later representation, the narrators' desire for consolation results in their construction of narratives that elide their contribution to atrocity. Finally, a second temporal gap allows a third layer of complicity to become possible. Where the protagonists' desire for consolation results in their tendency to de-emphasise their role in atrocity, the space which exists between the inscription of the narratives (Ono writes between 1948 and 1950; Stevens in 1956) and the date of their publication creates the potential for a similar desire for consolation on the part of the reader. Readings which close on judgements of the protagonists are tempting, given their alignment with political systems that are discredited as the world moves into the post-war era, but such readings may fail to acknowledge the possibility of ongoing complicities on the part of

⁴ Gregory Mason, 'An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro', *Contemporary Literature*, 30 (1989), 335-47 (p. 337).

⁵ Ishiguro describes the Japan of his early novels as being very much his 'own personal, imaginary Japan', and as such they are not attempts to create fully realistic settings. However, they contain enough of the historical referents of post-war Japan to provide a historical backdrop against which the actions of the protagonists can be read according to a realist contract. Kazuo Ishiguro and Oe Kenzaburo, 'The Novelist in Today's World: A Conversation', *Boundary 2*, 18 (1991), 109-22 (p. 110).

those who read afterwards. In this chapter, I therefore address *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day* in turn, examining each of the three layers of complicity that I have outlined above.

In addressing the first of these layers, I discuss the role of agency in Ono's and Stevens' complicity with structures and organisations responsible for atrocity, and in particular the way that both protagonists place themselves in positions whereby they limit their ability to challenge these dominant structures. At one point in *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens suggests that his own small actions contribute to events of 'unimaginable largeness', and Rebecca Walkowitz uses this concept to argue that Ishiguro 'takes seriously the idea that international, collective events can be transformed by local, individual actions'.⁶ In examining the small-scale but complicitous contributions of Ono and Stevens, I draw upon Victor Sage's interpretation of their actions in terms of ritual and failed rites of passage. Employing anthropological frameworks of understanding, Sage argues that episodes that could or should serve as such rites of passage in Ishiguro's work fail to perform the requisite functions of separation, transition and reincorporation: although these episodes may have the appearance of ritual, they do not possess this function, and the protagonists consequently fail to overcome their inertia, and hence remain trapped in their roles.⁷

Whereas propriety in Sebald is often a form of obfuscation employed in the later narrativisation of events, Sage's observations are useful in that they show how propriety possesses greater strength in Ishiguro, trapping Ono and Stevens in their ritualised patterns of action. I suggest propriety gains its power due to the close relationship between linguistic register and ritual, with ceremony tending to radically reduce the expressive potential of language.⁸ However, the ritualistic language employed by Ono and Stevens at the height of their careers, and at the points at which their complicity with malignant structures of power is established, is at odds with the looseness of the

⁶ Rebecca Walkowitz, 'Unimaginable Largeness: Kazuo Ishiguro, Translation and the New World Literature', *Novel* 40 (2007), 216-39 (p. 218).

⁷ Sage, 'Rites of Passage'. Sage draws on the work of Arnold van Gennep, who identified three stages in rites of passage, these being the preliminary stage of separation, the liminal stage of transition, and the reintegration of the subject into the social group, with newly acquired status. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 11.

⁸ Maurice Bloch, also extending van Gennep's concepts, writes of 'power through form', suggesting that 'the very rules of politeness, of appropriateness, of formalisation' of ritualistic language shackle actors to their roles. Maurice Bloch, 'Symbols, Song, Dance and Features of Articulation: Is Religion an Extreme form of Traditional Authority?', *European Journal of Sociology*, 15 (1974), 54-81 (pp. 59-60, 74).

retrospective narratives that they construct. The temporal structure of both novels makes this contrast evident: the main vehicle of both narratives is (often lengthy) passages of exposition, marked by hesitations and digressions as the narrators grapple with their memories, and these passages are incongruous with the rigidity of the direct speech included by both narrators. These contrasts also bring into view the unreliability of the narrators, and as such the second layer of complicity that I have identified in these novels, namely the minimisation of events, becomes visible.

Where Sebald's writing prompts recognition of the ways in which representation projects order onto an entropic world, and in doing so entangles us in networks of power and complicity, in Ishiguro's writing what becomes visible is the projection of desire onto the past. In the case of Ono and Stevens, their desire for consolation is the result of a growing awareness that, as the dust settles on the war, history is likely to condemn their complicities. Anticipating this judgement, their narratives underplay rupture and discontinuity, and hence perform the type of minimisation of events that Felman condemns as a mode of complicity. Moreover, where traumatic elements of either narrator's past do figure in their narratives, these tend to be employed to rhetorical ends. With the threat of judgement and condemnation present, the voices and experiences of others are put to use in order to secure the narrators' exoneration. The imperative to console themselves therefore results in both narrators failing at Laub's second level of witnessing, that of bearing witness to the testimonies of others.

The gaps between pre-war action and post-war narrative expose the narrators' guilt with regard to the minimisation of events. However, this shared temporal structure also acts on the reader by setting up an opposition between pre- and post-war values. The former are associated with imperialism and fascism, rigidity, ritual, and hierarchy, while the latter are aligned with democracy, freedom, extemporisation (in the form of 'bantering' in *The Remains of the Day*) and a relatively egalitarian social order. Identifying wrongdoing on the part of Ono and Stevens therefore involves an implicit judgement on these sets of values, and suggests that we have emerged into a more enlightened era. However, I suggest that readings which find consolation in this way also risk minimising the ruptures caused by atrocity. Moreover, to read *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day* in terms of consolation is to risk reading these texts as if history ended in 1945, and hence to fail to acknowledge the self-interest present in acts of interpretations of the past.

However, while the potential for such readings exists, I argue that Ishiguro warns us off finding consolation too easily. The need for caution on the part of the reader is signalled through Ishiguro's foregrounding of Ono's and Stevens' writing as acts of inscription, achieved in both cases by both narrators interpreting and reinterpreting as they write. In particular, in the case of Stevens' re-readings of Miss Kenton's letter, the boundaries between reading, interpretation and writing become blurred. The apparent ethical difference between the protagonists and the reader therefore begins to break down: if Ishiguro hopes that his themes find universal relevance,⁹ the ethical necessity of reading not for consolation, but critically, is one of the principal ways in which *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day* address the situation of the witness in the post-war era.

AN ARTIST OF THE FLOATING WORLD

Ritual: Traitors

The frame narrative of *An Artist of the Floating World* describes Masuji Ono's attempts to ensure a secure future for his immediate family following Japan's defeat in the Second World War. At the time of writing, he is mainly concerned with the marriage negotiations of his younger daughter, Noriko. There is some tension around these formalities due to the failure of a previous set of negotiations, possibly as a result of Ono's now sullied reputation as an artist. The frame narrative therefore digresses into the events which define Ono's career and subsequent disgrace, and these digressions tend to be attempts at consolation on Ono's part. Before addressing the ways in which this narrative of consolation produces a minimisation of events, I first examine the nature of Ono's complicity in Japanese imperialism.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, a newly confident and rapidly industrialising Japan sought to expand into the Asian continent. In doing so, it occupied parts of Russia, China and Mongolia prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, and parts of South East Asia and the Pacific after hostilities with the Allies had commenced. In addition to the suffering caused by these military activities, Japanese

⁹ Ishiguro has suggested that he does write with a wide readership in mind, with the aim of addressing universal themes. Groes and Lewis, 'Introduction', pp. 2-3.

forces were responsible for a number of atrocities during this period. The civilian population of Japan also endured hardships in the later years of the war, and suffered heavily from Allied bombing raids, before the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 precipitated its surrender.¹⁰ As Motoko Sugano notes in her discussion of the Japanese translation of *An Artist of the Floating World*, Japanese artists often collaborated with the militarist government, particularly from 1931 onwards, following the occupation of Manchuria.¹¹ In addition, as of 1938, the National Mobilization Law coerced the population into support for the war effort.

Such coercion is, however, notably absent from Ono's account of his own decisions. In the early 1920s, he comes under the influence of Chishu Matsuda, a member of the nationalist Okada-Shingen society. Matsuda advocates forging 'an empire as powerful and wealthy as those of the British and French' through a political system in which 'the military will be answerable only to his Imperial Majesty the Emperor' (p. 174). Ono adopts this doctrine wholeheartedly, and from this point on, he produces paintings which, from the descriptions he gives, appear to be crass expressions of militaristic sentiments. For example, his 'Eyes to the Horizon' shows three timid politicians juxtaposed with three soldiers who are determinedly striding westwards towards the Asian continent, against the backdrop of the military flag, and bounded by the coastline of Japan. The text down the right- and left-hand margins of the painting reads 'Eyes to the Horizon!' and 'No time for cowardly talking. Japan must go forward' (p. 169).

The objectionable nature of Ono's art is not mitigated in any way by his having been coerced into painting in this mode. Chu-chueh Cheng argues that 'Ishiguro portrays evil as an outcome not only rooted in certain scheming politicians but also aided by naïve civilians whose patriotism is too often manipulated',¹² but this assertion

¹⁰ John Dower summarises a number of these atrocities. The actions of the Japanese military in China were particularly notorious: the 'Rape of Nanking' in 1937 is estimated to have involved the slaughter of around 200,000 civilians (although the exact number of fatalities remains subject to debate), while in 1941-2 the Japanese army conducted their 'three-all' policy of 'kill all, destroy all, burn all' in Communist-controlled China. In the later stages of the war, there were heavy civilian casualties in Japan as a result of Allied air raids, with the combined death toll resulting from incendiary bombing raids and the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki estimated at around 400,000. Dower, *War Without Mercy*, pp. 40-4.

¹¹ Sugano also notes that the extent of artists' responsibility has been the subject of debate in Japan, and that the Japanese translation of *An Artist of the Floating World* in fact softens elements of the text that could lead it to be read as a direct contribution to this controversy. Sugano, 'An Artist of the Floating World in Japan', p. 75.

¹² Chu-chueh Cheng, *The Margin Without Centre: Kazuo Ishiguro* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), p. 14.

can be applied more comfortably to Ishiguro's other protagonists than it can to Ono, who in fact repeatedly emphasises his own agency. Early in the narrative, he makes the general claim that throughout his career he was able to 'think and judge for myself, even if it meant going against the sway of those around me' (p. 69), and the assertion of agency defines a number of critical junctures in Ono's life and career.

This tendency is evident in the critical split with his teacher and patron, Seiji Moriyama (referred to as Mori-san throughout). Mori-san's aesthetic project is the representation of the ephemeral pleasures of the night, the 'floating world' of the title. That Ono's decision to pursue a new and 'more tangible' (p. 180) direction in his art is his own, and that he is no puppet of the Okada-Shingen society, is evident in the fact that his decision is taken over a number of weeks. During this period, Ono experiences a number of hostile encounters with other pupils and, finally, with Mori-san himself. These take place away from Matsuda's promptings, and do so with the threat of expulsion from Mori-san's villa, and a consequent lack of financial support, hanging over Ono (pp. 180-1). Similarly, the exercise of agency can be identified in Ono's contribution to the persecution of his own former pupil, Kuroda. Following a split that echoes his own separation from Mori-san, Ono reports Kuroda to the Committee of Unpatriotic Activities in the belief that he will receive a 'talking to for his own good'. His intervention instead leads to Kuroda's imprisonment and torture, as well as the destruction of his paintings (p. 183).

I have identified in Sebald's work the sense that complicity arises less through the imposition of behaviour by bodies of power (such as the state) but through actors being bound into systems of thought and action. My comments on Ono's agency in his rejection of Mori-san's 'floating world' school, and his embrace of an imperialist agenda, suggest that this model does not apply to *An Artist of the Floating World*, and that Ishiguro presents complicity as resulting from moral choices undertaken by individuals. However, Ono's assertions that he always acted under his own agency obscure the way in which institutions and group identities work to produce complicity in their members. I have suggested that, in Sebald's writing, complicity occurs as a result of failures to transgress against discourses of propriety. However, I have also noted that the type of transgressions and suspensions of order associated with carnivalesque spaces can act as sites of persecution: the removal of normal structures of

law and order may simply give free rein to malevolent or destructive impulses.¹³ Neither transgression nor propriety is therefore inherently aligned with persecution or complicity, and the way that the two exist in tension can be seen throughout *An Artist of the Floating World*.

The situation in Mori-San's villa encapsulates this tension. The compound functions as a home and place of work for Mori-san's pupils, who are free to paint unburdened by the economic structures and constraints of mainstream society. Ono is thus able to escape from a job in which he churns out *japonaiserie* for Master Takeda's firm by placing himself under Mori-san's patronage. However, separation from the rest of society and its values is only sustainable through an adherence to Mori-san's project. Ono recalls an atmosphere of 'competitive yet family-like intimacy' in Mori-san's villa, with insults being traded across the courtyard, and which would often leave 'both sides red with laughter'. However, he also notes that evoking the name of Sasaki, a 'traitor' to Mori-san's project, would lead to things getting 'out of hand, with colleagues abandoning boundaries and actually scrapping in the yard' (p. 144). In Chapter One, I have cited Roger Sales' observation of the 'Janus-faced' nature of the carnivalesque: the boundaries required to delineate such a space also act as a means of control. Sales implies that the will to discipline the site of transgression comes from the outside, but in the case of Mori-san's villa, its physical and symbolic boundaries also allow the site to be disciplined from within.

Before Ono's departure from the villa, he has already witnessed such an instance of the enforcement of boundaries, in the persecution of Sasaki. Although few details are supplied, we can infer that Sasaki has also abandoned Mori-san's project, and is expelled from his patronage as a result. This event acts as a precursor to Ono's own departure. Sage interprets the representation of Sasaki's departure as following a 'ritual structure', with Ono's description being 'uncluttered by description of individual motivation':¹⁴ the sound of Sasaki's retreating footsteps marks his final rejection by an anonymous colleague (p. 143).

We would expect, however, that Ono's own departure would receive more detailed treatment, complete with an insider's reflection on the reasons for his decisions.

¹³ Stallybrass and White have argued that a number of instances of anti-Semitic persecution can be seen in these terms. Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, pp. 53-5.

¹⁴ Sage, 'Rites of Passage', p. 35.

Ono's narrative appears to provide such depth, in his statement of his belief 'that in such troubled times as these, artists must learn to value something more tangible than those pleasurable things that disappear with the morning light'. He also reflects on Mori-san's motivations, describing his teacher's reaction as 'perhaps understandable', having dedicated time and resources to his most promising pupils (pp. 180-1). Yet Sage suggests that Ono actually has a more limited degree of agency than it may first appear in this pivotal meeting. He observes that Mori-san's 'ritual of rejection' of Ono, undertaken at the Takami Gardens as dusk falls (pp. 175-6), is 'conducted by the master in profile, not looking at his pupil', and goes on to suggest that, at the moment of rejection, when Mori-san 'steps out of role, his profile becoming full-face [,] a moral conflict – in which Ono assumes he is behaving as a free individual, not simply as an institutional figure – becomes visible'.¹⁵ In identifying Ono's belief that he is acting under his own free will as an assumption, Sage implies that he is in fact mistaken: the choice of agency implied by a moral dilemma is partly illusory, and Ono's actions are dictated, to a much greater extent than he realises, by his role.

The sense that role determines agency is a feature of complicity in *An Artist of the Floating World*, and is evident in the repetition of episodes with very similar, ritualistic structures over the course of Ono's career. In these episodes, a close relationship between persecution and the adherence to ceremonial registers of language can be seen. Where language is frozen, it is usually an indicator of established forms of power being re-asserted, and this sense is reinforced by the fact that Ono confuses the speakers of such utterances on a number of occasions. His accusation that Kuroda is 'exploring curious avenues' (p. 177) is the same formulation that Mori-san directed at him on the occasion of their schism. He also originally attributes to Mori-san the assertion that, with regard to nurturing students, 'no man will make me believe that I've wasted my time', but then introduces some uncertainty, claiming that these may have been his own words to his students in the *Migi-Hidari* (pp. 150-1). Similarly, he recalls the assertion of Jiro Miyake (Noriko's first suitor) that the failure to admit the mistakes that have had catastrophic consequences for the whole country is 'the greatest cowardice of all', but immediately suggests that these may in fact have been the words of Suichi (Setsuko's husband, p. 56).

¹⁵ Sage, 'Rites of Passage', p. 35.

The way that role dictates verbal register in these ritualistic exchanges means that, while the cast changes, the words uttered do not: as John Rothfork has it, ‘one perceives that the performance is the same’ in all of these episodes.¹⁶ This tendency is exemplified by the use of the label ‘traitor’, which is applied to Ono, Sasaki and Kuroda at various times in the narrative. In each case, the role of the persecutor is dictated by the need to assert the authority of the dominant group, and individual agency is exercised in the decision to maintain the group’s identity and (as they would see it) integrity, but once this decision has been made, only minimal choices remain with regard to the type of utterance that can be employed to this end. In contrast, the dissenters exercise their agency in breaking from the group and adapting new artistic forms. The fact that these separations take place in ritualised exchanges exacerbates the extent to which agency is reduced and speech is determined by role; ceremony at its most absolute allows for no deviation from the prescribed script.

Complicity thus occurs through alignment with norms, and is performed through the employment of rigid linguistic structures which are both a symptom and a tool of the exercise of power (and hence of complicity) from within social structures. Frozen language acts as a form of social control:¹⁷ where no deviation from the accepted script is possible, the members of a group are forced to accept all of its tenets or none. Where these structures remain small-scale, the possibility of transgression and escape remains: when Ono leaves Mori-san’s villa, he is not rebelling against the whole of society, but one small enclave. However, by the time the situation is repeated with Ono in a position of power, the climate of nationalism to which he has contributed has produced a totalitarianism in which the dominant group is identified with the nation. Consequently, Kuroda’s rejection of Ono’s values is seen as a rejection of the nation state, and there is no enclave to which Kuroda can turn for refuge. The result is that, instead of having to endure the bullying of a handful of loyal artists, as were the fates of Sasaki and Ono, the state’s apparatus of power, in the form of the Committee of Unpatriotic Activities is brought to bear in disciplining Kuroda’s ‘treachery’, and his punishment is imprisonment.

The role of language in complicity is not limited to the restriction of agency described in the paragraphs above. The ritualistic exchanges that I have discussed

¹⁶ John Rothfork, ‘Zen Comedy in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*’, *Mosaic*, 29 (1996).

¹⁷ Bloch, ‘Symbols, Song, Dance’, p. 74

involve language that takes a non-narrative form: ceremonial registers, by their frozen nature, are a form of repetition and cannot, therefore, perform the explication, through a temporal structure, performed by narrative. However, language as narrative does feature as a mode of complicity in *An Artist of the Floating World* in Ono's later representation of his own actions, and it is this form to which I turn in the following section.

Minimisation: 'A Better Go of Things'

Ono retrospectively attempts to construct a narrative of consolation regarding his own actions before and during the war. In doing so, he is guilty of the minimisation of events identified by Felman as a form of complicity on the part of those who come after. This minimisation occurs through Ono's attempt to construct a consoling narrative by emphasising continuity and de-emphasising the traumatic ruptures caused by the war. Ono's concern with continuity is, in part, understandable given that Noriko is engaged in marriage negotiations as he writes; however, his concern for his daughter's future is conflated with his concern for his own reputation in the face of mounting evidence that his life has been dedicated to causes which are now viewed with ambivalence or disapproval by the majority of his compatriots.

Ono could absolve himself of a significant degree of wartime responsibility by claiming to be acting within a prescribed role, and hence with reduced agency.¹⁸ However, he possesses sufficient powers of self-reflection to make this position untenable, given that it was an active decision on his part to cease to paint the floating world in favour of nationalist content, regardless of the intervention of Matsuda. In order to construct a narrative of consolation, and hence of justification, he therefore attempts to marry his past actions with a narrative of continuity which pins its hopes on

¹⁸ This would, of course, parallel Eichmann's defence at his trial in Jerusalem. Hannah Arendt, in formulating her concept of the 'banality of evil' summarises Eichmann's position as follows: 'he did his *duty*, as he told the police and the court over and over again; he not only obeyed *orders*, he also obeyed the *law*'. However, Ishiguro's protagonists occupy more indeterminate positions than Nazi perpetrators, and this is part of the reason for the importance of his fictions. David Luban argues, with regard to *The Remains of the Day*, that 'Stevens is no Eichmann, but his attempt to realize a moral vision without exercising moral judgement proves fatal, in its own small way'. Ono, as I am suggesting here, has a greater awareness of the moral implications of his actions, and perhaps for this reason avoids employing this defence. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 135; David Luban, 'Stevens's Professionalism and Ours', *William and Mary Law Review*, 38 (1996), 297-317 (pp. 305-6).

the next generation. This strain between orientation towards the past and towards the future causes much of Ono's unreliability to become evident, and it is in reading between the lines of this tension that opportunities for the reader to identify Ono's duplicity arise.

The need for consolation can be seen in Ono's emplotment of his life story, and in particular through ending his narrative with two scenes, one from memory and one from the time at which he writes, which allow him to conclude with a sense of consolation. He seeks to satisfy his narrative's retrospective drive through the first of these scenes, which describes his return to Mori-san's villa sixteen years after his departure. Looking down on the compound, Ono describes the sense of triumph that he then felt as being 'a profound sense of happiness deriving from the conviction that one's efforts have been justified; that the hard work undertaken, the doubts overcome, have all been worthwhile; that one has achieved something of real value and distinction' (p. 204). This moment takes place in 1938, at the height of Ono's influence. He has received the Shigeta Foundation Award and has been involved in the New Japan campaign which, we can infer from his other work during this period, is implicated in Japan's militarism and imperial expansion.¹⁹

Shortly after these recollections, he turns to the future, describing in the narrative's final passages the reconstruction of the former pleasure district, now being populated with commercial buildings. As Ono watches the young office workers, he is struck by their 'optimism and enthusiasm', and goes on to state that the city's recovery fills him with 'genuine gladness'. He concludes his narrative with the assertion that 'our nation, it seems, whatever mistakes it may have made in the past, has now another chance to make a better go of things' (pp. 205-6). Concluding in this way, with the juxtaposition of a personal anecdote and more general observations about the city and the nation as a whole, Ono thus inserts his own narrative into that of the rest of the country.

Yet the duplicity of such an ending quickly becomes apparent, mainly because Ono's need to emphasise continuity requires the glaring omission of a number of historical and personal referents. For example, he attempts to focus on Kuroda's

¹⁹ 1938, as I have already noted, is the year of the National Mobilization Law. Ono recalls, in passing, that 'a chief of police I had never met before came to pay his respects' (p. 202). In the light of the role of the police in ensuring the population's complicity in the war effort from 1938 onwards, this encounter takes on a more sinister hue.

rehabilitation following the end of the war, stating that he is pleased with his progress, and that it is ‘natural after all that a former teacher should continue to take pride in such things, even if circumstances have caused teacher and pupil to become estranged’ (pp. 108-9). However, his choice of ‘circumstances’ to describe the causes of his estrangement from Kuroda is typically euphemistic, and acts as an ellipsis in that it fails to articulate the specifics of the contribution of his own actions to Kuroda’s persecution. Furthermore, this attempt to describe Kuroda’s career in terms of continuity is duplicitous, and is revealed to be so through the slippage in Ono’s previous mention of Kuroda, when he states that ‘I haven’t been in touch with him since ... since the war’ (p. 95). The ellipsis marks the point at which Ono is unwilling or unable to name the event of Kuroda’s imprisonment and torture, and he is forced to work hard to navigate around this rupture: he first shrugs off Kuroda’s refusal to meet him, stating that it did not upset him ‘unduly’, then modifies his initial assertion and states that the exchange ‘marred [his] optimism concerning Noriko’s negotiations’ (p. 114). However, even though Kuroda’s coldness contradicts the narrative that Ono wants to create, he manages to avoid any prolonged reflection of his actions in betraying Kuroda, instead addressing its potential effects on the ongoing narrative of his daughter’s marriage.

Ono’s immediate concern with Noriko’s future masks the omission of a number of other ruptures in his personal life, the most glaring of which are the deaths of his wife, Michiko, and his son, Kenji. Both are mentioned only a handful of times, and when they are included they are always incidental to another, more pressing line of recollection. We are aware of their deaths from near the beginning of the narrative, when Ono mentions the brevity of the commiserations offered to him by one of the Sugimura sisters who had previously inhabited his house (p. 11). After this point, Ono mentions Michiko only in passing, within other lines of recollection. For example, Matsuda’s apology for being unable to attend her funeral is recalled as part of a larger description of Matsuda’s failing health and their reflections on their careers (p. 90). Another, even briefer, mention of Michiko occurs in the concluding ‘June 1950’ section, and is also prompted by a meeting with Matsuda, in which Ono notes that the fifth anniversary of her death is approaching (p. 200).

Kenji is mentioned slightly more frequently. His name arises in an argument between Ono and Noriko, sparked by Noriko’s assertion that Ono is over-trimming the plants. Her accusation that Ono has ‘poor taste’ touches a nerve in the former artist, and

he in turn accuses Noriko of lacking an 'artistic instinct', and introduces Kenji as a point of comparison (pp. 106-7). He next mentions Kenji in his explanation to his grandson Ichiro (Setsuko's son) of why the composer Yukio Naguchi killed himself, stating that 'the likes of your Uncle Kenji sang [Naguchi's songs] when they were marching or before a battle' (p. 155). The final reference to his son comes shortly after this exchange, during another argument with Noriko and Setsuko when they contradict Ono's wish to give Ichiro some sake, to which he retorts that 'it did your brother no harm' (p. 157). The most significant details surrounding Kenji's death, however, are given in Ono's recollections of his funeral. It is revealed that he was killed in Manchuria as part of a 'hopeless charge' across a minefield, and that the ashes received by the family after a delay of over a year may not in fact be those of Kenji.

Visible in these passages is the rhetorical bent of Ono's narrative, which denudes his account of its validity as a form of witnessing. It is notable that the passage describing Kenji's funeral, which covers less than two pages, is framed by Ono's attempt to denigrate Suichi and the influence that he appears to have on his daughters (pp. 56-9). This is typical, and as the examples that I have cited above show, every mention of Kenji has a rhetorical function: Ono employs his dead son's name almost exclusively to make or illustrate a point. In each case, Ono attempts to shore up his own threatened sense of worth, but in doing so fails to reflect fully on the extent of his own culpability in Kenji's death.

In addition to these individual instances of using Kenji's name to further his own arguments, he also emplots the experiences of others to suit his needs. For example, he states that Suichi's experience of war would have been of a 'terrible nature', and attributes his son in law's anger to this experience. However, when he states that: 'it is tragic that so many of his generation died as they did' (p. 59), he gives Suichi's experiences, by labelling them as 'tragic', a genre. In ascribing to them the qualities of the tragic, Ono attempts to create a narrative around them that is rounded off by the verdict, finished, and hence insulated from the ongoing narrative of the life with which he continues to be engaged. That this represents a failure to hear and understand the story that Suichi has to tell is indicated by Ono's puzzlement when he asks: 'why must he harbour such bitterness for his elders?' (p. 59).

As a testimony, Ono's account is therefore compromised by its self-centred nature. His desire for personal and professional consolation results in the narratives of

others being subsumed into his own. This attempt to justify his actions, rather than to hear and give voice to their experiences causes his account to fail at Laub's second level of witnessing, that of 'being a witness to the testimonies of others'.²⁰ This failure is compounded by larger historical omissions that become evident in the selective inclusion of details regarding Michiko and Kenji, and which can be seen as contributing towards the making of history as a 'making of silence' described by Felman.²¹

This silence is particularly evident in the omission of the years of the Second World War. Ono describes the years following the war, and his digressions cover much of his career up to 1938, but the passing mention of the experiences of Kenji and Suichi while fighting in Manchuria only serves to draw attention to their brevity, and to the lack of historical detail in Ono's account: Japanese troops were present in Manchuria from 1931 onwards, and engaged in bitter fighting against the Mongolian and Soviet armies as well as the Chinese; Manchuria was also the site of some of the more infamous atrocities perpetrated by the Japanese army.²² Similarly, Michiko's death in what Matsuda calls a 'freak' air raid (p. 90) highlights the lack of detail regarding civilian deaths as a result of Allied air raids and more generally as a result of the deprivations of the latter years of the war. The atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki are also completely absent from his account.

I have cited Tamaya's assertion that Ishiguro represents history as 'it affects the fabric and texture of personal relationships'.²³ However, Ono's act of retrospection takes place in the years immediately following the war; that is, as 'history' begins to emerge out of the tangle of personal experience and to become the aggregate of shared signifiers. Such signifiers have fundamentally shaped the post-war world: Hiroshima and Nagasaki ushered in the nuclear age, and Ono's omission of these and other referents therefore result in the minimisations of his narrative being obvious.²⁴

²⁰ Laub, 'An Event Without a Witness', p. 75.

²¹ Felman, 'Camus' *The Fall*, p. 184.

²² Most infamously, chemical and biological experiments on human subjects were carried out by a group of scientists known as 'Unit 731', which was stationed just outside the Manchurian city of Harbin. Dower, *War Without Mercy*, p. 42.

²³ Tamaya, 'The Empire Strikes Back', p. 54.

²⁴ In addition to omitting the referents of the war itself, Ono also avoids addressing the aftermath. As Chu-chueh Cheng notes, the Tokyo war crimes trials were contemporaneous with Ono's first entry in *An Artist of the Floating World*, but he makes no reference to this. Cheng, *The Margin Without Centre*, p. 109.

The obviousness of Ono's shortcomings as a witness and narrator are in part due to the historical distance that exists between the moment of inscription and the moment of reading, and this sense of distance is emphasised by the oppositions between pre- and post-war Japan that the novel sets up. These oppositions seem to invite judgment on Ono: they create a series of binaries, and Ono falls on the wrong side of each. However, such a judgement has the potential to become another form of consolation, in this case on the part of the reader, and it is this danger that I discuss in the section below.

Reading as Complicity: Self-Portraiture

I have suggested that judgement on Ono is enabled, and perhaps implicitly encouraged, by the oppositions between pre- and post-war Japan present in *An Artist of the Floating World*. These oppositions are present in the contrasts before and after the war in terms of political beliefs, social norms, and the material landscape of Japan. Although there is no mention of the American occupying forces, the adoption of a democratic system is evident in a number of references to political change. Ono is sceptical of such changes, voicing his concern that Japan may be 'a little too hasty in following the Americans' (p. 185). In this case, he places himself in opposition to the younger generation, whose position is articulated by Taro Saito, Noriko's suitor. Saito suggests that 'a complete overhaul was called for', and goes on to praise the influence of the Americans, stating that 'just in these few years [...] we Japanese have come a long way in understanding such things as democracy and individual rights' (p. 185).

Where social changes are in evidence, Ono is also reactionary, speaking nebulously and disapprovingly of 'the new ways'. The new values that he hints at are concretely evident in Noriko's first marriage negotiations with Miyake being the result of their 'love match' (p. 19). New social values, and the American influence behind them, are also evident in Ichiro's heroes being the Lone Ranger and Popeye. The tension around these figures again prompts a clash of opinions, with Ono lamenting that 'only a few years ago Ichiro wouldn't have been allowed to see such a thing as a cowboy film', in contrast to Suichi's belief that American role models are more suitable for young people than traditional Japanese heroes (p. 36). The new values are presented in a much more positive light than older behaviour: Noriko's teasing of her father, for

example, about his softening from being a ‘tyrant’ to his present tendency to ‘mope’ (p. 13) stands in contrast to Ono’s encounter with his own father, in which his paintings are confiscated and burnt.²⁵

Material changes can also be seen in the reconstruction of the city. These serve as evidence of the adoption of consumerism and a market economy, with reference made to recently opened department stores (p. 121). Through these changes the city becomes more modern and more recognisably Western in character: gone are the cloth banners and narrow alleyways of the pleasure district, replaced by glass-fronted office buildings and wide, tarmacked roads (p. 205). Ono is ambivalent at times towards these transformations, but more often he either disapproves, or indulges in nostalgia. In particular, when his thoughts return to the pleasure district, which they do on a number of occasions, it is generally in a melancholy vein: at one point he likens two columns of smoke to ‘pyres at an abandoned funeral’, and the sight causes him to liken the area to a ‘graveyard’ (p. 27).

Therefore, despite aligning himself with the optimism of the office workers at the close of his narrative, Ono is being left behind by the changes taking place in Japan. However, while such oppositions are clearly delineated for the reader, Ishiguro has his protagonist writing at the moment at which Japanese society is still in flux, in the eighteen months between October 1948 and June 1950, and at which point new collective values are not yet established. Ono’s admission of culpability in acknowledging that ‘Eyes to the Horizon’ is a painting ‘whose sentiments are now outdated’ (p. 169) is therefore clearly inadequate with this hindsight. Yet the ease with which later readers can identify Ono’s failings also creates the possibility of reading becoming an act of consolation. Reading in this way may itself be a form of complicity in that it offers a form of closure which turns away from the continuing need to remain attentive to the process of reading as a form of witnessing.

That reading *An Artist of the Floating World* has the potential to become a form of consolation is mainly a result of the way in which the genres that comprise the narrative interact. In elucidating his notion of ‘complicitous genres’, Bo G. Ekelund refers to the Oxford English Dictionary definition of ‘complice’, as ‘one associated in

²⁵ To put these episodes in the terms employed in *The Remains of the Day*, Noriko possesses the democratic ability to ‘banter’, while the rigidity of Ono and Stevens is aligned with autocratic political systems.

any affair with another, the latter being regarded as the principal'. Ekelund's argument centres on *The Remains of the Day*, in which he suggests that 'the novel presents a complex of genres, each carrying particular burdens of meaning and subversion, each of them aiding and abetting the others in various ways'.²⁶ This mixture and interaction of genres is also present in *An Artist of the Floating World*, with elements of the novel of manners, the *Künstlerroman* and the memoir all present in Ono's narrative. However, as Ekelund notes, a 'complice' requires a principal, and in the case of Ono's narrative, the novel of manners and the *Künstlerroman* ultimately cede dominance to the memoir form.

Aspects of the novel of manners are present in Noriko's marriage negotiations, and the centrality of the *miai* scene means that it threatens to become the dominant strand. However, its subsidiary status is established by its presence in digressions into memory from the frame narrative, which takes the form of memoir. Furthermore, the friction between individual aspirations and dominant social codes which drives the novel of manners cannot work given the state of flux of social values in post-war Japan. Similarly, Ono's state of disgrace as an artist means that a fully developed *Künstlerroman* would be a painful undertaking: a narrative predominantly concerned with his career would be one of failure, and Ono opts instead to use aspects of his artistic life as instructive episodes in his personal development, which is narrated through the dominant memoir form.

The principal status of memoir is established through the narrative consisting of four dated entries. The form of the narrative therefore indicates that this is to be a personal act of retrospection, and this intention is reinforced by Ono's decision to begin his account with the 'auction of prestige' (p. 9) by which he bought his house: this acts as a yardstick for his achievements that create the sense of a retrospective summary of a life. It is the status of the narrative as memoir that offers closure on Ono's life, ending as it does with the image of him and Matsuda as 'two old men with their sticks' (p. 201). This sense of closure on Ono's life creates the possibility of reading as a form of consolation because it suggests that an era has ended, and is to be replaced by Noriko, Taro and their children: the rigid values which gave rise to the atrocities so tellingly absent from Ono's narrative have been replaced by a more liberal and democratic world. If this sense of closure creates the distance from which judgement is possible, Ono's

²⁶ Ekelund, 'Complicitous Genres' (para. 9 of 55).

direct form of address seems to further encourage the reader to reach a verdict on his life. When he writes that ‘if I tell you this [...] you may well wonder how I came to acquire such a property’ (p. 7), the opening of Ono’s narrative is an explicit invitation to enter into his reminiscences, and to share the values from which these are written.

However, when, in discussing the difficulties of self-portraiture, he notes that ‘each of us, it seems, has his own special conceits’ (p. 67), these comments obviously apply to Ono’s narrative itself. As perceptive as Ono’s observations on the nature of self-portraiture are, he singularly fails to apply these lessons to his own self-representation, and gaps between events as we now know them and Ono’s reputation are what allow us to pass judgement on him, and therefore to console ourselves that we are not like him: we belong to the democratic post-war world that was born out of the atrocities cultivated by Ono and his ilk.

Readings that find consolation in our distance from Ono’s values therefore do so through identifying failings in his narrative: in that he is unable to recount his own experiences in good faith, he fails at Laub’s first level of witnessing, and in his rhetorical employment of others’ testimonies, he fails at Laub’s second level. However, to read in such a way is to risk failing at Laub’s third level of witnessing. A reading that passes judgement on Ono superficially succeeds in remaining attentive to the process of witnessing in that it requires the insertion of the referents missing from his account, and as such requires an awareness of the failings of his account as an act of testimony. However, to accept the consolation that the text offers is to fail at a more fundamental level, because in critiquing Ono there is a danger of neglecting to read and interpret in a self-reflexive way which acknowledges the interests of the present in interpreting the past.

In finding consolation through ascribing to Ono a set of values and beliefs fundamentally different from our own, we in fact repeat the process of exclusion that takes place a number of times over the course of the novel. The binary logic of all or nothing which leaves no space for indeterminacy or for recognising degrees of sameness is the same logic that gives rise to persecution perpetrated by Ono’s father, Mori-san, and by Ono himself. Where narrative fails to give free rein to agency, and where language is instead put to use in rituals of judgement and exclusion, the result is that actors become trapped in patterns of complicity. The distinguishing feature of persecution in *An Artist of the Floating World* is its repeatability: the similarity of the

treatment endured by Ono, Sasaki and Kuroda respectively lends these episodes a sense of universality. Persecution does not, therefore, belong to a world that ended with Ono's retirement, but is, Ishiguro suggests, an inherent tendency in human behaviour, and one which arises when narratives are heard with the imperative to judge.

Elaborating on the idea of bearing witness to the process of witnessing, Laub writes of the need to 'halt and reflect on ... memories as they are spoken',²⁷ and it is perhaps reflection that creates the moments of arrest in which the workings of discourse become visible, as I have suggested in the introduction to this thesis. A reading that seeks to pass judgement rather than engaging with the indeterminacy of a narrative closes down the space for such reflection. Ishiguro, however, warns against consolation in the form of judgment. While Ono's observations on self-portraiture as a flawed 'mirror reflection' prompt an awareness of the way that the narrative is distorted by the artist's own desires, it is not a perfect analogy for his written account of events. The difference lies in the temporal dimension of narrative: mimetic painting generally represents a single moment, whereas narrative describes a series of events over time. The four dated sections of Ono's memoir emphasise this temporal movement, while also revealing the capability of narrative to re-interpret as it progresses. Through Ono's reinterpretations, the text makes visible the process of inscription in Ono's narrative. In doing so, I suggest, Ishiguro reinstates the indeterminacy of the novel and hence encourages reading that remains attentive to the process of witnessing as conducted through narrative.

One of the main ways in which *An Artist of the Floating World* makes visible the process of inscription is through its structure. The four sections are written from four different 'presents' within the temporal scope of the narrative. I have described Ono's dominant genre as memoir, but the use of four separate dates in fact locates it somewhere between memoir and diary form. The sections are written months apart, and as such do not have the immediacy of diary entries; nevertheless, in terms of inscription, the dated entries evoke associations of a journal written at the day's end. In other words, while it is not an entirely spontaneous form of inscription, it is one in which the words written have a greater degree of immediacy than a text that is presented as, for example, autobiography.

²⁷ Laub, 'An Event Without a Witness', p. 76.

Furthermore, the four distinct moments of inscription present the opportunity for Ono to revise and contradict himself as he writes. In his revisions, writing can be seen to be not simply a process of transcription, but a process of interpretation and reinterpretation. This quality of Ono's narrative is evident in passages that I have cited throughout this chapter, but is most clearly illustrated, and has the greatest significance, in the passages in which he discusses his reputation. In recalling Noriko's first, abortive, round of marriage negotiations, Ono claims: 'I have never at any point in my life been very aware of my own social standing, and even now, I am often surprised when some event, or something someone may say, reminds me of the rather high esteem in which I am held' (p. 19). However, Ono is in fact concerned with his own standing to the point of obsession, providing example after example of incidents which act as indicators of esteem. For example, he immediately follows this initial claim with a story about providing a letter of recommendation (pp. 19-20); he recalls a speech by Kuroda in which his pupil claims that Ono's influence has 'now spread beyond the world of art, to all walks of life' (p. 25); he describes how his petition to the relevant authorities was crucial to securing the permission needed to create a new pleasure district, centring on the Migi-Hidari (p. 63); and he repeats with relish Shintaro's exhortation, in attempting to persuade Ono to revitalise the pleasure district after the war, that 'a lord must gather his men' (pp. 76-77).

These revisions and inconsistencies force the reader to reinterpret as the narrative progresses. There is, therefore, no sense that the final, consoling, interpretations offered by Ono of his own life are the most reliable, and the sections that describe the possibility of consolation in the simplest terms are the sections which should be subjected to the greatest degree of suspicion. The inconsistencies in Ono's narrative require the reader to sustain the implications of a number of conflicting possibilities. Most obviously, the question of Ono's reputation is never resolved. This uncertainty crystallises in an argument with Setsuko, following his admission of culpability during Noriko's *miai*. Setsuko states that 'no one has ever viewed Father's past [as] something to view with recrimination'; Ono regards this claim, both in its reversal of Setsuko's earlier warnings and in its view of his reputation, as 'astonishing' (p. 193). As a result, it is impossible to determine quite how to read Ono. The prizes and examples of his influence support his claims to an elevated reputation, yet the uncertainties introduced by exchanges such as this raise the possibility, as Sage notes, that 'instead of living a life of solid achievement (albeit with questionable periods of

power and influence) there has been no substance at all to what Ono has been doing as an artist'.²⁸

Just as Ono is forced to interpret and reinterpret the events of his life as he writes, the uncertainties present in the text force the reader to reinterpret as the narrative progresses. As a result, the dangers of self-portraiture to which Ono draws our attention also apply to reading: the desire to seek consolation in judgement of Ono can be seen as the creation of a self-image which, in accentuating the flaws of Ono and the era that moulded him, also serves to minimise the potential for persecution that exists in the present. The danger of believing the stories that we want to believe is that it can act as a way of avoiding the painful process of self-reflection. This danger, introduced fully for the first time in *An Artist of the Floating World*, is present in the rest of Ishiguro's writing: I argue in my discussions of three of his other novels that Ishiguro tends to write in forms that offer the reader this temptation, but contain sufficient uncertainty that the reader is forced to reinterpret these narratives, and hence to defer closure and to enter into a reflective mode of reading.

THE REMAINS OF THE DAY

Ritual: *Déformation Professionnelle*

Despite the reflexivity present in *An Artist of the Floating World*, a significant proportion of the initial reception failed to attend to this aspect of Ishiguro's writing (and it was similarly ignored in discussions of *A Pale View of Hills*), focussing instead on attempting to identify 'Japanese' characteristics of his style.²⁹ Walkowitz, citing Homi Bhabha and Rey Chow, identifies the problems with such readings as being that they reduce difference to containable and stereotyped metonymies, and that 'obstinate strangeness justifies for many a distance that need not be measured'.³⁰ In other words, and in the terms of my own argument, where the perception of difference results in

²⁸ Sage, 'Rites of Passage', p. 36.

²⁹ Sim Wai-Chew and Rebecca Walkowitz have both summarised a number of instances of this trend in the reception to Ishiguro's work. Sim Wai-Chew, *Kazuo Ishiguro*, p. 13; Walkowitz, 'Ishiguro's Floating Worlds', *ELH*, 60 (2001), 1049-76 (pp. 1053-4).

³⁰ Walkowitz, 'Ishiguro's Floating Worlds', p. 1054.

closure predicated on pre-formed assumptions, rather than self-reflexivity in the process of interpretation, the result is likely to be failure at Laub's third level of witnessing.

Ishiguro has voiced his frustration at the reception of his first two 'Japanese' novels. Despite his assertions regarding the minimal influence of Japanese literature on his own writing, he has noted that 'people have not paid much attention to the ideas'³¹ as a result of this concern with identifying exotic elements of his style.³² It is perhaps for this reason that Ishiguro chose to situate his next novel, *The Remains of the Day*, in England. Regardless of Ishiguro's intentions, this change of setting has a number of implications regarding the way in which the novel addresses complicity. For the majority of his audience,³³ *The Remains of the Day* is much closer to home. Whereas the Japanese setting of *An Artist of the Floating World* makes it possible to dismiss Ono's values, and hence his complicity, as the products and concerns of a different time and place, Lord Darlington is a member of the British establishment, and his actions therefore possess identifiable relevance to the historical situation for a Western readership. The reader therefore enters into a complex relationship with the setting of *The Remains of the Day*: Ishiguro's exaggeratedly pastoral England plays on a nostalgic myth, and hence prompts the reader to enter into a more self-reflexive engagement with the text.

The post-war setting of *The Remains of the Day* presents a nation emerging from a difficult period in its history (Stevens writes in 1956), and, like Ono, Stevens struggles to come to terms with his contributions to that history. The frame narrative of *An Artist of the Floating World* takes place in a period of reconfiguration, with Ono lamenting the certainties stripped away by defeat as Japan feels its way towards its modern form. This relationship is reversed in *The Remains of the Day* with England, in the aftermath of victory, represented as being more or less certain of its democratic values (and this

³¹ Suanne Kelman, 'Ishiguro in Toronto', in *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*, ed. by Brian W. Shaffer and Cynthia F. Wong (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), pp. 42-9 (p. 49).

³² Ishiguro in fact embeds a warning against readings based on stereotyped ideas of national aesthetics, most notably in Ono's comment, while working for Master Takeda, that 'the essential point of the sort of things we were commissioned to paint – geishas, cherry trees, swimming carps, temples – was that they look 'Japanese' to the foreigners to whom they were shipped out' (p. 69). Ishiguro's frustration with the reception of the novel is, therefore, unsurprising: he notes that he has 'had every kind of Japanese cliché phrase – even Sumo wrestling' Kelman, 'Ishiguro in Toronto', p. 49.

³³ Ishiguro was aware that, at this point in his career, his readership in Japan was relatively small. Interviewed in the year of *The Remains of the Day*'s publication, Ishiguro states of his reception in Japan that 'there's a lot of curiosity about me as a person. There isn't very much interest in my books. The third one may actually have a larger readership, paradoxically, because it is set in the West'. Kelman, 'Ishiguro in Toronto', p. 47.

certainty of course, rests in part on these values being defined in terms of difference from Nazism), and with Stevens reflecting on a period during which these certainties had yet to emerge.

These differences notwithstanding, the two novels share a number of themes, and my discussion of *The Remains of the Day* therefore follows the same structure as that of *An Artist of the Floating World*. I therefore begin with an examination of the protagonist's complicity with atrocity, interpreting Stevens' actions before and during the war in terms of ritual. I then provide a reading of his narrative as one of consolation which acts as a minimisation of history. Finally, I argue that *The Remains of the Day*, like *An Artist of the Floating World*, offers the possibility of consolation to the reader, but that Ishiguro warns us off such a reading. However, as I suggest in my discussion to follow, an extra layer is added by which narrative can act as complicity: this is Stevens' concealment of the rhetorical nature of his own representation of events.

Like Masuji Ono, Stevens, the butler of Darlington Hall, seeks to construct a narrative of consolation. Having taken the opportunity offered by his new American employer, Mr. Farraday, to take a week off, the narrative is an account of his journey to the Cornish village of Little Compton. Stevens undertakes the journey in order to meet Mrs Benn, formerly Miss Kenton (and referred to as such throughout), who was the housekeeper with whom he worked between the wars. In writing the narrative, Stevens seeks to console himself on two fronts, these being the personal and the professional. In personal terms, it becomes apparent that he squandered his chance at romantic love with Miss Kenton in order to fulfil what he saw as being his professional duties. This in turn heightens the need for Stevens to see his career as having been worthwhile, and this is difficult, given that his years of service were dedicated to a former master, Lord Darlington, who first supported appeasement and then openly sympathised with the Nazis and, at times, other fascist causes.

Stevens' complicity results from his unquestioning loyalty to his former master. Lord Darlington, appalled by the stringent terms of the Treaty of Versailles, initially supports a softer stance towards Germany, and is later openly sympathetic towards the Nazi regime; Darlington's brief flirtation with the British Union of Fascists seems to be the high water mark of his far-right leanings, although Stevens' narrative is rather light on detail at this point. Darlington Hall is the site of a number of political meetings intended to reduce reparations payments in the 1920s, and to maintain Anglo-German

relations in the 1930s as tensions grow. Stevens' complicity in all of this occurs through his performing the role of the butler almost flawlessly, if we are to believe his account. 'I gave my best to Lord Darlington', he states near the end of his narrative (p. 255), and his best, it transpires, is the efficient management of the house which serves as the location for Darlington's political machinations.

Stevens' unstinting and unquestioning service is therefore the basis of his complicity with Darlington's politics and, as in *An Artist of the Floating World*, there is a close relationship between ritual and language. This relationship becomes visible in the contrast between the rigid language of professional service and the spontaneous language of extemporisation, exemplified by the propensity of Stevens' new employer, the American Mr. Farraday, to engage in 'banter'. Stevens describes this new expectation of his role as a 'kind of affectionate sport', but one which leaves him 'rather unsure' of how to respond (p. 15). Stevens thus makes a number of disastrous attempts to engage in bantering, such as that prompted by Farraday's query about a 'crowing noise' produced by itinerant ironmongers, to which he responds: 'more like swallows than crows, I would have said, sir. From the migratory aspect' (p. 17).

Stevens does not improve on this 'discouraging start', and his further, excruciating, attempts at extemporisation are in contrast with the fixed formulations that he employs much more comfortably when serving Darlington. One of the most notable instances of the rigidity of Stevens' language is in his humiliation at the hands of Mr. Spencer, one of Darlington's friends. Spencer, seeking to make an anti-democratic point about the ignorance of the general populace, quizzes Stevens on a number of technical matters of foreign policy. In each case, Stevens' response is: 'I'm sorry, sir, but I am unable to assist in this matter' (pp. 205-6). Sage interprets the exchange as a 'ritual of humiliation', in which Stevens' response, designed to meet the expectations of Darlington, 'reasserts the theatre of service as a benign conspiracy between master and servant'.³⁴ The implication of language in structures of power thus becomes visible: Stevens does not disclose whether or not he would be capable of answering Spencer's questions, but in choosing to adhere to a fixed and ritualistic response, he effaces his own agency in his provision of service.

³⁴ Sage, 'Rites of Passage', p. 41.

Although there is little at stake politically in the exchange cited above, elsewhere Stevens' embeddedness in the rituals of service ensures his complicity with Darlington's politics. Stevens is at his most culpable in the dismissal of two Jewish maids from Darlington Hall, instigated by Darlington, on the nebulous grounds of 'the good of the house' and 'the interests of the guests'. Stevens, however, makes no objection to this decision, brushing off Miss Kenton's objections on the grounds of the lack of agency accorded to their roles, stating that 'his lordship has made his decision and there is nothing for you and I to debate over' (pp. 155-7). He then conducts the interview with the maids in which they are dismissed. His complicity with Darlington is not, therefore, a matter of lacking sufficient power or the means to do so; it arises from his determination to employ what little agency he has in effacing any potential for choice in his own role. As a result, the possibility of questioning Darlington's judgement never occurs to him.

Where Stevens is presented with the opportunity to step outside the linguistic register dictated by his professional role, he is unwilling to do so. For example, when Miss Kenton catches him reading a 'racy' romance, he finds himself in an unfamiliar situation, which he likens to the two of them being 'suddenly thrust onto some other plane of being altogether'. However, he rejects the potential for intimacy presented by this encounter, and ushers Miss Kenton from his room 'quite firmly' (pp. 174-6). Having made choices such as this throughout his life, by the time at which Stevens writes, he, like Ono, clings to frozen registers of ritual, his rituals being those of professional service. In contrast to the mixture of voices present in the exchanges that Stevens encounters at Moscombe and outside Taunton, and to those he overhears taking place between the guests at Darlington Hall, his own utterances are entirely devoid of this variation in register. For example, the informality of Mr. Farraday's offer to 'foot the bill for the gas' for his trip leaves Stevens at a loss as to its sincerity and how to respond (p. 4). He repeats Farraday's offer a further three times while mulling it over (pp. 10, 13, 20), and it is notable that it remains in quotation marks each time: Stevens is entirely incapable of synthesising this alien register into his own speech; any possibility of subverting it is therefore foreclosed.

If Stevens' *déformation professionnelle* is evident in his behaviour, it is also visible in its effects on the spaces in which he lives and works. For the butler, the lack of distinction between the personal and professional roles results in the conflation of the

domestic and professional spheres. Stevens' home, in other words, is also his place of work, and the area of Darlington Hall which is available to him as a private space is tiny: even his butler's pantry, which he describes as the 'one place in the house where privacy and solitude are guaranteed' is subsumed within his professional role, and he repeatedly rebuffs Miss Kenton's attempts to place flowers in the room, seeing it as 'imperative that all things in it are ordered' (pp. 173-4).

The conflation of domestic and professional space in *The Remains of the Day* has wider political implications. Bakhtin holds that public spaces are the sites of carnival and hence of subversive challenges to established forms of authority.³⁵ For Ishiguro, however, private, domestic spaces also play a crucial role in the process of questioning authority. Although lacking the demonstrative nature of carnival, the discussions around democracy that take place over dinner in *An Artist of the Floating World* and the tensions around new values and American influences that manifest themselves in exchanges in the garden and on the veranda are also a crucial part of social change and reconfiguration. In contrast, Stevens' lack of a genuinely domestic space, and the resulting lack of privacy, is in part responsible for his inability to challenge Darlington's decisions, or to question his own complicity with them.

More pertinently in terms of the relationship between power and visibility, Stevens states that 'the great decisions of this world are not, in fact, arrived at simply in the public chambers [...] rather, debates are conducted, and crucial decisions arrived at, in the privacy and calm of the great houses of this country' (p. 121). In other words, the conflation of the domestic and the professional in the form of Darlington's and others' amateur statesmanship contributes to the removal of the operation of power from the public sites in which the general public are able to participate.³⁶ In this light, Harry

³⁵ Bakhtin writes that the laughter of the rogue, clown and fool 'bears the stamp of the public square where the folk gather. They re-establish the public nature of the human figure [...] everything is brought out onto the square, so to speak; their entire function consists in externalizing things'. Sue Vice notes that Bakhtin emphasised the democratic aspects of carnival, which is 'the opposite of a time of terror and purges'. Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel', pp. 159-60; Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 153.

³⁶ As Ekelund notes, the activities of Lord Darlington bear a more than passing similarity to those of the so-called 'Cliveden set', a circle of establishment figures with the Astor family at its centre, operating outside democratic processes: Joachim von Ribbentrop and Oswald Mosley were both guests at Cliveden. Ekelund argues that debates surrounding the extent to which this group conspired to bypass democratic frameworks misses the point to some extent, quoting the Astors' biographer, Lucy Kavalier: 'They did not plot; they did not need to plot. They were the establishment'. Kavalier's observation suggests the way in which power operates through a blend of display and concealment, and Ishiguro returns to the way in which power can function to produce atrocity within plain sight of the general population in *Never Let Me Go*; I attend to this aspect of his work in Chapter Four. Ekelund, 'Complicitous Genres' (para. 21 of 55).

Smith's later assertion that 'no matter if you're rich or poor, you're born free so that you can express your opinion freely, and vote in your member of parliament or vote him out' appears to be somewhat naïve (p. 196).

Furthermore, in acknowledging that power operates out of sight of the majority of the country's citizens, Stevens indicates the ways in which display and concealment are crucial to the exercising of power, and it is in this that, through his role as a butler, he is most actively complicit in Darlington's anti-democratic manoeuvres. Ostentation is of course a necessary part of providing Darlington Hall with sufficient status to act as the venue for a number of conferences between the wars, and Stevens is particularly concerned with well-polished silver as 'a public index of a house's standards': he quotes Lady Astor as saying that the silver at Darlington Hall 'was probably unrivalled' (pp. 142-3). However, and perhaps more importantly, Stevens is also aware that display requires an element of concealment, noting the particular difficulty of finding the 'balance between attentiveness and the illusion of absence' required during the delicate and sometimes intimate exchanges between dignitaries, and by which 'the suspicion that one's presence is inhibiting the conversation' can be avoided (p. 75).

The insidious nature of Stevens' complicity can be seen when contrasted with the role of his brother, Leonard, who was killed on military service in South Africa, possibly during the Second Boer War.³⁷ The brothers' roles have in common an effacement of agency which, as David Luban argues, is inherently conservative: their ethics of professionalism rely on accepting the fundamental decency of the values and stations upon which they operate.³⁸ However, where Leonard's role as an instrument of military power used to inflict atrocity (he dies during a 'most un-British attack on civilian Boer settlements', p. 41) Stevens is implicated in forms of power exercised out of sight of the public, and hence beyond accountability. In arguing that, 'like dignity, bantering is subject to rules which serve to express or, more often, to conceal relations of power',³⁹ Susie O' Brien suggests that Stevens may not be any better off under the apparently liberal Farraday than he was serving Lord Darlington. The important part of O'Brien's observation in terms of my discussion of complicity is, however, the way in

³⁷ The Second Boer War was notable for British atrocities perpetrated against Boer civilians, including the use of concentration camps. Kenneth O. Morgan, 'The Boer War and the Media (1899-1902)', *Twentieth Century British History*, 13 (2002), 1-16 (p. 3).

³⁸ Luban, 'Stevens's Professionalism and Ours', p. 315.

³⁹ O'Brien, 'Serving a New World Order', p. 793.

which ritual structures of language secure adherence to certain modes of behaviour, while obscuring the agency by which this form of power operates.

Stevens is in fact expert in this type of concealment. At the outset of the novel, he is found devising a plan by which the appearance of grandeur can be maintained at Darlington Hall while working with only a skeleton staff. He does so by keeping the 'most attractive parts' operative, while the servants' quarters and other areas which can remain hidden are placed under dust sheets (p. 8). For all that this opening appears to be a relatively inconsequential indication of the declining status of Darlington Hall, Stevens is in fact putting into practice the habits acquired under Lord Darlington, and which contributed to the events of 'unimaginable largeness' at Darlington Hall in the interwar years.

The degree to which Stevens has mastered the balance between action and invisibility is indicated when, during one of the most sensitive gatherings at Darlington Hall, and despite its 'off the record' nature, Lord Darlington does not make any effort to conceal the identities of the guests from his butler, stating in fact that 'you can say anything in front of Stevens, I can assure you' (pp. 75-7). Although Stevens interprets this as praise, his invisibility, and the consequent trust placed in him by Lord Darlington, is in fact a result of his personality being almost entirely subsumed into his professional role, and hence into complicity with Darlington.

As the discussion above indicates, Stevens is similar to Ono in that his willingness to surrender a significant degree of agency ties him into ritualistic action, which can be repeated but cannot lead to any form of challenge or subversion of the dominant structures with which he is aligned. In addition, Stevens' narrative is similar to Ono's in that there is a gap between the high point of his career and the moment at which he writes. This gap opens up the possibility for a second form of complicity, that of the minimisation of events.

Minimisation: 'No Discernible Traces'

Stevens' desire for consolation means that his narrative is oriented towards the future, closing with his resolution to practise the skill of bantering 'with renewed effort' (p. 258)

shortly after having resolved to ‘adopt a more positive outlook and try to make the best of what remains of my day’ (p. 256). Stevens is therefore attempting to console himself through creating a narrative which focuses on a bright future; however, and in a similar way to Ono, consolation involves a minimisation of the uncomfortable aspects of his own past.

Stevens labours to create a sense of personal optimism without abandoning his professional values. However, and again in a way similar to Ono’s narrative, the tension between the mounting evidence of the misguided nature of his actions and the desire to create a sense of consolation results in an inconsistent and unreliable narrative. This is largely because, in Stevens’ career, the high point of his professionalism is also the high point of his complicity, evident in the sense of triumph he recalls in helping to facilitate a meeting between Darlington and the German ambassador, Joachim von Ribbentrop, in order to set up a meeting between Hitler and the King, describing it as ‘a sort of summary of all that I had come to achieve thus far in my life’ (pp. 238-9).

Stevens’ unreliability is most evident in the historical referents that are missing from his account, and these serve to indicate where he minimises his complicities. The war years, during which the extent of Darlington’s misguidedness would finally have become clear, are entirely absent, and the damning visits of Ribbentrop to Darlington Hall are presented as part of a general whirl of activity during the interwar years. When Stevens reflects on these visits, he does so in terms of justifying Darlington’s actions (and, by proxy, his own), claiming that many were taken in by Ribbentrop’s charm (pp. 144-5). However, Stevens fails to mention Ribbentrop’s implication in the Holocaust, or his execution as a war criminal.⁴⁰

Stevens’ omissions with regard to Ribbentrop are part of a more general failure to address the consequences, in the form of the Holocaust, of the anti-Semitism exhibited at one point by Darlington and with which he is complicit: although he is momentarily capable of making the connection between small-scale actions and wider consequences in the notion of ‘unimaginable largeness’, he generally fails to apply this

⁴⁰ The Nazi Foreign Ministry, under Ribbentrop in 1941 when the ‘Final Solution’ was put into operation, was responsible for deporting the Jewish population from the Reich to concentration camps. Michael Bloch notes that these deportations would have been impossible without Ribbentrop’s consent, but that he did his best to ‘look the other way’, ordering all communications on the matter to be sent directly to his deputy. Nevertheless, he was the first of the Nazi leadership to be executed following the Nuremberg trials, Hermann Goering having succeeded in avoiding execution by committing suicide. Michael Bloch, *Ribbentrop* (London: Bantam Press, 1992), pp. 353, 456.

concept to his own actions. In arguing that Stevens ‘could have comfortably worn a Nazi uniform’,⁴¹ Rothfork identifies a more general relationship between fascism and Stevens’ ethics of dignity and service. This lack of self-reflection is evident in Stevens satisfying himself with the assertion that Darlington ‘came to abhor anti-Semitism’ (p. 145) while remaining blithely capable of his own brand of racism, dismissing ‘continentals’ as being ‘incapable of the emotional restraint’ required of butlers, and suggesting that ‘the Celts’ are also ‘unable to control themselves in moments of strong emotion’ (p. 44).

Thus, while Stevens’ narrative contains glaring omissions, complicity as minimisation also occurs through his failure to draw out the connections between his small-scale contributions and the larger picture of history unfolding. Nazism is not the only force responsible for atrocity in *The Remains of the Day*, and, if Stevens’ portrait of England as pastoral and conservative erases industrial Britain from the landscape, his insular worldview is even less inclined to identify and reflect upon British culpability abroad. 1956, the year in which Stevens writes, is the year of the Suez crisis, and a number of responses to the novel have read *The Remains of the Day* in terms of postcolonial politics.⁴² However, despite his brother having been implicated in atrocities committed against Boer civilians, Stevens represents the empire as an abstract and benevolent entity. In differentiating his own generation of butlers from the previous one, he claims that he would consider it a ‘worthier calling’ to serve someone who had made a significant moral contribution: he cites a Mr. Gordon Ketteridge as an example of someone who ‘made an undeniable contribution to the future well-being of the empire’ (p. 120). In doing so, Stevens shows no indication that he is aware of the process of decolonisation taking place as he writes, or of the violence and structures of power involved in either the creation or dismantling of Britain’s empire.

In the omissions present in Stevens’ later representation of events, he is guilty of minimisation through narrative. However, there is a second aspect to this process of minimisation: in addition to omitting the historical referents that would implicate Stevens and Darlington in atrocity, he also effaces the agency by which these omissions take place, and thus presents his own narrative as one that is innocent of manipulation.

⁴¹ Rothfork, ‘Zen Comedy’ (para. 26 of 41).

⁴² Tamaya, for example, draws parallels between the master / servant dynamics and coloniser / colonised relationships of power. Tamaya, ‘The Empire Strikes Back’, p. 47.

In other words, the same balance between display and concealment that Stevens achieves in his running of Darlington Hall is also present in his narrative.

That such narrative manipulation may in fact be taking place is evident in the incongruity between Stevens' notion of dignity, elucidated so painstakingly throughout the narrative, and his inclusion of elements that undermine this quality in his self-representation. Dignity, for Stevens, is a matter of discretion, and is encapsulated by the apocryphal story told to him by his father, in which a butler serving his master in India enters the dining room shortly before dinner, only to find a tiger asleep under the table. Having discreetly asked for permission to use the shotguns, the butler is able shortly after to report that 'dinner will be served at the usual time [...] and there will be no discernible traces left of the recent occurrence by that time' (p. 37). There is, therefore, a significant degree of skill and art in concealment, and Stevens' apparent passivity is in fact an active, complex and ongoing set of machinations by which he covers over the evidence of his own actions. These qualities are also rehearsed in his description of the English countryside as a 'land [that] knows of its own beauty, or its own greatness, and feels no need to shout about it' (p. 29) and, more prosaically, in his suggestion that greatness 'comes down to not removing one's clothes in public' (p. 221).

The very construction of the narrative seems, however, to fly in the face of these values. Despite its use of features of the diary, Stevens' narrative is no private record, as it consistently interpellates an anticipated reader. Outwardly oriented, his text is a baring of the soul, and an attempt at self-justification, and as such it is inconsistent with his notion of dignity as achieved through undemonstrative service. This inconsistency may be seen as the result of the narrative straining under the demands of consolation and denial. However, there is a second possibility, which is that Stevens is more aware of the rhetorical impact of his narrative choices than he initially appears to be. The sequential entries into Stevens' travelogue as his journey progresses provide the appearance of relative spontaneity, within which revisions and digressions inevitably take place. Yet the order in which Stevens introduces crucial pieces of information into this form should give us pause for thought. Christine Berberich argues that close examination of the information that Stevens reveals regarding the conferences held at Darlington Hall reveals that his 'often repeated mantra that he has no political opinion or knowledge is incorrect. He knows and always knew what was going on around

him'.⁴³ It is also notable that, despite the appearance of the narrative being structured according to the associations prompted by Stevens' recollections, he seems to delay the inclusion of emotive signifiers until late enough in the narrative that some of their shock is diminished: Nazis, Nuremburg, Mosley and the British Union of Fascists are only referred to by name past the half-way point of the novel (pp. 145-6).

This possibility that the narrative is a product of Stevens' deliberate and conscious emplotment is explored by Meghan Marie Hammond, who identifies a knowingness in his account. She argues that, in his representation of his father's death, Stevens 'is cognizant of his story's emotional weight, and he aims to convey it [...] he carefully narrates this scene to defend himself precisely as the kind of butler who is able to maintain his dignity in any situation, despite being a caring son underneath'.⁴⁴ Such a reading is supported by Stevens' representation of the incident. He reports, without further reflection, that Lord Darlington's reaction to seeing him is to say: 'You look as though you're crying'. He then records his own stoical reaction ('I'm very sorry, sir. The strains of a hard day'), and the lack of commentary on the reported events produces the illusion of their direct transcription. Given Stevens' penchant for extensive elaboration on most other aspects of his narrative, his use of direct speech and inference at this point are not typical, and the representation of this episode can therefore be seen as a piece of skilful editing on his part (p. 110).

The suspicion that Stevens is actually shaping his narrative to rhetorical ends is heightened by the later display of emotion that follows his meeting with Miss Kenton near the end of the novel. On the pier at Weymouth, having found an interlocutor in the form of another butler, he again opts for inference over exposition as a means of revealing his tears, reporting the following exchange verbatim:

'Goodness knows, I've tried and tried, but it's no use. I've given what I had to give. I gave it all to Lord Darlington.'

'Oh dear mate. Here, do you want a hankie? I've got one somewhere. Here we are. It's fairly clean. Just blew my nose on it this morning, that's all. Have a go, mate' (p. 255).

⁴³ Berberich, 'England's Traumatic Past', p. 124

⁴⁴ Hammond, 'The Ethics of Genre', p. 101.

Stevens generally favours lengthy exposition as a narrative mode, and appears to be something of an ingénue with regard to understanding the rules of narrative elsewhere, to the extent that he fails to console his own father on his death bed or to respond appropriately to Miss Kenton's romantic advances. Yet here, the inclusion of his interlocutor's production of a snot-stained handkerchief, a detail which provides a finishing touch of pathos to the scene while allowing the inference of his tears to be made, is a remarkable feat of narrative economy. David Lodge argues that Stevens' 'butlerspeak' has 'no literary merit whatsoever', and I concur that Stevens' constipated version of English is 'completely lacking in wit, sensuousness and originality'.⁴⁵ However, as the example cited here suggests, Stevens possesses a significant degree of literary skill in the way that the apparent spontaneity of his narrative and his tactical inclusions of direct speech combine to produce a rhetoric of emotional honesty.⁴⁶

Stevens' narrative has the appearance of a flawed transcription of events, his unwillingness to admit his own mistakes creating a degree of unreliability in his representation. However, I suggest that Stevens' use of an apparently spontaneous and emotionally frank frame narrative in fact conceals the knowing and deliberate rhetorical workings of his narrative through a two-fold act of minimisation: not only does Stevens edit out key episodes of his complicity with Darlington, but he also obscures the agency by which these omissions take place. To take such a reading to the extreme, when Stevens sits on the pier contemplating the remains of his day, the appearance of a conveniently sympathetic interlocutor in the shape of another butler is also suspicious. This is the perfect interlocutor for Stevens to round off his tale: a fellow butler is the only person with whom he can achieve the double consolation he needs in both personal and professional terms, unburdening himself emotionally without having to abandon the professional values to which he has clung throughout his working life. I have suggested that Ishiguro's narrators tend to project their desires onto the past in order to create their narratives of consolation; Stevens' encounter with another individual so similar to himself can be read as a manifestation of this tendency which breaks the realist rules of the narrative by introducing an invented interlocutor.

⁴⁵ David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Vintage, 2011), p. 155.

⁴⁶ This echoes the discussion in my introduction of the way in which testimonial genres employ a literary 'rhetoric of fact'; in *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens' creates a rhetoric of emotional honesty by means of an apparently testimonial narrative. This itself of course operates within a frame that is signalled as being fictional by its paratexts.

It is not possible to close with any certainty on a reading of Stevens. The effect of acknowledging the possibility of the reading posited above, however, has a similar effect on the text as I have argued exists with regard to *Austerlitz*: a spectrum of readings of the principal character are possible, and recognising this spectrum prompts fundamental questions regarding the ontological status of both the characters and the narrative. If we read Stevens sympathetically, and take his breaking heart on trust, we do so on the basis of reading his narrative as a more or less spontaneous and unmediated reaction to these events. However, if we identify in the narrative a sense of its being the product of a conscious process of emplotment, a carefully crafted story designed to elicit the desired emotional response, then the form of the narrative itself appears as a fiction, a simulation of unmediated emotional honesty employed to rhetorical ends.

The ontological uncertainty produced by the readings of Stevens that I have posited above encourages re-reading and re-interpretation of the novel. As such, I suggest that *The Remains of the Day*, like *An Artist of the Floating World*, offers the reader the possibility of consolation but ultimately warns against such an interpretive closure in favour of a sustained and critical relationship with the text.

Reading as Complicity: Bantering and Democracy

The butler on Weymouth pier speaks nostalgically of ‘*those days*’ (p. 254), creating a sense of similarity between the two men, and also a sense of difference between that era and the present. To what extent this distance produces critical interpretations is, as I suggest in this final section, one of the key questions raised by re-readings of *The Remains of the Day*. The novel provides ample scope for the reader to enter into a complicitous relationship with Stevens’ narrative but, as I have suggested with regard to *An Artist of the Floating World*, Ishiguro warns against reading as consolation, suggesting instead that interpretation should take place from a more uncomfortable position.

The possibility of the reader’s complicity arises as a result of two aspects of Stevens’ narrative. The first of these is the temporal distance between the reader and the moment at which Stevens writes. The content of his recollections straddles the upheavals of the Second World War and resulting transformations in England, and

hence sets up a series of implied oppositions. Stevens remains aligned with the pre-war values of service and related rigid and ritualistic behaviour, and as such is a 'walking anachronism'.⁴⁷ In opposition to these values are Mr. Farraday's bantering and the right to free expression exercised by Harry Smith and the other citizens that Stevens encounters in post-war England. Furthermore, the political implications of these oppositions are made apparent: in contrast to the democracy of bantering, the ethics of service are implicated in atrocity both in the cases of Leonard's participation in attacks on Boer civilians, and in the relationship between fascism and Stevens' and Darlington's adherence to hierarchy. For the reader to be dissimilar to Stevens is therefore to be distanced from the rigidity of service and from the politics of fascism. However, in a similar way to the consolation offered by *An Artist of the Floating World*, such a closure may cause the reader to fail to acknowledge the interests of the present in interpreting the past.

Secondly, the reader may be tempted into complicity with Stevens' point of view through the form of the novel, specifically through the interplay of genres. Ekelund notes that *The Remains of the Day* consists of a combination of five genres, these being travelogue, political memoir, the country house romance, farce, and the essay on values.⁴⁸ Of these, the principal is travelogue, and it is the precedence of this genre that has the potential to produce a form of complicity in the reader. The principal status of travelogue is established through the narrative being set in motion by Stevens' decision to undertake his journey to Cornwall, and through the frame narrative therefore being the record of his progress, as signalled by the dated entries which also give his location. The other genres arise incidentally as a result of Stevens' digressions and, in the case of farce, accidentally: given his concern for dignity, it seems unlikely that he intends the narrative to be read as such. Furthermore, the ending of the novel offers a sense of personal closure. In consoling Miss Kenton, assuring her that she and Mr Benn have 'some extremely happy years' in front of them (p. 252), even as his own romantic hopes are dashed, Stevens finally manages to speak in a voice that is a reflection of his interior life, breaking out of the frozen linguistic structures dictated by the rituals of service, and in doing so securing a degree of the reader's sympathy. Stevens' consolation of Miss Kenton therefore also acts as his own: his lesson learnt, Stevens

⁴⁷ John P. McCombe, 'The End of (Anthony) Eden: Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and Midcentury Anglo-American Tensions', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 48 (2002), 77-99 (p. 91).

⁴⁸ Ekelund, 'Complicitous Genres' (para. 10 of 55).

returns to Darlington Hall sadder and wiser, determined to redouble his efforts at bantering and at finding the human warmth that lies therein.

This sense of closure seems to complete the narrative; by this I mean not only that Stevens' act of writing comes to an end, but that, in the act of reading, the need for further interpretation seems to cease. The primacy of the travelogue genre means that the end of Stevens' journey offers interpretive closure in personal terms for him. Yet the sense of personal closure also results in the political elements of the other, contributory genres being de-emphasised: the problematic aspects of Stevens' discourse on values and the glaring omissions in the sections that recall political memoir are in danger of being forgotten as a result of the narrative offering consolation in personal terms.

The Remains of the Day may therefore result in reading as a form of consolation: if we define ourselves in terms of difference from Stevens, and accept narrative closure in terms of his determination to spend the rest of his days in amiable peace, this reading produces an interpretation that sees all as being well in a post-war world where the democracy of bantering has replaced the fascism of duty and service. Ekelund complains that whatever reflexivity is present in *The Remains of the Day* is not enough to save it from a somewhat smug historical perspective that functions as a minimisation of history.⁴⁹ However, I defend *The Remains of the Day* on the grounds that, while the novel appears to offer consolation on the grounds of Stevens' personal resolutions, Ishiguro in fact warns against such a reading. He does so through two aspects of the text, the first of which is indeterminacy around both the status of Stevens' narrative and the historical moment at which key events take place at Darlington Hall, and the second of which is the way in which Stevens' narrative becomes visible as inscription.

The reader may find consolation as a result of a clear opposition between 'then' and 'now', and through the wisdom of hindsight by which the protagonists' mistakes are clear to see. However, as David Luban notes, hindsight may encourage too-hasty judgements on their actions. He pinpoints 1923, the year of the international conference hosted by Darlington, as 'a fateful moment for Europe', describing in detail the financial and political upheavals taking place at that moment, which included the German default on reparations payments, the subsequent French occupation of the

⁴⁹ Ekelund's accusations are primarily levelled at *The Remains of the Day*, but are part of a more general attack on 'historiographical metafiction', which he contrasts unfavourably questioning of narrative form undertaken by Nathalie Sarraute and Jean-Paul Sartre in the 1950s (para. 47 of 55).

Rhineland, hyperinflation, and the rapid growth of the National Socialist Party under Hitler. On this basis, Luban speculates that, ‘if the Allies had revised the Treaty of Versailles and relieved the German agony, it is possible that Hitler would have remained a fringe politician forever’. This being the case, he suggests that ‘Ishiguro set his imaginary peace conference in 1923 precisely because he wanted to choose a time when Lord Darlington’s “amateurism” may have been right’.⁵⁰ Darlington’s later actions, notably his dismissal of the Jewish maids and his involvement with Oswald Mosley, strip him (and by implication, Stevens) of much of the sympathy that his well-intentioned efforts in 1923 elicit. Yet recognising the other potential outcomes of his ill-fated conference produces the realisation that, while judgement on the 1956 Stevens may appear to be straightforward, a judgement on the 1923 butler involves a retrospective imposition of the values of the present (themselves in part defined by the events of 1923) onto what was in fact a liminal period.⁵¹

More importantly in terms of warning the reader off interpreting the novel in consoling terms is the visibility of Stevens’ narrative as an act of inscription. If the realisation produced by Luban’s interpretation indicates that the large-scale, recognisable historical referents in the novel are coloured by the interests of the present, the smaller scale incidents of the novel are also subject to the same type of distortion. The action of the present on the past as it appears in Stevens’ representation is evident in the revisions that occur as he writes. I have argued that the dated sections of *An Artist of the Floating World* serve to foreground the process of inscription, and this is true to an even greater degree in *The Remains of the Day*. This is partly due to the sections being shorter and chronologically closer, with Stevens writing twice a day in some cases. Moreover, the impression of the narrative as a spontaneous record is heightened by Stevens’ tendency to begin these sections in the present tense and by making reference to the location at which he writes, before shifting into the past tense at the point when he begins his recollections. Thus, he begins the account of the first section

⁵⁰ Luban, ‘Stevens’s Professionalism and Ours’, p. 310.

⁵¹ The inter-war period has been used as an exemplar of a liminal period. Arpad Szakolczai notes that the danger of liminality is that, where there is no established form of authority to orchestrate transition, the potential exists for power to be appropriated by malevolent agents. In folklore, the figure of the trickster often takes advantage of liminality to usurp power, but Szakolczai argues that the ‘trickster’ politicians of the twentieth century, Mussolini, Hitler, Lenin and Stalin, also understood this potential of liminality. Stevens in fact describes Ribbentrop in precisely these terms, stating that ‘it is, of course, generally accepted today that Herr Ribbentrop was a trickster’ (p. 144). Arpad Szakolczai, ‘Liminality and Experience: Structuring Transitory Situations and Transformative Events’, *International Political Anthropology*, 2 (2009), 141-72 (p. 157).

of his journey with the words ‘tonight, I find myself here in a guest house in the city of Salisbury’ (p. 23), and while waiting to meet Miss Kenton he records that ‘at this moment, I am sitting in the dining hall of the Rose Garden Hotel having recently finished lunch’ (p. 215). In opening the final section of his reflections, his statement that ‘it is now fully two days since my meeting with Miss Kenton’ (p. 244) both signals the act of writing in the present while the (comparatively) long pause of two days between the events of the journey and his recording of them suggests the emotional turmoil that these have entailed.

This tendency lends the narrative the impression of immediacy which, as I have noted above, is called into question by the evidence of Stevens’ emplotment of events. Although it is not possible to determine the extent to which Stevens deliberately manipulates the narrative, the fact that he does so produces an awareness of the narrative as the result of an act of inscription. This awareness is heightened by the way that the diary form makes visible the reinterpretations present in Stevens’ narrative. These reinterpretations are most obvious in his re-reading of Miss Kenton’s letter at various points on his journey. For example, in Salisbury, Stevens writes that, ‘now, in these quiet moments as I wait for the world about to awake, I find myself going over in my mind again passages from Miss Kenton’s letter’. His reading at this moment, in which he is forced to admit that ‘she does not at any point in her letter state explicitly her desire to return’ to Darlington Hall (p. 46) is a revision of his first description of it, in which he claims that it contains ‘distinct hints of her desire to return’ (p. 10). These revisions continue as Stevens re-reads at various points on his journey, with his later recognition that ‘there is nothing stated specifically in Miss Kenton’s letter [...] to indicate unambiguously her desire to return to her former position’ (p. 149) perhaps being the point at which the realisation takes place, for the reader, that Miss Kenton’s possible return is, in fact, a projection of Stevens’ wishes onto her missive.

The travelogue form of Stevens’ narrative is not therefore, written from a single and stable present. Each new present of the narrative retrospectively creates new pasts which can only be read in the light of the more recent inscriptions. The projection of Stevens’ desire to justify his actions and to console himself is evident in his account of his life, but also evident is his interpretation of the past, not as a process completed prior to the act of inscription, but as inseparable from and changing with it. The boundaries between thinking (as interpretation), reading and writing therefore collapse to an extent,

and create a recognition that, in this particular textual mediation, the present is – and can be seen to be – always in dialogue with the past.

The realisation breaks down the apparent distance between Stevens and the reader which is set up by the oppositions between then and now, ritual and bantering, fascism and democracy, and which situates Stevens as object and elevates the reader to the position of subject, from where judgement may be passed on the novel's protagonists. Stevens' flawed act – or, more accurately, acts – of inscription are also acts of reading and interpretation, and therefore of the same nature as the reader's engagement with his text.

CONCLUSION

Felman suggests that a view of the present which 'denies [...] the implications of the past' is one which gives rise to complicity in the years following atrocity;⁵² consolation, as a perspective that attempts to minimise rupture and disappointment, functions as complicity in the narratives of Ono and Stevens, and also potentially in the interpretation of those narratives on the part of readers who come decades after the represented events. Ishiguro, I have argued, pushes us away from this mind set in *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day* and towards a mode of reading that remains attentive to the potential for the writing and interpretation of narrative to act as a denial of the past and its implications in the present. As such, he encourages reading as a critical process, and one which ultimately contributes to an ethical mode of witnessing.

I have cited Felman in the introduction to this thesis as arguing that fiction, as an imaginative medium, has a role to play in bearing witness to unimaginable extremities. However, the actions of Ono and Stevens are all too imaginable: they are not subject to the limit-case experiences of victims of atrocity, and their complicity takes place through the too-rigid performance of their professional roles. The unimaginable in these novels is not so much that which is so extreme as to be beyond description, but, as Stevens' evocation of the 'unimaginable largeness' of the consequences of small actions suggests, the difficulty arises in envisaging the consequences of such actions. Neither

⁵² Felman, 'Camus' *The Fall*, p. 178.

Ono nor Stevens possesses the inclination, will, or courage to employ imagination of this nature: they are capable only of inventing for themselves alternative pasts, in which their culpability is edited out.

Readings of Ono and Stevens may produce a degree of ontological uncertainty with regard to the status of their narratives, but Ishiguro's novels from *The Unconsoled* onwards employ imaginative forms more explicitly: Patricia Waugh contrasts the 'more conventional realist detail of the unreliable narrators' of *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day* with the 'emotionally projected and expressionist and strangely hyper-reflexive landscapes of the later novels'.⁵³ In *The Unconsoled* and *When We Were Orphans*, the projection of the protagonists' desires onto their narratives warps their accounts to the extent that they no longer follow even an ostensibly realist logic, while in *Never Let Me Go*, the historical backdrop upon which realism relies is removed. These anti-realist tendencies are at their strongest in *The Unconsoled* with the narrator, Ryder, able to read the thoughts of others and to report directly on events at which he is not present. Although *When We Were Orphans* steps back from such an extreme transgression of realism, it does employ similar strategies in its latter stages, and the result is ontological uncertainty around the status of the narrative. *Never Let Me Go* returns to a narrative voice that is more logically consistent in realist terms, but in contrast to Ishiguro's early novels this is employed against an explicitly imaginative field in the form of a fictional and dystopian England.

Chapter Four therefore examines the use of these imaginative forms, and the ways in which they address the notion of complicity. Atrocity is absent from *The Unconsoled* and as such I omit it from this discussion. However, the use of more transparently fictional forms in *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go* are, as I argue in what follows, related to the ethics of seeing and imagination and in particular to how failures to see imaginatively or differently may lead to atrocity.

⁵³ Patricia Waugh, 'Kazuo Ishiguro's Not-Too-Late Modernism', in *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, ed. by Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 13-30 (pp. 26-7).

CHAPTER 4. IMAGINED WORLDS: *WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS* AND *NEVER LET ME GO*

INTRODUCTION

In my conclusion to Chapter Three, I have suggested that *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go* move away from the realist mode employed in *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*. Reading the narratives of Ono and Stevens requires negotiation between a consistent, historical backdrop and an unreliable inscription that represents the protagonist's role within this setting. As such, the projection of the narrators' desires onto their stories, in the form of denials, obfuscations and revisions, can therefore be seen in primarily negative terms, and, I have argued, as forms of complicity. *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go* make use of more nakedly fictional forms, dispensing with the realist backdrop that exists in the earlier works, but the effect of this is to complicate the role of fiction.

In particular, the more fantastic aspects of these narratives establish a conflict between consoling fantasies and harsh reality. However, unlike the implicit but clear condemnation of consolation in the earlier texts, *When We Were Orphans* and *Never Let Me Go* are much more ambivalent. The reason for this is that both Banks and Kathy are more sinned against than sinning and, where Ono and Stevens tend towards fantasy in search of exculpation and denial, Banks and Kathy do so in an attempt to recoup that which they have lost: Banks still seeks his parents, years after their disappearance, and Kathy desperately tries to maintain the bonds between her surrogate family, the clones educated at Hailsham, in the face of their inevitable dissolution at the hands of the organ donation programme.

However, despite the sympathies that we might have for Banks and Kathy, their attempts to recover or sustain these relationships reveal a second contrast present in both novels. This is conflict between care, predicated on empathy, for one's immediate associates (friends, family, and lovers) and for those beyond this immediate horizon of concern. In the economy of both texts, care for one party always seems to come at the expense of empathy elsewhere, and the attempts of Banks and Kathy to sustain or recover their relationships often contain, and sometimes mask, a marked indifference to

others. To an extent, this is an unavoidable result of the systems with which the protagonists are engaged, and this is the starting point for my discussion of both texts. With regard to *When We Were Orphans*, I begin with Alyn Webley's identification of double-binds whereby economic and colonial systems ensnare subjects in their oppressive agendas;⁵⁴ building on this, I suggest that Ishiguro subverts the genre of classic detective fiction by representing crime without locus or perpetrator, therefore denying his protagonist the possibility of a solving that crime or bringing its culprits to justice. In discussing *Never Let Me Go*, I use Anne Whitehead's identification of the entanglement of care and complicity in the organ donation programme,⁵⁵ arguing that the forms of oppression which secure the clones' victimhood are normalised, foreclosing any attempts at resistance or rebellion.

In this chapter, I also argue that there is a close relationship between the protagonists' empathic failings, and their failures to bear witness to much of the suffering present in the represented worlds. Bearing witness requires seeing and telling, and Banks and Kathy fail on both counts. A concern with failures to see is evident in both novels, with Banks' myopia figured through his incongruous use of a magnifying glass, and with the sites of the organ donation programme present in plain sight, but unseen, a symptom of the normalisation of atrocity in *Never Let Me Go*.

In the final section of my discussion of each text, I return to the question of the complicity of the reader. As in *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro's use of genre creates the potential for complicit readings. In *When We Were Orphans*, I suggest that this possibility is less pronounced than in the other of Ishiguro's texts under discussion here, but that the denouement characteristic of classic detective fiction, present in a twisted form, offers a similar form of closure to the consolation offered by Ono and Stevens; as in those texts, I suggest that Ishiguro leads us away from such a readings. Similarly, in *Never Let Me Go*, the form of the text has the potential to trick the reader into the same failings as both Kathy and the 'normals' who manage and perpetuate the organ donation programme in that narrow empathy may result in blindness elsewhere.

⁵⁴ Webley, 'Double Binds'.

⁵⁵ Whitehead, 'Writing with Care'.

WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS

Complicity: Double-Binds

When We Were Orphans is narrated by the detective Christopher Banks. His story begins with his rise to prominence in London during the 1930s, before turning back to his childhood in Shanghai. Raised in the comfortable surroundings in the International Settlement, the idyll of Banks' childhood is shattered by the disappearance of his father, followed by that of his mother shortly after. Their disappearance continues to obsess Banks, and as a result he returns to Shanghai in 1937, in order to find and rescue them, just as the invading Japanese forces step up their incursions into Shanghai. Banks fails in this mission, having been following the wrong leads all along, and in the final, brief section of the narrative, written in 1958, Banks reflects on his recent visit to his mother, who has finally been located in Hong Kong.

Ishiguro's use of a detective as a narrator, and his adaptation of the traits of classic detective fiction, have a number of implications with regard to witnessing and complicity, and I discuss these below. Before doing so, it is worth outlining some of the characteristics of what is usually referred to as 'classic detective fiction'. Lee Horsley identifies the detective as a being engaged in a rational 'interpretive quest', during which his skills of problem solving are tested, and usually win out, as a result of which the identity of the perpetrator and the manner of the crime are identified. Such stories rely on the detective's absence from the crime itself, with the task of detection being one of reading indices of events as clues.⁵⁶ Furthermore, as Tobias Döring argues, classic detective fiction is ideologically conservative: the role of the detective is primarily 'restorative', and the restoration of order can only be seen as a positive thing if the order to be restored is itself seen as benevolent.⁵⁷ It also has a relationship with colonialism, with the East functioning as a 'training ground' for English gentleman detectives.⁵⁸ Finally, and significantly for the role of the detective as witness and testifier, Döring argues that 'the classic detective is [...] a master story teller', with the

⁵⁶ Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 4, 13.

⁵⁷ Döring, 'Sherlock Holmes - He Dead', p. 61.

⁵⁸ Döring, 'Sherlock Holmes - He Dead', p. 75.

revelatory climax of the tale itself being the detective's story of how he was able to piece together the trail of evidence which led to the perpetrator.⁵⁹

Christopher Banks would clearly like to fit the classic detective mould. His schoolmates mock him for wanting to 'be a Sherlock', and this teasing culminates in him being presented with a magnifying glass on his birthday (pp. 8-10). However, despite the mockery intended by the present, Banks in fact employs it as a tool to great effect in the early part of his career although, as I argue in the second section of my discussion of *When We Were Orphans*, it increasingly becomes a symbol of his myopia as large scale events engulf him in Shanghai.

In the classical mould, the detective can therefore be seen as a belated witness to the evidence of a crime, rather than to the crime itself.⁶⁰ Furthermore, his testimony is an expression of rational thought through causal narrative, which serves to bring about justice and in doing so the restoration of a benign order. However, Ishiguro subverts almost all of the defining characteristics of the detective given above in *When We Were Orphans* and he does so, I suggest, in ways that call into question the notion that crime always has a specific and identifiable locus and perpetrator.

Banks provides scant details of the cases that make his name. Despite referring to the 'self-evident brilliance' of his investigation of 'the Mannering case' (p. 20), he fails to elaborate on the nature of this investigation, and the details of the 'Trevor Richardson affair' (p. 9), the 'Roger Parker case' (p. 29) and 'the Studley Grange business' (p. 31) are similarly hinted at without being disclosed in any detail. The use of names as metonymies for these crimes as well as for the whole process of detection and, presumably, judicial trial, indicates the way in which Banks sees these crimes in relation to the world. By reducing the crimes to names and places, they seem to exist in isolation, and as blemishes on an otherwise ordered world. This worldview is further suggested by Banks' recollections of the Studley Grange case where, in a rare passage revealing details of an investigation, he describes examining the pond in which the body of the victim, Charles Emery, was found. The pond is situated in a walled garden, which Banks describes as being so enclosed as to resemble 'a roofless prison cell', and he conducts his investigations on his hands and knees, employing his magnifying glass in

⁵⁹ Döring, 'Sherlock Holmes - He Dead', p. 60.

⁶⁰ The detective's detachment therefore stands in contrast with Laub's conception of bearing witness 'to oneself within the experience'. Laub, 'An Event Without a Witness', p. 75.

order to examine the slabs around the pond in microscopic detail (p 31). This scene would belong in classic detective fiction, and this is perhaps how Banks would like to view the crimes scenes that he attends: they are isolated aberrations, almost hermetically sealed off from the rest of society (their impact on the surrounding community notwithstanding), and detectable and solveable as discrete units in time and space.

However, the difficulties of sustaining a view of crimes as isolated incidents are indicated by Sarah Hemmings' comments on the effects of Charles Emery's murder on the inhabitants of the village of Shackton, when she claims that the whole village has 'started to rot' and that the murder has 'dragged them down into a mire of suspicion' (p. 33). The imagery that she employs suggests that the crime may have a pervasive influence, and she is not alone in mixing metaphors which evoke spread and contagion with those that cling to the notion of crimes and criminals as definitively identifiable and locatable. Thus, despite Banks' success in the Studley Grange case, from this point onwards this notion of crimes as discrete entities is repeatedly problematized, and eventually dismantled.

This problematisation is often conducted through the protagonists' confusion regarding the nature of evil. Banks, for example, speaks of his intention as a young man 'to combat evil – in particular, evil of the insidious, furtive kind' (p. 21). Yet the sense persists that the perpetrators of 'evil' are identifiable and that their apprehension will result in the alleviation of more pervasive ills. Sir Cecil Medhurst thus speaks vaguely of 'evil ones' who 'corrupt' and 'run rings' round 'your ordinary decent citizen' before praising Banks as someone 'who'll spot their game quickly, destroy the fungus before it takes hold and spreads' (pp. 43-4). Similarly, Canon Morley speaks of the 'heart' of the crisis, and identifies the 'eye of the storm' as being Shanghai while also alluding to the potential for pervasion, claiming that it has the potential 'to spread its poison over the years even further across the world, right through our civilization' (p. 138). Even more confused in finding figures of speech for perpetration is the police inspector who speaks of the need to 'fight the serpent' which, he suggests, 'is a beast with many heads. You cut one head off, three more will grow in its place'; he eventually resolves the quandary posed by this metaphor by deciding on attacking its heart: 'why waste precious time wrestling with its many heads? I'd go this day to where the heart of the serpent lies and slay the thing once and for all before ... before ...' (pp. 135-6).

The confusion evident in these examples is perhaps understandable in that this is a world where a detective with a magnifying glass is expected, through his microscopic investigations, to identify the causes of crime, but where the causes of suffering are in fact manifestly revealed to operate on vast, societal scales and to be systemic as much as they are individual. Banks' behaviour, itself typical of classic detective fiction, is geared towards restoring the order which has been disrupted by isolated incidences of crime. However, that his mode of operation is helpless when dealing with suffering which results from systemic oppression, rather than individual acts of evil, is encapsulated by the 'crime' at the centre of the story of the Banks family, which is that of opium trading. Mass opium addiction among the Chinese population is alluded to frequently in Banks' narrative, and is shown to be responsible for widespread suffering and poverty. Banks' father is an employee of Morganbrook and Byatt, one of the largest companies involved in the opium trade, and the family's involvement results in a number of other crimes that affect them on an individual level: the attempts of Diana Banks and Uncle Philip to fight the opium trade eventually result in the latter being coerced into acting as a double agent for the Chinese government, and in the former's abduction at the hands of the Chinese warlord Wang Ku.

The locus of the perpetration of opium trading is particularly slippery, to the point that it always recedes from being definitively identified. Banks recalls how his mother, Diana, waged a crusade against opium during his childhood. He recalls her painting Morganbrook and Byatt, her husband's company, in unequivocally villainous terms, rehearsing her arguments at tea parties organised for wives of employees of the company. Banks summarises her argument as being that 'the British in general, and the company of Morganbrook and Byatt especially, by importing Indian opium into China in such massive quantities had brought untold misery and degradation to a whole nation', and Diana Banks employs a rhetoric of morality to make her case, speaking of 'scruples' and 'conscience', labelling the actions of the company as 'un-Christian and un-British' (pp. 60-1).

However, for all that Diana Banks' arguments seem to carry undeniable moral force, and that her husband's objections that the issue is 'not so simple' (p. 70) appear weak and evasive, there is in fact some truth in his defence. The complexity of the situation is revealed when Philip describes how he and Diana realised that the financial and colonial interests of the British firms would cause them to be intransigent towards

the moral arguments against the trade: he reports that ‘the country could be run virtually like a colony, but with none of the usual obligations’ (p. 288). As a result, they turned to the Chinese warlords in control of the territories through which the opium travelled. Some, such as Wang Ku, began to seize the opium shipments for themselves; the Nationalists under Chiang also sought to profit from the trade, causing Philip initially to align himself with the communists: as Philip states, ‘the trade had simply passed into different hands’ (p. 293).⁶¹

Even the crime itself does not remain a stable entity. On his return to Asia in 1958, Banks reports, second-hand, that ‘much of the poverty – and also the opium addiction against which my mother battled so hard – has receded significantly under the communists’. However, his conclusion that ‘it would certainly appear that communism has been able to achieve in a handful of years what philanthropy and ardent campaigning could not in decades’ (p. 300) is naïve. Opium addiction, as Philip is aware, is a tool of power and, while it had been significantly reduced by 1958, this is also precisely the historical moment at which other forms of oppression had replaced it: Mao Zedong, having consolidated his power in the relatively young People’s Republic of China, began to implement policies that resulted in political repression, crushing poverty, and mass starvation.⁶²

The messiness of the alliances and complicities involved in the opium trade becomes visible in Philip’s tale. Philip explicitly punctures the myth of classic detective fiction towards the end of the novel, scorning Banks’ concerns as being limited to ‘stolen jewels [and] aristocrats murdered for their inheritance’ (p. 294). It is

⁶¹ Although the fact is not mentioned in the novel, the invading Japanese also became involved, trading with the Chinese even as the invasion into the mainland progressed. Cheng, *The Margin Without Centre*, p. 114.

⁶² The Communist regime under Mao all but eradicated opium addiction through a mixture of law enforcement measures, education, and rehabilitation. However, the forms of power established in the early years of Mao’s regime also gave rise to the perpetration of other forms of oppression. 1957 saw the first of Mao’s great purges. He inaugurated the ‘Hundred Flowers Campaign’ in the hope of stimulating the country’s demoralised intellectuals, speaking of ‘letting a hundred flowers bloom’ in the humanities and ‘a hundred schools of thought contend’ in the sciences. Intellectuals responded accordingly, using what they believed to be a genuine invitation to freedom of expression to criticise the ruling Communist Party. The backlash was swift in coming, with over 300,000 intellectuals labelled as ‘rightists’, effectively bringing their careers to an end, with many sentenced to work in labour camps or spells in prison and, in a few cases, executed. Worse was to follow, however, with the catastrophic ‘Great Leap Forward’. The introduction of communal farms in 1958, combined with ill-conceived attempts to boost steel production through the use of ‘back yard furnaces’, resulted in the destruction of the social fabric of Chinese peasant society and a famine which resulted in the deaths of an estimated 20 million people. In 1963, at the end of the Great Leap Forward, the median age of death in China was 9.7 years of age. Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York and London: Norton, 1999), pp. 493, 536-53.

significant that this dismissal is part of the novel's denouement, at which point the unfolding of the story is not given to the private detective (Banks), but to a double agent (Philip): Ishiguro seems to suggest that the supposed objectivity of the investigator is hopelessly detached from the reality of the situation, and the only witness with sufficient knowledge to produce the narrative of the crime is one whose betrayals grant him access to all sides of the story. Moreover, while Philip's denouement ties up a number of loose ends, in terms of identifying the perpetrators of opium trading, all that becomes clear is the difficulty of locating the site of the crime: its eradication at one locus only leads to its being profited from in a different place and by a different body. Webley and others identify the colonial politics of the text, discussing the politics of exploitation of the Chinese at the hands of the British and other colonial powers.⁶³ However, to speak of 'Chinese' and 'British' identities as pre-given is to miss the way in which identity can be broken down and individuals bought or bound into complicity with other structures of power.

This complexity of alliances means that avoiding any sort of complicity is all but impossible. As Alyn Webley notes, the Banks' attachment to Morganbrook and Byatt is one of a number of double binds that operate within *When We Were Orphans*, and which leave the protagonists no ethical route of escape from impossible choices. Not only does the company provide the comfortable lifestyle to which the Banks family is accustomed, but they are trapped in Shanghai by his father's role because he is, in fact, a professional servant. The Banks' house and the majority of its possessions belong to the company, and when Banks overhears his father saying 'without the firm, we're simply stranded' (p. 86), this also indicates that the Banks' complicity with the opium trade is secured by economic necessity: as Webley argues, the family have 'been "shanghaied" into the service of imperialism at its most destructive and corrupt'.⁶⁴

Webley identifies a number of other double-binds at work in the novel. Although some are relatively inconsequential, centring on minor conflicts within the Banks family, in other cases they work on a societal level. As Webley notes, in the case of opium addiction, a double-bind works as a form of colonial control: the poverty of the Chinese population combined with the importation of opium created the conditions

⁶³ Tobias Döring also examines the (post)colonial politics of *When We Were Orphans*, albeit with a greater focus on the detective fiction genre than the subject matter discussed here. Döring, 'Sherlock Holmes - He Dead'.

⁶⁴ Webley, 'Double Binds', p. 198.

for mass addiction. The likelihood of addiction was, in turn, used as a justification for refusing to take on Chinese employees, hence perpetuating the cycle of poverty.⁶⁵ The activities of Morganbrook and Byatt therefore allow imperial power to be perpetuated under the guise of paternalistic care for those who have in fact been reduced to a state of helplessness by mercantile colonialism.

Webley suggests that the presence of double binds in Banks' life is in part responsible for his psychological state, noting that they have been linked to schizophrenia.⁶⁶ However, in terms of complicity, double-binds are represented as the primary means by which individuals' collusion within systems and structures of power is secured, and by which good intentions end up being twisted and put to use in the service of oppression. The case of Banks' Uncle Philip is instructive in this regard. Initially Diana Banks' ally in her crusade against opium trading, Philip is revealed at the end of the novel to be the 'Yellow Snake', a double agent acting on behalf of the Chinese government, whose intelligence has led to a number of bloody reprisals in the conflict between Chiang Kai-shek and the communists. However, when Banks remarks that Philip is 'much given to treachery' (p. 285), he responds with a narrative of the way in which a series of double-binds resulted in his current position.

Banks himself is subject to perhaps the strongest double-bind present in the novel, and its strength results from his ignorance of its existence for the majority of the novel. Banks believes his wealth, which funds his education and hence makes possible his career as a private detective, to be the legacy of an aunt. However, Philip reveals that his wealth is in fact the result of a financial arrangement whereby Wang Ku's money ensures Banks' comfortable upbringing in return for his mother's 'compliance' (in Philip's words) in acting as the warlord's concubine (pp. 291-3). Banks, in other words, unwittingly profits from his mother's captivity and abuse. In this case, complicity is not even entered into (whether with full agency or, as in Philip's case, under duress) but is inherited and exists prior to any awareness on the part of Banks.

Action, whether ethical or not, is predicated on knowledge, and Banks' ignorance of the reality of his situation (which stands in contrast with his mother's informed sacrifice) results in his utter failure as a detective: he pursues clues that pertain to the world as he imagines it, rather than as it actually exists. Knowledge relies upon

⁶⁵ Webley, 'Double Binds', p. 187.

⁶⁶ Webley, 'Double Binds', pp. 198-90. Webley cites the work of R. D. Laing in making this connection.

seeing and telling, in other words, on events having been witnessed. Banks' failure as a detective thus results from failures of witnessing, both his own and on the part of others, and it is to these failures that I turn in the following section, mainly addressing Banks' myopia and his failure to construct a narrative that accurately bears witness to his world.

Vision: The Magnifying Glass

From Banks' return to Shanghai in 1937 onwards, he displays increasingly myopic tendencies. His blindness is suggested by a number of instances in which his vision is blocked, or in which he chooses a myopic focus at the expense of taking in the larger picture. For example, on his return to Shanghai, he claims that the people there 'seem determined at every opportunity to block one's view' (p. 153). Later when he is given a pair of binoculars by a Chinese officer in order to survey the slums that he has entered, he brings them into focus only to find that he is looking directly at a chimney stack only a few yards in front of him (p. 234). Similarly, while waiting to meet the Yellow Snake, when he looks out of the window, he finds that his view is restricted to the gardens at the side of the house (p. 283).

Moreover, when Banks does have the opportunity to see events in their fullness, and therefore to arrive at a more or less accurate interpretation of events, his myopic perspective often causes him to miss the full implications of that which he sees. At a function in the Palace Hotel, for example, the expatriate community moves out onto the balcony in order to watch the shelling of Shanghai by a Japanese warship. Having been presented with a pair of opera glasses, Banks finds himself absorbed with a microcosm of the city:

I picked out one particular boat – a barge-like vessel with a lone oarsman [...] For the next few seconds, I went on staring through the glasses at the boat, having quite forgotten the fighting. I noted with interest the boatman, who like me was utterly absorbed by the fate of his cargo and oblivious of the war not sixty yards to his right. (pp. 160-1)

The way in which the boatman's focus on his immediate task results in his obliviousness to the wider picture is also an appropriate image for the detective's own

myopic tendencies. 'So that's the war,' concludes Banks, not in fact having looked at the shelling or its effects.

If this episode is indicative of the way in which Banks satisfies himself with a hopelessly simplistic picture of events that he has not, in fact, genuinely witnessed, the relationship between bearing witness (or failing to do so) and the conflict between local and global concerns is materialised in the climactic section of the novel. The culmination of Banks' search for his parents leads him to enter a slum known as 'the warren', where he believes his parents are being held. Seeking a house opposite the residence of a blind actor named Yeh Chen, he plunges into the warren just as fighting between the invading Japanese forces and the Chinese defenders intensifies.

Throughout this section, Banks' single-minded quest for his parents leads to him become all but blind to the larger-scale events taking place around him. Amid the fighting, Banks possesses an eyewitness view of the conflict, and also encounters and speaks to antagonists belonging to all sides. These include both Chinese and Japanese civilians, soldiers and officers. Their views encapsulate the complicated loyalties of the time: Lieutenant Chow, for example, fights for Chiang's government forces, but is considering joining the communists after the war, so disgusted is he with the poverty that he encounters in the warren. In another encounter, Colonel Hasegawa makes explicit the colonial logic behind the Japanese invasion, with his admiration for England ('Calm, dignified. Beautiful green fields') also extending to his belief in the need to follow Britain's imperialism, describing the invasion of China as 'regrettable' but 'necessary' if Japan is also to become a 'great nation' (pp. 276-8). In other words, these encounters present Banks with a unique opportunity to bear witness to the fighting itself, and also to its complex causes, including the actions of Britain and its representatives. Yet Banks utterly fails to do so: he does not make the connection between the Japanese invasion and the colonialism which brought Banks' family to Shanghai in the first place, nor does he recognise the causal link between the poverty in the warren and the politics of exploitation in which his family is involved. In fact, he does not even fully acknowledge the immediate and manifest suffering caused by the fighting as it takes place.

Banks' myopia is therefore a symptom of the way in which local concerns result in blindness towards the global effects of those concerns, and in this respect his behaviour represents an exaggerated version of Stevens' failure to genuinely conceive

of the ‘unimaginable largeness’ of the events in which he participates. The relationship between Banks’ myopia, his professional role, and his complicities are embodied in his use of his magnifying glass. I have already described the scene in which Banks uses his magnifying glass to examine a walled garden for clues as an example of Banks’ mistaken belief in crime as being tied to specific and discrete loci, but the limitations of such microscopic attention to detail only become fully apparent when he continues to use it as the fighting escalates in Shanghai.

While attempting to make his way through the warren, Banks twice examines bodies with his magnifying glass, and on both occasions his actions are pointless and bordering on the delusional. On the first occasion, he examines the wounds of the Japanese soldier whom he believes to be his childhood friend, Akira, but the examination does not enable him to help in any meaningful way (p. 254). On the second occasion, Banks’ use of his magnifying glass has become pathological in its desperation. Having finally located the house in which he believes his parents to be held, Banks finds it destroyed, probably by a shell. He initially brandishes his magnifying glass at the young Chinese girl who is the only survivor, assuring her ‘I’m just the person you want’, before adding: ‘I’ll see to it they don’t get away’ (p. 272). The absurdity of this statement lies in the fact that the girl’s parents’ deaths have been caused by a shell fired anonymously, from a distance, in the service of much larger bodies of power: locating the individual perpetrators is thus unlikely, and certainly not achievable through Banks’ preferred method of detection.

Following his reassurances to the girl, Banks proceeds to examine one of the corpses through his magnifying glass, focussing on the stump of the woman’s arm (p. 272). However, he quickly abandons this examination, instead undertaking a hopeless and frantic search for his parents, in which he destroys what remains of the room and throws one of the bodies to one side in doing so. Horsley notes that developments in crime fiction, and movements away from the tropes of classic detective fiction, have involved an increased interest in bodies of victims, and have thus explored the possibilities of the genre as a means of examining invisible crimes.⁶⁷ However, despite being thrown face to face with the bodily evidence of violence perpetrated on an invisible population (the Chinese are either invisible, or are figured in terms of criminality, monstrosity or disease throughout *When We Were Orphans*) Banks’

⁶⁷ Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, pp. 117, 202.

means of detection performs neither of these political and ethical functions. His myopia, by this point a parody of his previously rational investigations, results in him overlooking the humanity of the dead Chinese in the house.⁶⁸

As Banks progresses through the warren in search of his parents, the novel takes on an increasingly warped and fantastic flavour. In this, the suggestion arises that the projection of desire onto narrative that I have identified as being a characteristic of all of Ishiguro's narrators, here becomes so strong as to shape the protagonist's world to the extent that it breaks the realist frame of the text. Banks' world is twisted to reflect his obsessions and consequent blindness. As such, the novel comments on what we are able to see and tell. However, the tension between realist and fantastic modes produces an ontological uncertainty around Banks' narrative, therefore creating the need for an active and critical mode of readership: this, I suggest in what follows, is the overarching ethical thrust of the novel.

Reading: Between Realism and Fantasy

I have argued that consolation takes the form of complicity in *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day* in that it involves denials of culpability, and results in the minimisation of events which Felman identifies as a failure of witnessing.⁶⁹ There is, as Ishiguro is aware, a relationship between detective fiction and consolation: he suggests that classic detective fiction was a kind of 'facile escapism' from the effects of the First World War.⁷⁰ However, Banks is unable to find the same consolation that the restorations of order provided by detective stories are supposed to offer, or which Ono and Stevens are able to persuade themselves that they deserve. Instead, the revelatory conversation with Philip, described by Christopher Ringrose as ten pages of 'hard, direct revelation of facts surrounded by 303 pages of misunderstanding, misreading and

⁶⁸ This episode recalls Sebald's interpretation of Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* in *The Rings of Saturn*, discussed in Chapter Two, in which a group of surgeons, preoccupied with the anatomy of the dead man, overlook his suffering and attend only to those features of his anatomy as they pertain to the generalisable characteristics of the human body.

⁶⁹ Felman, 'Camus' *The Fall*, p. 190.

⁷⁰ This is not to say that Ishiguro is uncharitable towards the writers of this particular genre. He notes that 'that was a generation that knew better than we do today what the real nature of evil and suffering was'. Alden Mudge, 'Ishiguro Takes a Literary Approach to the Detective Novel', *Bookpage* (September 2000) <<http://bookpage.com/interview/ishiguro-takes-a-literary-approach-to-the-detective-novel>> [Accessed 29th August 2012].

conjecture'⁷¹ shatters any illusions that Banks may still harbour of restoring his family to its previous state. The impossibility of consolation is compounded by his visit to his mother in 1958. Having located her in Hong Kong, now under the care of a group of nuns, he finds his mother broken by the sufferings that she has endured at the hands of Wang Ku, unable to recognise him, and displaying only a flicker of recognition when he refers to himself by his childhood nickname, 'Puffin' (p. 305). In addition, Banks himself appears to have suffered some sort of breakdown, indicated by the tendency of his adopted daughter, Jennifer, to treat him as 'some sort of invalid, especially whenever the past, or else the Far East, re-emerged' (p. 299). This, then, is presumably the result of Philip's revelations and his failure in his life's mission of recovering his parents.

However, up to the point of Banks' failure to locate his parents in the warren, wish fulfilment drives the misunderstanding, misreading and conjecture of which the vast majority of the narrative is comprised. Banks' choice of career is informed by the wish fulfilment fantasies that begin in his childhood. Shortly after his father's disappearance, he begins to play at being detective with Akira. As the two boys develop and elaborate on their fantasy, the details become increasingly unlikely: Banks' father is being held by respectful captors who continue to treat him as a superior, and who have in fact chosen him 'precisely because his kind views towards the plight of the poorer Chinese were well known' (pp. 110-1). Notably, the fantasy ends with 'a magnificent ceremony held in Jessfield Park, a ceremony that would see us, one after the other, step out onto a specially erected stage – my mother, my father, Akira, Inspector Kung and I – to greet the vast cheering crowds' (pp. 111-2). In Banks' fantasies, the detective's narrative denouement therefore conflates professional triumph and the restoration of law with the restoration of his own family unit.

If Banks' childhood fantasies are understandable instances of self-delusion, they stretch, and ultimately break, the realist contract as the novel progresses. Timothy Weiss suggests that in *When We Were Orphans*, 'place is never completely outside a character's consciousness, but rather expresses something of that consciousness (its

⁷¹ Christopher Ringrose, "'In the End it Has to Shatter": The Ironic Doubleness of Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*', in *Kazuo Ishiguro: New Critical Visions of the Novels*, ed. by Sebastian Groes and Barry Lewis (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 171-83 (p. 177).

desires, its perspectives, its attitudes, its memories)',⁷² and the way in which Banks' consciousness, and in particular his desires, affect the places and people with which he interacts becomes increasingly pronounced. Shortly after moving to England, Banks recalls his aunt saying 'it's hardly healthy, a boy his age, sunk in his own world like that' (p. 10), but as the narrative progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent that Banks may never have emerged from that world.

The suspicion that Banks' obsession is shaping his world grows from his return to Shanghai onwards. In particular, the willingness of the local population both to share his belief in the possibility of his parents' safe recovery, the importance that they appear to attach to this task, and their willingness to assist in its completion all stretch credulity. When Banks identifies an opportune moment to announce his return to the assembled expatriate community in Shanghai, a serendipitous piece of timing means that his brief and optimistic statement is rounded off by a jazz orchestra striking up just as he concludes; when a troupe of Eurasian dancing girls then takes to the floor, it is as if Banks' own sense of importance has resulted in his life taking on a fantastic form. Furthermore, the ceremony proposed to mark his parents' return, mooted by Grayson (ostensibly a representative of Shanghai Municipal Council) bears an uncanny resemblance to Banks' childhood fantasies of his parents' rescue: he suggests Jessfield Park as the venue, where Banks' parents will present themselves to the cheering crowd to the strains of 'Land of Hope and Glory'. Furthermore, the ceremony is to act as the stage for Banks to deliver the detective's narrative, with Grayson encouraging him to describe how he 'went about solving the case', and going over the 'vital clues' that led to his parents (pp. 178-9). Grayson's proposal would therefore facilitate Banks' fantasy of a moment of absolute personal and professional satisfaction, fulfilling his wishes with a remarkable degree of similarity to his internal, childhood fantasies.

Wish fulfilment fantasies seem to finally overwhelm realism when Banks is taken to his old house on Bubbling Well Road, now occupied by a well-off Chinese family. Mr Lin, the head of the family, greets Banks in almost flawless English and offers him dinner before, even more improbably, referring to an 'agreement' by which the house is to be returned to Banks. Their discussions revolve around the ways in which Banks plans to return the house to its former uses, and include his angry

⁷² Timothy Weiss, *Translating Orients: Between Ideology and Utopia* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 130.

dismissal of Mr Lin's concerns that his former *amah*, Mei Li, could have ended her days as a beggar (pp. 193-5).

As the willingness of the locals to assist Banks grows in concert with his own submersion in the fantasy of his parents' safe return, the ironic distance between his narrative and the position of the reader also widens. By the time he returns to Shanghai, fifteen years have passed since his parents' disappearance, and the probability of finding them, to an external observer, would seem to be extremely slim. Nevertheless, Banks tracks down his childhood hero, Inspector Kung. Despite his now being an opium addict, Kung helps Banks to identify this location in which his parents may still be held:

The old man was staring at me intently. Eventually he said slowly: 'That house. The house my men failed to go to. That house. You are saying...?'

'Yes. It's my belief that is where my parents are being held'. (p. 206)

If this breathless exchange belonged to a traditional detective fiction text, it would present two brilliant and rational minds assembling, piece by logical piece, the picture of the crime. Yet here the scene functions as the combined delusion of an opium addict intoxicated by nostalgia for his former powers, and a young man still desperate to believe that his parents are alive and well.

Any realism remaining in the text recedes further at precisely the point at which it should in fact assert itself, that is, when Banks comes into direct contact with the physical and bodily evidence of the destruction wrought by the war. Despite the pressing concern of the Japanese invasion, and continuing the tendency begun in his conversation with Mr Lin at his old house, a number of the interlocutors encountered by Banks have the English and the educational background not only to be able to converse with him, but also to be able to understand his motivations and the urgency of his task. Lieutenant Chow and his Captain appear to know who Banks is, and, despite being engaged in desperate fighting to halt the Japanese advance through the warren, they express their gratitude for his visit, which they interpret as being in order to provide 'moral support' (p. 231). The exchange would not be out of place in one of the society gatherings that Banks is accustomed to attending, and its incongruousness amid the urgent, close quarters fighting is another indication that Banks' fantasies have caused the narrative to depart from a realist framework.

Banks passes through the centre of the fighting under the protection of two officers and a soldier (the man he identifies as Akira) and while doing so remains strangely immune to the dangers of the fighting that is causing death and destruction all around him. This bubble only bursts with Banks' failure to find his parents. His manic search among the wreckage, at which point he states that 'the atmosphere had become fairly overwrought' involves him destroying what remains of the house (p. 272). This is followed by the realisation that he has been mistaken in identifying the Japanese soldier he encountered as Akira. This has, of course, been obvious to the reader for some time, but Banks only belatedly arrives at this conclusion, and his admission that 'I'm beginning to see now, many things aren't as I supposed' (p. 277) can be seen as the moment at which his fantasy is first punctured, although his interview with Philip completes the process irrevocably.

The moment of puncture results in Banks' fantasies being destroyed, and, it is implied, in his psychological breakdown. Therefore, even though the plot of the narrative that Banks wants to tell does not provide the restoration present in classic detective fiction, it does provide a form of restoration for the reader by returning the mode of the text to realism. Not only do Philip's revelations tie up the loose ends of the fate of Banks' parents, but even the more fantastical elements of Banks' narrative are restored to a realist framework. Banks' delusions are understandable to a degree in the sense that his mother and Philip have created a fiction for him to inhabit, which has in turn shaped his whole interpretation of his life. The sense that the fantastic elements of Banks' narrative are finally subsumed back into a realist framework is reinforced by the revelation that Grayson, whom Banks has taken throughout to be an inconsequential bureaucrat, is in fact revealed to be an intelligence officer. Grayson's constant pestering of Banks regarding the details of the ceremony have simply functioned as his excuse to remain close to Banks in order to ensure that his investigations did not inadvertently 'do anything to cause a big stink with the other Powers' (p. 282).

The narrative therefore sits in tension between realist logic and more fantastic elements, oscillating between the two. I have argued that Ishiguro's protagonists occupy intermediate positions in which they are both subject to and creators of history, and it is this position that creates the double-binds of complicity that I have described earlier in this chapter. In the more realist sections, Banks is the dupe of others, believing the stories that others want him to believe. Moreover, and more pervasively, Banks believes

in the kinds of narratives on which he has been raised, namely those in which a detective, operating under his own rational agency, is able to bring perpetrators of crimes to justice. However, where the narrative veers into more fantastic territory, Banks becomes a creator of worlds, with the landscape and those around him drawn into and affected by his wish fulfilment fantasies.

The final return to a realist framework suggests that Banks, throughout his life, has been living according to a faulty and myopic logic. Yet things are not quite so simple when the question of the narrator's emplotment of events is raised. Like *The Remains of the Day*, *When We Were Orphans* is divided into dated sections, with the moment of transcription tied to a series of different presents through the narrator's use of the present tense. For example, Banks muses over his magnifying glass, stating 'I have it now here before me' (p. 8) near the beginning of the narrative; the shift from 1931 to 1937 in Part Three is signalled as a new present for Banks by his reference to an episode 'yesterday' (p. 127). However, in contrast to *The Remains of the Day*, these intervals are spread out over a number of years: the first two sections are written in the early thirties; Parts Three to Six are clustered in the period between April and October 1937, before the final few pages which constitute Part Seven are recorded in 1958, and describe Banks' recent trip to visit his mother in Hong Kong.

In the case of *The Remains of the Day*, whether Stevens' narrative is a record of his journey to Cornwall transcribed in (relatively) good faith, or whether his emplotment of events is designed to manipulate the reader into empathic complicity with his story, there remains a discernible logic of motivation behind either. However, in Banks' case, the emplotment of his story is more confusing. Twenty eight years elapse between the first entry (1930) and the last (1958), and the temporal gaps between the sections are such that he would have had ample time for reflection on events before recording them. This being so, what are we to make of the more fantastic elements retained in the narrative? It is possible that the Banks of 1958 has chosen to retain the fantastic elements of his narrative as a sort of admission of his own mania. However, if this is the case, we might expect his concluding lines to reflect on this earlier period, but they do no such thing and as a result his restrained goal of living out the rest of his days in London strikes a disingenuous note. An alternative is that Banks still does not recognise his own pathological interpretation of the world that drove his search for his

parents, and has included these earlier passages in good faith, as a verbatim transcription of events as he experienced them.

Webley interprets the novel in the latter sense, identifying schizophrenic tendencies in Banks, writing of his ‘vulnerable psychological state’ and a ‘vocational commitment that bordered on the delusional’, attributing this psychological state to the double-binds in which Banks is caught.⁷³ As such, Webley’s reading resolves the status of the narrative in psychological terms: attributing the fantastic elements of the narrative to Banks’ psychological state thus, on a meta-textual level, returns the narrative to a logically consistent framework. It also produces an interpretation of Banks’ condition as an individual one, the result of the specific contingencies of his life and tribulations.

Yet there is enough in the novel, and certainly in its closing pages, to suggest that Banks’ situation, and his narrative, may be more universally applicable. The text ends ambiguously, with Banks’ assertion that he does not ‘wish to appear smug’ as he ‘own[s] up to a certain contentment’ (p. 313) living a life of leisure in London, and occasionally leafing through old newspaper cuttings of his cases, sitting incongruously with the suggestion of a nervous breakdown. Moreover, when, in the closing lines, he writes that, ‘for those like us, our fate is to face the world as orphans, chasing through long years the shadows of vanished parents’ (p. 313) the obsessive drive of the sections set in Shanghai are recalled, as is the enigmatic title of the novel.

Indeed, the title of the novel raises a number of questions, none of which are fully resolved by this ending. The ‘when’ of the title suggests that orphanhood is a conditional state, from which it is possible to revert to non-orphanhood, and the past tense of the title perhaps implies that this has in fact been achieved. However, despite locating his mother, her broken state means that there is little sense that his family unit has been restored in the way that he always hoped. Furthermore, the ‘we’ is also difficult: it may refer to the three orphans of the novel – Banks himself, Sarah Hemmings, and Jennifer – but the wording of his assertion (‘those like us’) seems to suggest that orphanhood is a state of being that, if not universal, is more widely applicable than just to the protagonists of the novel.

If the ‘we’ of the title is as expansive as Banks’ closing comments suggest, then his story reads less as an account of how an obsessive psyche can warp one’s perception

⁷³ Webley, ‘Double Binds’, pp. 190, 195.

of the world, than it does as a parable on the way in which the stories that we believe (and that we find ourselves inhabiting) dictate the world that we are able to see and act upon. Banks' myopia, in this reading, may also be our own, with the desire to hear, read and create narratives that fulfil our desires resulting in blindness towards instances of suffering that fall outside of those stories. However, in the inconsistencies between its realist and fabulist tendencies, the novel promotes a mode of reading that involves reassessment and reflexivity regarding our own process of interpretation; as such, it shares an ethical impetus that I have identified in *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*.

Furthermore, the potential for oscillation between reading the novel as realist and fabulist is also a movement between empathy for Banks (recognising something in his condition that may be shared, or which may in fact be universal) and the distance required to identify his blindnesses. In other words, the text asks us to sustain our intimate concern for an individual subject while at the same time recognising the wider implications of this empathy, and in particular where empathy with this protagonist's point of view may slide into ideological complicity with forms of logic responsible for oppression and exploitation. The reader's empathy towards Banks is always troubled by an ontological uncertainty regarding the nature of the inscription that we read, and Ishiguro further problematizes the nature of empathy in *Never Let Me Go*, a novel in which he returns to the conflict between local and global concerns, but does so using a setting in which care and complicity are even more tightly interwoven than is the case in *When We Were Orphans*.

NEVER LET ME GO

Complicity: Mimicry

In my discussion of *When We Were Orphans*, I have addressed Christopher Banks' intermediate status, arguing that, like Ono and Stevens, he has a sufficient degree of agency to shape his life, and the form that he gives to it through narrative, while at the same time being subject to larger historical forces. At first glance, *Never Let Me Go* departs from the three earlier novels under discussion by representing a group who are

unequivocally victims of history, albeit in an imagined and dystopian version of England.

The protagonists of the novel are human clones, raised to early adulthood, before being required to ‘donate’ their vital organs for the benefit of the non-cloned population. These donations eventually result in their death, or ‘completion’ in the euphemistic parlance of the organ donation programme, with fourth donation being the point beyond which none survive (although some ‘complete’ before this). Before having their organs harvested, the clones spend a period as carers, during which they drive around the country attending to the needs of donors and acting as their advocates. The narrator is Kathy H., herself a clone, acting as a carer at the time of the narrative, and her thoroughgoing use of these euphemistic terms to describe the exploitation and murder of her own kind suggests a troubling degree of acquiescence to her role.

Before examining the precise nature of the clones’ complicity in the organ donation programme, I pause to note the way in which institutional power operates in *Never Let Me Go*. If Long’s readings of Sebald identify the presence of disciplinary power,⁷⁴ the functioning of the organ donation programme in *Never Let Me Go* is strongly suggestive of Foucault’s notion of biopower. He distinguishes this from disciplinary power, in which the state increasingly acts on the bodies of individuals, in that its aim is the exercise of power over the population as a whole, that is, over ‘man-as-species’. Biopower thus seeks to control rates of reproduction, fertility, and longevity, as well as environment factors that might impact on these.⁷⁵ The potential for self-interest, and resulting complicity, in such a system is suggested when Foucault argues that biopower functions to ‘optimize a state of life’,⁷⁶ and does so through subtle forms of power, such as insurance, savings and safety measures, in which the majority of the population believe themselves to have a stake.⁷⁷

Foucault thus outlines the way in which the state’s appeal to the self-interest of the majority of the population has become a more effective form of power than one which relies on coercion. He also notes that, within such a system, the domination or destruction of a particular group must be along biological terms. The clones’ exploitation in *Never Let Me Go* operates in this way, with their status determined by

⁷⁴ Long, *Image, Archive, Modernity*, p. 2.

⁷⁵ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, pp. 242-3.

⁷⁶ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, p. 246.

⁷⁷ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, p. 244.

their biological difference from the normals, while the self-interest of the dominant group perpetuates the system. Yet a surprising feature of the novel is that the society in which the organ donation programme operates also seems to have successfully obviated any need for coercion in terms of securing the clones' own acquiescence to their subordinate role. For all that the organ donation programme is a system of institutionalised mass murder, a sense of fear and threat are largely absent from Kathy's narrative. Foucault argues that biopower can, and often does, overlap with disciplinary power.⁷⁸ State control over the clones' bodies can be seen in their weekly medicals at Hailsham (p. 7) and, although these are not far removed from the types of check-ups undergone by schoolchildren in Britain, they can be seen in a more sinister light given the potential for donors to be categorized as 'agitated' (p. 3), although Kathy fails to elaborate upon the repercussions of such a classification.

Yet alongside these systems of classification, the spatial control of individuals' bodies is notably flexible in *Never Let Me Go*. In contrast to science fictions which represent technology as the tool of dystopian and totalitarian systems, the enforcement of boundaries has something of a homely, even slipshod, feel to it, with censored pages torn out of books and magazines by hand at Hailsham (p. 67); and when the students' progress to the Cottages, Keffers' only means of keeping track of their comings and goings is through a hand-written log book (p. 116).⁷⁹ In addition, in a conversation between Kathy and Chrissie (an older clone) it is suggested that the rules forbidding clones to visit those working as carers can be transgressed (p. 148). Although it is difficult to ascertain how much of Chrissie's implication is bravado, Miss Emily, the former head of Hailsham, is more explicit when she states that students' breaking the rules in order to locate her has proved to be 'not so hard' (p. 252).

The examples above indicate that the clones are neither under constant surveillance, and nor are they subject to punitive threats that might discourage such transgressions. There are suggestions that the clones' willingness to perform their role is a result of the organ donation programme having succeeded in persuading them to invest in it. Kathy thus takes pride in her role as a carer in the opening passages of the text (p. 3), and this sense of investment is encouraged by the official communications of the programme which she describes as 'saying how they're sure you did all you could

⁷⁸ Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, p. 250.

⁷⁹ In contrast, the 2010 film shows the clones wearing electronic wrist tags. *Never Let Me Go*, dir. by Mark Romanek (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2010).

and to keep up the good work' (203). However, acting with much greater force in terms of securing the clones' acquiescence to the system (and in a way that echoes the double-binds present in *When We Were Orphans*) is the conflation of care and complicity, which is secured by the clones' indoctrination into their roles as carers and donors.

Yet, as Whitehead argues, the role of care is ambiguous in the extreme in *Never Let Me Go*, and ultimately functions to secure the clones' complicity in their own exploitation. Identifying a number of ways in which complicity is predicated upon care, Whitehead argues that, on an individual level, Kathy's 'preoccupations with professional success' as a carer act as a distraction from her own impending death.⁸⁰ On an institutional level, the clones' liberal education involves them reading aspirational Victorian novels which present narratives of personal advancement that are not open to the clones, and as such this education is 'at best a deception or lie, and at worst, complicit with the system of political oppression'.⁸¹ Finally, on a national and systemic level, and citing the assertion of a former 'guardian' of the clones that the donation programme arose out of people's natural desire to ensure the best health for those close to them, Whitehead argues that 'the true horror of Ishiguro's dystopic society is revealed: it is shown to be founded, precisely, on relations of care. Personal selflessness, wanting the best for those whom we love, shades here into a politics of exclusion'.⁸²

The rationale of cloning is to create a surplus, that is, to create an excess of vital organs in order that these can be used to prolong the lives of those whose organs have failed. Yet the creation of clones produces no such surplus because, in terms of sentience and emotional and empathic capacity, they appear to be as fully human as the normals who exploit them. Moreover, it is this capacity for empathy which produces the mimicry which results in the normalisation of the ongoing atrocity, and hence secures the clones' complicity in the system that requires their own deaths.

Shameem Black suggests that empathy begins with motor mimicry, which serves as a basis for more sophisticated forms of empathy,⁸³ and throughout *Never Let Me Go*, the potential for mimicry to produce empathy exists in tension with the sense that it also results in the clones' alignment with the system that exploits them. There is often a self-consciousness about the clones' mimicry which lends it the sense of being

⁸⁰ Whitehead, 'Writing with Care', p. 60.

⁸¹ Whitehead, 'Writing with Care', p. 57.

⁸² Whitehead, 'Writing with Care', p. 77.

⁸³ Shameem Black, 'Ishiguro's Inhuman Aesthetics', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 55 (2009), 785-807 (p. 786).

performed, as is the case when Kathy comments of Ruth's attempts to impress the older students at the Cottages by copying their behaviour that it was 'as if I was in the front row of the audience when she was performing on stage'. Yet Kathy also suggests that Ruth's performance is on behalf of the other Hailsham students, as part of an attempt to help the whole group adjust to their new surroundings (p. 128). This self-consciousness does not, therefore, necessarily denude the act of mimicry of value, and Patricia Waugh argues that 'Ishiguro shows again and again how the aesthetic is not simply a mode of self-deception [but] that, at the heart of what makes us ethical in the first place, is our imaginative and aesthetic ability to conjure counterfactuals or to empathize with other minds through imaginative projection'.⁸⁴

However, in other incidents, mimicry is employed to more disturbing ends. For example, in an early passage, Kathy establishes an empathetic bond with Tommy after he has been subject to a prank by a group of other boys. In contrast, the other watching girls align themselves with the bullies through their mimicry of Laura:

... we were all laughing at Laura – the big clown in our group – mimicking one after the other the expressions that appeared on Tommy's face as he ran, waved, called, tackled. [...] Laura kept up her performance all through the team picking, doing all the different expressions that went across Tommy's face: the bright eager one at the start; the puzzled concern when four picks had gone by and he still hadn't been chosen; the hurt and panic as it began to dawn on him what was really going on (pp .8-9).

There is a degree of empathy here, as the humour that the girls derive from Laura's play-acting relies upon the recognisability of the various emotions being experienced by Tommy. However, acting with greater force in this instance is the desire for alignment with the dominant group, and it is notable that Tommy's victimisation at this point is a result of his not being a sufficiently competent mimic: in contrast to the rest of the boys who are 'moving around the field in that deliberately languorous way they have when they're warming up', Tommy is already 'going full pelt' (p. 8).

This early incident indicates the way in which copying acts as a form of alignment which has more serious consequences for the clones as the novel progresses, and which crucially serves to normalise the atrocity of which they are the victims. The

⁸⁴ Waugh, 'Not-Too-Late Modernism', pp. 26-7.

mimicry performed by the clones often takes the behaviour of the normals as its object of emulation, and through this their difference, and hence any basis for transgression, is minimised. This trend begins at Hailsham, where the students attend ‘Culture Briefings’ in their final years, which, in an example of institutionalised mimicry, are intended to prepare them for what they can expect to find ‘out there’: they roleplay ‘waiters in cafés, policemen and so on’ (p. 108). These indicate that acting in the right way is less about acting ethically than it is about alignment with perceived norms: there does not seem to be any transcendent moral framework that determines what is deemed to be appropriate or otherwise.⁸⁵

Contrasting *Never Let Me Go* with other science fictions which represent clones, and which tend to involve assertions of individuality and difference, Mark Jerng argues that the Hailsham students attempt to find their identities by finding someone who is the same as them.⁸⁶ The way in which the adoption of this logic contributes to the clones’ complicity with the organ donation programme as they approach adulthood begins to become evident when Kathy, through frustration born out of care, lectures Tommy on his behaviour. Irritated by his habit of demonstrating his emotions by accompanying verbal articulations of feeling with over-the-top facial expressions, Kathy explodes: ‘if you want to pretend you’re happy, you don’t do it that way!’ Her concern here is that Tommy’s inability to mimic expected behaviours showed ‘how easily you could take advantage of him’ (p. 104). The irony here is that, while Kathy is aware of the implications of Tommy’s naivety on an immediate level, she fails to recognise that, in the wider scheme of things, the donation programme takes advantage of them all.

The close relationship between empathy and mimicry has its roots in more deeply held conceptions regarding the value of uniqueness and likeness, which are manifest in the clones’ attitudes towards art. Walkowitz suggests that ‘likeness is both the apex and nadir of value’ in the novel.⁸⁷ In examining the values attached to works of art in *Never Let Me Go*, she utilises a distinction between ‘tokens’ and ‘types’, with ‘tokens’ being individual instances of the work (an individual copy of a novel, for

⁸⁵ The lack of any transcendent moral framework is thrown into focus by the rare references to God and to religious frameworks of thought. When Tommy’s childhood tantrums recede, Kathy asks him ‘Did you find God or something?’ (p. 23) This strikes an odd note, as does the notion of the clones’ art being important as it reveals their souls, because the rest of the novel is dominated by discourses which combine (and blur) empathy and professionalism in generally pragmatic ways, but from which such transcendent and spiritual concepts are absent.

⁸⁶ Jerng, ‘Giving Form to Life’, p. 386.

⁸⁷ Walkowitz, ‘Unimaginable Largeness’, p. 225.

example), while ‘type’ refers to the reproducible content.⁸⁸ She suggests that, at first sight, tokens are privileged in the novel, citing the clones’ disdain for things which have been copied, and notes that the organ donation programme itself can exist because of the clones’ subaltern status as copies: ‘the humans believe that clones lack interiority, which is measured, according to all of the characters, by the capacity for genuine love, authentic expressivity, and artistic originality’.⁸⁹

The behaviour of the protagonists initially seems to bear this out. Despite their relative poverty – their possessions are cast-offs from normals which they purchase in the ‘Sales’, and objects created by other students, obtained in the ‘Exchanges’ – the clones are often nakedly materialistic in terms of how they value these items. The exchange value of these items appears to be based on a Romantic conception of art, with originality, expression, and the artist’s skill forming the basis for an item’s valuation, hence Kathy’s glee at managing to secure a calendar drawn by Patricia C., which has ‘a stunning little pencil sketch of a scene from Hailsham life’ for each month, and which she describes as a ‘real catch’ (pp. 91-2). This suggests that value, like care, is exclusive: the uniqueness of the calendar, and Kathy’s success in obtaining it at the expense of others, is part of its value.

However, the complexity of the value of these ‘tokens’ grows as the novel progresses. The systems of exchange present at Hailsham appear to be exclusive and somewhat ruthless, and the clones themselves learn to be canny operators within the system, securing compensation, for example, for losing their ‘most marketable stuff’ (p. 38) to the Gallery, despite the prestige attached to this (p. 38). Yet, the essays which the students begin at Hailsham and take with them to the Cottages show that the materialistic conception of art in terms of its exchange value is not entirely negative, ruthless, or exclusive. Kathy recalls that, initially, ‘no one really believed the essays were important, and among ourselves we hardly discussed the matter’ (p. 113) because they are aware that their guardians would not read them. Without the possibility of the essays receiving recognition through their circulation, they therefore have little value, and the sense of value acquired through shared significance and appreciation grows when she comes to the conclusion that the essays were intended to give them direction

⁸⁸ Walkowitz, ‘Unimaginable Largeness’, p. 222.

⁸⁹ Walkowitz, ‘Unimaginable Largeness’, p. 225.

in their new surroundings, and thus describes them as a 'farewell gift' from the guardians (p. 113).

This episode suggests that the value of art seems to lie in its shared significance: value is not only attached to the uniqueness of an artefact, but also to the way in which that artefact comes to act as a touchstone of shared meaning. This is also evident when Ruth replaces Kathy's lost cassette of *Songs After Dark* with *Twenty Classic Dance Tunes*: Kathy states that her initial disappointment (of the tape not being of the same type as her original) is replaced by 'real happiness'; she does not play it often because 'the music has nothing to do with anything', but she values it as 'an object, like a brooch or a ring' (p. 75). Similarly, when Tommy begins to draw his animals again, in the hope of producing the evidence that will secure a deferral for him and Kathy, she feels 'relief, gratitude, sheer delight', but not so much because of their potential as evidence for securing their deferral, but because it signals that 'this was Tommy's way of putting everything behind us everything that had happened around his drawings back at the Cottages' (p. 237). That the real value of Tommy's drawings lies in the way that they can be shared is reinforced by Kathy's hurt at Tommy's final withdrawal from her, at which point he continues to draw his animals, but does so in private (p. 271).

Tension between these contrasting attitudes towards art are present throughout the novel, and can be seen both as a cause and a product of the clones' complicity with the organ donation programme. When Madame states that her collection of the clones' art was intended to 'prove [they] had souls at all' (p. 255), she is attempting to show that the clones are unique, in other words, that they are 'tokens'. However, the idea of deferrals suggests that artistic value may be traded against the use value of the clones' internal organs; the implication is that this exchange can be quantified in terms of time, that is, in terms of the number of years and months granted to the clones. The Romantic ideal of art as the expression of a unique individual is therefore subsumed into a different, dominant system of value based on the utility of the clones, and which returns them to 'types'. In Tommy's assertion that Madame, by looking at their art, can 'see if they match', he has also subscribed to a Romantic ideal incorporated into a more brutal system of use-value exchange (p. 173).

The clones' engagement with art has the potential to produce empathy through moments of shared significance. The risk remains, however, that this empathy may be exclusive, reaching out to those close at hand while shutting out other groups. Again,

then, the significance of tokens can reduce particular groups to types in a way that is discriminatory and which creates the potential for persecution.

Both conceptions of art underpin the clones' outward behaviour, and in particular their desire to adopt certain forms of behaviour. In contrast to *An Artist of the Floating World*, where institutions create an opposition between a conformist inside and a transgressive outside, the normalisation produced by the clones' desire for sameness results in conformity in both sections of the population, namely the clones and the normals. In the following section, I argue that this normalisation results in a failure to bear witness, on the part of the clones, to their own situation: blindness towards their own exploitation results in failures to create narratives that articulate their own experience and suffering.

Vision: In Plain Sight

The normalisation that I have described as being achieved through the clones' mimicry forecloses the sight and narrative required for them to bear witness to the atrocity within which they are embedded. It is notable that the evidence of the atrocity of organ harvesting does not appear to be hidden, but remains unseen and unwitnessed in plain sight. The logic by which this takes place is present in the lives of the clones and their guardians from the outset, with the appearance of normality being perceived as a defence against suspicion: as Toker and Chertoff astutely note, 'real privacy for talking about subjects perceived as dangerous is only possible [at Hailsham] when the conversation is hidden in plain view'.⁹⁰ They cite conversations between Kathy and Tommy in the dinner queue and by the pond, in which remaining within view (albeit unheard) serves as protection from others' suspicions. Toker and Chertoff argue that Hailsham therefore functions as a panopticon which serves to secure their complicity in their roles, and draw a parallel between this surveillance and other dystopian literature.⁹¹

The panopticon is a discrete system which Foucault describes as working according to the 'state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic

⁹⁰ Toker and Chertoff, 'Reader Response', pp. 169-70.

⁹¹ Toker and Chertoff, 'Reader Response', p. 169.

functioning of power'.⁹² However, the boundaries at Hailsham appear to be somewhat porous, and the clones are able to observe some of their school's connections with the outside world. When they do look back at their captors, the clones do not perceive any threat, and Kathy recalls how the gardeners and delivery men would 'joke and laugh with you and call you "sweetheart"' (p. 36). The clones in fact employ their licence to observe throughout, but never do so sufficiently critically to question their own exploitation. These failings are evident during their trip to Cromer, when they attempt to locate Ruth's genetic original. The five clones find themselves pressed up against the plate glass window of an office, themselves the observers, staring at the woman who may be Ruth's 'possible'. When they are noticed and the look is returned, Kathy describes how 'this broke the spell and we took to our heels in giggly panic' (p. 157). There is no threat of repercussion, but only a schoolgirl's fear of transgression; their concern is not born out of a fear of violence, but through a concern with what is appropriate.

Robbie B. H. Goh analogises the clones to a racial group, arguing that 'the clones are never described in terms of ethnicity, yet they are marked by a "difference" which the narrative finds hard to pin down'.⁹³ However, it is precisely because the clones are not visibly marked as different that the organ donation programme becomes normalised. This dystopia, then, does not function through absolute isolation, and perhaps contrary to what might be expected, once the clones reach adulthood and hence enter the donation programme as carers, they become more, rather than less, visible. Kathy describes how much of her time as a carer is spent 'out there – in the towns, shopping centres, transport cafes,' (p. 137) suggesting that, if for the clones the possibility that their 'original' may come into view at any time is always present, the reverse must also be true for the normals: products of the donation system go about their jobs within plain sight.

Although present, the clones remain unacknowledged in a reversal of the relationship between observation and fear present in the model of the panopticon. In *Never Let Me Go*, looking does not produce fear on the part of the controlled group, but instead it is the normals who are afraid of looking at – and seeing – the section of the

⁹² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 201, 205.

⁹³ Robbie G. H. Goh, 'The Postclone-nial in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*: Science and the Body in the Asian Diaspora', *Ariel*, 41 (2011), 45-71 (p. 62).

population that they are oppressing. This episode in Cromer, and the lack of reaction on the part of the normals to seeing the clones, is in stark contrast with Madame's visit to Hailsham, during which it becomes clear that she is afraid of them, as Kathy says, 'in the same way someone might be afraid of spiders' (p. 35). The only difference between the two episodes is that Madame is aware of the clones' nature while the office workers are not. Madame describes her struggle for the clones' welfare, describing the 'barrier against seeing you as properly human'; it is for this reason that, she claims, the clones were 'kept in the shadows' (p. 258). Yet the unintentional irony of her remark lies in the fact that it is precisely the clones' visibility that contributes to the normalisation of the organ donation programme and hence allows the normals to look without acknowledging the clones' subaltern status. Kathy comments of Madame's reaction that 'the first time you glimpse yourself through the eyes of a person like that, it's a cold moment. It's like walking past a mirror you've walked past every day of your life, and suddenly it shows you something else, something troubling and strange' (p. 36). However, it is the inability, both on the part of the clones and the normals, to retain this fearful and estranged perspective that leads to a failure to question the sense of difference that allows organ harvesting to take place.⁹⁴

As a result, none of this observation is translated into witnessing because seeing is not followed by any attempt on the part of the clones to explicitly narrativise their status and its implications: where nothing is seen to be out of the ordinary, there is nothing to report. However, the clones' failure to construct narratives around their own situation is not one of absolute silence, and their position within the donation programme more often produces quasi-silences and abortive narratives.

The reason for the clones' failure to bear witness to their own situation is partly the result of the way in which knowledge is imparted to them. Miss Lucy neatly expresses the tactical withholding of information from the clones when she informs them that they have been 'told and not told' about their roles in life. (p. 79). Kathy and Tommy absorb enough of her message to later speculate that information is drip-fed to them, in a way that is 'timed very carefully and deliberately' so that they were 'always

⁹⁴ The notion of blindness to that which is present in plain sight is literalised in another science fiction novel, China Miéville's *The City and the City*. The novel describes two cities which occupy the same physical space, but which are politically separate to the extent to which the citizens of each city are required to 'unsee' those of the other (and are trained to do so from childhood). The novel turns on the possibility of a third city, whose existence is possible due to the institutionalised blindness. The novel is generically a police procedural, so the use of detection is again used to comment on pervasive and political crimes. China Miéville, *The City and the City* (London: Macmillan, 2009).

just too young to understand properly the latest piece of information' (p. 81). As a result, where it might be expected that Miss Lucy's speech acts as a revelatory spur within a narrative arc, it in fact prompts nothing in the way of reaction by the students: as Kathy says, the students' reaction was "'Well, so what? We already knew all that'" (p. 81).

Jerng contrasts *Never Let Me Go* to other cloning narratives, in which clones' assertion of their humanity takes place through a process of individuation involving a journey from innocence of their own condition towards full knowledge of it.⁹⁵ I suggest Kathy's narrative does describe such a journey, but crucially that realisation always and fatally lags behind the moment at which this knowledge could be acted upon. This failure is, in part, a result of the role of the institution (Hailsham), but crucially this failing is repeated by the clones as they interact with each other. Moments of emotional honesty are rare, and the clones generally fail to take advantage of these opportunities to acknowledge explicitly their position outside the society of the normal. As a result, they fail to bear witness to the atrocity to which they are subjected. An exception is Ruth's angry dismissal, prompted by her own nearing completion, of carers' claims to empathy with donors, in which she provides a forceful physical image of Chrissie during the donation process, 'on that table, trying to cling onto life' (p. 222). However, more typical is the reference to death a few pages from the close of Kathy's narrative, when she relates Tommy's concerns, apparently shared by other clones, that 'maybe, after the fourth donation, even if you've technically completed you're still conscious in some sort of way [...] then you find there are more donations, plenty of them, on the other side of that line' (p. 274). Even at this stage, when time is running out, however, Kathy describes how they 'both shrank back' (p. 274) from this frank discussion.

This exchange demonstrates the clones' tendency to combine the avoidance of explicit communication with the circulation of unreliable knowledge. A striking feature of the stories that the clones tell each other is that they are overwhelmingly based on rumour and conjecture, and as such can be seen in terms of urban legend. Diane E. Goldstein notes that rumours and urban legends often proliferate at times of crises; they are further encouraged when official sources of knowledge are perceived to be inadequate, at which point unofficial sources tend to fill this gap.⁹⁶ This also seems to be the case in *Never Let Me Go*, with the clones speculating on possibles (pp. 137-8),

⁹⁵ Jerng, 'Giving Form to Life', p. 378.

⁹⁶ Diane E. Goldstein, 'The Sounds of Silence: Foreknowledge, Miracles, Suppressed Narratives, and Terrorism - What Not Telling Might Tell Us', *Western Folklore*, 68 (2009), 235-55 (pp. 236, 244).

deferrals (pp. 151-2), on Hailsham's location (p. 280) and its closure (p. 207) and, as their deaths near, on the more sinister possibilities of clones completing early (p. 221), and even of a horrific process of ongoing donations beyond the fourth, which Kathy describes as 'horror movie stuff', but is unable to authoritatively refute (pp. 273-4).

From the beginning, these stories act as a type of self-regulation for the Hailsham clones. As I have noted, Hailsham does not appear to require any coercive physical means of enclosing its students, with their compliance instead maintained by their own folkloric superstitions. One rumour tells of a boy who left the site, and whose body was later found tied to a tree with its hands and feet cut off; another describes how a girl, having left, was forbidden to return by the guardians ('much stricter, cruel even' at the time of the story), and how her ghost has since haunted the woods (p. 50).

However, it is significant that, in *Never Let Me Go*, rumour only replaces absent authoritative knowledge up to a point. For example, when the clones discuss different ideas about 'possibles', a number of suggestions are made, but the arguments 'would invariably fizzle out': rather than gaining impetus, these rumours stall as a result of them, in the words of Kathy, nearing 'territory we didn't want to enter' (p. 137). These refusals to transgress certain boundaries in narrative can be seen in terms of 'tellable' and 'untellable' narratives. Tellable narratives are those which are aligned with the standards of a community, and untellable narratives are those which are deemed to be too 'risky' in terms of their potential to transgress these standards.⁹⁷ It thus appears that any narrative which constitutes an explicit attempt to envisage a realistic future becomes untellable for the clones.

The clones follow the tendency to replace untellable narratives with less risky accounts,⁹⁸ and rumours deliberately instigated as jokes by the clones can be seen as troubling forms of deflection from any direct attempt to address their own roles within the organ donation programme. The rumour about the potential for elbows to 'unzip', causing internal organs to spill out unexpectedly is recognised by everyone, except Tommy (again the target of bullying) as being a fiction, yet it functions as a distraction from the hard truth of the way in which the clones' organs are to be harvested. Similarly, the joking attribution of all pornography at the Cottages to 'Steve's collection' is a folkloric myth of origin which makes use of a semi-mythical predecessor, and which

⁹⁷ Goldstein, 'The Sounds of Silence', p. 249.

⁹⁸ Goldstein, 'The Sounds of Silence', p. 252.

also acts as a convenient means of avoiding the need to pinpoint the responsible party whenever new magazines appear (p. 130). However, this story, combined with an earlier tacit agreement not to ask about sex at Hailsham, is also a means of avoiding another, untellable narrative: sex reminds the clones of their difference from the normals in their inability to reproduce, and it also touches on their own origins and the theories of possibles.

Finally, and most powerfully in terms of securing their continued acquiescence to the organ donation programme, the clones repeatedly perpetuate comforting fantasies rather than confronting harsh truths. As with much else, this behaviour begins in early childhood and thus becomes ingrained by the time the clones have reached an age where they have the potential to act on their knowledge. Kathy, for example, twice chooses not to puncture fantasies constructed by Ruth, and as is the case with the clones' mimicry, apparently inconsequential habits acquired in childhood contribute to their subordination in later life. On the first occasion, Kathy supports Ruth's tale about receiving a pencil case as a special gift from one of the guardians, despite having evidence to the contrary (p. 64). Later, having found herself excluded from Ruth's fantasy of being 'secret guards', she finds herself sharing her outsider status with another girl, Moira B. Yet she angrily rejects the possibility, raised by Moira, that they both acknowledge that Ruth's game is a fantasy and hence disavow it. Reflecting on the incident, Kathy hypothesises that 'Moira was suggesting she and I cross some line together, and I wasn't prepared for that yet. I think I sensed how beyond that line, there was something harder and darker and I didn't want that. Not for me, not for any of us' (p. 55).

The closest that Kathy comes to reflecting on this tendency is late in the novel, after Ruth's death. Tommy suggests that, while he and Kathy 'were always trying to find things out', Ruth 'always wanted to believe in things' (p. 279). Tommy makes this comparison after asserting that he is glad that Ruth was not alive long enough to find out that their attempt at deferral had failed. Kathy, however, is more ambivalent. Although she recognises that this knowledge would have made Ruth 'feel bad', Kathy states: 'when I say I wish she'd found out the whole score, it's more because I feel sad at the idea of her finishing up different from me and Tommy' (p. 279). In this hypothetical dilemma, many of the factors driving the clones' behaviour come into focus: the desire to belong to a group often results in the exclusion of others, and also in

the creation of stories whereby the real origins and implications of that exclusion are never fully addressed.

Reading: After the Event

The clones' failure to bear witness to their own status and role is, in many ways, a result of their adopting the same logic as their persecutors. This preference for comforting fantasy over difficult truth underpins the very existence of Hailsham, with Miss Emily explaining that:

‘... we were able to give you something which even now no one will ever take from you, and we were able to do that principally by *sheltering* you [...] we kept things from you, lied to you. Yes, in many ways we *fooled* you [...] but if [Miss Lucy] had her way, your happiness at Hailsham would have been shattered’ (pp. 262-3).

The preference for fantasy over reality is one of a number of ways in which the logic of the organ donation programme is adopted by the clones. This doubling of logic is also present in the conflation of care and complicity, in the exclusivity of care, and in failures to act on knowledge in time to alter courses of events that have been set in motion. In this section, I argue that the potential also exists for the reader to subscribe to the same forms of logic, and hence to read in a way that is complicit with the systems of thought which justify the organ donation programme.

As is the case with *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*, it is the form and generic traits of the narrative which create this potential. *Never Let Me Go*, like all of Ishiguro's texts under discussion in this thesis, is written in the first person, exclusively in the voice of the narrator / protagonist. Kathy's narrative, however, is more straightforward in many ways than those of Ono, Stevens, and Banks: she is more reliable (although somewhat limited), and there is no suggestion of the kind of emplotment to manipulative ends that I have suggested is a possibility in the other novels, and particularly in *The Remains of the Day*. As a result, Kathy's narrative is largely free from the kind of ontological uncertainty that is present in the other texts.

Kathy's apparent trustworthiness is heightened by the text appearing to be hermissive to a confidant who shares her background, with the 'you' to whom she addresses herself seeming to be another, unidentified clone. At the beginning of her narrative, for example, she appears to anticipate being read by another carer, albeit one without her privileges, stating that, 'if you're one of them, I can understand how you might get resentful' (p. 3). Although the pronoun slides into more universalising use (for example, she speaks of how 'you and your friends wanted the [sports pavilion] just to yourselves, so there was often jockeying and arguing', p. 6) this form of address retains a sense of intimacy, and hence makes a claim to the reader's empathy.

Keith McDonald suggests that the use of autobiographical form 'seeks to draw the reader into the account of events, to ask us to bear witness to the dystopian world and the treatment of its victims', suggesting that 'the text itself becomes the vessel in which this incorporation takes place, with the memoir functioning as the testimony and the reader as the witness to the traumatic unfolding of events'.⁹⁹ McDonald evokes trauma in making this claim, but I suggest that trauma is notably absent from a novel which represents a horrific system of mass murder; as my discussion of the normalisation of the donation programme suggests, the clones' desire to align themselves with the perceived norms of this world, enacted through their mimicry of the normals, results in the potential for most negative affect, including trauma, being foreclosed. While I concur that the text interpellates the reader as a potential witness, I am less certain than McDonald that witnessing automatically takes place through the act of reading: the normalisation of the donation programme means that nothing out of the ordinary takes place, and where nothing extraordinary occurs, there is no imperative to bear witness.

The question, then, that I ask of the experience of reading *Never Let Me Go*, is: what have we witnessed, and how successfully have we done so? The potential for readers' responses to fail to bear witness to the suffering of the clones lies in two aspects of Kathy's narrative which again double the logic of the organ donation programme. The first of these is the exclusive nature of empathy, and its relationship with care. The intimate tone of Kathy's narrative offers the reader an empathic relationship with her, but this same empathy may result in blindness to suffering

⁹⁹ Keith McDonald, 'Days of Past Futures: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* as "Speculative Memoir"', *Biography*, 30 (2007), 74-82 (pp. 80-1).

elsewhere. The most obvious form of social exclusion in the novel is based on the different status of the clones and normals: the lack of empathy on the part of the normals for their creations makes the clones legally killable, and as such their ‘dream futures’ of becoming postmen, or of working on farms or in offices, remain only fantasies. Many responses to the novel have focussed on the way in which this dividing line addresses questions of scientific progress and humanity.¹⁰⁰ However, there is another line of exclusion running through the novel, which is that of the difference in status between the clones raised at Hailsham and those raised elsewhere. The actual implications of the differences in upbringing are subject to conjecture, with rumours circulating, for example, of Hailsham students being able to secure jobs in shops or as park keepers; Kathy realises that clones raised elsewhere suspect that ‘a separate set of rules’ applies to the Hailsham students (pp. 143, 149-50).

Once outside Hailsham, these rumours appear to have little substance, and no special treatment is conferred upon Kathy and Tommy when they ask for a deferral. However, this sense of difference does appear to be grounded in fact with regard to the treatment of clones at Hailsham and elsewhere during their childhoods. This is suggested only vaguely by Miss Emily in her assemblies when she refers to ‘privilege’ and ‘opportunity’ (p. 43), but is hinted at in a much more disturbing way in throwaway remarks made at various points. Miss Lucy, for example, refers to electric fences being used at other centres, stating that ‘you get terrible accidents sometimes’ (p. 77). More explicitly, Miss Emily tells Kathy and Tommy that ‘all around the country, at this very moment, there are students being reared in deplorable conditions, conditions you Hailsham students could hardly imagine’, adding that, with the closure of Hailsham, ‘things will only get worse’ (p. 255). In other words, the lack of coercive power that I have discussed at the beginning of this chapter, and the conflation of care and exploitation that characterises the clones’ situation, is particular to those raised at Hailsham.

The evidence of this cruelty is scattered throughout the novel, but the ethical failing of blindness (and a resulting lack of concern) towards those outside immediate

¹⁰⁰ For example, Gabriele Griffin states that, ‘at the heart of *Never Let Me Go* is the question of the relative status of the clones and of what it means to be human’; Walkowitz argues that the humans are capable of instigating the organ donation programme because ‘they convince themselves that they are “not like” the clones’. Gabriele Griffin, ‘Science and the Cultural Imaginary: The Case of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*’, *Textual Practice*, 23 (2009), 645-63 (p. 653); Walkowitz, ‘Unimaginable Largeness’, p. 225.

networks of care is repeated by Kathy herself, in her lack of attention to the horrors experienced by non-Hailsham students. Speaking of being granted the right to choose her donors as a result of her experience, Kathy justifies her preferences for other former Hailsham students on the grounds that ‘when you get a chance to choose, you choose your own kind’ (p. 4). Kathy, in other words, employs the logic which gave rise to the donation programme in her own decisions, and this logic also extends to the autobiographical representation of her own life.

The potential for reading to produce the same type of exclusive empathy is created by the autobiographical form of the narrative. If we accept the invitation to enter into an empathic relationship with Kathy’s narrative, which itself is driven by her concerns for her immediate circle of friends, we risk failing to sufficiently acknowledge the evidence of atrocity taking place elsewhere. Miss Emily tells Kathy and Tommy that they ‘could hardly imagine’, the treatment of clones raised at other centres, but Kathy never takes this figure of speech seriously by making the effort to imagine those other lives. The work of further empathic imagination is therefore left to us to do; if we fail to do this, we fail to witness the treatment experienced by the majority of clones, raised at less humane institutions than Hailsham. The novel’s use of an imagined England presents an uncanny version of our own society, but one that we become familiar with through Kathy’s intimate narrative, and whose troubling aspects we may therefore neglect to examine fully where they lie outside the scope of her concerns.

The second aspect of the logic of the organ donation programme which is doubled so as to act on the reader is that of lateness. I have described above how the ‘drip-feeding’ of information to the clones removes the potential for the shock of revelation, and Kathy’s narrative betrays a concern with realisation coming too late to be acted upon throughout. On several occasions, Kathy makes quite deliberate use of simile to evoke the experience of realising that events have overtaken her. On the first such occasion, Kathy approaches Ruth’s group, realising a moment too late that she is about to be excluded, recalling that ‘it was like the split second before you step into a puddle, you realise it’s there, but there’s nothing you can do about it’ (p. 53). She employs a comparable simile when describing an argument at the Cottages, when Kathy allows her dominant position in the conversation to slip: ‘it was like when you make a move in chess and just as you take your finger off the piece, you see the mistake that

you've made, and there's this panic because you don't know yet the scale of the disaster you've left yourself open to' (p. 122).

The sense of lateness which pervades her narrative is a product of the moment at which she writes, after the deaths of Ruth and Tommy. However, even before their 'completions', a rumour of Hailsham's closure causes Kathy to realise the urgency of her task, and, likening the Hailsham clones' relationship to a bunch of balloons, she worries that 'one of the strings would come unravelled and a single balloon would sail off into the cloudy sky'. At this point, she recalls that: 'it started to dawn on me, I suppose, that a lot of things I'd always assumed I'd plenty of time to get round to doing, I might now have to act on pretty soon or else let them go forever' (p. 209).

As a result of this revelation, Kathy consoles Ruth shortly before her death by agreeing to become Tommy's carer (p. 232). However, there is a sense of too-lateness which hangs over Kathy and Tommy's relationship. When they finally become lovers and begin to have sex, Kathy detects 'something in Tommy's manner that was tinged with sadness, that seemed to say "Yes, we're doing this now and I'm glad we're doing it now. But what a pity we left it so late"' (p. 235). Similarly, when Tommy begins to draw again in the hope of providing artwork which will secure a deferral for him and Kathy, she feels that Tommy's drawings 'weren't as fresh now [...] they looked laboured, almost like they'd been copied'. She concludes by describing the feeling that they are 'doing all of this too late; that there'd once been a time for it, but we'd let that go by, and there was something ridiculous, reprehensible even, about the way we were now thinking and planning' (p. 237).

It is this sense of lateness that gives the ending of the novel its power. Kathy's narrative concludes with her driving through Norfolk, the 'lost corner' of England, according to their childhood mythology. Coming up against a barbed wire fence, Kathy notices that all sorts of 'strange rubbish' has been caught on it:

I started to imagine just a little fantasy thing, because this was Norfolk after all, and it was only a couple of weeks since I'd lost him. I was thinking about the rubbish, the flapping plastic in the branches, the shore-line of odd stuff caught along the fencing, and I half-closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I'd ever lost since childhood had washed up. (p. 282)

Both McDonald and Whitehead read this ending as being about redeeming value in the clones' lives. McDonald argues that 'ending the novel at this stage in the narrative gives over the testimony to this place of lost things' and adds that, crucially, it has been witnessed by the reader with the result that 'the reader and narrator exist at either side of this landscape, each looking for traces of lives lost'.¹⁰¹ Whitehead likewise sees this ending as redemptive, suggesting that 'Kathy's story seeks to reclaim this "rubbish," to assert that these lives cannot simply be disposed of as so much matter or refuse, but claim their own value, have their own dignity and worth'. Identifying the function of this ending as performative, she argues that 'Kathy's narrative has caught and held the lives of what society designates as trash, using art to redeem and regenerate what has so thoughtlessly and carelessly been thrown away'.¹⁰²

I concur that Ishiguro ends the novel in a way which allows the reader, through reading, to recognise the value of lives deemed worthless by the system in which they have been raised, exploited, and used up. However, and as with the logic of the way in which information is imparted to the clones too late, this realisation comes after the fact, when the fates of Kathy, Tommy and Ruth are already sealed. Just as during her reflections Kathy retrospectively identifies the significance of earlier episodes, the act of re-reading reveals evidence of the atrocity which only registers too late.

One of the passages which acquires the greatest significance with rereading is in fact one of the earliest described by Kathy. Recalling caring for a non-Hailsham donor, she describes how, close to completing, he repeatedly asks her for stories about Hailsham. She concludes that:

What he wanted was not just to hear about Hailsham, but to *remember* Hailsham [...] that's what he was doing: getting me to describe things to him, so they'd really sink in, so that maybe during those sleepless nights, with the drugs and the pain and the exhaustion, the line would blur between what were my memories and what were his. That was when I first understood, really understood, how lucky we'd been (pp. 5-6).

Kathy is in a position to bear witness to the suffering of other clones, yet other than the points at which these other clones are instrumental to the central drama involving

¹⁰¹ McDonald, 'Days of Past Futures', p. 82.

¹⁰² Whitehead, 'Writing with Care', p. 80.

herself, Ruth and Tommy, they are excluded from her narrative. This failure to relate their experiences therefore renders disingenuous her claim to ‘really understand’ (p. 6) how lucky she and her friends were to have been brought up at Hailsham. Moreover, it is only after evidence of the cruelty to which non-Hailsham clones are subjected has been drip-fed into the narrative that the implications of this passage become clear. Unlike Kathy, who is so desperate to hold onto the memories of her childhood and the value of the bonds forged at that time, this donor has experienced a childhood so horrific that he attempts to replace his own memories with a happier story.

When reading focuses only on redeeming the value of the lives of Kathy and those whose lives her narrative represents, it involves a forgetting of the other clones whose lives are debased to an even greater extent by the system of organ donation: it involves a failure of witnessing. Whitehead suggests that the novel raises the possibility that ‘the redemptive power of art is an illusion’, but that ‘the novel’s ending seems, quietly but decisively, to resist such a conclusion’.¹⁰³ The novel’s closing lines do offer this possibility of redemption, but if this redemption is not to be at the cost of empathy for those beyond our immediate horizons, it needs to be held in tension with an awareness of what we already suspect to be happening, and which we can confirm to be the case through careful reading – and re-reading – of the evidence at hand.

Never Let Me Go, set as it is in the late 1990s, means that we read after the event. This suggests that our own knowledge of atrocities may already have come to us too late. It suggests that failures of witnessing may not necessarily result from the active subscription to morally abhorrent programmes, but are more likely to occur through a failure to do our ‘detective work’, through a natural focus on our local concerns at the exclusion of that which is not immediately obvious. Seminal work on the role of witnessing and testimony has understandably and rightly addressed the question of what it is for the victims of atrocity and trauma to bear witness; *Never Let Me Go* prompts us to consider the difficult necessity of witnessing for those for whom life is not defined by the experience of trauma, and for whom normality may involve unseen and unacknowledged complicities. It asks us to make the effort required to look beyond the surfaces that we normally see (office windows, high streets and motorway service stations), and to make the shift in perspective required to acknowledge that the evidence of the ongoing atrocity has been there all along, in plain sight.

¹⁰³ Whitehead, ‘Writing with Care’, p. 80.

CONCLUSION

The final passages of *Never Let Me Go* can be read figuratively, certainly, but their signification is sufficiently open to allow for a number of interpretations. Similarly, the ambiguity of Banks' narrative as a whole, and in particular his closing comments, permit the novel to remain open to a number of interpretations. I have argued in the first section of my discussion of *Never Let Me Go* that the value of art, for the clones, partly lies in its potential for shared signification: its content, its type, is less important than its function as a token which produces shared recognition in those who encounter it. The open nature of these texts, however, means that they may not necessarily achieve this shared significance.

Ishiguro seems to warn us that this may be the case, including in both novels a number of instances where shared recognition fails: most obviously Banks, as I have argued, appears to be living a life according to a different story than the one experienced by those that he encounters. The same possibility of failure is present in *Never Let Me Go*: the episode in which Miss Emily comes across Kathy dancing to 'Never Let Me Go' while clutching a cushion to her chest acquires a great deal of significance for both, yet for each the event has a different meaning. Miss Emily sees Kathy holding onto an 'old, kind world' which she knows cannot remain, while for Kathy the song is about a woman who is terrified that something might separate her from her baby, although she acknowledges that 'that's not what the song's about at all' (pp. 266-7).

Shared recognition is the basis for empathy, but also for exclusion. Common ground and empathy are an ethical necessity, but being too certain of our ground leads to the kind of delusional take on the world that is evident in the Onos and Stevens of this world. In Ishiguro's later, more fantastic, fiction, we are never quite sure what it is that we have witnessed and, as such, his writing sustains worlds which demand quizzical, reflexive and attentive readings, while at the same time asking the reader to make the effort to enter into empathic relationships with the inhabitants of these worlds.

Kathy, reflecting on her coming transition from carer to donor, writes of welcoming 'the chance to rest – to stop and think and remember' (p. 37). I have discussed the importance of reflection to the process of witnessing in Chapter Three, citing Laub's assertion of the need to 'halt and reflect on [...] memories as they are

spoken'.¹⁰⁴ Banks and Kathy, already embedded and complicit in the same systems of thought and power that cause them harm, achieve this reflection only partially, and not in time to take any action by which they can avoid the unhappy outcomes of their lives. For the reader at least, however, an alternative exists, with Ishiguro's novels allowing the chance to read and reflect before it is too late.

¹⁰⁴ Laub, 'An Event Without a Witness', p. 76.

CONCLUSION

If limit-case events produce, as Dori Laub suggests, an ‘imperative to tell’ on the part of those who have experienced them, for those coming afterwards, this imperative is replaced by an ethical injunction born out of the knowledge of extremity and atrocity. Yet this injunction is uncertain, always threatened by self-interest, complacency, the desire for consolation, or the unwillingness to challenge an orthodoxy which has a vested interest in not looking at the past. As such, as the distance from events grows, the danger of the kind of minimisation of the past raised by Felman also increases.

This danger pervades the fiction of Sebald and Ishiguro, with the content and form of both writers’ novels turning on the awareness of the potential for narrative and representation to fail as modes of witnessing. On this basis, this thesis has set out to examine the relationship between narrative and complicity in their writing, and in doing so has attempted to outline the possible roles for fiction as a mode of witnessing. Of Laub’s three levels of witnessing, the first, that of being ‘a witness to oneself within the experience’ is an impossibility for the narrators and protagonists living after the central historical events of the novels. It is at the second and third levels, those of ‘being a witness to the testimonies of others’ and ‘of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself’¹ that the need for witnessing, and the attendant potential to fail in these respects, is present in their writing. In terms of the second level, representations of protagonists’ blindness and deafness, whether wilful or resulting from blinkered self-interest, suggest some of the ways in which these forms of complicity arise: often, they are the result of the protagonists’ embeddedness in discourses, which is itself related to their adherence to their professional and social roles. However, it is at Laub’s third level that these texts engage most fully with the nature of witnessing: the texts ask the reader to reflect on the deficiencies in narrative and representation – partly inherent, and partly resulting from the agency of those reading and writing – and in doing so to meditate on the process of witnessing itself.

I have argued that Sebald is well aware of this potential for representation to fail to bear witness to atrocity. In the reflexive and ekphrastic passages that punctuate his

¹ Laub, ‘An Event Without a Witness’, p. 75.

work, he suggests that modes of representation are inherently inadequate as means of bearing witness. In his texts, all forms of representation are shown to be projections of order onto the world, and as such are always partial, biased, and inadequate. However, these problems are exacerbated by the agency of those who occupy positions in which they are able to create representations and shape discourse. This includes his narrators who, as academics, are not only educated in the discourses which have produced atrocity, but also contribute to the continuing proliferation of these systems of thought. I have also suggested that Sebald sees no easy way out of this impasse, but that the (often neglected) subversive function of his narrators is to make visible the implication of representation in atrocity and to question the discourses from which such representations are constructed.

This subversive function is most visible in *Vertigo*, which is narrated by Sebald's most awkward persona. From this point on, however, his narrators increasingly act as conduits for the stories of others. Although his other novels contain moments of subversive and transgressive behaviour, this tendency reaches its apogee in *Austerlitz*, in which the narrator appears to become almost completely effaced, and seems to be present only in that he transmits the story of Jacques Austerlitz. However, as I have argued in my reading of Sebald's final novel, the narrator's existence as an organising presence has a significant ontological impact on the status of the text, and on the status of the elements from which the text is assembled; this is true also of his other works. It is, therefore, in the juxtaposition and visible mediation of discourses that the texts exhibit a mindfulness of their role in the process of witnessing, and by which they prompt active, critical, and ethically engaged readings.

In Ishiguro's writing, complicity tends in one sense to be represented more directly than in Sebald, with the protagonists of the four novels discussed here culpable to varying degrees in the atrocities described and alluded to in the texts. However, as I have argued, the form of these four novels creates the potential for complicitous readings which fail to fully acknowledge the ongoing effects of atrocity outside the immediate scope of the narratives. I have also argued that Ishiguro's texts, by making visible the way in which the narrators' acts of inscription are processes of interpretation and re-interpretation, alert the reader to the dangers of accepting the closure offered by the forms employed.

In Ishiguro's early novels, his protagonists' complicities and denials are detectable in the omissions and obfuscations in their narratives. Acting against historically and logically consistent backgrounds, we are able, as readers, to identify where the inadequacies of the narrators' accounts hide or minimise their involvement with atrocity. The protagonists' desires to retrospectively construct acceptable stories of their lives therefore dictate the form of their narratives, and in Ishiguro's later works, notably *The Unconsoled* and *When We Were Orphans*, this projection of desire onto narrative begins to shape their worlds to the extent that the novels no longer inhabit a realist framework. Although Kathy H.'s narrative does not exhibit the same world-forming projection of desire, *Never Let Me Go* also departs from a realist setting in order, as I have argued, to comment on the limited and self-interested nature of our scope of vision.

Laub conceives witnessing as beginning with an encounter between speaker and listener in which testimony can be given voice to and heard. Such encounters bring together his first and second levels of witnessing, with the implication being that both parties must be willing to work together to allow the process of witnessing to take place. However, the relationship between representation (including narrative) and complicity in Sebald and Ishiguro problematises this model in two significant ways. Firstly, it calls into question the notion that all parties act in good faith when testimony is given and heard. Laub concentrates on the experiences of victims, but where the parties involved are in some way culpable, the desire for exculpation means that both the articulation of experience, and its interpretation by listeners, may lead to minimisations or distortions. Secondly, and more fundamentally, both Sebald and Ishiguro indicate the way in which the lack of an extradiegetic position from which representation – the stuff from which testimony is created – can itself be evaluated may lead to complicity with systems of thought responsible for atrocity. The transmission of knowledge employs forms of representation which are of the same discourses out of which the crimes at the centre of these texts arose, and any ethical form of representation needs to acknowledge this baggage.

The way in which Sebald and Ishiguro foreground their narratives as acts of inscription points towards the crux of this problem: rather than experience existing prior to testimony, the acts of remembering, thinking, interpreting and expressing experience are all tied together in the act of inscription. However, if this recognition pinpoints the

problem of complicity in representation, it is also the starting point for looking for a way out. Certainly, this awareness encourages us, as readers, to read with Laub's third level of witnessing in mind, and to sustain an awareness of the way in which the process of witnessing occurs, and hence of the dangers inherent in this.

Important work on witnessing, testimony, and the experiences of victims is being supplemented by a growing interest in the representation of perpetrators. However, both of these strands of scholarship presuppose the categorisations on which they are premised. While such categorisations may be unproblematic in some cases, Sebald and Ishiguro indicate the commonality of varying degrees of culpability, and also suggest that elements of victimhood and perpetration may not be mutually exclusive. Their writing asks its readers to sustain a balance between the extremes of empathy and judgement, and to read content as testimony to events while reflecting on their own relationship with that content. Becoming attentive to the ways in which narrative and representation contribute to the process of witnessing may be a productive means of examining our relationship with the limit-case events that have shaped us: the fictions of Sebald and Ishiguro create a space for reflection and questioning in which witnessing can take place, while that same process is held to account.

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