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Looking to Remember: Narrative, Image, and Technology in Twentieth-Century Literature

By

Irene Yoon

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

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in

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Elizabeth Abel, Chair

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Professor Steven Lee

Professor Suzanne Guerlac

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Abstract

Looking to Remember: Narrative, Image, and Technology in Twentieth-Century Literature

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Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Elizabeth Abel, Chair

Looking to Remember argues that technological developments in visual culture produce a distinct literary tradition of modernist memory work that spans the long twentieth century. In the course of this century, innovations in glass architecture, photography, film, and digital processing made the lives of others suddenly appear as visible as one's own. Against a broad backdrop of theoretical engagements with visual culture, modernism, and memory studies, I highlight four authors—Virginia Woolf, Vladimir Nabokov, W.G. Sebald, and Teju Cole—whose narrative explorations of visual technologies expand the boundaries of individual memory. The tradition they constitute unites modernism's familiar emphasis on private consciousness with its less familiar attunement to the reverberations of atrocity across national boundaries. By focusing on the aftermath of two World Wars, the Cold War, and the "War on Terror," I propose a visual aesthetics of secondhand witnessing that reimagine individual subjectivity in the context of transnational communities. These authors connect disparate moments and places through a shared concern with the ethics of mediated witnessing. This dissertation interrogates the murky boundaries of war and peace, the public and the private, the seen and the remembered, from the early twentieth century to our own time.

My dissertation begins by situating Woolf's invention of her novelistic tunneling method within a broader European cultural scene that witnessed the construction of Bauhaus's celebrated glass curtain wall and the emergence of Maurice Halbwach's sociological term "collective memory." By exploring the danger of seemingly transparent access to private and public memory in the aftermath of the twentieth century's first "total war," I demonstrate how Woolf resists the nationalism of the interwar period by cultivating a non-appropriative form of collective identification. From the deceptively transparent mediation of glass in *Mrs. Dalloway*, I turn to Nabokov's interrogation of photography's apparently unmediated access to distant times and places. Doubly displaced by the Russian Revolution and the Second World War, Nabokov initially rejects photography's claim to objectivity in favor of memory's imaginative idiosyncrasies. But he eventually includes nearly two-dozen family photos in the final version of *Invitation to a Beheading*, recasting the Cold War era's promotion of a monolithic history as a stereoscopic interplay of image and text. Confronted with the glut and precarity of images decades later, W.G. Sebald transforms Nabokov's stereoscopic method into an oscillating cinematic vision. Fracturing glass slides and slowing Nazi films to a funereal pace, Sebald reframes remembrance as the perpetual fluctuation between imaginative projection and material screens. His readers confront the past through unending processes of visual identification and dis-identification with victims and perpetrators of atrocity alike. In dialogue with Woolf, Nabokov, and Sebald, novelist

and photography critic Teju Cole expands the optics of witnessing derived from the human eye to drone technologies that obfuscate individual responsibility. By analyzing the foreshortened visual perspective and attenuated bodily remove of digital technology in Cole's *Open City*, together with his writings on and about the Internet, I conclude my dissertation with an examination of a post-9/11 world in which technology instantiates, as well as records, acts of violence.

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opportunity to share work, ideas, and the odd margarita, Jessica Crewe and Luke Terlaak Poot proved extremely supportive friends and inspiring writers. I simply could not have made it through the last nine years or this dissertation without my fellow Angelenos, Rebecca Gaydos and Samia Rahimtoola. Their exceptionally sharp and capacious minds, steadfast encouragement, and unique appreciation of the Vegas museum scene have left indelible marks all over this dissertation. From our early encounters on Gchat and in Glasgow, respectively, Sarah Chihaya and Gina Patnaik have been among my most cherished interlocutors and friends. This project, and any desire to produce subsequent ones, owes much to their insight and support.

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Lastly, to my fiancé Gabe, thank you for your generous readings (and rereadings!) of my work; for your thoughtfulness in conversation and in life that continually inspire me to think and live better; for how you have patiently and gracefully held our lives together in the slow crawl to this project's completion. You have given me so much to look back on and remember with fondness and gratitude and that much more to look forward to in the years to come.

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One's first encounter with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany. For me, it was photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau which I came across by chance in a bookstore in Santa Monica in July 1945. Nothing I have seen—in photographs or in real life—ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I understood what they were about.

- Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (1977)

Discussions of memory and twentieth-century literature usually begin with the work of Marcel Proust, not Susan Sontag, and with good reason. Proust's groundbreaking concept of involuntary memory, a private experience of a memory's spontaneous resurgence through a chance encounter with a material object, has become a modern touchstone for critics, novelists, and neuroscientists alike.¹ The material object in this foundational instance—the famous madeleine—is literally internalized and ingested in a process that, according to Walter Benjamin, bears all of the markers of Proust's necessary isolation from the shocks of a rapidly modernizing world. The “prototypically modern revelation” Sontag describes above, however, directs our attention toward a different, but no less significant, iteration of twentieth-century memory. Confronting the rapidly modernizing world head on, Sontag stumbles upon photographs of strangers in Nazi concentration camps instead of a familiar cookie from her childhood. The encounter ultimately transforms rather than reveals the character of her memories.

Sontag's account highlights, among other things, the quickly changing media and norms of viewing that attend images of historical trauma. What comes as an unprecedented shock to the twelve-year-old in 1945 threatens to “anesthetize” rather than “wound” the adult who inhabits a world flooded by the “proliferation of such scenes of horror” three decades later.² As Marianne Hirsch observes, “Sontag describes this radical interruption through seeing... only to show how easily we can become inured to its visual impact.”³ The moment also introduces another modern revelation beyond the initial shock of seeing the aftermath of Nazi violence or the later dulling

¹ See, for example, Jonah Lehrer, *Proust Was a Neuroscientist* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007) and Daniel Schacter, *Searching for Memory* (New York: Basic Books, 1996). After biting into a tea-soaked madeleine, unexpectedly reminiscent of those his aunt had given him as a child, the adult Marcel famously recovers childhood memories in all of their sensory fullness: “the whole of Combray and its surroundings, taking shape and solidity, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea.” Proust thus locates the past, “somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us).” Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past: Swann's Way & Within a Budding Grove*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin, Andreas Mayor (New York: Vintage, 1982), 51; Proust qtd. in Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 156-7.

² Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 19-20.

³ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 105.

effect of such images of atrocity: the recognition of suddenly having one's own life and past reorganized around people and places one can see but will never encounter firsthand.

The images Sontag saw in that Santa Monica bookstore were “only photographs—of an event [she] had scarcely heard of and could do nothing to affect, of suffering [she] could hardly imagine and could do nothing to relieve,” yet the images, “cut [her...] sharply, deeply, instantaneously.” The visual encounter with an event utterly removed from her personal life moreover comes to structure Sontag's sense of her life's entire narrative arc. It was “years before [she] understood what [the images] were about,” and yet the confrontation with them quickly and irrevocably reorganizes Sontag's life “into two parts, before I saw those photographs... and after.”⁴ The remembrance of things in her own past, in short, becomes a function of what she once saw in the photographic images of others.

The continuation of Sontag's account is illustrative. “When I looked at those photographs, something broke,” Sontag recalls, “Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead, something is still crying.”⁵ Strikingly evocative of the discourse of traumatic firsthand experience, Sontag's account is also acutely self-conscious about how far removed she is from the literally broken, grieved, wounded, dead, and crying bodies she sees in the images before her.⁶ The dissonance prompts the reader to wonder what exactly those “somethings” of her story are: What broke? What limit? What went dead? What is still crying? Why is it so difficult to locate exactly who or what is affecting or affected in the otherwise straightforward memory, “when I looked at those photographs”? There is, I propose, another incipient narrative running alongside “this radical interruption through seeing,” one which might encompass the afterlife of Sontag's memory as well as the traumatic rupture embodied by the photographic images themselves. The authors I take up in this dissertation endeavor to tell such stories.



My title, *Looking to Remember*, gestures toward the intimate relation between acts of seeing and remembering, on the one hand, and the desire to regain a variously attenuated past, on the other. Looking to remember as a set of actions is generally associated with primary experience. One has to be there to see it and subsequently to remember it. In that regard, this dissertation might be said simply to ask what “it” is that one sees and remembers in the first place. This concern with sensory perception and its relation to the exploration of memory is, of course, one very familiar to the practice and study of modernist narrative fiction. Looking to remember as a statement of desire, however, admits a remove in time, space, or experience that makes

⁴ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 19-20.

⁵ Sontag, *On Photography*, 20.

⁶ In its accidental quality, belated attribution of meaning, juxtaposition of irrevocable wound and continuous crying; and essential unknowability of the experience in the moment of its occurrence, Sontag's account hits upon many of the key characteristics of traumatic experience articulated by Cathy Caruth and others. The strange temporal juxtaposition of Sontag's admission that “something went dead, something is still crying” furthermore finds particular resonance in the myth of Tancred and Clorinda that Caruth, in her reading of Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, discusses. After accidentally killing his lover Clorinda, Tancred discovers that he has unexpectedly wounded her a second time as he hears her cry. See Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) and “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History,” *Yale French Studies* 79 (1991): 181-192.

remembrance the object of perpetual pursuit as much as an act in and of itself, a pursuit open to first- and secondhand witnesses alike. The emergence of new technologies of visual mediation such as photography, film, and digital media and new conceptual models for understanding individual and collective memory in the twentieth century blur and complicate the distinction between the two modes of looking conjured by this project's title.

Accordingly, I highlight dynamic constellations rather than definitional equations between innovations in narrative technique, visual technologies, and historical context in my exploration of modernist fiction. I argue that technological developments in visual culture fostered a distinct literary tradition of modernist memory work that spans the long twentieth century. I do so primarily through an investigation of how certain writers shape their narrative techniques around attention to visual technologies. New visual media—and these writers through them—reframe fictions of transparent access, unbounded by time or place, to the lives of others. As I discuss in Chapter 1, such visual encounters find prescient expression in Virginia Woolf's interwar interrogation of glass, a material intimately bound up with modernist aesthetics and that recurs prominently throughout the work of authors in the decades that follow.⁷ From the photographic plate to the Bauhaus curtain wall, *Kristallnacht* to the LCD screen—the story of the twentieth century could very well be told through a story of glass's fate. The ease with which glass confuses the definition of mediated and unmediated, self-reflective material barrier and transparent window, sets the stage for the works I discuss in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.⁸

In the process, my project introduces a genealogical affinity across an unexpected, transnational assemblage of authors. Virginia Woolf, Vladimir Nabokov, W.G. Sebald, and Teju Cole, I argue, unite modernism's familiar emphasis on private consciousness with its less familiar attunement to the reverberations of technology and conflict across national boundaries. Writing in the wake of two World Wars, the Cold War, and the "War on Terror," they interrogate how their visual access to the lives of others trouble relations between self and other, memory and material image. Current strands of postwar memory studies have focused on how and whether one can memorialize experiences of atrocity from a 1.5- or post-generational remove.⁹ I highlight the pervasive impact of a more diffuse, technologically mediated distance from such events on an individual's search for his or her own past, and vice versa. The testimony of the secondhand witness as such may not be admissible in the court of law or the annals of history, but it does, I argue, reveal how the strategies of modernist fiction can illuminate the redistricting of public and private memory across the last century and the ethical quandaries these shifting boundaries raise.

⁷ The centennial exhibition of Vladimir Nabokov's life and work (1899-1977) at the New York Public Library was fittingly named "Nabokov Under Glass." (April 23-August 21, 1999).

⁸ W.J.T. Mitchell describes windows in particular as "perhaps one of the most important inventions in the history of visual culture, opening architecture to new relations of inner and outer, and remapping the human body by analogy into inner and outer spaces." Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 214. Isobel Armstrong's *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* marks the distinction between nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernism through their respective glass cultures (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008). Anne Cheng's *Second Skin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Judith Brown's *Glamour in Six Dimensions: Modernism and the Radiance of Form* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009) both make the case for glass, in its traceless transparency and evocation of pure surface as a modernist medium par excellence.

⁹ See Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006) and Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*.

Modernism and Narrative

Situating Woolf, Nabokov, Sebald, and Cole within a long modernist tradition running from the First World War into the early years of the twenty-first century raises now-familiar concerns about the periodization and definition of modernism in the first place.¹⁰ Is modernism an aesthetic or an historical category? A totalizing system or force of rupture? Susan Stanford Friedman's *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* explores the crises of contradiction that plague the term and its counterpart, *modernity*.¹¹ What Friedman's capacious "definitional excursion" finally lands on, then, is less a definition and more a confrontation with "the contradictory dialogic running through the historical and expressive formations of the phenomena to which the terms allude. Order and disruption are symbiotically necessary to each other for each to have its distinctive meaning."¹² It is within this understanding of modernism, caught between its self-identification with notions of continuity and rupture, the investigation of oneself versus others, aesthetic autonomy and embeddedness in a technologically mediated modernity, that I locate the authors of my dissertation.

The choice to confine the scope of my inquiry into twentieth-century memory and literature to authors of narrative fiction is founded in part on the deeply intertwined and even occasionally mutually constitutive relationship between memory and narrative as masterfully articulated by Paul Ricoeur, among others.¹³ The emphasis on fiction strikes at the heart of any debate about the nature of memory in the first place. Put simply, what are we recalling when we remember the past: fact or fantasy? The writers I examine creatively navigate and insist on memory as not just one or the other but both. They likewise draw on their own autobiographical accounts of the past in their exploration of memory in their fiction, and their fiction in their autobiographical writing. The possibility of affording memory any kind of positive—if problematic—value is inextricably bound up with the question of its imaginative practice. By virtue of its ability to move fluidly between multiple temporalities, between fiction and history, and between image and text, narrative fiction is uniquely situated to the task of rendering memories in a manner as proximate as possible to the complex practice of memory itself.¹⁴

Contemporaneous philosophies of memory had a particularly profound impact on twentieth-century literary production. For all of the categorical confusion surrounding modernism as such, there remain certain techniques and preoccupations that consistently surface in descriptions of modernist fiction. They all arguably bear the imprint of William James's and

¹⁰ See David James, *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Michaela Bronstein, *Out of Context: The Uses of Modernist Fiction* (forthcoming from Oxford); Eric Hayot, "World-Modernism Theory," Modern Language Association Convention, January 10, 2015; Jean-Michel Rabbaté, ed. *A Handbook of Modernism Studies* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

¹¹ Susan Stanford Friedman, "Definitional Excursions" in *Planetary Modernisms* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 19-45.

¹² *Ibid.*, 45

¹³ To draw from a favorite example of critics across numerous disciplines: in Book 11 of Augustine's *Confessions*, the very existence of a literary form (in his case that of the psalm) demonstrates a reliance upon the temporal extension made available through memory. So too, as scholars from fields as varied as psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, and literary criticism have all concluded, is the construction and retention of memory reliant on narrative forms. See Daniel Schacter on narrative memory in *Searching for Memory* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*, Vols. 1-3 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984-1988), James Olney's *Memory & Narrative: The Weave of Life Writing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998). Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*.

¹⁴ See Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*, and W.J.T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Henri Bergson's theories of consciousness and lived time as qualitatively fluid and non-linear.¹⁵ In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel*, Morag Shiach succinctly catalogues these characteristic features as: "innovations in the representation of time; complex explorations of the nature of consciousness; formal experiments in narrative structure; and an intense use of the imaginative power of the image."¹⁶ Of these formal experiments and complex explorations of the nature of consciousness and representation of time, there is perhaps no other concept more frequently associated with modern fiction than William James's stream of consciousness, at once a narrative device and a theory of mind generally understood as "the continuous flow of sense-perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and memories in the human mind."¹⁷

While I take up Woolf's resonance with—and departure from—both James and Bergson in Chapter 1, their influence on the shape and preoccupations of modern fiction is palpable in the interests all four authors share in representations of psychological interiority, processes of remembrance, and narrative time. Woolf is a recognizably central figure of modernist fiction, but the narrative experiments by Nabokov, Sebald, and Cole that I examine in this dissertation fit the modernist mold in this sense as well. *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) connects the lives and memories of strangers Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith through their independent sensory perceptions of the same car, text, and man on the streets of London. Nabokov's memoir *Invitation to a Beheading* (1966) emphasizes an achronological experience of time, recounting, for example, a straightforward boyhood butterfly chase in Russia that seamlessly concludes decades later in the mountains of Colorado. Sebald's "hybrid prose fictions" knit together a wide array of images and texts that test the limits of his characters' conscious and unconscious memories. Cole's *Open City* (2011) funnels a veritable ocean of historical and cultural memory through a gap in its narrator's personal memory the size, comparatively, of the head of a pin.

All four writers are notable stylists whose fluency with and fixation on the narrative representation of individual memory have earned them labels from critical proponents and detractors alike: "[sophisticated/ mere/ melancholic] aesthete" (all of them), "purely psychological" (Woolf), "too fascinated by his own despair" (Sebald), "totally uninterested in [public] matters" (Nabokov), and inclined to narrate events "without any perceptible rhyme or

¹⁵ See, for example, Mary Ann Gillies's *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996); Bloomsbury's *Understanding Philosophy, Understanding Modernism* series which includes *Understanding Bergson, Understanding Modernism* edited by S. E. Gontarski, Paul Ardoin, Laci Mattison (New York, London: Bloomsbury, 2013) and *Understanding James, Understanding Modernism* edited by David Evans (New York, London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Robert Humphrey, *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1954); Shiv Kumar *Bergson and the Stream of Consciousness Novel* (New York: New York University Press, 1963).

¹⁶ Morag Shiach, "Reading the Modernist Novel: An Introduction" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel*, ed. Morag Shiach (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-14.

¹⁷ "Stream of Consciousness," *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (3 ed.), ed. Chris Baldick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). As James describes it in his 1892 *Principles of Psychology*, "Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as 'chain' or 'train' do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. *In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life.*" William James, "The Stream of Consciousness," in *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Dover, 1950 (1892), 239, emphasis in original. The related literary device, more narrowly construed, is "a special style of interior monologue... [that] presents a character's thoughts 'directly', without the apparent intervention of a summarizing and selecting narrator," while also "mingl[ing] them with impressions and perceptions," and occasionally "violat[ing] the norms of grammar, syntax, and logic" ("Stream of Consciousness," *Oxford Dictionary*). James Joyce's *Ulysses* often crops up as the textbook example.

reason” (Cole).¹⁸ While no doubt intended to sting with every pinching scare quote, F.R. Leavis’s take on Woolf’s writing, seen from a more positive vantage, might serve as an astute characterization of all of the works I discuss in this dissertation.

The preoccupation with intimating ‘significance’ in fine shades of consciousness, together with the unremitting play of visual imagery, the ‘beautiful’ writing and the lack of moral interest and interest in action, gives the effect of something closely akin to a sophisticated aestheticism. (There is also the Aesthetic brooding wistfulness about the passage of time.)¹⁹

In fact, this is more or less a recapitulation of the criteria of modernist fiction enumerated by Shiach above. But in its distrust of these narrative strategies, Leavis’s commentary also echoes other trenchant critiques of modernist literature, including that of Georg Lukács.

In his essay “The Ideology of Modernism,” Lukács decries “the approach generally adopted by bourgeois-modernist critics themselves: that exaggerated concern with formal criteria, with questions of style and literary technique,” namely, that of the “stream of association” which presents “momentary sense-impressions” as “itself the formative principle governing the narrative pattern and presentation of character.” The results of such writing are a concept of “man, for these writers, [as] by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings,” and the “negation of outward reality.”²⁰ Rather than refute these critics, *Looking to Remember* argues that the modernism that unites Woolf, Nabokov, Sebald, and Cole in fact leans into such claims.

As fluid, virtuosic, and beautiful as their respective prose styles are, these writers also all confront the dangers of solipsistic self-reflection. Such confrontations register in their writing as fissures, impasses, and gaps—the decidedly *unfluid* features of their work that accrue in particular around images of others. In other words, *Looking to Remember* explores what happens when these “momentary sense-impressions” do not reflect one’s own past image back to oneself, as with Proust’s madeleine, but rather, through engagements with visual technology, create a window into someone else’s experience. The characteristic strategies of modernist fiction become essential to investigating how visual technologies reconfigure the private and public in the twentieth century. The nature and ethical stakes of responsibly managing different levels of remove vary with the circumstances of each encounter, but the associative processes of an individual consciousness remain the site of investigation.

¹⁸ F.R. Leavis, *A Selection from Scrutiny*, Vol.2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 99; Tess Lewis “W.G. Sebald: The Past is Another Country” *New Criterion* (December 2001), 86; Jean Guiget, *Virginia Woolf and Her Works*, trans. Jean Stewart (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), 281; Margo Jefferson, “Writing in the Shadows,” review of works by W.G. Sebald, *New York Times*, March 18, 2001; Edmund Wilson, *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971*, ed. Simon Karlinsky (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 20; John Knight, “Who Needs a Plot?: Teju Cole’s Open City,” *The Millions*, January 17, 2012.

¹⁹ Leavis, *A Selection*, 99.

²⁰ Georg Lukács, “The Ideology of Modernism” in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter (Boston, New York: Bedford St. Martins, 1989), 1218-19, 1222.

Private and Public Images

Where Lukács condemns the willful “negation of outward reality” he sees in the inward turn of modernist literature, Benjamin identifies the inevitable conflicts of an increasingly mechanized and mediated modern world. In one of his most celebrated accounts of modernity’s “change in the structure of... experience,” Benjamin opens with a meditation on “the contemplative actualization of the stream of life” in the philosophy of Henri Bergson and the novels of Marcel Proust. Benjamin moves in quick succession from Bergson’s rejection of “any historical determination of memory” and insistence on this contemplative turn as “a matter of free choice” to Proust’s qualification of it in terms of the difference between voluntary and involuntary memory, a subject I return to with Nabokov’s reading of *À la recherche du temps perdu* in Chapter 2.

Emphasizing the grounding “in some material object” of Proust’s response to Bergson, Benjamin presses on the notion that it is subsequently “a matter of chance whether an individual forms an image of himself, whether he can take hold of his experience.”²¹ This may generally be the case, but “it is by no means inevitable to be dependent on chance in this manner.” An individual’s “inner concerns” are not “issueless” and “private... by nature,” Benjamin insists. They become so “only when he is increasingly unable to assimilate the data of the world around him by way of experience.”²² The writer struggling to form his or her self-image through the contemplative actualization of memory needs somehow to overcome the material shocks of the modern world and the desensitization they produce. This Proust does, Benjamin suggests, by writing from the intense isolation of his sickbed—a response to “outward reality” that is not so much willful negation as it is symptomatic and sensitive self-preservation.

Benjamin describes the attempt otherwise to parry, as in a duel, the violent shocks to human consciousness that increasingly define modern life—and with it, the shocks of film and photography.²³ Drawing on stories by Edgar Allen Poe and E.T.A. Hoffman in which characters struggle to assimilate the steady stream of passing strangers they see through their windows, Benjamin proposes that the alienating “shock experience which the passer-by has in the crowd corresponds to what the worker experiences at his machine.”²⁴ The increasing visibility of the crowd and mechanization of society at the turn of the twentieth century produce situations in which an unthinking “touch of the finger” on a camera shutter “suffices to fix an event for an unlimited period of time.”²⁵ The event is captured by a disjointed “touch of the finger” rather than the fully actualized—and increasingly rare—“storyteller” whose object is not to “convey a happening *per se*, which is the purpose of information,” but rather to embed the story in his or her own life “in order to pass it on as experience to those listening.”

In the decades after the First World War, the photographic capture of an event appears to become the measure of public reality, the near-extinct storyteller, shielded from the shocks of the outside world, the bearer of private experience. The continual confrontation with the images

²¹ Marcel Proust qtd. in Benjamin, “On Some Motifs,” 156.

²² Benjamin, “On Some Motifs,” 158.

²³ As Kathrin Yacavone notes, “Despite the fact that its recording and archiving function is exactly that which traditionally links photography with memory... Benjamin sees in the camera’s immediate operation and mechanical instrumentality a denial of *Erfahrung* and of involuntary memory by virtue of its mechanical triggering of shocks—akin to those which inhabitants of cities experience.” Kathrin Yacavone *Benjamin, Barthes and the Singularity of Photography* (New York, London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 102.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 176

²⁵ Benjamin, “On Some Motifs,” 158, emphasis mine.

of others in the press of the crowd—and of the shutter—threatens to alienate a storyteller from the image of him or herself in his or her search for the past. But what about modernists Woolf, Nabokov, Sebald, and Cole who, by contrast, make their encounters with visual technology and their movement on city streets across the globe central to their narrative endeavors? What might it look like to draw on photography in the reassertion of the storyteller as such?

Accounts of modern mediated experience articulated by Marshall McLuhan and Roland Barthes in the latter half of the twentieth century seem at first to confirm the impasse between public and private images as described by Benjamin. Writing in 1964, McLuhan extends the Freudian description of neurological shock that Benjamin invokes throughout his essay on Baudelaire (alongside Bergson and Proust) to diagnose the numbness we experience in response to the proliferation of new media and their supply of endless stimuli. “With the arrival of electric technology,” McLuhan argues, “man extended, or set outside himself, a live model of the central nervous system itself. To the degree that this is so, it is a development that suggests a desperate and suicidal autoamputation, as if the central nervous system could no longer depend on the physical organs to be protective buffers against the slings and arrows of outrageous mechanism.” As a result, “social experience” becomes “too violent and super stimulated... for the central nervous system to endure.” The resulting “shock induces a generalized numbness or an increased threshold to all types of perception. The victim seems immune to pain or sense. Thus the age of anxiety and of electric media is also the age of the unconscious and of apathy.”²⁶

What for McLuhan registers as numbness and apathy borne out of the prosthetic extension of technology, emerges for Barthes in bruises, lacerations, and a key temporal impasse. In *Camera Lucida* (1980), Barthes reflects on the paradox by which “the same century invented History and Photography.” The result is “that everything, today, prepares our race for this impotence: to be no longer able to conceive *duration*, affectively or symbolically: the age of the Photograph is also the age of revolutions, contestations, assassinations, explosions, in short, of impatiences, of everything which denies ripening.”²⁷ The power of the photograph comes not so much from its participation in “the good historical scenes” of the *studium*, contrived as they themselves are, but from the disruptive force of its *punctum*: the stray visual detail, “that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).”²⁸

In Barthes’s succinct formulation, these visual encounters take place in private, if we understand “private life” to be “nothing but that zone of space, of time, where I am not an image, an object. It is my political right to be a subject which I must protect.” In this manner, Barthes proposes:

The reading of public photographs is always, at bottom, a private reading... This is also true of the photographs which at first glance have no link, even a metonymic one, with my existence (for instance, all journalistic photographs). Each photograph is read as the private appearance of its referent.²⁹

²⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 54.

²⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 93-94.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

²⁹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 97-98

But, he continues, “the age of Photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such, publicly.”

Much as Benjamin argues that “voluntary and involuntary recollection lose their mutual exclusiveness” in the combination of the “individual past... with material of the collective past,” for Barthes the divide between private and public, as understood above, between subjective self and the object of image, blurs considerably in the photographic encounter. It is only, he writes, “since the private is not only one of our goods (falling under the historical laws of property), since it is also the absolutely precious, inalienable site where my image is free (free to abolish itself), as it is the condition of an interiority which I believe is identified with my truth, or, if you like, with the Intractable of which I consist” that Barthes says he “must, by a necessary resistance, reconstitute the division of *public* and *private*: I want to utter interiority without yielding intimacy.”³⁰

Instead of setting an image of oneself against an image of another, Barthes describes a situation in which two seemingly incompatible regions are united in his singularly embodied response: “I experience the Photograph and the world in which it participates according to two regions: on one side the Images, on the other my photographs; on one side, unconcern, shifting, noise, the inessential (even if I am abusively deafened by it), on the other the burning, the wounded.” Both “abusively deafened” and “burning, ... wounded,” Barthes echoes the temporal dualities of Sontag’s earlier response—“something went dead; something is still crying”—above. It is perhaps worth noting here that every photograph that Barthes addresses in *Camera Lucida* features some other person or persons, evoking the “fatality (no photograph without something or someone)” he sees as endemic to the form itself.³¹

Neither fully public nor fully private, yet somehow registered as fully *interior*, *individual* confrontations with time and mortality—each of the authors here take up the task of “utter[ing] interiority without yielding intimacy,” of grappling with the impact of such visual encounters, through “reconstitut[ing] the division of the *public* and *private*” in their writing. Both modernist narrative techniques and keen attention to the sense-impressions generated by specific technologically-mediated encounters are ideally suited to the task. While McLuhan baptizes the postwar period as “the age of anxiety and of electric media [...] of the unconscious and of apathy,” he notes that it is also “strikingly the age of consciousness of the unconscious.” The byproduct of one becoming “aware of technology as an extension of his physical body,” is that,

with such awareness, the subliminal life, private and social, has been hoicked up into full view, with the result that we have ‘social consciousness’ presented to us as a cause of guilt-feelings... total social involvement instead of the bourgeois spirit of individual separateness or points of view. In the electric age we wear all mankind as our skin.³²

In that gap between the “guilt-feelings” caused by having the “private and the social [...] hoicked up into full view” and the rather disconcerting image of “total social involvement” (“all mankind as our skin”) are a series of thoughtful narrative explorations of what it looks like to renegotiate the private and public in memory.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 6.

³² McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 54.

In an echo of impasse between news photograph and storyteller, anesthetizing technology and social experience, historians, philosophers, and critics at the turn of the twenty-first century seemed to hold a collective breath for traditional modes of generational memory giving way to a kind of “high-tech amnesia,” the culmination of a modern consciousness fully overwhelmed by external stimuli. According to these accounts, “organic” modes of communicating narratives from the past to the present had by the twenty-first century been lost to impersonal forms of storage and recording, “memory entwined in the intimacy of a collective heritage” replaced by “the ephemeral film of current events.”³³ As Eric Hobsbawm puts it, “the destruction of the past, or rather of the social mechanisms that link one’s contemporary experience to that of earlier generations, is one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late twentieth century.”³⁴

Rather than follow Pierre Nora to his doleful conclusion that “what began as writing ends as high fidelity and tape recording,” however, I pick up instead on the heels of Andreas Huyssen’s more capacious insistence that while “the fissure that opens up between experiencing an event and remembering it in representation is unavoidable” (and this, he notes, is true whether that representation takes places “in language, narrative, image, or recorded sound”), “[r]ather than lamenting or ignoring it, this split should be understood as a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity.”³⁵ Such creative endeavors, mixing language and narrative with technologically reproduced images and recordings, are at the heart of the dissertation.

Technology and the Transnational

Sontag, Benjamin, McLuhan, and Barthes all use surprisingly visceral language in their descriptions of technological mediation. Their words invoke personally experienced combat, wounds, piercing, death, and amputation. In doing so, they press the affinity between the disruptive shock of these individual, quotidian visual encounters and that of firsthand encounters with the large-scale historical violence that punctuated the long twentieth century. Their language, in fact, recalls (sometimes explicitly) that of Sigmund Freud’s investigation of trauma and shellshock in returned veterans after World War One. This returns us to the uncomfortable series of questions raised by Sontag’s indeterminable “somethings.” Can one really liken the experience of confronting an image of someone else’s suffering to the actual wounds of war?

The graphic language of firsthand bodily experience, rather than simply indicating an insensitive or overblown rhetoric, gestures toward the strange interstitial position of the secondhand witness who is profoundly shaped by trauma but removed from the traumatic event itself. I focus on the role of visual technologies in facilitating such moments of retrospective and anticipatory identification: the underlying anxiety, fear, and guilt an individual experiences in confronting an image of another and grappling with how or why that that could have been—or could still somehow turn out to be—“me.” We might also think of the transformation of how one continues to remember after the fact, as opposed to the encounter that facilitates the recovery of the past as it once was, that Sontag’s adolescent experience demonstrated above.

³³ See Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Random House, 1995); and Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7-24.

³⁴ Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, 3.

³⁵ Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 13; Huyssen, *Twilight*, 2-3

Paul Saint-Amour’s recent work reorients discussions of modernist literature proleptically, around not just memory or the firsthand experience of traumatic events but rather a more diffuse but deeply felt “*pre-traumatic stress syndrome* whose symptoms arose in response to a potentially oncoming rather than an already realized catastrophe.” Saint-Amour proposes that “early-twentieth-century military practices, particularly the aerial bombing of civilians and population centers, fundamentally altered the temporality of urban experience, turning cities and towns into spaces of rending anticipation,” such that “in the immediate wake of the First World War, the dread of another massive conflict saturated the Anglo-European imagination.”³⁶

Beyond even the most immediate sense of bodily threat—which does certainly temper Woolf’s skepticism around urban glass and Nabokov’s resistance to Soviet historiography—I am interested in the particular visual mechanisms which give rise to such a strong sense of *mass experience* in the first place. As the century progresses, the threats of technology balloon from fears of being bombed to complicity with drone technology, from the anxiety of remembering to that of forgetting. The issue becomes as much about aligning with perpetrators as with victims, as I discuss in the second half of the dissertation with my chapters on Sebald and Cole.

Benedict Anderson has famously argued that the explosion of print technology and culture in the nineteenth century created “imagined communities” of shared national belonging.³⁷ The emergence of visual technologies like photography, film, and digital media in the twentieth-century—immediate, prolific, and far less dependent on commonalities of language and culture—widens the field of belonging, as it were, considerably. Ariella Azoulay, for example, has recently made the compelling case for reimagining political affiliation not along the lines of nation-states but through what she calls an alternative “citizenry of photography.”³⁸ Projects such as photographer Josef Koudelka’s *Wall* (2013), a collection of panoramic photographs taken over four years along the ever shifting barrier separating Israel and Palestine, and Wendy Brown’s *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (2010), each mobilize photographic images to demonstrate the arbitrariness and porousness of extant national identifications.³⁹ And new media theorists Ethan Zuckerman and Aleks Krotoski have provided useful accounts of our current age of “digital cosmopolitanism” and ongoing entanglement in the worldwide “virtual revolution.”⁴⁰

This global expansion of imaginative collective engagement also reflects the mobility and displacement of entire populations as a result of the Second World War, the Cold War, and widespread decolonization, among other crises. The authors in this dissertation illuminate, by their very juxtaposition, some of the new geographical complexities of memory in the twentieth century. It is no coincidence that the historical traumas that shape and inform each chapter’s accounts of memory take place on the world stage, and, for the more recent three authors, shape their eventual moves to the United States and England. A Russian who lived in exile his entire adult life in the United States and Europe, a German who lived his entire adult life in England, and a New Yorker born to Nigerian parents in America and raised in Nigeria—Nabokov,

³⁶ Paul Saint-Amour, *Tense Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7-8.

³⁷ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York and London: Verso, 1983).

³⁸ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).

³⁹ Josef Koudelka, *Wall* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2013); Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010).

⁴⁰ Ethan Zuckerman, *Rewire: Digital Cosmopolitans in the Age of Connection* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013) and Aleks Krotoski, *Untangling the Web: What the Virtual Revolution is Doing to You* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013).

Sebald, and Cole all lay claim to transnational identities and trajectories that significantly inform their work.

I anchor this genealogy in Woolf, an English modernist figure who occupied a seemingly more circumscribed world, to emphasize the impact of emergent visual technologies and the modern cityscape in the imaginative excavation of the past. That is, while Sebald implicitly aligns himself as successor to a genealogy of European émigré writers including Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov, a movement—as I discuss in Chapter 3—from firsthand witness to stereoscopic reconstruction to cinematic oscillation, I take Woolf’s mediated access through panes of glass rather than Conrad’s “misty halos... made visible by spectral illumination” as my starting point.⁴¹ By the last century, one need not be a sailor to “see” the Congo. *Looking to Remember* thus joins the growing consensus among critics that modernist fiction be understood not in aesthetic isolation from technological modernity, nor even as just responding to it. Instead, as Mark Goble and Sara Danius have both compellingly argued, we can understand these authors as demonstrating how “the power of media technologies in the twentieth century [...] was already modernism’s own.”⁴²

Visual technologies not only reshape our understanding of the personal and public parameters of memory, but they also, in the hands of these authors, capture the shifting boundaries of war and peace, the foreign and the domestic, as we look to remember today. The unprecedented technologies and violence introduced by the First World War cast a long shadow across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. They can furthermore inform our understanding of what I see as a second comparable reconfiguration inaugurated by 9/11 and its immediate aftermath, which I discuss in Chapter 4. The widespread phenomenon of secondhand witnessing in the aftermath of two World Wars, the Cold War, and the “War on Terror” recasts the familiar modernist project of memory’s subjective recovery, grounding the individual subject in the particularities of her historical moment.

Looking to Remember

My dissertation begins in the wake of the First World War. In the first chapter, “Behind a Pane of Glass: Collective Memory in Virginia Woolf’s Interwar London,” violence on the Continent returns to the streets of London through the real and imagined memories of veterans and civilians alike. Between innovations in glass production at the turn of the twentieth century and the rise of the International Style of architecture, urban spaces across Europe and the United States became increasingly transparent—and increasingly fragile. Walking the streets of a city like London offered unprecedented visual access to the lives of other people, but it also called this access into question, especially in relation to returning soldiers such as *Mrs. Dalloway*’s Septimus Warren Smith. Woolf, I argue, envisions the transparent pane of glass as a necessary barrier and

⁴¹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Stanley Appelbaum (New York: Dover, 1990), 5.

⁴² Mark Goble, *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 3. As Danius points out, while “most scholars and critics agree that avant-garde movement such as cubism, futurism, surrealism, and vorticism must be understood in relation to technology, [...] that the emergence of mass culture, notably cinematography and recorded music, must be grasped against the background of the second industrial revolution,” with for “the [modernist] novel [...] the notion of aesthetic autonomy still looms large on the interpretive horizon, preempting, it seems, reflection on the historicity of high-modernist aesthetic practices.” Sara Danius, *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 2.

imaginative conduit through which violent deaths like Septimus's, "to serve the narrative purpose, must be remembered/ forgotten as 'our own'."⁴³

I situate the invention of Woolf's novelistic "tunneling" method within a broader European cultural scene that witnessed the construction of Bauhaus's celebrated glass curtain wall, the emergence of Maurice Halbwach's sociological term "collective memory," and modernist experimentation with the fluidity of time and consciousness. By exploring the danger of seemingly transparent access to private and public memory in the aftermath of the twentieth century's first "total war," I show how Woolf resists the nationalism of the interwar period by cultivating a non-appropriative form of collective identification. Whereas other high modernists famously conceptualized the war's aftermath as a physical and spiritual wasteland, I argue that Woolf turns to the smooth surfaces and shiny promises of modern urban architecture in order to interrogate the kinds of postwar memory that cities afford and foreclose. Through newly ubiquitous panes of glass, Woolf stages both the allure of collective memory and the violence to individual experience it threatens.

In Chapter Two, "Stereoscopic Dreamlands: Vladimir Nabokov and the Will to Remember," it is the seeming transparency of photography and its documentary status that Vladimir Nabokov turns on its head as he writes and revises his memoir in permanent exile from the Soviet Union. Nabokov initially responds to the tension between public and private claims on the past by insisting upon the absolute idiosyncrasy of his own experiences and his capacity to remember them, a play on the Proustian model that critic John Burt Foster, Jr. calls "noninvoluntarily memory."⁴⁴ He denies the attempts of editors, biographers, and politicians to speak on his behalf and, in the same vein, he repeatedly rebuffs photography's claim to accurate representation of the past. I consider how the various iterations of his memoir (pulled together from pieces published as early as 1936, released as a whole for the first time in 1951, then in a 1954 Russian translation, and finally in English again in 1966) reflect Nabokov's shifting negotiations with the verbal and the visual in narrating memory.

The Cold War was at its height between the first and last full-length versions of Nabokov's memoir. After leaving the United States for Europe in 1960, he grappled not only with his own reconstruction of the Russian past but also with Soviet historiography's: how do we tell the truth about the past when our materials consist of conflicting stories and suspect photographs? Photography, by virtue of its manipulability, cannot give us a clear window into the past—or through the Iron Curtain. But Nabokov eventually exploits this limitation to foreground how, in a postwar world fully saturated with photographic images, the closest approximation of the past requires the knowingly artificial fusion of documentation and fiction. By using narrative strategies that call on the reader's memory of the text *and* invite identification with his own recounted memories, Nabokov highlights some of the ethical thorniness of the century's blurred distinctions between public and personal histories.

For W.G. Sebald, born in Germany in the last years of the Second World War, the individual past does not emerge from the artful melding of document and fiction but through a kind of bifocal vision that oscillates continuously between them. In my third chapter, "W.G. Sebald and the Filmic Oscillation of Memory," I turn from Nabokov's limited archive to the flood of images that propels Sebald's search for ways to recover an obscured European past. Usually positioned, like Sebald himself, at a generational remove from the Second World War,

⁴³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 206.

⁴⁴ John Burt Foster, Jr., *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

his non-Jewish German narrators attempt to gather the lost threads of Jewish displacement and decimation. His works *The Emigrants* (1997), *The Rings of Saturn* (1998), and *Austerlitz* (2001) are driven by unrealizable desires to reclaim such memories through visual technologies that block rather than grant access to the imaginative work of memory.

Sebald's texts combine the fictional and nonfictional in a manner that insists upon the impossibility of definitively naming or assimilating the two. I argue that in doing so they draw upon the logic of the filmic still's mutually exclusive representations of a fictional scene, on the one hand, and the photographic index of actors before a camera, on the other. Sebald introduces us to a mode of remembrance characterized by the sutured stutter of an imagined past and a physical present, between one eye "wild" and the other "domesticated." Reconfiguring the search for the past through the movement between identification and disidentification, fact and fantasy, Sebald orients the terms of postwar memory around the productive possibilities of permanent uncertainty. The relationships between his narrators and characters—and between each of these and Sebald himself—dramatize this push and pull of memory and forgetting at various levels of remove.

All three of these authors have taken as their starting point the notion that some form of visual access to an imagined past is possible, however remotely. In the dissertation's final chapter, I argue that for Nigerian American novelist and photography critic Teju Cole, working within both print and digital media, the operative mode is neither stereoscopic nor filmic vision, neither mirror nor window. It is instead one marked repeatedly, if counterintuitively, by *blindness*. His work reflects the unprecedented virtual access—instantaneous worldwide connectivity—and concomitant blind spots of twenty-first-century memory.

My fourth chapter, "Blind Spots and Empathy Gaps: Blindness and Insight in Teju Cole's *Open City*," explores individual memory within a visual frame now densely packed with images of global conflict. Familiar scenes of large-scale conflict insistently loom large, crowding out space for personal memories—and personal acts of violence—to surface. Cole's rich and variegated Internet presence enacts similar reversals of image and experience. I look at his Twitter series, "Seven Short Stories About Drones" and "Small Fates" and his Tumblr *Op Cit* to consider what happens to memory when violence itself, rather than encounters with its aftermath, occurs by visual proxy. I turn Cole's digital optics into a lens for reading his 2011 novel *Open City*, an exploration of post-9/11 New York City through the meandering meditations of a young Nigerian-German psychiatrist named Julius. Mapping the city as much as it maps Julius's own mind, the novel occasions a final consideration of individual and global trauma, and of Cole's overt connections to literary antecedents Woolf, Nabokov, and Sebald.

Looking to Remember traces the tantalizing transparency of glass, photography, and film across the long twentieth century. It closes with an examination of how, in our present digital age, the more avenues we supposedly have available to vision, the less insight we might actually have into our own pasts. The shape of the project might be said, in other words, to echo not only the continuities across the century and this long modernist tradition with which I began, but the ruptures as well. In the movement from the first half of the project to the second, I shift from the difficulties of remembrance to an examination of late twentieth- and early twenty-first century texts that query what it looks like to forget. Learning to recognize and navigate this contemporary situation, I propose, becomes the essential task of not just the mental health professional tasked with care for the wellbeing of his patients, but also of the twenty-first-century "global citizen" and critical reader looking to remember her past and that of others as well.

Behind a Pane of Glass: Collective Memory in Virginia Woolf's Interwar London

Shop windows, car windows, house windows, ground skylights, looking glasses, prosthetic eyes, photographic frames, lumps on the beach, fragments on the street, mantelpiece décor...the ubiquity of glass in Woolf's work offers us a prismatic reflection of the medium's centrality to nineteenth- and twentieth-century accounts of modernity. Critics have fixated on the very 'thingness' of glass, its object-status, or the conditions of its materiality, situating Woolf's work within high modernist or wartime anxiety about either the breakability of glass or its scarcity in early twentieth-century urban spaces. Some, alternatively, have highlighted the metaphorical implications of Woolf's use of glass, evocative of "moments of creative intensity," a figuration for the "reciprocal fusion between the perceiver and the perceived" in her modernist experiments with consciousness, or even for art itself.⁴⁵ The split along the lines of material and metaphor underscores glass's own paradoxical condition as medium and barrier, lens and object, the invisible thing making visible things. It highlights, as Judith Brown points out, how "blankness isn't, after all, identical to nothing," but "merely comes to represent nothing through the emptiness of its surface."⁴⁶ It also invites interrogation in light of the recent call to "take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts...what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*."⁴⁷ But what do we do with the very surface that makes it impossible to look at *without* seeing through? What depths, if not those of "hidden, repressed" meanings, might lingering on the glass surfaces of Woolf's texts reveal?⁴⁸

In this chapter, I argue that Woolf plays with the perceptual oscillation between surface and depth that glass affords to demonstrate the limits and possibilities of temporal, spatial, and intersubjective relations in interwar London. Glass in some of Woolf's earlier work—as Elizabeth Outka's and Bill Brown's readings of *Night and Day* (1919) and "Solid Objects" (1920), respectively, attest—draws our attention to the omnipresence of a certain glaring absence, that of World War One.⁴⁹ All the more remarkable for the fact that the two texts, as both critics

⁴⁵ Hermoine Lee, "A Burning Glass: Reflection in Virginia Woolf," in *Virginia Woolf: A Centenary Perspective*, ed. Eric Warner (New York: Palgrave, 1984), 16. See also Harvena Richter's discussion of glass "surface[s] or background[s] as a reflector of the self" reflection in *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 99.

⁴⁶ Judith Brown, "Cellophane Glamour," *Modernism/Modernity* 15:4 (2008), 615.

⁴⁷ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108.1 (2009): 9.

⁴⁸ We might overlook glass in favor of the subjects and objects it frames, but the very possibility of overlooking glass still requires our insistent looking at and through it. Noting several key moments in Woolf's novels where different characters look at the same thing, either at the same time or, as is crucially the case in *Mrs. Dalloway*, at a temporal and geographical remove, Douglas Mao makes the compelling case for how these scenes reflect her signature negotiation of "time or space...as well as intersubjective distance." Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 54. Notably, every example Mao provides (Rachel and Evelyn looking at framed photographs in *The Voyage Out*; Katherine and Ralph seeing fields through a train window in *Night and Day*; Clarissa and Septimus glimpsing *Cymbeline* through Hatchard's window; Clarissa meeting the gaze of the old lady opposite through their windows) occurs through the unremarked mediation of glass (53-35). I propose we shift our perspective to consider the glass that she consistently invokes to frame and mediate them all.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Outka, *Consuming Traditions: Modernity, Modernism, and the Commodified Aesthetic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Bill Brown, "The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism)," *Modernism/Modernity* 6.2 (1999): 1-28.

emphasize, were written in 1918, during or very shortly after the war, her “strategy of avoidance” by turns “reflected central cultural tropes from the war years... responding not simply to Woolf’s anxieties but to anxieties shared by the larger culture” and provided “an account of the aesthetic...that is a history of the senses fundamentally altered by the facts of wartime scarcity and postwar depression.”⁵⁰ In her later work, glass continues to reveal the seeming transitivity between individuals and a larger culture through which anxieties are shared and senses altered, but it does so with the key difference of shifted vantage points in time. Woolf eventually brings the war up to the surface of her texts through characters like veteran Septimus Warren Smith, but in doing so she raises questions not only of individuals’ and their larger culture’s avoidance but also of their memories. In other words, Woolf’s evocations of glass still alert us in a sense to the war’s absence, but now that absence is not matter of its *being over there* as much as it is its *being over*.

Paying particular attention to scenes of memory in the changing urban streetscape of *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and in her own unfinished memoir “A Sketch of the Past” (1941), I read Woolf’s narrative strategies and use of glass in particular as nuancing both modernism’s relation to its Victorian antecedents in art and architecture and contemporaneous developments in the understanding of collective memory. Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the longstanding technology of glass manufacturing was “radically overhauled,” quickly transforming urban experience and social consciousness through the mass production of plate glass.⁵¹ On commercial streets “between 1910 and 1919... window displays in London were being transformed,” and by the 1920s and 30s, further innovations “made glass newly available in architecture above all, and newly spectacular.”⁵² As Anne Cheng describes this early-century shift, “from aerodynamic tears to the glass wall, modern design and aesthetic philosophy remained absorbed in the idea of ‘pure’ surface.”⁵³ “Pure” modern surfaces like transparent cellophane or glass “offered the modern imagination new ways of seeing the mundane world” and sometimes, even “a new way into time itself.”⁵⁴

The Bauhaus School’s famous glass curtain wall, begun the year of *Mrs. Dalloway*’s publication and completed the following spring, is perhaps the definitive realization of this high modernist investment. Its design permits “interior and exterior to be seen simultaneously,” creating an experience of “various levels of reference, or of points of references, and simultaneity.”⁵⁵ Glass here enacts for the individual spectator what Siegfried Giedion thus called in 1941 the architectural realization of “the conception of space-time” in the manner of Picasso’s *L’arlesienne*. Offering viewers outside the building the fantastical possibility of not only seeing fully into the interior, but furthermore of seeing out again through the opposite side from an insider’s perspective, the glass wall also approximates what I would call the architectural realization of modernist free indirect discourse, in which, as Jennifer Wicke puts it, “People may not *know* one another’s thoughts in telepathic communication, but they *are* one another’s thoughts; whatever

⁵⁰ Outka, *Consuming Traditions*, 150; B. Brown, “Secret Life,” 4.

⁵¹ Trotter, “Material Futures,” 54.

⁵² Outka, *Consuming Traditions*, 139; Trotter, “Material Futures,” 54.

⁵³ Anne Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11.

“Aerodynamic tears” refers to the “teardrop” curvature popularized by industrial designer Norman Bel Geddes as the ideal shape to reduce drag and maximize speed on airplanes.

⁵⁴ J. Brown, “Cellophane Glamour,” 608, 616.

⁵⁵ Sigfried, Giedion, *Space, Time & Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 489.

order there is to consciousness arrives in the momentary interconnections of inchoateness.”⁵⁶ Immersion in the transitivity implied in all three forms would also depend on a new, “modern viewer, one who is simultaneously aware of and seduced by the vision behind the glass,” one who, in the case of the Bauhaus wall, for example, would be both conscious of and momentarily inattentive to the intervening artifice of the extensive steel latticework holding all that transparency together.⁵⁷ In short, at the time Woolf was writing, glass enjoyed a kind of celebrity as the medium of modernism, enabling in architecture the desired spatializing and temporalizing effects of modernist innovation in the visual and verbal arts. It seemingly did so at the cost of the previous century’s preoccupation with the mediation and intersubjective relations glass occasioned.

While twentieth-century modernism valorized the individual experience of “pure formal aesthetic transitivity” and “traceless purity,” the Victorian era, as Isobel Armstrong argues, encountered glass—in its novel ubiquity and oft-marred transparency—as the fraught medium through which “individual experience takes a social form.”⁵⁸ The transition between these two glass cultures occurs not just in high art but in quotidian experiences of commerce as well. By the 1910’s and 20’s, shoppers wandering the streets of London looked through glass that “emphasized fantasy...and that de-emphasized both the commercial exchange and sense of mass production.”⁵⁹ Through these windows, modern consumers see not other people or other things (i.e. salespeople or goods) but rather “different views of possible selves, obtainable for a price.”⁶⁰ Edgar Allan Poe’s emblematic nineteenth-century *Man of the Crowd*, pressed against the glass, seeing others and being seen across a dirty pane with “marks on the surface, scratches, fingerprints,” gives way to the single subject’s enhanced vision through the expansive transparency of glass, what David Trotter calls “the embodiment of the International Style’s vision of the radiant city of the future.”⁶¹

Given Woolf’s exploration of glass transparency in her own work, however, this distinction between nineteenth- and twentieth-century glass aesthetics—much like the glass that characterizes it—is not always so clear. The “traceless purity” of glass, emblematic of both “a historical condition and aesthetic ideal,” allows, at least theoretically, for modernist art capable of overcoming the separation of “time or space...as well as intersubjective distance.”⁶² In the early twentieth century, the transparency of modern materials like glass becomes “close to the idea of the instantaneous” (or “simultaneity” in Giedion’s account), a way to mobilize the temporal multiplicity of the present—that is, a kind of “Bergsonian...overlaying [of] past, present, and future in a single and simultaneous moment.”⁶³ Woolf may have found this possibility compelling, but glass in her work also always asserts itself as a limiting factor, a material surface that opens up the recognition of such opportunities while simultaneously foreclosing them.⁶⁴

⁵⁶ Jennifer Wicke, “Mrs. Dalloway Goes to Market: Woolf, Keynes, and Modern Markets.” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 28.1 (1994): 12.

⁵⁷ Outka, *Consuming Traditions*, 148.

⁵⁸ Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 14.

⁵⁹ Outka, *Consuming Traditions*, 139

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁶¹ Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 14; Trotter, “Material Futures,” 53.

⁶² J. Brown, “Cellophane Glamour,” 617; Mao, “Solid Objects,” 54.

⁶³ J. Brown, “Cellophane Glamour,” 616.

⁶⁴ In this way, Woolf’s engagement with glass presages and resonates with current work like Anne Cheng’s and Judith Brown’s that draws our attention to an interwar moment that complicated the very possibility of a ‘pure’ surface” even as it extolled its virtues.

That is, the blankness of its transparent surface may *represent* a non-existent barrier, as Woolf and Brown both remind us, but it is not non-existent: it exists, it is there, and for all of its illusory absence, it still materially intervenes and physically separates one from the contents on the other side. The urgency of this recognition becomes clearer when one considers that for Woolf's generation, the past that is overlaid by the present and future is one saturated everywhere with the ubiquitous and yet often inscrutable experiences of the First World War.⁶⁵ Woolf's deployment of glass in the 1920s and 30s may call attention, as her earlier works did, to anxieties about allowing the wartime past to permeate our sense of the present and future—but here it speaks to the clear allure and necessity of it too. It continues to raise questions of the transitivity between individual and collective experience, but it increasingly does so in tandem with questions regarding contemporaneous notions of collective memory. In other words, calling attention to glass's presence while constantly invoking the seduction of transparency and the “beauty... behind a pane of glass” becomes essential to Woolf's own temporally-inflected exploration of how “individual experience takes a social form.”⁶⁶

The year of *Mrs. Dalloway*'s publication and the Bauhaus wall's construction also saw the release of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs's foundational *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* (1925), which popularized notions of memory's inherently social construction and function. If, as Halbwachs claims, “every collective memory unfolds within a spatial framework,” such that “we can understand how we recapture the past only by understanding how it is, in effect, preserved by our physical surroundings,” Woolf's exploration of Clarissa Dalloway, Peter Walsh, and Septimus Warren Smith's individual memories via glass on the streets of London complicate our sense of both what constitutes the collective and the past in the first place.⁶⁷ Or, put in terms of the longer-standing tradition of the memory arts, if “an art which uses contemporary architecture for its memory places and contemporary imagery for its images will have its classical, Gothic, and Renaissance periods, like other arts,” Woolf asks us to consider what looks like to remember in an increasingly “transparent” modern world containing drastically splintered experiences.⁶⁸ Glass in her work illuminates Woolf's sensitivity to and concern with tensions that inhere in conversations about memory today: namely, the kind of access we can individually claim to have to our pasts and the problem and necessity of reckoning with others as we seek that access.

In the readings that follow, I argue that Woolf negotiates the concerns of temporal, spatial, and intersubjective separation as a problem, in particular, of memory via glass. If as W.J.T. Mitchell proposes, “every medium constructs a corresponding zone of immediacy, of the unmediated and transparent, which stands in contrast with the medium itself,” glass, and the new spatial frameworks it occasions in the early twentieth century, complicates such distinctions by blurring the bounds of mediated and unmediated, transparent and visible.⁶⁹ Or as Judith Brown puts it, modernism was “hardly a passive transitional period,” because in it, paradoxically, “blankness was *both* the absence of any variety of things... *and also* ...the sign of a newly

⁶⁵ For more on the anticipatory anxiety wrought by WWI, see Paul Saint Amour, *Tense Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁶⁶ *Mrs. Dalloway*. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text as MD 96. Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 14

⁶⁷ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 6-7.

⁶⁸ Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Pimlico, 1992), 11.

⁶⁹ W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 214. Accordingly, Mitchell goes on to describe windows in particular as “perhaps one of the most important inventions in the history of visual culture, opening architecture to new relations of inner and outer, and remapping the human body by analogy into inner and outer spaces” (214).

ubiquitous, or a swiftly becoming ubiquitous, technological presence.”⁷⁰ Woolf’s modern fiction—particularly those works written from the simultaneously retrospective and anxiously proleptic vantage of the interwar period—explores how the visual technology of glass and its corresponding “zone of immediacy” stage opportunities to overcome our separation from others and from our pasts, even as they physically impede such opportunities’ realization.

The Surface of the Present

During the last two years of her life, Woolf began what one might call a double-paned project of retrospection. Shuttling between the work of Roger Fry’s biography and her own memoir, “A Sketch of the Past,” seemed at once to threaten and enable both; as she writes in July 1939, “The past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths.”⁷¹ Woolf continues, “The present must be smooth, habitual. For this reason—that it destroys the fullness of life—any break—like that of house moving—causes me extreme distress; it breaks; it shallows; it turns the depth into hard thin splinters.... I write this partly in order to recover my sense of the present by getting the past to shadow this broken surface.” This late meditation on the process of envisioning and subsequently writing the past as through a transparent, smooth, “sliding surface”—capable of easy fracture—is striking as both an evocation of glass that never names it and as such, an oddly clear crystallization of a figure for memory that haunts much of Woolf’s oeuvre. Which is to say, while the imagery certainly also suggests the more natural articulation of an icy surface over water, the ways in which Woolf conceptualizes these *divergent* surfaces is, as we’ll see shortly, more akin to her recurrent considerations of urban glass.⁷²

In this attempt to recapture her sense of the present through recalling her past, Woolf writes into being the perceptual experience of glass’s most salient and paradoxical characteristic: material presence in apparent absence. We begin with the image of the smooth surface of water, the indistinguishable present running like the sliding surface of a deep river—no glass in sight. But already with the present’s status as a “sliding surface,” we observe a capacity for separation through the tactile sensation of one surface sliding over another (the term “sliding” requires, of course, the interaction of at least two parts). The event of fracture makes the material manifest: it renders the surface palpably “shallow,” set apart from the river depths, accentuating the illusory quality of its former absence. To drive the point further, the shattered surface and its “hard thin splinters” visually obscure the depth beyond it, creating the near-opacity of crackling. This rupture, this forced confrontation with the materiality of perceptual transparency, is what drives Woolf to respond by “writing... to shadow the broken surface with the past.” What begins as an abstracted meditation on the experience of memory emerges as a spatial model of temporal depth mediated by glass.

The ‘pure’ glass surface of the transparent present sliding smoothly over the depths of the past might serve as an aesthetic ideal for Woolf, but it is one that gives away almost immediately to the “extreme distress” of broken, hard and splintered surfaces reminiscent of both the “marks

⁷⁰ J. Brown, “Cellophane Glamour,” 617.

⁷¹ Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past” in *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (New York: Harcourt, 1985), 98. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text as *MB*.

⁷² The frozen Thames in *Orlando*’s is a clear example of her use of icy surfaces to interrogate models of time. But in it, there’s no separation between the surface and the deep—the water is frozen through, the world of the past perfectly preserved, still and visible.

on the surface, scratches, fingerprints” Armstrong reserves for an earlier century and the fear of future destruction later realized by the Blitz. The anxiety of mediation is far from absent, though here there is a noteworthy shift in axis away from the horizontal model of an individual’s relation to another person to the vertical depth of an individual’s relation to another iteration of herself in time. Having touched upon the finicky and fragile limits of glass perception, Woolf proclaims her intention to write her way to some resolution. Moving away from the splintered glass, she imagines lowering herself into the stream of the past, “like a child advancing with bare feet in a cold river” (*MB* 98). The figure shadowing from beyond this broken surface, it seems, will be her own, the haunting silhouette of a submerged child. But identifying as both the child shadowing the surface from below *and* the spectating adult writer who can see that shadow from *this side* of the present, the vision of memory is strangely bifurcated. Rather than an outright rejection of the mediated intersubjectivity of her predecessors, the incorporation of a temporal dimension marks Woolf’s modernist innovation upon the Victorian model.

In the process, Woolf recognizes that glass may not only impede perception of her past, it can also render such complex temporal perception impossible to sustain, even imaginatively. As she notes in an inverted variation on this image in her 1929 essay, “The Moment; Summer’s Night”: “If you are young, the future lies upon the present, like a piece of glass, making it tremble and quiver. If you are old, the past lies upon the present, like a thick glass, making it waver, distorting it. All the same, everybody believes that the present is something. . . .”⁷³ Whether one is young or old, the present is always figuratively filtered through a distorting glass pane that makes it either actually “tremble and quiver” and “waver” by its physical pressure, or at least appear to do so to visual perception. Unlike the articulated glass of “The Moment,” however, the mediation of glass doesn’t appear at all in Woolf’s later model until this qualified transparency comes to light. Her writing is as much a response to the now very visible (and furthermore obfuscating) surface as it was initially an evocation of illusory absence that allowed her to see clearly through to the depths. The conceptual possibilities of glass are equally bound up in its fragile materiality and its perceptual affordances. By demonstrating this, the brief passage from “A Sketch of the Past” asks us to consider how distinct our past and present really are, how separable any given individual is from those who surround her, and what those distinctions mean for how we remember and write a life—ours or anyone else’s.

Meanwhile: a river of time, a stream of thought. Whether we look back to antiquity and Heraclitus or a generation to William James and Henri Bergson, it is evident that this recurrent image of Woolf’s resonates deeply with a longer history of the philosophy of time and memory.⁷⁴ Resonates, but again with crucial differences: here, at best, we have the momentarily seamless *illusion* of the fluid and continuous flux of temporal consciousness; at worst, we have nothing but the jarring shock of the present’s sensory impressions; at neither extreme do we fully encounter or inhabit the past’s depths without some material obstruction or mediation. Why? And why, as I’ve been so keen to show, pair this otherwise pastoral image with the decidedly unpastoral perceptual experience of (shattered) glass?

Recent re-evaluations of Woolf’s conception of time—and in particular of her deviation from the Bergsonian model—may provide a helpful point of entry. As Ann Banfield has

⁷³ Virginia Woolf, “The Moment: Summer’s Night,” in *The Moment and Other Essays* (New York: Harvest, 1974), 3.

⁷⁴ Versions of Heraclitus’s statement that “Into the same river you could not step twice, for other <and still other> waters are flowing” are also cited by Petrarch, Aristotle, and Plato. Heraclitus, “Fragment 41,” *The Fragments of the Work of Heraclitus of Ephesus on Nature* (Baltimore: N. Murray, 1889), trans. G.T.W. Patrick. See also William James, “The Stream of Thought,” in *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York: Dover, 1950), 224-290.

compellingly argued, Woolf's own philosophy and corresponding aesthetic of time come—contrary perhaps to popular belief—not from Bergson or James but Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore.⁷⁵ Considering Woolf's adaptation of the short story to the novel form and her engagement with Cambridge Time as such, Banfield concludes that for Woolf, "Time passes not as *durée* but as a series of still moments. Temporal relations connect moments as spatial ones unify Impressionism's atomized color, with the mathematical theory of continuity playing a crucial role."⁷⁶ While we might register in everyday experience the kind of temporal fluidity the image of a stream or river evokes, in actuality, that continuity emerges from the compact serial relation of discrete moments—not the interpenetration of past, present, future. The result, a physically distinct but usually invisible demarcation between past and present moments: the past seen behind a pane of glass? Or, as Woolf ventures through the projected thoughts of Jacob Flanders as he sits looking out on the water (sea now rather than stream), we might likewise consider how indeed "All history backs our pane of glass."⁷⁷

But Woolf's account of her difficulty in seeing through to and subsequently writing about the past centers on not only the fact of this separation but also on the particular physical qualities that attend it, i.e. the slipperiness, transparency, solidity, and breakability of glass. Which is to say, if we allow that Cambridge Time provides the scaffolding for this model of memory, it is striking that the true nature of time only comes to the fore in the wake of distressing rupture. It is Woolf's encounter with this breakage, not the earlier clarity through which "one sees through the surface to the depths," that compels her to continue her memoir, to write in order "to shadow the broken surface with the past." For all of the actual solidity of the distinction between moments in time, they nonetheless retain within and across each of them a certain fluidity and sense of continuous motion (whether as sliding surface or flowing river), and thus on some level do perpetually change *along with* one's shifting perception rather than remaining still or distilled *in spite* of it.

Attentive to some of these tensions, Martin Hägglund extends and redirects Banfield's argument to articulate what he calls Woolf's "aesthetics of the moment."⁷⁸ Rather than coalesce completely as perfectly crystallized and aesthetically rendered units (framed behind glass if not wrapped in cotton wool or encapsulated as a short story), such moments are already charged with the quality of temporal excess, of simultaneous deferral and delay. This is because,

⁷⁵ Ann Banfield, "Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-Impressionism, and Cambridge Time," *Poetics Today* 24:3 (Fall 2003): 471-516.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 471.

⁷⁷ Woolf, *Jacob's Room*, 47.

⁷⁸ Martin Hägglund, *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 57. Hägglund's study of this 'chronolibidinal' logic centers on three modernist writers also at the heart of the present project, but in it chronolibido as such is clearly a transhistorical phenomenon, emerging in Plato and Aristotle and Proust and Nabokov alike. The modernist novel becomes the focus of attention because it is conventionally that which aesthetically defines itself in terms of the timeless, epiphanic, etc. It thereby offers fruitful insights about this impulse toward and against survival via its seeming resistance to such a conception of time in the first place. It is my contention, however, that there is more to the fact that this particularly productive tension would emerge with a set of authors writing in the twentieth rather than, say, the fourth century b.c.e. Woolf's evocation of plate glass sliding over a running river of time—fusing the built and the natural, the modern and the pastoral, the strange and the staid—may just be one of a number of ways these modernist writers worked out the ambivalence of their relation to time and memory; but if, as I hope to show, Woolf took seriously the specific materiality and nature of her surroundings and historical moment in defining her life and art (one thinks of her oft-quoted, if somewhat tongue-in-cheek, declaration that human nature itself changed in or around December 1910), we ought likewise to take them seriously in considering their role in shaping her particular aesthetic of memory.

Hägglund asserts, “the moment can only be given as a moment by passing away, and it is the passing away of the moment that makes it a matter of passion, whether positive or negative.”⁷⁹ Crystallization is therefore an issue of “how the moment is refracted in memory and anticipation,” not “timeless presence.”⁸⁰ I’ll return to the implications of this traumatic conception of time in my discussion of *Mrs. Dalloway* and simply point out here that if these moments of being function as sealed vessels for particular experiences, they are—by virtue of our very desire for them to be just that—leaky ones. Neither fully discrete nor fully interpenetrative, perhaps there is something inherent to the structure of such highlighted moments—and not just our perception of them—that bears the traces of temporal contiguity *and* continuity.

We might think, for example, of Clarissa Dalloway's most treasured memory of her kiss with Sally Seton. Given “a diamond” twice “wrapped up” and “told just to keep it, not to look at it,” Clarissa can't help but immediately disobey. In eager anticipation, “she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through, the revelation” (*MD* 35). And at the same time, Peter Walsh's interruption breaks in just as starkly, declaring—among other things—the definitive finitude and ultimate inaccessibility of this already lost moment, “like running one's face against a granite wall in the darkness.” This most extraordinary, “exquisite [...and] infinitely precious” experience is nevertheless subject to the material traces of time's passing. Even if Clarissa “just... keep[s] it” without unwrapping it, its radiance penetrates and permeates the outside, shining through; even if she “does not...look at it,” wanders instead in “darkness,” a solid granite wall and the demands of the present await her. Or, to return to the terms of the passage we began with in Woolf's memoir, moments of being marked by a temporal clarity that separates them out from the rest of the cotton wool of experience, moments of seamless synchronicity between remembering present and remembered past, arise both in anticipation of their shattering and in the wake of rupture, marking physical seams even when none are visible. Accordingly, one might say along with Hägglund that Woolf is only too aware of the fact that “the violent passage of time is at work even in the most immediate and fully experienced moment,” and seeks to “record it so that it may live on in time” (fractured or semi-transparent vessel and all) rather than “render it eternal.”⁸¹ If so, the task at hand is to explore precisely how such moments might indeed live on in time, memory, and writing.

Building and innovating upon available models, Woolf redirects the new optics afforded by the previous century's glassworlds to engage questions of not only intersubjectivity but also of time and memory. I would like here to take up Banfield's method of examining short stories as composite (if more porous) parts of Woolf's novelistic aesthetic, considering how these individual glassed glances might reassemble as the prismatic model we encounter in full through *Mrs. Dalloway*. Reconfiguring the conventional narrative of Clarissa and Septimus' doubling, I see Woolf instead offering a triangulated model encompassing Clarissa, Septimus, and Peter Walsh. In doing so, I refuse the critical line that indicts Woolf as sacrificing Septimus for Clarissa's sake; I argue that Woolf interrogates instead how someone like Mrs. Dalloway cannot conceive of her own life apart from the violent sacrifices *already* made by young men like Septimus. Finally, I return to her late work and her unfinished memoir in particular to consider how her increasing emphasis on a kind of temporal and social brokenness through glass mirrors the very real and ubiquitous brokenness of glass surrounding her in wartime England.

⁷⁹ Hägglund, *Dying for Time*, 76.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁸¹ Hägglund, *Dying for Time*, 57.

Contrary to the well-worn critique of modernism's singular obsession with individual subjectivity, Woolf demonstrates a commitment to interrogating—not ignoring—“proof of some existence other than ours” in the world around her.⁸² Through Woolf's writing “to recover [her] sense of the present by getting the past to shadow the broken surface,” the unseen acts of perception, of memory, of recovery—figured through glass—become that which gets at the “evidently immensely complicated” reality of people, not the insistence upon a commonality of its objects. The precariousness of this distinction between the inter- and intra-subjective in memory and perception is perhaps fitting in light of Woolf's decision to reconfigure the terms of nineteenth-century glass culture's fraught mediation through the same fragile medium. All of this ultimately culminates in a new vision of memory that aims to render, retool, and perhaps even resist the past in and through the distinctly modern material world of the present.

The problem of time's passage emerges as a problem of writing. In her essay, “A Burning Glass: Reflections on Virginia Woolf,” Hermione Lee describes many of Woolf's glassed ‘moments of being’ “at which the mind becomes a reflector,” and through which one might intensely experience being simultaneously internal and external to perception. And in doing so, she foregrounds the problem Woolf faces throughout: the problem of “how such moments can be translated into language without losing their transparency and intensity” at a remove of a few minutes or forty-five years.⁸³ Lee argues that while Woolf's attempts to account for these experiences afterwards are awkward or at the very least effortful, “the moments themselves happen ‘without any effort’... Something solid or opaque or impenetrable is changed into something ‘transparent’: something shadowed or dormant is ‘quickened’ or ‘intensified’.”⁸⁴

As a reflection on the past, the layered approximations of sensory experience in her retrospective account highlight the intrinsic haziness of even the most artfully rendered retrospective narratives. One might think of this as akin to Woolf's translation of the past's “depths” seen through the smooth surface of the stream into a written “shadow” on the other side of the “broken surface” (*MB* 98). But Lee's reading of “A Sketch of the Past” has the curious effect of inverting the process as Woolf describes it a few pages later. There it is only *after* transparency is rendered a solid, opaque, and impenetrable object—not the other way around—that a distressed Woolf begins writing her past and retrieving her present.

Woolf does this, I argue, through cultivating a narrative technique that negotiates the problems of memory and intersubjectivity through an optical model that unites them both. Insofar as the longer works evoke and work out how to write a life in time (or, as she puts it in her memoir, the difficulty of how “to give any account of the person to whom things happen”), Woolf's earlier stories and essays offer helpful glimpses of the kinds of problems such models both pose and attempt to address in the first place (*MB* 68). Or, one might say, the earlier stories helpfully articulate the questions to which *Mrs. Dalloway* and “A Sketch of the Past” both respond: How distinct are the past and present? Our past and present selves? What do those distinctions mean for how we remember? For how we write and remember a life? If Woolf's glass optics somehow draw together a constellation of vision, materiality, memory, and intersubjectivity, what are the implications for how we understand modernism's relation to memory—and our own?

⁸² Virginia Woolf, “The Mark on the Wall,” in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick (New York: Harvest, 1989), 89.

⁸³ Lee, “A Burning Glass,” 14.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

A World Beneath the Waves

Returning to Woolf's 1920 story "Solid Objects," we meet the protagonist John encountering his first solid object as he immerses himself (both physically and metaphorically) in remembrance. As he burrows his hand deeper and deeper into the sand on a beach, "his eyes lost their intensity, or rather the background of thought and experience which gives an inscrutable depth to the eyes of grown people disappeared." John's childhood memory of burrowing into the sand tunnels seamlessly into his present digging; that is, we initially only receive information of his present action of "working his fingers in the water" and "curl[ing] around something hard" through his reminiscence of how such activities went as a child: "He remembered that, after digging for a little, the water oozes round your finger-tips; the hole then becomes a moat; a well; a thing to make it, still working his fingers in the water, they curled round something hard—a full drop of solid matter—and gradually dislodged a large irregular lump, and brought it to the surface."⁸⁵ The "water oozes" and "the hole... becomes a moat" both presumably in his memory of the quintessential childhood experience and in his present perceptual experience of burrowing—a technique we'll reencounter, of course, in the famous opening lines of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Here, however, literally digging deeper into the memory of such activity from his childhood, John's eyes strangely lose depth, giving way to "the clear transparent surface, expressing nothing but wonder, which the eyes of young children display." When John then discovers a large irregular lump of glass, "almost opaque," bereft of any identifiable "edge or shape"—"nothing but glass"—his fascination leads him to hold it up to the light, up against the sky, and, most strikingly, to position it before him such that "its irregular mass blotted out the body and extended right arm of his friend." In short, this glassiness also takes over his field of vision, now from the outside, and stands between him and his relation to another person, his friend Charles. We move through the "clear transparent surface" of John's childlike gaze to an opaque glass lump that begins to occupy it for the duration of the story. Fascinated with what he believes to be "so hard, so concentrated, so definite an object compared with the vague sea and the hazy shore," John begins to pursue this doubly-glassed vision everywhere he goes, at the cost of his friendships, his present commitments and future career in politics.⁸⁶

But as he then begins peering through the transparent "windows of curiosity shops" to objects on display "which reminded him of the lump of glass," the hard, definite, and concentrated features of the objects presently before him dangerously begin to lose their "actual form." For, "looked at again and again half consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it."⁸⁷ His very pursuit of "solid objects" renders them less solid, less present, less real—a term whose qualifications Woolf, of course, repeatedly explores throughout her work. And this pursuit is furthermore haunted from the first by the "clear transparent surface" of vision emptied of the "background of thought and experience which gives an inscrutable depth to the eyes of grown people," a perspective paradoxically so immersed in memory's past that it occludes the possibility of recognizing it as past at all. Or, in other words, if indeed "We start transparent" until

⁸⁵ Virginia Woolf, "Solid Objects," in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick (New York: Harvest, 1989), 102.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 102-103.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

eventually “all history backs our pane of glass,” John has problematically inverted the model such that history is evacuated and congealed in an all-consuming lump of glass presently before us on a mantel.⁸⁸

The narrator of “The Mark on the Wall” (1917/1921) takes an altogether different tack in her ambivalent pursuit of such objects as the mark on the wall. She begins by introducing a mnemonic method grounded in the visual:

In order to fix a date it is necessary to remember what one saw. So now I think of the fire; the steady film of yellow light upon the three chrysanthemums in the round glass bowl on the mantelpiece. Yes, it must have been the winter time, and we had just finished our tea, for I remember I was smoking a cigarette when I looked up and saw the mark on the wall for the first time.⁸⁹

The measured reconstruction of the scene from mid-January here affirms the separation between her present reflection and memory of her first encounter with the mark in much clearer terms (“in order to fix,” “so now I think,” “Yes, it must have been... for I remember”) than John’s initial childhood reminiscence during his first encounter with the glass lump. The “round glass bowl on the mantelpiece,” not unlike the glass lump that adorns John’s, merely facilitates her remembrance rather than overwhelms it. In the same vein, while John devotes all of his time to the pursuit of his hard, definite, and concentrated objects themselves, the narrator here consciously uses the mark on the wall as a pivot point around which she coordinates various lines of thought “away from the surface.” The allure of shop windows in “Solid Objects” turns into vague annoyance at the “tree outside the window tap[ping] very gently on the pane” for impeding her ability to “think quietly, calmly, spaciouly... without any sense of hostility, or obstacle.... to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts.”⁹⁰ If John’s fascination was ultimately with detaching glass’ opaque solidity in the present from any sense of its relation to other times or people, the narrator here insists on glass’ utter transparency, the illusion of its present absence.

The narrator’s desire for such boundlessness finds clearer definition against the solidity of glass a few paragraphs later. Musing about “how instinctively one protects the image of oneself from idolatry or any other handling,” she comes to an impasse: either “the looking glass smashes, the image disappears, and the romantic figure with the green of forest depths all about it is there no longer,” leaving us with only “that shell of a person which is seen by other people,” or as we carry on “fac[ing] each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror; that accounts for the vagueness, the gleam of glassiness, in our eyes.” The terms of the glassy-eyed gaze here alter those of “Solid Objects” through the introduction of multiple optical illusions: the gaze emptied of the depth of accumulated time and experience becomes the pre-condition for the illusory self-projection of “the romantic figure with the green of forest depths.” Instead of fostering an appreciation of real depth or perceptual relief, shattering the reflective glass surface and its illusion of transparency leads to “an airless, shallow, bald, prominent world” for oneself.⁹¹ Maintaining them, however, pointedly precludes any real reciprocity or recognition

⁸⁸ Woolf, *Jacob’s Room*, 47.

⁸⁹ Woolf, “The Mark on the Wall,” 83.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

with or of others: one shell is exchanged for another. The social form of individual experience Armstrong attributes to Victorian glass dissipates not into modernism's "traceless purity" of expanded self-awareness but into shallow, thwarting, self-reflective surfaces. Through the play of glass's reflection and transparency, Woolf refracts not only questions of time and memory, but also of inter- and intra-subjectivity.

As she sinks deeper and deeper into her thoughts, the narrator does, however, imagine an alternative:

a very pleasant world. A quiet spacious world, with the flowers so red and blue in the open fields. A world without professors or specialists or house-keepers with the profiles of policemen, a world which one could slice with one's thought as a fish slices the water with his fin, grazing the stems of water-lilies... How peaceful it is down here, rooted in the centre of the world and gazing up through the grey waters, with their sudden gleams of light, and their reflections—if it were not for Whitaker's Almanac—if it were not for the Table of Precedency!⁹²

Concerned initially with the fraught horizontal plane of interactions when face to face with one's own reflection in a mirror or across omnibuses and underground railways, the axis rotates as she considers the experience of not only observing the depths from a defined remove but of quite literally immersing herself in and seeing through it. What might it look like to inhabit a world where distinctions of authority, specialization, morality—even individual thought—disappear entirely, leaving one free to peacefully observe and move through the world unperturbed by shifts in light and reflection? To allow one's fingers to work in the water without ever grasping a solid lump of glass? Meditatively sinking further and further away from the surface, from the tree tapping gently on the window pane, she is, nevertheless, abruptly recalled by the reminder of confining social taxonomies like the Table of Precedency and insists that she “must jump up and see for [herself] what that mark on the wall really is—a nail, a rose-leaf, a crack in the wood?”⁹³

But this time, the return to the surface, to its “hard separate facts” comes as a welcome relief. Grasping her perception of the mark on the wall—“something definite, something real”—as through it were “a plank in the sea,” the narrator momentarily “worship[s] solidity... reality... the impersonal world which is proof of some existence other than ours.” This “satisfying sense of reality,” however, is not one ruled by Whittaker's Almanack—nor, as it is for John, one that precludes relation to anything or anyone apart from his “solid objects.” Rather, it “at once turns the two Archbishops and the Lord High Chancellor to the shadows of shades” and reminds the narrator of how her experience might echo that of other “men and women.” Instead of returning to the reflective looking glass shells that separate and obscure us or continue to imagine complete submersion in an underwater world where such distinctions disappear entirely, the welcome “proof of some existence other than ours” now emerges on the other side of the transparent window glass pane. Her mind wanders to wood, to the life of that very tree outside her window and others like it, “lining rooms, where men and women sit after tea, smoking cigarettes.” Having momentarily realized the desire now to “take each one” of the “peaceful... happy thoughts” the tree evokes “separately,” however, the narrator—much as an older Woolf, distressed by house-moving, does in writing her memoir—comes up against such a desire's

⁹² Ibid., 87

⁹³ Ibid., 88.

fleeting nature and fragility: “*something is getting in the way... I can’t remember a thing. Everything’s moving, falling, slipping, vanishing... There’s a vast upheaval of matter*”: a man now stands over her, curses the war, and pronounces the mark on the wall a snail.⁹⁴

In these two stories, we see Woolf interrogate through glass two sides of the same problems the material world raises for our understanding of time and others. Beyond the distress that the cracked surface causes an older Woolf looking back on her past in “A Sketch,” the opaque solidity of glass inspires John to perpetually relinquish his vision of any time but the present. But this present vision is a destructively narrow one; it impedes his ability to recognize or relate to others or even recognize those present, “solid objects,” for what they actually are. Much like the mistaken listener who expects to take “after an hour’s discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of... notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece for ever,” the glass lump on John’s mantelpiece enshrines a dangerously simple and literally reified understanding of the world around him, incapable of responding to change over time.⁹⁵ Eerily fixed though John’s fate may seem by the story’s end, the impulse to focus on the solidity of present things, to want to think only of that which is directly before you, to fixate on the present at the cost of considering one’s past and future is by no means so strange, particularly in the aftermath of a devastating war.

To deny the material world and its frustrating divisions, as the narrator of “The Mark on the Wall” initially proposes, appears a tantalizing detour for the imagination, but it is likewise unsustainable insofar as one hopes ultimately to avoid either solipsism or madness. One either must retreat entirely inward or disavow any separation between herself and anything or anyone else, becoming, in a sense, legion. The refusal of the object world of the present might allow for the disintegration of social division, ideological constraint, and the violence they engender; but it is, first, only entirely realizable in one’s imagination, and second, indicative of a kind of violence itself, destroying the bounds between individuals—even if they are most immediately recognizable as reflective shells—and their lived experiences over time. Insofar as the intoxication of Bergsonian *durée* similarly involves such an imaginative immersion and interpenetration, such a disdain for the distractions of the material present, it’s telling that it is nevertheless eventually with the grateful gasp of someone nearly drowned that the narrator jumps up to grasp at the mark on the wall, her plank in the sea.

Which is to reiterate, then, that in order for the mystifying power of archbishops and lords to become the “shadow of shades” (as, of course, Septimus and Rezia will quite literally see them do on Bond Street) *and* for the narrator to newly imagine others in situations, in rooms, similar to her own, for her to be able peacefully take each as separate but no longer simply opaque shells or self-reflective surfaces, the narrator of “The Mark on the Wall” considers them as on the other side of a transparent window. Separate but visible, distinguished and yet accessible—much, it’s important to note, in the same way that she introduces her mnemonic method, so unlike John’s, at the beginning of the story. She can successfully and *peacefully* remember if she both clearly sees her past and sees it *as physically passed*.

The narrator’s second respite in her reconstructed sense of the “peaceful, happy” present is perhaps as difficult to sustain as her underwater vision. The earlier sense of the present and its disruptive distractions—the distress Woolf would later experience with house moving, for example—almost immediately asserts itself once more in the trifecta of man, war, and snail; that

⁹⁴ Ibid., my emphasis.

⁹⁵ Virginia Woolf, *A Room Of One’s Own* (New York: Mariner, 1989), 4.

is, in the intrusion of patriarchal authority, the ongoing war, and the prosaic dismissal of her imaginative wandering “away from the surface.” Which leaves us with the question, then, of what it might look like to maintain *over time* this qualified vision of oneself and others *in time*, a vision carefully directed at fragile, sliding surfaces and running depths in a modern world that constantly threatens to overwhelm it with perpetual opacity and self-reflection or the potentially dangerous allure of transparency’s illusion. We ask what might it look like, given this precariousness, for an author like Woolf to write in longer narrative form, the account of an individual life in time: her own, Roger Fry’s, Clarissa Dalloway’s.

Published two years after the *Mrs. Dalloway*, “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” (1927) takes up many of the themes and questions of the preceding two stories, while also offering some insight into the narrative strategies Woolf employed to turn the experience of time’s passing into the story of a life among other lives, *The Hours* into *Mrs. Dalloway*. “A Mark on the Wall”’s imagined immersion in a “very pleasant world” resurfaces here, on the city streets of London, six years later. As this narrator leaves her house under the pretext of needing to buy a pencil and embarks upon an evening amble through London, the “objects which perpetually express the oddity of our own temperament and enforce the memories of our own experience” disappear, and with them the “shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughness a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye.”⁹⁶

Woolf begins to dispense with both the solid objects and reflective shells of the previous stories straightaway. With our eerie transformation into “an enormous eye” (the narrator is quick to include us as readers in the adventure) the depth diving of “A Mark on the Wall” is likewise left behind. Our present experience can allow us “only [to] glid[e] smoothly on the surface,” for the “eye is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure. It floats us smoothly down a stream, resting, pausing, the brain sleeps perhaps as it looks.” Gliding smoothly along the surface, resisting any pull into the depths, the “flowers so red and blue in the open fields” become “the blue and red bunches of flowers burning so bravely through the plate glass of the florist’s windows.”⁹⁷ The task here, as the narrator repeatedly emphasizes, is to remain “content... with surfaces only—the glossy brilliance of the motor omnibuses; the carnal splendor of the butcher shop,” with the world only as it is offered to vision in the present moment, behind the transparent sheen of plate glass.⁹⁸

Rather than reduplicate John’s myopic obsession with the solidity of things, however, the anonymity of the urban streetscape allows us at least in part the kind of imaginative fluidity of the previous story’s underwater vision. As opposed to the glassy-eyed vagueness of people facing each other on the Tube and seeing only themselves, the narrator allows her gaze to alight briefly on different scenes such that “into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tether to a single mind but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others.”⁹⁹ But the shallow penetration, the illusion of multiplicity, requires the brain to rouse from its smoothly sailing stupor. Even the briefest moment of absorption into the bodies and minds of others requires a reckoning with the passage of time that the singular, enormous eye gliding along the surfaces of the present can’t yield alone.

⁹⁶ Virginia Woolf, “A Street Haunting,” *Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth, 1994), 481.

⁹⁷ Woolf, “The Mark on the Wall” 87; Idem., “A Street Haunting,” 482

⁹⁸ Woolf, “A Street Haunting,” 482.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 490.

Using similar language in her 1926 essay, “The Cinema,” Woolf likewise wonders what the brain might be able to do with the eye taking in images from ten years past, beholding “a world which has gone beneath the waves.”¹⁰⁰ Resist as she does the “danger of digging deeper than the eye approves... impeding our passage down the smooth stream by catching at some branch or root,” she nonetheless finds herself half assuming the vision of “the whole breadth of the River Thames—wide, mournful, peaceful,” as seen “through the eyes of somebody who is leaning over the Embankment on a summer evening, without a care in the world,” and half present to her current perception of the winter night and “the river rougher and greyer than we remembered.”¹⁰¹ Her desire, as she likewise expresses it in “A Sketch of the Past,” to see unimpeded through the surface of the smoothly running present to the river depths of the past below is thwarted by the realization that “the sights we see and the sounds we hear now have none of the quality of the past.”

Unlike John, the narrator remains cognizant of the fact that “it is only when we look at the past and take from it the element of uncertainty that we can enjoy perfect peace.”¹⁰² The past is set apart from the present while refracted through anticipation (“the element of uncertainty”) and memory (the retrospective removal of that uncertainty by knowledge of what follows). But like the narrator of “The Mark on the Wall,” here the initial fantasy of dissolving divisions entirely, though enviable, is inevitably enmeshed in and thwarted by the requirements of the present. While it may be true that “the true self [is] neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves,” day-to-day “circumstances compel unity; for convenience’ sake a man must be whole.”¹⁰³ Instead of considering this entirely a shame, however, this narrator admits to how “comforting [it is] to feel the old possessions, the old prejudices, fold us round, and shelter and enclose the self which has been blown about at so many street corners.”¹⁰⁴ In arriving at this precarious balance between the pleasure of boundless immersion and an acknowledgement of its necessarily illusory and fleeting quality, the narrator of “Street Haunting” can finally appreciate “the only spoil retrieved from the treasures of the city, a lead pencil,” and ostensibly write the story we have just read.

“Street Haunting,” which concludes neither with the bleakness of a man fixated on hoarding relatively worthless objects at the cost of all else in his life nor the frantic loss of some momentarily grasped peace of mind, leaves us instead with a writer pleased with her new pencil. “Street Haunting” departs from the others in a few telling ways besides its conclusion: it very intentionally sets these questions *in motion* on the city streets in a way that highlights and embraces multiplicity and dispersion while also acknowledging the limitations and necessarily illusory quality of both. The explicit emphasis on plate glass windows and *flânerie* furthermore underscores the embeddedness of these experiences in a particularly modern, urban setting and asks how much both vision and memory are contingent upon the material and historical moments in which they occur. The stream Woolf’s “enormous eye” floats along is, after all, emphatically coextensive with the modern city streets of her narrator’s perambulation, not a pastoral idyll. And yet, there remains the drawback of such urbane movements through time and space: its enforced shallowness. How might one acknowledge the limitations of such movements

¹⁰⁰ Woolf, “The Cinema,” *Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth, 1994), 349.

¹⁰¹ Woolf, “A Street Haunting,” 489.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 486.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 491.

along street surfaces, and *still* give a sense of tunnels and depth? How might we as readers, the other half of Woolf's "enormous eye," likewise take surfaces seriously while also remaining attentive to what reverberates below? If either Woolf's late solution of writing "in order to recover [her] sense of the present by getting the past to shadow this broken surface" or finally contenting herself with her "only spoil," a pencil, is any indication, there is something in the act of writing that may offer an alternative, however tenuous (98). A look at *Mrs. Dalloway* will demonstrate how.

Window Shopping

*"I should say a good deal about The Hours and my discovery: how I dig out beautiful caves behind my characters: I think that gives exactly what I want; humanity, humour, depth. The idea is that the caves shall connect and each comes to daylight at the present moment. Dinner!"*¹⁰⁵

- Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, August 30, 1923

*"London is enchanting... But my mind is full of The Hours... And I like London for writing it..."*¹⁰⁶

- Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, May 26, 1924

"A Sketch of the Past" builds the perceptual experience of glass out of Woolf's rumination on memory; *Mrs. Dalloway* comes at memory from the other side, building memory out of the perceptual experience of urban glass. The opening lines of the novel set the stage for the acts of memory through glass to follow. We find ourselves not consciously on Victoria Street with Clarissa experiencing "life; London; this moment of June," but rather "plunged into the open air of Bourton," Clarissa's childhood home, thirty-four years earlier (*MD* 4). Mapping the time of past and present onto the spatial coordinates of the country and the city is nothing new, of course. What is strange is the way Woolf manages—just as she does in her image of the glassed stream in "A Sketch"—both to coordinate these discrete temporal and spatial designations (past, country; present, city) and to momentarily align them so fully in the act of memory as to blur all distinction. While Clarissa's consciousness drifts to her Bourton past, her body and sensory impressions ostensibly remain in the "daylight at the present moment" in London. We don't plunge into Bourton *instead* of London, we plunge with Clarissa into the open air of both. At first glance, this foray into the past, into the "beautiful cave" behind Clarissa, resembles the kind of Bergsonian "overlaying [of] past, present, and future in a single and simultaneous moment" that the "traceless purity" of modernist glass aims to offer.¹⁰⁷ But instead of flowing seamlessly from her memories to her impressions of the present moment, which come surely enough on the next page, the narrative is suddenly interrupted.

Between Bourton and London we encounter Clarissa from the outside, through the gaze of her otherwise inconsequential neighbor Scrope Purvis. For a minute—for a brief paragraph—we glimpse Clarissa in all her physical solidity: stiff, upright, aged, birdlike, white, recently recovered from grave illness, on the street curb, waiting for Durvall's van to cross. *Then* we find ourselves back in Clarissa's mind, inundated now not with recollections of her girlhood but the sensory stimulation of "the swing, tramp, and trudge" of the present moment, of London. Like a

¹⁰⁵ Virginia Woolf, "August 30, 1923," *A Writer's Diary* (New York: Harvest, 2003), 59.

¹⁰⁶ Virginia Woolf, "May 26, 1924," *A Writer's Diary* (New York: Harvest, 2003), 62.

¹⁰⁷ J. Brown, "Cellophane Glamour," 616; Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 14.

viewer suddenly attentive to the steel latticework holding the Bauhaus wall's expansive transparency together, the reader fleetingly confronts the divisions not only between Clarissa and her neighbor, but also between Clarissa's present and her past. This momentary recourse to the outside reveals how any foray into the depths of the past, like the ecstasy of a moment's impossible passion, must ultimately run up "against a granite wall in the darkness"—or, as this essay proposes, against the vexed solidity of a pane of glass (35). Memory, while powerful and enchanting, can bring the past up to the present, but it cannot ultimately turn the past *into* the present without dire consequences, as the figure of Septimus demonstrates.

Clarissa thus (incorrectly) imagines "being herself invisible; unseen; unknown," as she peers first into Hatchard's window, then a glove shop's, and finally out of Mulberry's window at the back-firing car on the street outside (10). She exults, invisible "in people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge"; that is, in the anonymity, mobility, and full sensory immersion of her modern, urban *flânerie*. And, as in Woolf's later memoir, it is the sense of seemingly transparent continuity with the present moment, "this moment of June," that grants Clarissa a view into her past (4). Looking through Hatchard's window, she dreams, "trying to recover [...an] image of white dawn in the country," an image the reader recognizes from her opening recollection five pages earlier of an early morning at Bourton more than three decades past (9). Through the glove shop window, Clarissa remembers her uncle at his death, turning on his bed during the War one morning and saying, "I have had enough" (11). The recollection of her daughter's distaste for gloves propels her up Bond Street to Mulberry's, the first store she actually enters. In these early pages, we encounter Woolf's retrospective meditation on the glass surface of the present, running habitually, smoothly over the memories of the past, transposed onto the glass surface of shop windows. At each shop window, Clarissa sees not only what is materially beyond the surface but also into memories of her girlhood and the more recent years of the war. The exhilarating anonymity of London's hustle and bustle seems at first to facilitate the "peace" Woolf identifies as necessary "to feel the present sliding over the depths of the past" (*MB* 98).

But neither at the bookstore window nor at the glove shop's is this quite fully realized for Clarissa. The substance of her "dreaming as she looked into Hatchard's shop window" remains an unanswered question, as does the question, "What was she trying to recover?" (*MD* 9). Even as Woolf alerts the reader to the white dawn of Bourton in Clarissa's mind, Clarissa herself never actually claims it as she looks at the books on display. Her dreaming through the glass, likewise, is abruptly cut off by the annoyance she feels at her own vanity, always wanting "that people should look pleased as she came in" (10). Perhaps, she wonders, if "she could have looked even differently!" To have "looked... differently" cuts, of course, two ways: in one sense, to be the one looking, and in the other, to be the one looked at. Staged before shop windows, Clarissa's irritation coupled with her sense of her own "narrow pea-stick figure; a ridiculous little face, beaked like a bird's" and the fact that "she held herself well was true; and had nice hands and feet; and dressed well, considering that she spent little" is likely the result of both kind of looking.

The dissatisfaction Clarissa feels and the impulse to project a version of herself that "looked... differently," despite her concession that she "dressed well, considering she spent little," evokes the now-familiar figure of the female shopper whose identity is forged in the crucible of early-century window displays, the modern consumer whose sense of stable identity breaks down in "a never-ending loop of desire, buying and dissatisfaction."¹⁰⁸ But if in *Night and Day*, Woolf

¹⁰⁸ Outka, *Consuming Tradition*, 137. For further discussion of the construction of female identity and the urban spectator as *flâneuse* vis-à-vis changes in glass display and consumer culture, see Rachel Bowlby's *Just Looking: Consumer*

depicts “the modern subject’s longing for a return of this illusion” of stable identity via her search “for the something that might at once represent the genuine article and yet still be a modern construction,” for goods “representing, constructing, and reproducing part of the past” even as they “promis[e] to bring the viewer into contact with another appealing identity,” in *Mrs. Dalloway* the plate glass windows and the objects behind them now thwart rather than facilitate both of those quests. At each store window, Clarissa’s present sense of invisible continuity with her past tellingly snags on the displayed goods: the very thoughts of buying Evelyn Whitbread a book and a pair of gloves for herself or Elizabeth immediately disrupt her memories and return Clarissa instead to an irritating sense of her own present vanity, to her frustration with constant self-reflection.

Again, breaking away from the glove shop window, Clarissa’s memory of her uncle’s death and disillusionment with the war is thwarted by her irritation with Miss Kilman, which she acknowledges as more a hatred for the latter’s insinuation that “the whole panoply of [Clarissa’s] content were nothing but self love” (*MD* 12). Self-reflection mars the transparency of these opening scenes of glass mediation, just as the momentary interjection of Scrope Purvis’s perspective (one that Clarissa’s self-assessment echoes) disrupts our sense of Clarissa’s autonomous, urban anonymity and a seamlessly interpenetrating past and present. If, as Outka argues, “The glass becomes both a metaphor for and a material manifestation of the combined accessibility of the goods and the elusiveness of the aura they radiate” such that the “outside gazer could be seduced by the space behind the glass” in “a willing self-seduction,” something has gone awry for Clarissa who cannot seem to get past her reflections on the surface long enough to get there.¹⁰⁹

The facile conflation of reflection in the psychological act of introspection and the physical act of light beams creating a virtual image on a reflective surface illuminates (in both senses of the word) the way in which Woolf purposefully marries the material and the metaphorical implications of glass in her innovative evocation of it. As a result, the reader not only luxuriates in “the intoxication of words—the linguistic slide of beauty in the message hidden in the beauty of words” along with Septimus, but also recognizes through Clarissa the familiar experience of a doubled attention to image and object (*MD* 86). As Jean-Paul Sartre argues in *L’imaginaire* (1940), “every object, whether it is presented by external perception or it appears to inner sense, is susceptible to functioning as a present reality or as an image, depending on the centre of reference that has been chosen. The two worlds, the imaginary and the real, are constituted by the same objects; only the grouping and the interpretation of these objects varies.”¹¹⁰ The constant perceptual, linguistic, and imaginary slide between sensory and psychological possibilities that glass in particular so readily facilitates is arguably what also makes it such an attractive figure for Woolf. The fact that Clarissa’s fluid “dreaming” into the windows of Bond Street and her past breaks as she catches herself reflected—psychologically if not physically as well—effects a kind of obfuscation analogous to the broken surface that Woolf finds so distressing later. Reflection, like breakage, reinforces an awareness of glass’s materiality as a

Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola (New York: Methuen, 1985), Anne Friedberg’s *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), and Alys Eve Weinbaum’s “Ways of Not Seeing: Engendering Modernity’s Optics in Baudelaire, Benjamin, Freud and Masereel” in *Loss* (University of California Press, 2003), eds. D. Kazanjian and D. Eng, 396-426.

¹⁰⁹ Outka, *Consuming Tradition*, 137.

¹¹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’imaginaire*, trans. Jonathan Webber (New York: Routledge, 2010 (1940)), 20.

barrier marking Clarissa an outsider. Put simply, catching a reflection is a sure way to know glass is there.

The shiny Bond Street windows may persist in highlighting the desirability of the material objects beyond the glass—even as Clarissa (much as she imagines herself unseen) wants to view the street with “no splash, no glitter”—but their power to evoke the illusion of a kind of stable identity, one where the prewar past and postwar present could successfully cohere, no longer holds (*MD* 10). As Woolf composed *Mrs. Dalloway*, she repeatedly noted her frustration with the “glittery” quality of Clarissa herself, “too glittering and tinselly.”¹¹¹ Her first remedy, as she describes it in her diary, was to “bring innumerable other characters to her support”; later, recounting how she nearly gave up altogether “because [she still] found Clarissa in some way tinselly,” Woolf writes with satisfaction, “Then I invented her memories.”¹¹² The commercial streets of London and the vistas their windows open up may comprise much of the sensory pleasure that causes Clarissa to exult in the present, “this moment of June,” but their material presence and reflective quality also both physically and metaphorically call attention to the limitations of Clarissa’s own self when set apart from her relation to others and to her past.

Later in the day, on Victoria Street, Peter Walsh stops to find “himself, reflected in the plate-glass window of a motor-car manufacturer” (*MD* 47). Contrary to Clarissa even in his mode of window-shopping, Peter’s reflection in the glass, the image of “this fortunate man,” seems to be precisely that which attracts him to the shop. Peter looks through the glass momentarily “at the great motor-cars capable of doing—how many miles on how many gallons?” but is ultimately much more preoccupied with the surface’s ability to reflect in his expatriated person: “all India... behind him; plains, mountains; ... decisions he had come to alone—he, Peter Walsh.” Rather than an instance of his Indian past being reflected off the glass, the subordination of Peter’s memories to his self-aggrandizing suggests that the visions are instead coextensive with his sense of his self, a belated and refracted realization of the seduction the glass windows initially offer Clarissa. While the “peace” of Clarissa’s memories seem to depend on a kind of invisible continuity between herself and the displays behind glass, Peter’s equanimity is contingent on facing the plate glass’s reflective surface. The commercial displays that force Clarissa’s unwanted self-reflection feed into Peter’s enjoyment of his own as the cars remind him of the plough he had invented in his Indian district and the wheel-barrows he had ordered from England (48).

But the moment “a cloud crosses the sun, silence falls on London; and falls on the mind”—and presumably, the glass window ceases to reflect the light of the hidden sun and him, Peter Walsh, with it—Peter quails. The now-transparent glass reveals the past; “looking rather drearily into the glassy depths,” Peter is absorbed in the “deep emotion, and an extraordinarily clear, yet puzzling recollection of [Clarissa]” (48, 49). The “glassy depths,” punctuated by church bells, grant Peter momentary insight into Clarissa’s window gazing and his own, as he considers how “some grief for the past holds it back; some concern for the present” (48). As the sound of the bells fades and leaves Peter alone to consider the fluidity of the glassy depths in uninterrupted silence, he recoils and marches up Whitehall, the political center of Britain. The momentary shadowing of the past through Clarissa “languishe[s],” and Peter is left, just as Clarissa is in front of Hatchard’s, with questions about what he actually remembers: “But what room? What moment? And why had he been so profoundly happy when the clock was striking?” (49, 50).

¹¹¹ Woolf, *Writer’s Diary*, 60.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 77.

The feeling of anonymity Clarissa finds so comforting in the continuous motion of the city, in her ability to look through shop windows and imagine herself unseen by those passing by—or even by herself—frightens Peter. His brief moment of reconciliation between the glassy depths of the past and the smooth, transparent surface of the present clusters around “some moment of great intimacy” between him and Clarissa; namely, around the possibility of their marriage that the church bells accompanying Clarissa “in white” bring to mind (*MD* 49). But as the bells remind Peter that Clarissa is ill and will someday die as he will, their eventual silence also leaves Peter alone to look drearily into the glassy depths of a past in which that union never materialized. During the war, as Outka argues, window displays “promise a temporal shift by representing, constructing, and reproducing part of the past, and... also work spatially, promising to bring the viewer into contact with another appealing identity... whether in the form of a romantic partner... or in the form of an alluring new role for the viewer”; after the war, they ultimately remind Peter that that offered promise has already been and will always remain irrevocably broken.¹¹³ Confronted with the reality of the passage of time and of mortality, Peter can’t look through the window any longer. He insists instead upon a false reflection, the vision of a future “roll[ing] down to him, vigorous, unending” through Whitehall, in the form of young soldiers marching to the Cenotaph, a nationalized inversion of both painful postwar realizations. The city streets and their glass windows facilitate memories that Peter can’t handle, highlighting a certain *failure* of intersubjective connection, a separation and rupture that time deepens and only death perhaps nullifies.

Depth-gazing Clarissa prides herself at slicing “like a knife through everything” and yet cannot escape the feeling of being “at the same time...outside, looking on”; the expatriated Peter prides himself on his eccentricity and status as outside observer but can’t seem to do anything with the knife that he takes out at least half a dozen times but opens and shuts childishly when he gets excited (*MD* 49). Before the glass panes of Bond Street, Clarissa’s exultation in her invisibility and sense of continuity with her past turns on her recognition of her own vanity: she admittedly still wants to be seen, to be known by and to know others. Peter’s momentarily smug and solipsistic sense of self, in turn, catches on the revelation that such clearly defined boundaries between oneself and others, between the present and the past, are in actuality as tragic and false as they are momentarily triumphant.

In the pages between Clarissa and Peter’s scenes of solitary window-shopping, we move into a distinctly social space of perception staged on either side of Mulberry’s store window. Entering the florist’s to “buy the flowers herself,” Clarissa once more immerses herself in a reverie of her Bourton past (*MD* 3). Miss Pym, “who thought her kind, for kind she had been years ago,” immediately recognizes her (12). Clarissa is as she was “years ago”: the exhilarating anonymity of urban window-shopping melts away but so too, it seems, does the threat of breaking continuity with the past as she gives into the “seduc[tion of] the vision behind the glass.”¹¹⁴ Breathing in the flowery scent, Clarissa opens her eyes to see Mulberry’s transformed into a vision of “frilled linen from a laundry” and “sweet peas spreading in their bowls,” to “girls in muslin frocks [who] came out to pick sweet peas and roses after the superb summer’s day” (*MD* 13). In other words, she opens her eyes to see the summer evening at Bourton thirty-four years earlier where she and Sally (who “made [flowers] swim on the top of water in bowls”), share “the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it” (35).

¹¹³ Outka, *Consuming Tradition*, 153.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

Merging her present and past, Clarissa forgets the distress of self-reflection: alone with Miss Pym, alone with Sally, “the others disappeared” (35). But then the sudden sound of “a pistol shot in the street outside” draws Miss Pym away to the window, recalling how Peter’s sudden interruption of Clarissa and Sally’s union years ago intrudes “like running one’s face against a granite wall in the darkness” (35, 53). Clarissa again violently confronts the barriers that separate her from others. The backfiring car shatters the transparent overlay of Mulberry’s and Bourton—just as the passage breaks and switches to the voice of an external, omniscient narrator.

At the window, Miss Pym shares what she sees with Clarissa; outside Mulberry’s, the passersby who glimpse into the window of the car share their vision too, the rumors “passing invisibly, inaudibly, like a cloud” (*MD* 14). If a kind of recognition or mutuality—being seen and liked and trusted by Sally, by Miss Pym—in Mulberry’s could facilitate the deep reverie it does for Clarissa, one might expect the collective gaze of the Bond Street crowd at the window of the motor car to produce a similar reconciliation of perceptions, returning us perhaps to the prewar model of glass mediation or alternatively offering proof of Halbwach’s interwar theory that “One can say equally well either that the individual remembers by placing himself at the viewpoint of the group, or that the group memory realizes and manifests itself in the memories of individuals.”¹¹⁵ With not just one but three people who had actually seen the figure beyond the window inside the car, the odds of getting the very recently past vision to fill in the space broken by a “square of dove grey”—the blind drawn by the figure inside—ought to be that much greater. Nevertheless, the effect, while “for thirty seconds all heads were inclined the same way—to the window,” is one of acute epistemological uncertainty: “nobody knew whose face had been seen”—*especially* those who saw it (*MD* 14). People who had seen and people who hadn’t claim to know for certain that the figure is indeed the Prince of Wales, the Queen and the Prime Minister; this collective vision only reduplicates the breakdown of actual perception and knowledge. The chiasmus formed by Clarissa and Peter on either side of this scene in the novel, much like their own romantic relationship, seems to meet in a moment of communal, epistemological and perceptual collapse rather than any successful union.

If the smooth, sliding surface of the present is proven time and again a fleeting illusion, we return to how Woolf retrieves the past in the present through her writing. Neither the one-sided solitary reflections of Clarissa and Peter nor the attempt at communal recognition of authority suffices to recover and maintain the depths of the past. Instead, an alternative: Septimus. Getting the past to shadow the broken present requires a different kind of immersion and a different kind of mutuality from that which Clarissa finds in Mulberry’s or Armstrong deems characteristic of either the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. In a society fractured by the experience of war, Woolf investigates the allure and impossibility of both a self-contained private consciousness and seamless collective understanding. If early twentieth-century sociology rejects “individual memory, as a purportedly original agency” in favor of “collective consciousness...whose ontological status is not in question,” Woolf raises the question of what it means for someone like Septimus, returned from the War, to experience himself as part of “the group, not the isolated individual but the individual as a group member.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Floyd N. House, Review of *Les Cadres de la Memoire* by Maurice Halbwachs, *American Journal of Sociology*, 31.3 (1925), 390.

¹¹⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 95.

In other words, rather than see Clarissa's rise in terms of Septimus's fall, or suggest that Woolf "obviously...brought in Septimus not so much to state his own case as to enhance that of Clarissa," I would like to consider instead how she interrogates the impossibility of someone like Peter or Clarissa conceiving of his or her life apart from a past populated by sacrifices *already made* by unknown young men like Septimus.¹¹⁷ The effect may still be to illuminate something about Clarissa, but I'd like to suggest that Woolf very carefully maintains a separation, boundaries both as solid and transparent as a pane of glass, between the characters. Clarissa cannot contemplate the "peace" of her present apart from the realities of Septimus's past, nor can she appropriate or absorb his experiences as her own. Neither the Victorian vision of "individual experience tak[ing] a social form" nor the modernist fascination with a single subject's capacity to experience "various levels of reference...and simultaneity" quite suffice. Triangulated through Clarissa and Peter's failed union, Septimus demonstrates Woolf's constant negotiation of the extremely delicate but pressing necessity of recognizing both the bounds and affordances of intersubjective and temporal experiences alike.

Behind a Pane of Glass

With the motorcar that pulls Miss Pym and others to windows and the narration away from Clarissa's perspective, we suddenly catch our first glimpse of Septimus, "aged about thirty, pale-faced, beak-nosed" (*MD* 14). The novel begins with one scene of the seeming interpenetration of past and present, which the externalized vision of Clarissa via Scrope Purvis immediately undercuts (4). And here, disrupting a similar moment of Bourton and London's melding, we have another such intrusion, only this time Clarissa's immersion in the past is pointedly interrupted by the imagined sound of a gunshot and the vision of a similarly pale and bird-like war veteran. Abstracted momentarily to Woolf's omniscient third-person narrator, the street scene that follows "the surface agitation" the motor-car produces, comes back into focus through Septimus (14). Septimus takes in the scene, looking at where "the motor car stood, with drawn blinds, and upon them a curious pattern like a tree" (14-15). His perception of the car window is remarkably the only stable one rendered in this scene. While Clarissa and the various members of the crowd let their guesses slide into conflicting certainties about the identity of the figure behind the glass, Septimus's gaze settles on the materiality of the glass window, the drawn blind behind it, and the pattern of trees on its surface—the vision of authority turned correctly (and quite literally) into the "shadow of shades" that the narrator in Woolf's earlier short story "The Mark on the Wall" (1917) only dreams about.¹¹⁸ In contrast to the crowd's lack of consensus, Septimus's is also the only vision that's confirmed by another person, as his wife Rezia likewise notes "the tree pattern on the blinds" (*MD* 15). Though Rezia wonders whether the Queen is sitting in the car, she and Septimus are alone in seeing the window, blind, and pattern that are actually there, rather than claim falsely to perceive who or what is beyond them.

The couple's uniquely accurate reading of the glass's complex surface quickly dissolves, however, into what Septimus sees as the "wavering and quivering" of the world—much like the wavering and quivering of the glassed present in "The Moment"—and the distraught understanding that he is "being looked at and pointed at... for a purpose" (*MD* 15). Insofar as we

¹¹⁷ Shalom Rachman, "Clarissa's Attic: Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* Reconsidered," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 18.1 (Jan. 1972), 5.

¹¹⁸ Woolf, "Mark on the Wall," 158.

might see Septimus, in his own words, “descend[ing] another step into the pit,” as in the bifurcated vision of “A Sketch,” his repeated reference to himself as a “drowned sailor” and to Rezia likewise as “drowned, under water” is telling (90, 67, 87). *Mrs. Dalloway* does not stop at portraying the sliding surface of a stream; to find a solution to the surface’s inevitable splintering, one must also somehow step *into* the stream of the past. But it is pointedly through Septimus’s immersion, *not* Clarissa’s, that the wartime past shadows the broken surface of the present for most of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

On the other side of Mulberry’s glass pane, retreating from Bond Street into some park marks Rezia’s unsuccessful attempt at hiding herself and Septimus from others. While Clarissa might exult in her sense of anonymity on the streets of London, the Warren Smiths gain the unwanted attention of numerous passersby like Peter, Maisie Johnson, Carrie Dempster, and, at least in Septimus’s mind, Evans, his friend and officer who died in the war. Sitting under such scrutiny, “the word ‘time’ split its husk; poured its riches over [Septimus]” (*MD* 69). The barriers separating moments of time, past from present, open, as Septimus’s words mingle with “an immortal ode.” The voices of the war dead of Thessaly, led by the far more recently deceased Evans, join him in Regent’s Park. The chiming clocks that interrupt Peter’s gazing into the “glassy depths” and snag Clarissa’s urban euphoria with an awareness of her impending death makes no impression on Septimus, who seems both smilingly oblivious and uncannily linked to the present time they tell. When Rezia asks him, “What is the time?” Septimus, “smiling mysteriously” at Peter whom he sees as Evans, announces that he “will tell [her] the time,” just as “the quarter struck—the quarter to twelve” (69). Drawing the past into the present, Septimus manages to merge the two seamlessly in a manner that belies the disrupted visions of Clarissa and Peter at their respective glass panes, but he does so at a cost.

What Septimus’s equanimity at the end of this passage confuses for the reader is the terror that first attends Evans’s arrival. While time splits its husk, the clear vision of the tree-patterned grey blind likewise breaks as Evans—constantly figured as either “behind the tree” or “behind the screen”—emerges, “a man in grey,” as “the branches parted” (*MD* 69). Far from interrupting Septimus’s vision of the past, as the broken surfaces of Clarissa’s day do, Evans presses on, heedless of Septimus’s own cry, “For God’s sake don’t come!” Much of the terror comes precisely from a momentary sensation of the past intruding upon the present without the distinction of things *having happened*: if Evans is indeed already dead and approaching him thus, Septimus “could not look upon [him],” but instead “no mud was on him; no wounds; he was not changed” (68). Clarissa cannot contemplate her past without the intrusion of the present, figured as her awareness of herself and the glass’s mediation; Peter finds his momentary glimpse of the glassy depths so devastating that he immediately turns to the patently false narrative of an unendingly triumphant future for the nation; Septimus’s vision on the other side of the broken present alternatively provides a fluid gateway for a past that won’t stop, a nightmare vision that turns the present body of Peter into that of the deceased Evans, as opposed to Clarissa’s dreamy conflation of Sally and Miss Pym.

As Rezia repeatedly commands him to “look” at “real things” around them in the park, the tension between Septimus’s fluid temporal perception and the material world around him becomes palpably manifest (*MD* 25). In the ceaseless blurring of present object and past memory, Septimus senses not only the melding of Peter and Evans, but the “horrible, terrible” sight of a dog becoming a man and “the flesh... melted off the world” (66). His ability to “see through bodies,” enacting on one hand, Clarissa’s philosophy of the interconnectedness of all things, also leads to a sense of “his [own] body... macerated until only the nerve fibres were left.” Likewise, looking at the trees in the park becomes too much for Septimus, who wants desperately to “shut

his eyes” and “see no more” because he can’t help but see “the leaves... connected by millions of fibres with his own body” (22). Worn away to nothing but his uncanny ability to sense a painful dissolution of boundaries between himself and those around him, between the present and the past, Septimus’s body becomes “spread like a veil upon rock” (66). The sense of potential drowning that pervades Woolf’s earlier stories, like the narrator’s underwater desire “to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts” in “The Mark on the Wall,” emerges in this later novel as a fully realized nightmare.¹¹⁹ Rezia’s directives to look are, after all, Dr. Holmes’s.

Brought to Sir William Bradshaw’s for a second opinion, Septimus sits “in the arm-chair under the skylight staring at a photograph of Lady Bradshaw,” and there the trees that pattern both the car window and its Regent’s Park echo are gone—as is Septimus’s memory (*MD* 95). Confronted by Sir William about his “crime,” which just pages earlier Septimus enumerates as various iterations of his inability to feel about the events of his past, he repeatedly “could not remember it... Love, trees, there is no crime—what was his message? He could not remember it” (96). The broken continuity that plagues Clarissa and Peter’s memories suddenly thwarts Septimus too—Septimus who is pathologically incapable of forgetting—here, on the other side of Mulberry’s glass and below Sir William Bradshaw’s, almost a hundred pages later.

While Septimus’s navigation of the obfuscated motor-car window and its screened echo in the park introduce the seamlessness of his past and present, looking through a clear glass frame at a photograph of Lady Bradshaw, a woman who, the narrator informs us, once roamed rivers catching salmon but whose will has long since been “water-logged... sunk,” brings Septimus to the surface of the present: the “ground-glass skylight” above and his own gazing at a younger Lady Bradshaw before him (*MD* 95). To recall Woolf’s essay “The Cinema,” in this moment of looking at “a world which has gone beneath the waves” years ago, the “brain is roused from the stupor of the eye.”¹²⁰ Only here, under the ground-down glass of Sir William’s roof, Septimus and Lady Bradshaw are both part of a submerged world, part of a necessarily suppressed past (hers, her youth; his, the war)—*not* floating along the plate-glass surfaces of present city streets. The revelation of the glassed partitions between him and Lady Bradshaw, between him and this moment of June outside, brings Septimus not further down into the indistinguishable depths of the past, but fully up to the material surfaces of the present. The encounter with Sir Bradshaw leaves Septimus “muttering messages about beauty”; “But beauty,” as Septimus notes soon thereafter, “was behind a pane of glass” (*MD* 96).

Back in their Bloomsbury flat later that afternoon, Rezia delights in Septimus’s momentary return to the present. They joke and chat and make a hat; Septimus wakes from a nap to find himself “stretched out... not on a hill-top; not on a crag; on Mrs. Filmer’s sitting-room sofa” (*MD* 142). The “visions, the faces, the voices of the dead” are gone, and Evans no longer responds from behind the screen (143). A plate of bananas, an embroidered screen, the coal-scuttle remain a plate of bananas, an embroidered screen, and the coal scuttle: *anti*-memory objects that ground Septimus in the present rather than connect him, fiber by fiber as with Peter and the dog in Regent’s Park, to the terrors of the past. Ready, at last to “face the screen” and accept his separation from his past, however, he realizes that in doing so he will be subject instead to these “men... who different in their verdicts (for Holmes said one thing, Bradshaw another), yet judges... were” (145). Reminiscent of the crowd’s willful misprision earlier that

¹¹⁹ Woolf, “The Mark on the Wall,” 87.

¹²⁰ Woolf, “The Cinema,” 173.

morning on Bond Street—and, on top of all that, invested with power and “ten thousand a year”—Bradshaw and Holmes “mixed the vision and the sideboard; saw nothing clear, yet ruled, yet inflicted.”

Ruling out all other forms of escape, Septimus, unnervingly at his most lucid, opens the lodging-house window and “throw[s] himself out,” rejecting the kinds of social submission (hidden away in a sanatorium or hidden in plain sight, pretending everything is fine) that Bradshaw and Holmes seek to impose (*MD* 145). Septimus’s death, flinging his body through the opened window to land on the rails dividing Mrs. Filmer’s private property from the public street beyond, seems the abundantly clear reaction against—and product of—a postwar culture which might still claim that an individual experience could peacefully take social form or alternatively looks to valorize the seamless multiplicity of one individual’s experience alone. The intersubjective seeing and being seen that windows (dis)allow and the subsequent unwillingness to see things for what they are on the surface (whether out of some patriotic necessity or belief in medical scientific insight), raises the question of what Septimus’s death might mean for Peter, Clarissa, and *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Peter’s turn from the street window to the false future, to boys too young to have fought in the war marching toward an empty tomb; his inability to see Septimus, a real, live soldier, as anything but one half of a generic lovers’s quarrel in the park; and again, his perverse proclamation that the ambulance speeding Septimus’s body away is indicative of “one of the triumphs of civilization”—in short, Peter’s constant insistence upon surfaces without depth, present perceptions without acceptance of the actual past, meet with Clarissa’s thwarted attempts to identify herself and her past with Septimus (*MD* 166). She hears about his suicide at her party, and “her body went through it, when she was told” (202). In sharp contrast to the opening pages of the novel, however, where Clarissa’s thoughts of the present and the past come together along a string of fluid, explanatory “for”s, the prevailing conjunction of the pages that follow her physical and biographical identification with Septimus is the resistant “but”:

A young man had killed himself—but how? [...] So she saw it. But why had he done it? [...] She had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine, never anything more. But he had flung it away. [...] But this young man who had killed himself—had he plunged holding his treasure? [...] She had escaped. But that young man had killed himself. (202-3)

One could read these comparisons as admission of a kind of scapegoating or causality that Septimus provides Clarissa and the novel itself—that is, as indication of the various ways in which Mrs. Dalloway’s bourgeois existence is buoyed by the sacrifices of young men like him. Certainly the lines that follow the quote above seem at first glance to confirm that sentiment:

Somehow it was her disaster—her disgrace. It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress. She had schemed; she had pilfered. She was never wholly admirable. She had wanted success, Lady Bexborough and the rest of it. And once she had walked on the terrace at Bourton. (203)

But Clarissa’s punishment of seeing others “sink and disappear” while ostensibly seeing herself reflected both “in her evening dress” and in all her vanity, wanting to be seen and admired also

recalls, of course, her earlier reckoning on Bond Street—a shifted trajectory the otherwise somewhat out-of-place sentence, “And once she had walked on the terrace at Bourton” confirms.

To take this a step further, Clarissa’s contemplation of Septimus’s suicide stages this tension explicitly at a window once more. Just as she leaves her house in the morning convinced that no one saw or recognized her, Clarissa had imagined that her peering into the life of the old lady opposite through their windows was likewise seamless, unidirectional, unremarked. But the abrupt realization that the old lady may have seen her all along, punctuated by two exclamations (“Oh but how surprising! in the room opposite the old lady stared straight at her!”) emerges alongside another doubled exclamation about the light across the way, behind drawn blinds, shining and then going out (“There! The old lady had put out her light!”) (181). In between these two revelations, Clarissa hears the clock strike the hour and thinks of how “the young man had killed himself.” The violent extinguishing of Septimus’ life, quietly echoed in the old lady’s light going out—or, seeing “sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness”—“made [Clarissa] feel the beauty; made her feel the fun” of her life in its very juxtaposition to such precarity; it also, however, comes with the imperatives that “she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter” (182). As Clarissa finally glimpses both the possibilities and limitations of her window-watching, of her ability to imagine a soldier’s life and death, we encounter one last narrative transition to the outside: the remaining seven pages of the novel occur almost entirely in her absence, offering the fullest and most continuous account her past through Sally and Peter’s shared memories from the other side of the house.

In the literal aftermath of Septimus’s death, Peter similarly warns himself against “a sort of lust over the visual impression...fatal to art, fatal to friendship” and remembers how Clarissa “felt herself everywhere... since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spread wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered, somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death... perhaps—perhaps” (*MD* 148-9). We might locate the work of glass in this novel in that dash, the slender line coordinating two sides, the seen and unseen, this person from that, the present and the past—the difference wrought by repetition. Through Woolf’s play on and through the ubiquitous glass surfaces of interwar London, we encounter the innovative possibilities of accounting for the past through the interplay of multiple persons and their shared perceptions; we also confront the very real boundaries that limit and obscure these same visions. These boundaries, figured both materially and metaphorically through glass, demonstrate not only the necessary separation of moments in time, past from present, and of individual lives (Clarissa, Peter, Septimus), but also the beauty and terror that can attend the momentary, illusory perceptions of interconnectedness and continuity they simultaneously afford.

From the uninterrupted cycle between “gazer, then the glass, then the space and the objects behind it” that allows us “a vantage point from which to recognize...the loop of idealization and desire” in her earlier wartime writing, to the various confrontations of thwarted, if tantalizing, access to the one’s own past or another’s that we see through that same glass several years later in *Mrs. Dalloway* and “A Sketch of the Past,” we see the evolution of Woolf’s constant interrogation of what it looks like to remember in a newly “transparent”—and newly violent—modern world.¹²¹ In these interwar texts, however, the brokenness and fragmentation of such attempts usually stop with that of a person’s perception. The glass may be covered by blinds, overrun with reflections, ground into opaque skylights, or moved aside for suicides, it is,

¹²¹ Outka, *Consuming Tradition*, 137.

nonetheless, always *intact*. While plate glass's synthetic sister cellophane could boast of durability in addition to its "pure transparency," I'd argue that the anxiety, fragmentation, and danger—not to mention the nature of its own architectural ubiquity—that attend glass in particular anticipate Woolf's sense of the conflict to come.

In other words, I agree with David Trotter that Woolf, like other modernist writers, perhaps "found in the brittleness of glass a metaphor more appropriate to their purposes than they did in its transparency," but I depart from his more optimistic reading that this implies a kind of utopian vision through the projection of material resilience.¹²² That is, along with Paul Saint-Amour's reading of Woolf, I read her growing sense of glass's contingency under the alternative anticipatory signs of another World War, not utopia.¹²³ The fractured glass in Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past" might hold together long enough for her to shadow its broken surface, but there's a tenuousness that is markedly absent from earlier invocations of the material. With the onset of the Second World War, it is indeed brokenness—not transparency—that becomes synonymous with glass. Amy Elkins, in her reading of Woolf's 1941 *Between the Acts*, attributes Woolf's growing investment in not only glass's breakability but also its already-realized *brokenness* to the destruction wrought by the Blitz; as survivors would later note, at that time glass simply didn't exist *except* as broken shards.¹²⁴

The scattered "hand glasses, tin cans, scraps of scullery glass, harness room glass, and heavily embossed silver mirrors" that seem to stop the "hands of the clock...at the present moment" in this late, wartime novel—Woolf's last—emerge then as particularly charged fragments.¹²⁵ While Big Ben and St. Margaret's might chime at discordant intervals, the physical time that they each mark as moving forward nonetheless continues in *Mrs. Dalloway's* world. Even Septimus's most terrifying revelations of time's disintegration still coincide with the chiming of the three-quarter hour. But in *Between the Acts*, the moment the audience of Miss La Trobe's play reckons with the fragmented glass around it, capable of seeing no depths but only themselves reflected (like Clarissa, only tinsel, dissociated from others and the past), is the moment that both physical ("the hands of the clock had stopped") and experiential ("It *was* now.") time cease.¹²⁶ In other words, if we consider both the material and metaphorical implications of this scene, we see more than the war's physical ruins or the figurative self-knowledge in this "most vivid illustration of Mrs. Woolf's use of surface or background as a reflector of the self."¹²⁷ Tracing the development of Woolf's use of glass throughout her career, we see how "reflector and reflected merge" in her final novel to momentarily herald the ultimate nightmare vision: no reckoning with the past or future beyond the present;¹²⁸ no other behind the glass; no regaining the "peace" necessary "to feel the present sliding over the depths of the past" or further "writing... to shadow

¹²² Trotter 53, 55-56. Reading the metaphor of shattering glass the narrator of *Jacob's Room* attributes to Jacob and his friends as they assemble and disperse in the wake of an argument, Trotter insists that "to imagine them as breakable is not necessarily to imagine them broken." Through the figure of glass, we might "imagine them as not needing to be unbreakable in order to remain what they are"—even shattered and dispersed, the possibility of individual identification remains (58). Though he concedes that "there is little utopia in that expectation—soon to be eclipsed by Jacob's death in the war," he finds further possibilities emerging in the material changes glass manufacturing would begin to bring about in the mid-1920's, making glass more flexible than previously imaginable.

¹²³ See Paul Saint-Amour, *Tense Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹²⁴ Amy Elkins, "Fractured Optics: Modernism's Glass Aesthetic," delivered at MSA Conference, August 31, 2013.

¹²⁵ Woolf, *Between the Acts*, 185-6.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 186, emphasis mine.

¹²⁷ Harvena Richter, *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 99.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

the broken surface with the past”: only war (*MB* 98). If the collective visions of Clarissa, Peter, and Septimus are able to coalesce around their respective (in)abilities to navigate the (in)separability of their pasts from the present via glass, these later accounts darkly undermine any resistance to the onslaught of the past as it brings with it the return of world war and the very sacrifices—psychological and physical—that made the June day of *Mrs. Dalloway* possible.

“In probing my childhood (which is the next best to probing one’s eternity) I see...” A few pages into his 1966 memoir *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, Vladimir Nabokov “plunge[s]” himself—and us, his readers—into the “awakening of consciousness” with his earliest memory. A reversal of the dream optics of the *unconscious* we encounter in Freud and Benjamin, here the possibility of memory emerges with laboriously wrought vision: “I see... a series of spaced flashes, with the intervals between them gradually diminishing until bright blocks of perception are formed, affording memory a slippery hold.” One flash after another, the lights coalesce into blocks of vivid perception, his memory gropes, fastens onto the image that subsequently develops: “strong sunlight... lobed sun flecks through overlapping patterns of greenery... my mother’s birthday.”¹²⁹ The strikingly visual and willful quality of this early act of remembrance sets the parameters, much as Proust’s madeleine famously does in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, for Nabokov’s subsequent method throughout *Speak, Memory*.

As many critics have noted, Nabokov’s “art of memory” was in fact significantly influenced by the time he spent studying Proust with his wife Véra between 1935 and 1936.¹³⁰ The autobiographical sketch that most clearly demonstrates Nabokov’s indebtedness to Proust is also fittingly the only one he wrote in French, “Mademoiselle O,” published in *Mesures* that year. “Mademoiselle O,” later Chapter 5 of his memoir, was the “essay that initiated the series” of attempts to recollect his own past (*SM* 9). But in many ways these two founding moments could not be more different. One scene privileges sight and, as this chapter will demonstrate, the externalizing, intersubjective optics of photography; the other foregrounds taste and the literally internalizing, solitary experience of ingestion. Nabokov’s memory concretizes, takes hold—however slippery—by the continued, concentrated effort of construction; Marcel realizes that each bite of his cookie, every conscious attempt to strain for the past, takes him further away from his memory—and leads him to his theory of the *mémoire involontaire*, arguably modernism’s most famous and seemingly intractable contribution to twentieth-century narratives of memory.

This chapter focuses on how Nabokov develops what I call his “stereoscopic method” through the matrix of “Mademoiselle O”’s influences and revisions. The narrative strategies that emerge over the course of Nabokov’s thirty-year experiment in memoir, I argue, reflect his engagement with—and departure from—not only dominant accounts of modernist memory via

¹²⁹ And indeed Nabokov introduces this first sight on the heels of his complete rejection of “the vulgar, shabby, fundamentally medieval world of Freud.” Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 21. All subsequent in-text references will appear parenthetically as *SM* (not to be confused with the 1951 British edition).

¹³⁰ See Yvette Louriá’s “Nabokov and Proust: The Challenge of Time” (*Books Abroad* 48.3 (1978): 469-476); Michael Wood’s *Magician’s Doubts* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994); and John Burt Foster, Jr.’s *Nabokov’s Art of Memory and European Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). Louriá and Foster have carefully highlighted the myriad ways in which “Mademoiselle O” echoes—though, of course, with telling differences—Proust’s *Recherche*: significant linguistic allusions both in its original French and subsequent English translations, prominently recreated scenes of maternal figures reading aloud, extended accounts of childhood insomnia and fascination with the play of light in the dark—not to mention, of course, a pervasive obsession with the past and its accessibility in the present. Foster offers a particularly rich account of the development of Nabokov’s strategies regarding memory over the course of his entire career, not just the latter decades of his autobiographical turn.

Proust, but also the misadventures of contemporary Soviet historiography. Forced by the Bolshevik Revolution to spend his entire adult life in permanent exile, Nabokov passionately insists that volition is central to reclaiming the past. As Michael Wood notes, Nabokov's memory "is an act of will, and of the will at its most determined and lucid and courageous... the very reality of these persons in the memory depends on the will's image of them." It follows, then, that "Nabokov will have no truck with involuntary memory, or indeed with anything involuntary."¹³¹

John Burt Foster, Jr., however, provocatively draws our attention to a more nuanced and conciliatory engagement with Proust through his strategy of what Foster calls "noninvoluntary" memory. A close reading of "Mademoiselle O" demonstrates that Nabokov in fact "align[s] his verbal echo with a mode of memory that is noninvoluntary yet still concrete." Neither voluntary nor involuntary, such memories emerge spontaneously, like Proust's Combray, but rather than slip away with every sip of tea, they linger as clear and present images. Foster argues that Nabokov's own search for lost time thus carefully pays homage to the local "*pans*" ("patches") of memory that erupt in Proust as the key images of the kiss and the magic lantern—points of contrast to the buried and ever elusive images of involuntary memory—while also emphasizing the fact that "Mademoiselle O" offers only "some image" rather than the panoramic view of voluntary memory's mining of "*grands pans de mon passé*" ("large patches of my past").¹³²

Clearly, Proust and Nabokov's modes of memory differ not only on the point of volition, but also on that of *vision*. In other words, if Nabokov's central contribution to modernist memory is to champion the conscious will of remembrance, what does it mean that he does so primarily by giving precedence to "some image," to "the will's image," to the way the systematic play of light writes vivid, visual blocks of perception—and thereby memory—into being? To what extent are visuality and consciousness in memory related? In this chapter, I trace the inextricability of memory from its optics in Nabokov's writing, especially as it develops with respect to his final version of *Speak, Memory*. If his memoir emerges as the site of interplay between fact and fiction, memory and history, it is also emphatically that of image and text. Drawing from his own account of memory as a "stereoscopic dreamland," I will explore his engagement with both the *photo-* and *stereo-* graphic in his autobiographical writing.

This chapter is not the first to explore the rich possibilities of stereoscopic vision in accounts of modernist memory, but it is perhaps the first to do so while foregrounding its relation to externalized, technological mediation rather than primary, present perception.¹³³ The conversation with Proust continues in unexpected ways. Around the same time that Nabokov worked on revising *Speak, Memory*, critic Roger Shattuck attempted to reorient readings of Proustian memory away from that of the beleaguered madeleine. He does so by similarly turning to the willed experience of visual perception. Eschewing the "attitude of passivity" and the "tendency...to encourage the substitution of pleasure for effort" that such moments seem to emphasize, Shattuck claims that these moments of seeming mnemonic apotheosis are means and

¹³¹ Wood, *Magician's Doubts*, 86-87.

¹³² John Burt Foster, Jr. *Nabokov's Art of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994), 119-120.

¹³³ Roger Shattuck's 1963 treatment of Proust in fact likewise emphasizes the process of visualization, bringing to light the stereoscopic effects Proust develops and Marcel experiences in the course of his *Recherche*. To do so, Shattuck necessarily dispenses with the prevailing critical emphasis on involuntary memory as articulated by experiences like the madeleine, just as Nabokov does in advocating pursuit of "the will's image." *Proust's Binoculars: A Study of Memory, Time, and Recognition in A la recherche du temps perdu* (New York: Random House, 1963).

not ends in the search for lost time.¹³⁴ Human vision naturally occurs according to a stereoscopic principle in which “two slightly different versions of the same ‘object’ from our two eyes are combined subjectively with the effect of relief,” of dimension. While we tend to think of this effect as limited to spatial depth-perception, Proust, in a manner not unlike Woolf and the modernist architects of Chapter 1, retools stereoscopic vision as a model for conscientiously “remov[ing] our depth perception from space and re-erect[ing] it in time.”¹³⁵ In this way, Proustian memory “designates a stereoscopic or ‘stereologic’ consciousness which sees the world simultaneously (and thus out of time) in relief. Merely to remember something is meaningless unless the remembered image is combined with a moment in the present affording a view of the same object or objects. Like our eyes, our memories must see double; those two images then converge in our minds into a single heightened reality.”¹³⁶

The richness of this reading and its affinity with Nabokov’s development of his own ideas regarding memory becomes even clearer when we turn to his first stereoscopic dreamland in “Mademoiselle O.” But there are two problems that Proust’s model (via Shattuck) raises that I believe Nabokov’s work addresses, if not resolves. One is the problem of where the purely *metaphorical* relation to stereoscopic vision ceases. The scare quotes Shattuck tucks around key terms like ‘object,’ ‘optical view,’ ‘flat,’ and ‘stereologic’ raise the question of the extent to which Marcel’s memory is indeed *stereoscopic* or rather simply follows the *logic* of the stereoscopic principle.¹³⁷ The definition he provides above wherein Marcel’s consciousness “sees the world simultaneously (and thus out of time) in relief” and yet emphatically depends on “a moment in the present affording a view of the same object or objects” exposes the basic underlying tension around how one can experience memory’s image as outside time when it is necessarily tied to the material world of present visual perception.

The second, related concern is the extent to which remembrance as such is indeed a purely subjective and solitary experience. Despite Shattuck’s key departure from the discourse privileging involuntary memory and his emphasis instead on consciousness and voluntary memory, his account of stereoscopic memory still revolves around the fact of its discovery and implementation being entirely Marcel’s “subjectively combined” own. The fact that Shattuck foregrounds the stereoscopic principle behind natural visual perception rather than the reduplicated procedure of stereographic representation is telling. The stereoscope, invented in the 1840’s, constructs and externalizes the imaging principle described above. Etymologically, “stereoscope” breaks down into a kind of *solid seeing*, and it refers to an instrument that derives “from two pictures (usually photographs) of an object, taken from slightly different points of view (corresponding to the positions of the two eyes), a single image giving the impression of solidity or relief, as in ordinary vision of the object itself.”¹³⁸ It democratizes vision insofar as the reconstructed image is essentially the same for all viewers at all times because it relies on the same photographic referents and viewing apparatus; it also admittedly does so through artificial construction and the *simulation* of primary experience. Shattuck’s stereoscopic analogy necessarily

¹³⁴ Ibid 36-37. Marcel’s “salvation” thus emerges in the form not of the passive experience of involuntary memory but in the “active participation of the mind” which leads to “conscious recognition” of the self in time (38, 40).

¹³⁵ The example of stereoscopic imaging allows Marcel to learn how to accumulate images separated chronologically in time and strain until he “sees in them not change... but revelation of true identity, the ‘optical view.’” Ibid., 42.

¹³⁶ Ibid 46-47.

¹³⁷ Shattuck makes explicit reference to “the metaphor of the stereoscope” and the “increasingly...optical terms [through which] Proust gave figurative expression to his sense of art and reality” (Ibid., 41).

¹³⁸ “Stereoscope” (OED).

foregrounds primary, present perception rather than the instrument's externalized reconstruction of a thing already seen; anyone may observe Marcel's struggle in this process, but no one can join (or challenge) him in the actual experience of its suspense, strain, or revelation of a "single heightened reality."¹³⁹

Nabokov's imagistic, noninvoluntary memory sits somewhere between the chance, subjective experience of the involuntary and the highly constructed (still subjective) voluntary modes advocated by either side of Proustian memory. In doing so, it calls upon the externalized, mediated vision of stereoscopic photography. The "patches" of memory (like the "bright blocks of perception" we began with) that concern Nabokov are, I argue, snapshot images: crystallized scenes, highly evocative visual encounters that involve less rooting around in wide swaths of a buried past and more bringing into focus or developing out of negatives images that are essentially, like the sunlight and greenery of his mother's birthday, *already there*—in Foster's words, "still concrete." As Nabokov recounts in *Speak, Memory's* foreword: he "discovered that sometimes, by means of intense concentration, the neutral smudge might be forced to come into beautiful focus so that the sudden view could be identified, and the anonymous servant named" (12). There is both an element of labor—an "intense concentration" to its construction—and a certain *givenness* (a view once seen, a servant once known) that is tied to its visual quality. The implication then is that through his memories Nabokov is able to make visible things and people and places *as they once were*, a reverse-engineering of Barthes' photographic *ça a été*: stereoscopic vision in the technological sense.

If his memory relies on the concrete nature of the already-seen, it is definitively not subjective in the way that Proust's stereoscopic method is. But as such, the *stuff* of his memories, if not his various experiences of it, is also subject to corroboration, refutation, manipulation by others—or utter loss through forgetting by all. Nabokov's task is to negotiate a balance between imagination and recollection that somehow curtails any understanding of memory as purely internal and solitary or fully reliant on temporally-bound material traces, and, furthermore as a writer, to somehow communicate this to his readers. As Martin Hägglund puts it, Nabokov's response is thus to "[ascribe] a tremendous power to his proper consciousness, emphasizing in particular his ability to recreate the past in a clear and distinct fashion [as he] mobilizes as his power against the threat of forgetting."¹⁴⁰ But if the "very reality" of his memories depends solely on the exceptional strength and skill behind his "will to image" and make the past imaginatively present, can he still claim—as his revisions, research, and own foreword suggest he wants to—the factual basis of things apart from his own conjuring? Instead, one might see in this bravura, as Hägglund does, Nabokov's admission of "the precariousness of any affirmation of one's life, however self-assured." He must eventually acknowledge that "everything he wants to remember was transient from the beginning."¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Except insofar as the author Proust might be said to identify with the narrator and writer-to-be Marcel as iterations of himself. In this way, his very writing might be said to externalize, construct, and render solid "the single heightened reality"—still, only for himself—his voluntary, painstaking version of stereoscopic memory.

¹⁴⁰ See also Foster's *Nabokov's Art of Memory*, Hana Pichova's *The Art of Memory in Exile* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2002), and Elizabeth W. Bruss's *Autobiographical Acts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978). That Foster is quick to distinguish his usage of the term from Frances Yates' groundbreaking *Art of Memory* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1966), a study of memory practices since antiquity that require explicit spatialization and mapping, is particularly interesting given our present concern with the place of the material and spatial in Nabokov's own practice.

¹⁴¹ Hägglund, *Dying for Time*, 81.

Transience, of course, haunted every aspect of Nabokov's life, whose geographical trajectory was repeatedly dictated by historical conflict. The Cold War was at its height in the years (1951-1966) between his first full-length memoir and last revision of it. During this time, Stalin died, the Cuban Missile Crisis narrowly concluded, and Nabokov left the United States for Europe. There he was reunited with friends and family who refuted and corrected much of his previously unassailable testimony; his sisters gave him a photo album stuffed with images of their past life in Russia; publishers asked him how to approach Soviet historiography from *this side* of the Iron Curtain. Nabokov's constant revision and translation of his past in this time reveals his shifting understanding of not only the relation between imagination and recollection, but also between the assurance of his idiosyncratic experience and the tidal pull of belonging.¹⁴²

To discuss *Speak, Memory* in terms of communal experience seems to fly in the face of Nabokov's staunch insistence upon his radical individuality and distaste for explicit social or political commentary. As he remarks in a 1962 interview,

I pride myself on being a person with no public appeal. I have never been drunk in my life. I never use schoolboy words of four letters. I have never worked in an office or in a coal mine. I have never belonged to any club or group. No creed or school has had any influence on me whatsoever. Nothing bores me more than political novels and the literature of social intent.¹⁴³

Indeed, Nabokov never worked in a mine or office: rather, he grew up the son of a prominent liberal politician and aristocrat in the uncertain early decades of democratic reform in Tsarist Russia, fled the country in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution and civil war, later lost his father in a botched assassination attempt by radical right-wing monarchists, lived in Berlin with his Jewish wife and son as Hitler came to power, and left Paris for the U.S. just weeks before the Nazi occupation—unable to say goodbye to his brother who would perish in Neuengamme, narrowly missing liberation by a few months himself. And not once along this trajectory, so markedly determined by some of the greatest political upheavals in the last century, did he subscribe to any particular party, club, or creed. He never voted in a single election. He never made a public endorsement for any group—even those championing causes he believed in; and he would furthermore decry as pedantic hacks writers who would use explicitly use their work to do so.¹⁴⁴ Friends and critics alike have raised concerns about his work being that of an extremely gifted aesthete, heartlessly inconsiderate of the serious ills of the world—or have alternately insisted on his inability to address such social issues because of the fact that he was "totally uninterested in these matters and [had] never taken the trouble to understand them"—but a

¹⁴² Foster helpfully tracks Nabokov's shifting language on this issue over the course of various interviews and delineates out how each revision of the "Mademoiselle O" also accomplishes this.

¹⁴³ Vladimir Nabokov, in interview, June 5, 1962. *Strong Opinions* (New York: Viking, 1973).

¹⁴⁴ While avowedly anti-capital punishment, he refused the California Committee Against Capital Punishment's request to make a public statement on their behalf, replying that he had already written a whole novel on the subject (*Invitation to a Beheading*); he would not add his name to a group letter demanding the release of dissident writer Vladimir Maramzin (he sent a separate telegram to that effect instead). In a 1974 letter to recent fellow exile Alexander Solzhenitsyn warmly inviting him to Switzerland, Nabokov makes his stance explicit: "I never make official 'political' statements. Privately, though, I could not refrain from welcoming you." See *Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters 1940-1977*, eds. Dmitri Nabokov & Matthew Bruccoli (New York: Harvest, 1989).

spate of recent scholarship has gone far in debunking such claims.¹⁴⁵ Highlighting how even the most seemingly apolitical of his works in fact index his sensitivity to the political context of Cold War America (spies, uranium, the DEW Line, CCF, and all), this work draws our attention to a figure simultaneously steeped in fervent anti-Communism *and* deep suspicion of simplified politics, one whose idiosyncratic stance and aesthetic practices reflect both the tragedies of his personal history and an intense investment in tracking the ways in which contemporary politics infiltrated the world he lived in and his understanding of it. Reading his long-term memory project in light of this, I'd like to offer the possibility of reading Nabokov's stereoscopic method as not only the product of three decades' aesthetic experimentation but also a timely sensitivity to the problem—*and necessity*—of accurate historiography.

While Foster carefully explores Nabokov's pervasive interest in crafting the "mnemonic images" of noninvoluntary memory, verbal constructions that function as both visual—and in this sense more or less concretely referential—and tropological evocations of the past throughout *Speak, Memory*, he ultimately dismisses the final edition's inclusion of nearly two dozen physical images (mostly family photographs, as well as a few drawings) "as simply a more literal variant of the text's repeated attempts to visualize the past."¹⁴⁶ But it is Nabokov's late interaction with *these* externalized and differently "concrete" images of his past, coupled with the long-term development of his stereoscopic optics of memory and wariness of collective narratives, that significantly complicates any account of his approach to memory as one of seamless, irreproachable construction—or, more simply put, of his unquestionable "mastery of the past."¹⁴⁷ For all of his passion and precision and sheer virtuosity, photographs and stereoscopic technology reveal the necessarily fraught nature of his—and our—attempts to capture the fixity and flux of memory and history, to become fully, in the words of *Ada's* Van Veen, "a hater of Space, and a lover of Time."¹⁴⁸

An exploration of Nabokov's narrative strategies in this light will eventually bring us back to the issue of the *will* to remember on both the individual and communal levels.¹⁴⁹ While illuminating the complexities of individual, personal memory, they also offer new insight into his critical ambivalence as an exiled man and writer about the social, material, and aesthetic consequences of vision and technology on the experience of memory in the twentieth century. As a newfound exile and college student in England after the Bolshevik Revolution or a multiply displaced college professor and writer, Nabokov invites the question of *what* he uses to compose and construct his memories as much as *how* he does it. What materials—imaginary, recollected, visual, verbal, English, Russian, fictitious, documentary—are necessary to build his self-proclaimed "artificial but beautifully exact" models of the past, his vision of a country he would never revisit except perhaps through his writing?

¹⁴⁵ Both critiques are, for example, well-known examples from his long-time friend (and later 'frenemy') Edmund Wilson. See *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971*, ed. Simon Karlinsky (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 20, 210. For examples of recent scholarship offering new perspectives on the integration of political history into his work, see: Andrea Pitzer's *The Secret History of Vladimir Nabokov* (2013); Dana Dragonoiu's *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism* (2011); Adam Piette's *The Literary Cold War* (2009); Steven Belletto's "The Zemblan who Came in from the Cold" (2006).

¹⁴⁶ Foster, *Nabokov's Art*, 182. These family photographs can also be found in the New York Public Library's Berg Collection.

¹⁴⁷ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), 154.

¹⁴⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

¹⁴⁹ For more on Nabokov's gradual shift from the idiosyncratic 'I' to an acknowledgement of belonging to a 'we,' see Alex Zwerdling's *Rise of the Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

In short, if, for Nabokov, the question is a matter of what it looks like to remember, one might think of him asking it along two contrapuntally accented lines:

What does it look like *to remember*?
What does it *look like* to remember?

To ask one in light of *Speak, Memory* is, in effect, to ask the other.

A Diabolical Task

Nabokov's childhood in Russia was steeped in both English and Russian; he spent his entire adult life as first a Russian- then an English-language novelist in Europe and the United States. The particular difficulties of his speaking, thinking, and writing in the two languages are among Nabokov's most constant and overt preoccupations throughout his work, not least of which because of their respective temporal associations. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov first equates the story of his English university education to "the story of [his] trying to become a Russian writer," wherein "Cambridge and all its famed features—venerable elms, blazoned windows, loquacious tower clocks—were of no consequence in themselves but existed merely to frame and support [his] rich nostalgia," a nostalgia shaped by his "fear of losing or corrupting, through alien influence, the only thing [he] had salvaged from Russia—her language" (*SM* 261, 265). Believing himself initially successful in sifting out the Russian language of his past from the English language and surroundings of his present, Nabokov eventually realizes that though he had been "quite sure that Cambridge was in no way affecting [his] soul, ... actually it was Cambridge that supplied not only the casual frame, but also the very colors and inner rhythms for [his] very special Russian thoughts" (269).

This admission leads him to venture an explanation through a peculiar ecology of memory, one in which the past and present come to construct one another by turns:

Environment, I suppose, does act upon a creature if there is, in that creature, already a certain responsive particle or strain (the English I had imbibed in my childhood). Of this I had my first inkling just before leaving Cambridge, during my last and saddest spring there, when I suddenly felt that something in me was as naturally in contact with my immediate surroundings as it was with my Russian past, and that this state of harmony had been reached at the very moment that the careful reconstruction of my artificial but beautifully exact Russian world had been at last completed. (269-270)

This passage highlights at least two helpful insights into the nature of memory for Nabokov. The first, the manner in which we experience and appreciate the present is contingent on the conditioning of the past. The Englishness of Cambridge that comes to unwittingly "suppl[y] not only the casual frame, but also the very colors and inner rhythms for [his] very special Russian thoughts" can only do so because in some ways it already has through his English education as a child in Russia. Conversely, this experience also calls attention to the ways in which Nabokov's account of his memories of his Russian past are necessarily shaped by the subjective conditions of his present moment as a student in England—and again, one might add, by his 'actual' present at

the moment(s) of (re)writing.¹⁵⁰ It is in this “state of harmony” where one experiences the past and present as mutually constituting one another that he is able to fully resurrect the consciously “artificial” (because constructed) *and* “beautifully exact” (because faithful to his experience both past and present) image of his Russian world in both his memoir and his mind as a student at Cambridge.¹⁵¹

Significantly, it’s not just the English language that bleeds into his Russian as he learns to become a writer at Cambridge. He is emphatic about how the English scenery, the images and “famed features” of Cambridge likewise coming to frame, color, and pace his “special Russian thoughts”—thoughts inextricable, through the salvaged language of his past, from his memories of his home country (*SM* 266). Nabokov draws attention more explicitly to the inextricability of the visual and the verbal in the lines preceding his meditation on memory’s environment. Describing Cambridge, Nabokov notes how “nothing one *looked at* was shut off in terms of time, everything was a natural opening into it” (269, emphasis mine). He continues, while “in terms of space, the narrow lane, the cloistered lawn, the dark archway hampered one physically, that yielding diaphanous texture of time was, by contrast, especially welcome to the mind, just as a sea view from a window exhilarates one hugely, even though one does not care for sailing.” Even in describing the oppressive quality of space, Nabokov can’t help but translate that “yielding diaphanous texture of time” into another spatial—and explicitly visual—image of a view through a window. This “constant awareness one had of an untrammelled extension of time” both *in spite of* and *in response to* one’s visual engagement with the space of Cambridge has, for Nabokov, everything to do with thoughts not just of language, but moreover, of a shared literary tradition, “of Milton, and Marvell, and Marlowe.” While setting the groundwork for a kind of stereological understanding of memory and its representation, Nabokov explicitly foregrounds the issues of present visual perception we saw in Shattuck’s model. His meditation on a kind of bilingual temporal consciousness thus also raises important questions regarding memory’s mediums. How are the visual and the verbal mutually dependent in our practice of memory? How can one represent memory as such in turn?

For all of Nabokov’s vehement resistance to Freudian psychoanalysis, there is a striking formal resemblance between Nabokov’s verbal-visual ecology of memory to Freud’s analysis of dreams as images with the structure of language. Freud’s depiction of the verbal and the visual languages of dreams as simultaneously *juxtaposed* (“presented to us like two versions of the same subject-matter”), *inhering* in one another (“a transcript...into another mode of expression,” “the translation”), and *layered* (“the characters... have to be transposed individually into the language of dream-thought”), resonates with the phases of stereoscopic rendering and the necessary interrelation of the verbal and the visual in Nabokov’s narrative strategies.¹⁵² As ever in his lifelong grievance with Freud, however, the two significantly part ways on the issue of

¹⁵⁰ Decades later, both of these claims would be corroborated by scientific research into the nature of memory conditioning (the ways in which our past training and experiences shape how we engage with and retain our present experiences) and the subjectivity of memory retrieval (the manner in which the subjectivity of our present experience informs the manner and content of our remembrance of things past). See Daniel L. Schacter’s 1994 *Searching for Memory* and *Memory, Brain, Belief*, eds. Daniel Schacter and Elaine Scarry (2000).

¹⁵¹ Nabokov’s use of the word *reconstruction* rather than *construction* at a moment when he describes *at last completing* his “artificial and beautifully exact Russian world” perhaps gestures, much like Ada and Van’s layered marginalia in *Ada*, to the furrowed present of his writing rather than the remembered present in which he experiences the completion of this artificial Russian world for the first time.

¹⁵² Sigmund Freud, *On the Interpretation of Dreams*, in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* eds. Vincent B. Leitch, et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), 311-312.

interpretation. Nabokov would vehemently deny there being anything “nonsensical and worthless” about the “pictorial composition” of this complex “picture-puzzle.” The complex visual images do not stand in for a deeper reality; they *are* the reality.

Nabokov, for example, begins the chapter describing his adolescent transformation into a writer with the declaration, “In order to reconstruct the summer of 1914, when the numb fury of verse-making first came over me, all I really need is to visualize a certain pavilion” (*SM* 215). The Nabokovs’ Vyra pavilion surfaces noninvoluntarily “at least twice a year... appear[ing] in [his] dreams quite independently of their subject matter... clinging to a corner of the dream canvas or cunningly worked into some ornamental part of the picture.” The image recalls to itself both the “perhaps a little more perfect” pavilion of his dreams and his memory of the strikingly similar “real thing,” complete with missing glass and crumpled leaves. From this stereoscopic overlay of dream pavilion image and waking memory, he derives both a clearer vision of the pavilion from his past and the detailed narrative reconstruction of a particular stormy summer afternoon spent inside it half a century before. Contra Freud, the potential payoff in juxtaposing, layering, and unifying two languages (English/Russian, verbal/visual) is the return of the past, both perceptually and metonymically, by way of the vibrant, present vision such constructed images (artificial and beautifully exact, one might say) afford—not buried insight into one’s subconscious for which they are only symbolic ciphers. The vibrancy of this doubled image significantly emerges on the order of both Nabokov’s encounter with it *and* his rendering of it for us as readers. His insistence on the clarity of the pavilion image returning to him regularly “just as it was, or perhaps a little more perfect” facilitates his “exact” rendering of both images and their construction. Nabokov’s method highlights the possibilities and pitfalls of explicitly artificial construction and its relation to present sensory perception through a narrative enactment of stereoscopic perception in real (readerly) time.

But Nabokov still insists that he “[does] not believe in time.” Likening his narrative to “fold[ing his] magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another,” he aims to craft an ecstatic timelessness for both himself and whatever “visitors... [who may] trip” on his artful layerings and juxtapositions (*SM* 139).¹⁵³ Such “state[s] of harmony” as he experienced at Cambridge thus occur as a multiply present ecstasy, “a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that [he] love[s]... A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern—to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal” (139). As Boyd points out, he had used similar language in his own 1959 English translation of *Invitation to a Beheading*.¹⁵⁴ But where the earlier novel speaks solely to Cincinnatus C’s imagined encounter with time, here Nabokov opens up the experience as one shared (however dismissively) with the reader. The manipulable magic carpet of memory merges with that of narrative; Nabokov’s narrative strategies call upon the reader’s faculties in ways that are analogous to his own search for memory. This formulation privileges non-linearity and timelessness; however, the

¹⁵³ Nabokov here confesses, in fact, that he “do[es] not believe in time,” on the heels of a chapter in which he takes the reader on a seamless butterfly chase into a Russian bog during his childhood and out the other end at a Colorado marsh decades later with admitted virtuosity. He is likely distinguishing the linear, measurable “time” from the “Time” as such.

¹⁵⁴ In it, the protagonist describes a “*there*” where “time takes shape according to one’s own pleasure, like a figured rug where folds can be gathered in such a way that two designs will meet—and the rug is once again smoothed out, and you live on, or else superimpose the next image on the last, endlessly, endlessly.” *Invitation to a Beheading* (1959, English Translation) quoted in Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), 156-157.

potential to *trip* on such convolutions quietly implies an outside—a temporally-bound material reality that contains him, his readers, and his magic carpet narrative, and the possibility of stereoscopic memory. In it too, remembrance—or the harmony of completed reconstruction—is not a matter of his active backwards reach from present to past; instead, the beloved people and places and things of once-future fates and already-lived pasts invade the present, are somehow *all there*, like his pavilion, like the images he describes in his Foreword, if only momentarily.¹⁵⁵ Is it necessary or even possible for Nabokov to trade his absolute imaginative control for an intermediate mode, where figures of the past assert their own authority, their own existence, to “humor... a lucky mortal” such as he? And if so, how?

Stereoscopic Dreamlands—I

Written and published in French first in 1936 and translated into English for the January 1943 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, “Mademoiselle O,” inaugurates what I have been calling Nabokov’s stereoscopic method, a practice he continued to develop as he revisited the various prose pieces that culminate in his autobiography. The 1966 version of *Speak, Memory* suggests a more palpable shift in his understanding of the potential uses of photography, but Nabokov’s interest in photographic technology is longstanding. The successive versions of “Mademoiselle O” reflect the sharpening of Nabokov’s historical specificity and nostalgia for his estranged homeland, which I will return to shortly. But in all of its iterations, the story begins with Nabokov’s playful attempt to salvage the memory of his governess from his fictionalized accounts of her in his novels by offering an overtly mythical account of her first arrival.

The first section culminates with her arrival at the local train station, “visualize[d...] by proxy.” Flagging an affinity with optical technology rather than primary perception, Nabokov immediately admits to this first memory of Mademoiselle as an imagined reconstruction; he “was not there to greet her; but [he does] so now as [he tries] to imagine what she saw and felt” (*SM* 98). This visualization by proxy begins with his “ghostly envoy offer[ing] her an arm that she cannot see.” Only after Mademoiselle and his ghostly aid traverse the parenthetical sentence, “(‘There I was, abandoned by all, *comme la Comtesse Karenin*,’ she later complained, eloquently, if not quite correctly.)” in which Mademoiselle likens herself to a character of fiction (and falsely at that), does the scene begin to materialize.¹⁵⁶

A door opens with a “shuddering whine,” and “hot air rushes out.” The coachman Zahar, “a burly man in sheepskin with the leather outside, his huge gloves protruding from his scarlet sash into which he has stuffed them... snow crunching under his felt boots,” then “takes

¹⁵⁵ In this way, Nabokov adds his own twist to the longstanding conflict between classical conceptions of memory as either the domain of the virtual (and therefore unreliable) or of that which concretely *has been* (a debate we saw also saw at the heart of our discussion of Proust’s stereoscopic method above). The Platonic understanding of memory emphasizes its occurrence as a present image of that which is by definition *absent*; memory is thus contained within the virtual sphere of the imagination. The Aristotelian defense of memory foregrounds its temporal condition and the fact that the stuff of memory is past by virtue of its *having existed*. See Paul Ricoeur’s *Memory, History, and Forgetting* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005) for a fuller account of this conversation.

¹⁵⁶ The dangers of smudging the already fraught boundaries between fact and fiction are also, of course, very present to Nabokov. The chapter and essay also famously begin with Nabokov’s meditation on how “after [he] had bestowed on the characters of [his] novels some treasured item of [his] past, it would pine away in the artificial world where [he] had so abruptly placed it,” and subsequently he finds himself in a position where “the man in [him] revolts against the fictionist,” offering the following chapter as his “desperate attempt to save what is left of poor Mademoiselle” (94).

over” in all his remarkably tactile vividness. The “dexterous tweak-and-shake of finger and thumb” with which he finally “eases” his nose is nearly as palpable as our own digits turning the page. Mademoiselle, likewise, climbs into his sleigh until all the fullness and fleshiness of her “vast form is securely encased,” causing the horses to “strain their quarters, shift hooves, strain again” under her tangible weight in the process. But the “heavy sleigh” suddenly undergoes yet another translation, “wrenched out of its world of steel, fur, flesh, to enter a frictionless medium where it skims along a spectral road that it seems barely to touch” (*SM* 99). What happened?

Nabokov goes on to reveal the sleight of hand as the result of “one moment, thanks to the sudden radiance of a lone lamp where the station square ends,” in which “a grossly exaggerated shadow, also holding a muff, races beside the sleigh, climbs a billow of snow, and is gone, leaving Mademoiselle to be swallowed up by what she will later allude to, with awe and gusto, as ‘*le steppe*’” (*SM* 99). The flash of light that reveals the square edges of the scene and the flickering shadow-double Mademoiselle also illuminates her acute awareness of being looked at. She transmogrifies village lights into “the yellow eyes of wolves.” Nor, again, is she alone in being doubled—“a second sleigh, bearing her trunk and hatbox, is following, always at the same distance, like those companionable phantoms of ships in polar waters which explorers have described.” A lone lamp’s “sudden radiance,” “one moment” doubling Mademoiselle as “a grossly exaggerated shadow, also holding a muff,” leaves her, in all of her former hefty materiality, to “be swallowed up” in the “frictionless medium” of the scene: in short, as a photographic image.¹⁵⁷ But not just any photographic image, the doubled, illusory solidity of the stereoscopic image—a “stereoscopic dreamland,” as Nabokov finally calls it, and to which he artfully adds a moon in keeping with the tradition of one of the most celebrated stereoscopic photographers, Eadward Muybridge.¹⁵⁸

In addition to requiring the doubling and distance of two separate perspectives on the same scene, the stereoscopic image also demands the conscious acquiescence to the illusion of crafted artifice. The stereoscope then manages to render solid, vivid, and *present* (“as in ordinary vision”) the solid, vivid, captured moments of the past in a manner that surpasses the two-dimensional quality of the individual photographs themselves. Unlike Proust’s stereoscopic method, in which the strain and triumph of stereoscopic vision is unequivocal and in a sense only shared with the reader after the fact, Nabokov’s skillfully renders a vivid image of Mademoiselle in her material fullness with and for the reader: his revelation of finding himself in a stereoscopic dreamland comes on the heels of the reader’s attempt to pull the doubled Mademoiselles and carriages together in her construction of the same scene. In this way, as Foster points out, Nabokov might be said to insist on the fact that “imagination... has outdone memory in recovering the literal truth.”¹⁵⁹

Rather than suggest the permanence of this unified vision, however, Nabokov’s early rendering of Mademoiselle emphasizes a constant flicker and flux, its coming into and out of focus with his awareness of the various iterations of separation from the historical solidity of that moment. The first is the flux between the imagined and the actual presence. The faint and ghostly quality of the scene coincides with his avowal of its status as a vision by proxy. It is only when Nabokov and Mademoiselle give in fully to the constructed artifice of the scene, to its status

¹⁵⁷ Mademoiselle is simultaneously swallowed up by the “frictionless medium” of the verbal text.

¹⁵⁸ “And let me not leave out the moon—for surely there must be a moon...” (99). See Rebecca Solnit’s *River of Shadows* on Muybridge’s trademark photo-editing practices (New York: Penguin, 2004), 47.

¹⁵⁹ Foster, *Art of Memory*, 115.

as fiction that she and Zahar are able to materialize and solidify for the reader.¹⁶⁰ On the other hand, the recognition of the scene's distinctly photographic quality, its two-dimensional materiality, jostles Nabokov and us (just as it jolts Mademoiselle in the carriage) back into the recognition of its flatness in a "frictionless medium." This finally compels him to acknowledge the various present moments (first at "forty-five" and then at "sixty years" remove) of his writing—one of very few such admissions in the text—as he confronts the crumbling materiality of the years via a handful of New England (not St. Petersburg) snow:

But what am I doing in this stereoscopic dreamland? How did I get here? Somehow, the two sleighs have slipped away, leaving behind a passportless spy standing on the blue-white road in his New England snowboots and stormcoat... All is still, spellbound, enthralled by the moon, fancy's rear-vision mirror. The snow is real, though, and as I bend to it and scoop up a handful, sixty years crumble to glittering frost-dust between my fingers. (100)

In this manner, the plight of the "passportless spy" trying to regain and render his memories from sixty years' remove begins to merge with that of the young exile who cannot help but recognize the ways in which his English present in some sense constitutes his Russian past—and, as we will see, with the nationless memoirist confronted with the image of a childhood home he presently knows both intimately and not at all. The overlay of textual images constructs a more exact *and* artificial, vivid *and* faulty vision of the past that serves likewise as the underlying principle behind his reconciliation of Cambridge and St. Petersburg, a life in exile and his home country.

And as such, the "stereoscopic dreamland" that results from his layering of both his historical familiarity with the general scene of Mademoiselle's arrival and his fanciful construction of her specific experience (from which he was admittedly absent) re-emerges in the final memoir with some key differences. Counterintuitive to the process of an otherwise unaided, aging memory—but very much in keeping with a researcher with new access to a wealth of historical "data" or, equally, according to Nabokov, the magic of Mnemosyne's arbitrary spectacles—names, places, and dates are prominently inserted in *Speak, Memory* where they were not in *Conclusive Evidence*. In the short first section of this chapter alone, the "little train station" where Mademoiselle makes her epic arrival is identified as "little Siverski station," the "country home" crystallizes as "Vyra," "the horses" are christened "Zoyka and Zinka," the standardized address of Zahar, the coachman, to "Mademoiselle" takes on the more phonetically accurate transcription of "Madmazelya." While Boyd is certainly right in affirming Nabokov's repeated insistence that he mourned "not lost property but the unreal estate of memory," with the 1966 edition, readers encounter a new urgency in mapping that "unreal estate" onto the geographical and biographical coordinates of the historical one. (Indeed, the new frontispiece to *Speak, Memory* is a map of Vyra and its environs.)

¹⁶⁰ Nabokov and Mademoiselle, of course, note this fictional quality differently—hers is through identification with the character Anna Karenina, his is through his acknowledgement that she had not quite got the reference right. Again, this may very well be another verbal wink along the lines of "Hopkinson." With respect to the relation between the material and photographic bodies, conversely, Nabokov goes on to describe the difficulty of "extract[ing] the graceful creature" (the photographed vision of a young Mademoiselle) from the present materiality of "her familiar form" which "had engulfed it" (108).

At the conclusion of this new first section, an adult Nabokov can now locate himself here, “in *this* stereoscopic dreamland,” rather than the removed there of “*that* stereoscopic dreamland” (100). Likewise, the emphatic “No, [that] even...is not” construction of realized fiction is replaced by a more continuous sense of “is no longer.” The amorphous figurations of “my imaginary double” on the road with “that great heavenly *O* shining above the Russian wilderness of my past” sharpen into the more concrete images and striking political inflections of “a passportless spy...in his New England snowboots and stormcoat” with “the moon, fancy’s rear-vision mirror.” Rather than the moon shining above the Russian past somewhere over there, the moon provides a rear-vision mirror through which “a passportless spy” can see his past come to life from *here* and *now*. The earlier language that confines the memory dreamscape to inventions on the page (like the letter *O*) rather than a moon in the sky, to the fanciful vagaries of an “imaginary double” rather than the political vagaries of the “passportless spy,” to the emphatic distinction of an entirely mistaken experience rather than one which is simply acknowledged as *no longer*—such language might be useful in the construction of a vivid and isolated mythical memory, but not one that communicates verifiable continuity (however tenuous) from the past into the present, or, by extension, one has the power to set any records straight.

The House Was Here

Perhaps the most prominent instance in Chapter Five where this kind of referential clarification occurs is in Nabokov’s expansion of “our St. Petersburg home” into a description of “our town house, an Italianate construction of Finnish granite, built by my grandfather circa 1885, with floral frescoes above the third (upper) story and a second-floor oriel, in St. Petersburg (now Leningrad), 47, Morskaya (now Herzen Street)...” (109). This edit is also striking as a clear echo of the first caption and photograph to appear in this final edition. This emphatic link between the revision of the story that had been the foundation for his art of memory and an uncharacteristically “straightforward” inclusion of photographs implies that both are part of the same arsenal for engaging the slippery and contested space of narrating the past.

In other words, the questions surrounding the efficacy of these stereoscopic images run aground on another explicitly material concern regarding the composition of Nabokov’s revisited autobiography: photography.¹⁶¹ As I suggested above, the importance of photography and figurations of photographic technologies to Nabokov’s work has not, of course, escaped the attention of numerous critics. Referring variously to Nabokov’s reliance on “photographic metaphor” and his “imaginative optics,” as modes of “describ[ing] in photographic terms” both “the reminiscing process... and the reviewing of that past,” other critics have emphasized photography’s figurative relation to his account of memory without necessarily pressing the point of memory’s relationship to photography itself.

But in following the lead of W.J.T. Mitchell who insists that we not resolve too quickly the historical materiality of photography *and* its tension with the written text that surrounds, confronts, and absorbs it, I would like to suggest that Nabokov ultimately invokes much more than a convenient metaphor when he likens the construction of his early memory of his French

¹⁶¹ Petit, 4. See also Karen Jacobs in “Optical Minitaures in Text and Image: Detail and Totality in Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory* and Sebald’s *The Emigrants*,” *Etudes Britanniques Contemporaines* 31 (Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry, 2006) and also her postscript on *Lolita* in *The Eye’s Mind* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2002). According to Petit, “the numerous telescopes, microscopes, mirrors, and magic lanterns that were Nabokov’s toys when he was a child become metaphors to plunge into the recesses of memory through the ‘carefully wiped lenses of time’” (5).

governess to the layering of a stereoscopic image. If memory inspires gratitude to the figures of “tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal” as much as it does the magic carpet narrative of “the contrapuntal genius of human fate,” *Speak, Memory* actually attests to the acknowledged complexity—if not unknowing falsehood—of both Nabokov’s early fear of losing “the only thing [he] had salvaged from Russia—her language” to the “alien influence” of English, and the very notion that the Russian language was indeed “the only thing [he] had salvaged” in his exile. The Nabokovs did indeed lose their land, possessions, and wealth in their flight, but dozens of photographs, mostly taken prior to the Revolution and kept safe through exile remained—even as many beloved relatives perished.¹⁶²

When his sisters gave him these photographs after the 1954 publication of the *Drugie Berega*, Nabokov might have initially dismissed them, as he (like other modernists before him) was wont to do, as crude material hindrances. Describing, for example, the “dim little photographs in crumbling frames [his mother] liked to have near her couch” in post-exile Prague, Nabokov immediately insists, “she did not really need them, for nothing had been lost... she had with her all that her soul had stored” (49-50). The insufficiency and crudeness of the photographs’ public and temporally-bound materiality—“dim... crumbling,” like his sixty years crumbling with the material palpability of New England snow—stands out all the more against the “great clarity” with which Nabokov can still see his mother in that moment, the perfect way his mother carried her memories like actors “remember[ing] their lines” (50). The presumed referentiality of his mother’s photographs seems at direct odds with the clarity and richness of both his and her individual memories of the people and places they depict.

Two decades later, Nabokov further sets the visual media of photography and painting against one another. In a 1970 interview, he reverses the conventional alignment of photography with a kind of objective referentiality and painting with subjective representation: the “blue-tinted or pink-shaded photograph taken by a stranger” is the re-touching of a “bad memoirist,” while the “good memoirist preserve[s] the utmost truth of the detail” by finding “the right spot on his canvas for placing the right patch of remembered color.”¹⁶³ Nabokov concedes in another interview that photography might very well contain artistic value, but as a medium of memory or personal historical record, he associates it here only with inaccurate, sentimental “retouching.”¹⁶⁴ Yet his mother still liked to have her photos near her couch, and twenty-two photographs nonetheless appear meticulously interwoven in the progression of *his* memoir. Moreover, photography and photographic technology—not painting—provide the main topoi for the framing, filling, and rhythm of the written narrative itself.¹⁶⁵

A quick catalogue of *Speak, Memory*’s photographs appears, however, to undercut Nabokov’s later insistence on the false objectivity of the medium. In fact, if his goal as he playfully describes it remains to provide some “conclusive evidence” of both him and his family “having existed,” the motivation behind the photographs appears quite straightforward.¹⁶⁶ The

¹⁶² Most of these photographs are now a part of the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library.

¹⁶³ Vladimir Nabokov, “Interview 19,” *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage, 1973):

¹⁶⁴ “The mechanical process can exist in a ludicrous daub, and artistic interpretation can be found in a photographer’s choice of landscape and in his manner of seeing it” (Ibid. “Interview 15”).

¹⁶⁵ Indeed, while his final amendments to the body of the memoir appear to have been fairly faithful to his additions in their nascent index card form, Nabokov went through at least half a dozen painstaking drafts detailing his selections and their corresponding captions.

¹⁶⁶ These include: a snapshot of the Nabokovs’ former St. Petersburg residence, photos of his grandparents, family portraits, the author at work, his wife and son’s Nansen passport pictures, and (in the single idiosyncratic

pictured people and butterflies are all accounted for in the written text, and the chronology of the photographs roughly corresponds to the chronology of the surrounding narrative. Lawrence Petit explains this tension by pointing out the ways in which the adjacent written text constantly undermines whatever referentiality the photographs seemingly provide. According to Petit, while “the photographs are indeed presented as a faithful, transparent window into the past,” the captioning that accompanies them “obfuscates this autobiographical project [...] by the opacity of the reminiscing, or anamnestic discourse.” The photographs themselves appear as transparent windows onto autobiographical referentiality while the corresponding text does the work of “undermin[ing] the integrity of referentiality,” and more specifically, the presumed referentiality of the photographs.¹⁶⁷ Or, one might say, the verbal captions are Nabokov’s way of once again asserting the efficacy of his imaginative reconstruction over and against any material documentation in the revelation of noninvoluntary memories.

No doubt, *Speak, Memory*’s very first image and caption appear to demonstrate this antagonism nicely.¹⁶⁸ The only photograph of the set taken after 1940, the year of the narrative’s conclusion with the Nabokovs’ emigration to the United States, this opening image appears,



“taken in 1955 by an obliging American tourist” (18). Every subsequent line of caption text proceeds to undermine the representational capacity of the black-and-white image: evoking through Nabokov’s nearly four-decade-old memory, for example, the color of the building’s granite (“pink”) and the second-floor east-corner window of the room where he was born, hidden in the image, according to him, by newly-planted lindens (“green upstarts”). An inversion of Benjamin’s optical unconscious,

Fig. 1 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 18.

Nabokovian twist) photographs of butterfly holotypes (“*Plebejus (Lysandra) cornion* Nabokov”) from the American Natural History Museum.

¹⁶⁷ Laurence Petit, “Speak, Photographs?: Visual Transparency and Verbal Opacity in Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory*,” *Nabokov Online Journal* 3 (2009): 1.

¹⁶⁸ The full caption to the photograph reads as follows:

This photograph, taken in 1955 by an obliging American tourist, shows the Nabokov house, of pink granite with frescoes and other Italianate ornaments, in St. Petersburg, now Leningrad, 47, Morskaya, now Herten Street. Aleksandr Ivanovich Herten (1812-1870) was a famous liberal (whom this commemoration by a police state would hardly have gratified) as well as the talented author of *Biloe i Dumi* (translatable as “Bygones and Meditations”), one of my father’s favorite books. My room was on the third floor, above the oriel. The lindens lining the street did not exist. Those green upstarts now hide the second-floor east-corner window of the room where I was born. After nationalization the house accommodated the Danish mission, and later, a school of architecture. The little sedan at the curb belongs presumably to the photographer (*SM*, 18).

the insistent consciousness of the caption identifies colors and dimensions of the ‘real’ house that the photograph cannot, a gesture that seems at first glance more akin to the good memoirist “placing the right patch of remembered color” on his canvas than allowing the stranger’s sentimental hand to tint it.¹⁶⁹ Nabokov seems intent on claiming the victory for the “yielding diaphanous texture of time” rather than the physically hampering terms of material space represented by the photographic image. Of course, the counter claims of both the photograph and the caption remain simultaneously unsubstantiated and irrefutable so far as the readers have only the image and Nabokov’s belated account at hand, but Nabokov asserts the upper hand as the claimant of personal memory.

And he continues to pursue this advantage at every turn. Nabokov uses the written text to build the house of his own memory over and against the near-present reality of the building as represented by the 1955 photograph. The house is “in St. Petersburg, now Leningrad, 47, Morskaya, now Herzen Street” (18). He refuses to allow the names of “now” to eradicate the names of history and his memory, as the house is both in St. Petersburg *and* Leningrad, on Morskaya *and* Herzen Street.¹⁷⁰ Or as Wood puts it, if “Nabokov’s habitual (overt) stance is that of memory’s proud agent and possessor... Nothing is lost, the past is not a foreign country. Then was then and *is also* now.”¹⁷¹ The dizzying associative discourse Petit notes emerges at this point as the renamed street sparks a brief synopsis of the life of famed exile Alexander Herzen, his father’s preference for one of Herzen’s books, and the subsequent changes in tenants of the house after their departure. By the time Nabokov concludes this first caption with the abrupt, off-hand description of “the little sedan at the curb” as “belong[ing] presumably to the photographer,” the reader faces the challenge of maintaining faith in the straightforward referentiality of the photographic object as such after everything that Nabokov’s “reminiscing and anamnestic discourse” performs upon it—all before the autobiographical narrative proper begins (18).¹⁷²

The challenge does not stop there. It does seem that the photograph’s presence posits a claim to reference that the subsequent caption befuddles, demonstrating the transparency of the photograph rendered opaque through written language. But the strange concluding description of the little sedan offers yet another complication. More than simply provide, as some critics suggest, “irrelevant information on peripheral details of the photograph,” this last sentence admits to the vicissitudes of Nabokov’s verbal account in light of the photograph’s visual one.¹⁷³ Most of the caption asserts the primacy of Nabokov’s own memory over and against the presumable referential reality of the photographic image, but the photograph for once contains knowledge that Nabokov does not have. An outsider four decades and many thousand miles removed from the house in the photograph, he can at most *presume* that the sedan he sees belongs to the photographer but has no direct knowledge—or, for that matter, that the second-floor east corner window still exists behind the unfamiliar linden trees (which, of course, he’s never seen in

¹⁶⁹ During a dispute with the publisher about the accuracy of his concluding depiction of the ship at port in France, Nabokov staunchly insists: “As my policy throughout the book has been to remain absolutely true to a vision of a personal past, I cannot change the color of the funnel although at a pinch I might omit any mention of that color. As you have probably noticed I often make mistakes when recalling names, titles of books, numbers, but I very seldom err when recollecting colors” (“Notes on Parks and Gardens,” Berg Collection, NYPL).

¹⁷⁰ Incidentally, the house at present stands once more at 47 Morskaya Street in St. Petersburg.

¹⁷¹ Wood, *Magician’s Doubts*, 86-87.

¹⁷² The placement of this photograph, while always first in the series, does vary with different editions of the 1966 text. Every subsequent edition, however, prints the photograph before the main text of the memoir begins.

¹⁷³ Petit, “Speak Photographs,” 6.

person but so confidently colors green!). Or, recalling Wood's terms, Nabokov's "will to image" has been momentarily ruffled by an image that both is and isn't his—and perhaps just as importantly, belongs in a sense as much to the reader as it does to him.

The admission is at first glance an inconsequential (if stylistically off-beat) one—certainly the house has continued to exist on that street, in that city, after his last glimpse of it in 1918, and in that respect the scene of the photograph is not one Nabokov has any personal memory of, even as he can accuse it of offering only an incomplete and false projection of the house as he himself has known it. But in this sense, the photograph provides an important corrective—however slight—for the effect of time's passage that Nabokov's written reminiscences cannot account for; it asserts the importance of reckoning with the dimming and crumbling aspect of the photos by his mother's couch, just as his circuitous caption offers a framing narrative of color and temporal depth that the black-and-white instant snapshot cannot express. To conclude the controlled play of his writing with this wobble that the reader can experience and observe in his account of the photograph seems less a gesture of masterful bravado and more an acquiescence to the complexity of memory and its representation. If we read the visual image and verbal text here stereoscopically instead (as we see Nabokov do with the pavilion and Mademoiselle), we experience simultaneously Nabokov's exceptional ability to make an image present—an ability he insists surpasses that of the photographic image alone—and an implicit acknowledgement once again that "everything he wants to remember was transient from the beginning" such that the "celebrated consciousness in *Speak, Memory* is not an idealized entity but one hypersensitive to the temporality of its own existence."¹⁷⁴ The dismissive declaration he makes to those along for his magic carpet ride, "Let visitors trip," here flickers as an admission that he himself is in a sense a visitor to his own memory, to his own home.

An early discarded motto to his 1951 *Conclusive Evidence*, which predates this photograph by four years, attempts to convey a similar ambivalence through verbal narrative alone:

The house was there. Right there. I never imagined the place would have changed so completely. How dreadful—I don't recognize a thing. No use walking any farther. Sorry, Hopkinson, to have made you come such a long way. I had been looking forward to a perfect orgy of nostalgia and recognition! That man over there seems to be growing suspicious. Speak to him. *Turisti. Amerikantsi.* Oh, wait a minute. Tell him I am a ghost. You should know the Russian word for "ghost"? *Mehta. Prizrak. Metafizicheskiy kapitalist.* Run, Hopkinson!¹⁷⁵

Beyond the cheeky theatricality of this prefatory address as a ghostly, exiled "metaphysical capitalist" to his American tourist companion "Hopkinson," many of the basic tensions of memory dramatized between the text and image of the 1966 version appear here as well: the challenge to recognition, the disappointment to seamless recollection, the biting sorrow at only being able to return to his home through the proxy of an American tourist. But the omission of a photograph highlights at all times the imagined rather than the remembered; oddly, the absence of the photographic image makes it *harder* for Nabokov to claim the authority of his own memory in opposition to it. Instead of the kind of tension the photograph and caption perform, the

¹⁷⁴ Hägglund, *Dying for Time*, 81.

¹⁷⁵ Vladimir Nabokov Papers, Berg Collection, NYPL.

fantastical motto announces instead the impossible materiality of exiled memory before its narrative rendering even begins.

Or, in other words, the verbal text's relation to the image in *Speak, Memory* positions Nabokov both as the color-tinting stranger of photographic remove *and* the painter placing the right spot of "remembered color." The distinction between the "good" and the "bad" memoirist's mediums are necessarily blurred here: represented memory—visual *and* verbal, photographed *and* painted—assumes qualities of both "conclusive evidence" accurately remembered and the vicissitudes of the sentimental and estranged. The process of rendering memory through the stereoscopic enmeshment of the visual and verbal in this manner reveals the rise and fall of quiet hiccups that belie the felt experience of memory as "a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that [he] love[s]." As full, vivid, present and conclusive as Nabokov's accounts might make a memory appear, the trick of distance, of one's remove in time that heightens the tension between the having-existed and the imaginary qualities of memory, still lingers as problematic. Rather than continue to ignore that confusion, however, Nabokov seems to allow for at least its possibility in this final version as part of what it looks like to remember.

The presumed ownership of the little sedan and green lindens might draw us more fully in line with the implications of Nabokov's earlier claims regarding the forms of memory and memory writing as a result. Nabokov's caption and photograph of the St. Petersburg home immediately suggest that to maintain a strict binary of visual transparency and verbal opacity is to ignore the complexity of the "multiple metamorphoses" he so doggedly imputes to his particular experience of revisiting autobiography (4). As with *Mademoiselle*, the process of reading the two together allows for a keener sense of both memory's solidity and fragility. The photographic image and corresponding text come to *mutually* constitute the simultaneously referential and illusory quality of memory within Nabokov's narrative framework, just as writing affords Nabokov the opportunity to experience memory as the past-in-present.

The centrality of this particular image and this particular paradox for Nabokov finds its most succinct expression perhaps in the late provisional title "The House Was Here," one of several Nabokov tried out before proclaiming the final edition instead "An Autobiography Revisited." The combination of the ambiguous deictic "here" (rather than the distancing "there" of the discarded motto), which locates us in St. Petersburg *and* Leningrad, in the photograph *and* the pages of the text itself; the past tense "was" both spatially and temporally unmoors the family home's already tenuous location in Nabokov's memory and its rendering. In addition to foregrounding the obvious import of this first image to his process of "revisiting," it also, of course, highlights the manifest tension in what it looks like to revisit his past once more as his own biographer in 1966. Much as Nabokov may want to give his own words the advantage, even as he extends the sense of *inconclusive* play, that advantage is still always incomplete, and the dynamic tension he instantiates between his rendered memory and what we might call the photograph's testimony helps articulate how.¹⁷⁶ This instance of play between the verbal and the visual, between the here-and-now and the here-and-then, brings us closer to a way of answering why photography in particular receives the kind of attention it does in Nabokov's revisited autobiography. In doing so, it also opens up, as the rest of this chapter contends, new insights

¹⁷⁶ While the juxtaposition of this with the earlier motto suggests that the American tourist photographer of 1955 is just as illusory as Hopkinson and therefore still a product of Nabokov's verbal control several fans took to sending photographs to the author from their various pilgrimages to his Russian homes. Nabokov was, it seems, quite moved and excited by this albeit mediated access to his homeland.

into the relationship between individual memory and collective experience which Nabokov repeatedly interrogates throughout his work.

Stereoscopic Dreamlands—II

These various attempts at retrieving and building memories out of doubling, layering, superimposing image and text, text and text, image and image simultaneously refuse the succession of time and admit the necessarily artificial nature of his past's reconstruction. They also implicitly raise another difficulty of reconstruction: how to bring "artificial but beautifully exact" past worlds back without either flooding them with or coldly ignoring the weight of present grief. While the St. Petersburg home still exists today, the Nabokovs' Vyra estate that also occupies so much of the autobiography was burnt down in 1944. If either the title or motto were meant to evoke Vyra's loss instead, the task becomes that much more freighted with the weight of grieving "the things and beings that [he] had loved most in the security of [his] childhood [which] had been turned to ashes or shot through the heart"—chief among them, Vyra and his father, Vladimir Nabokov Sr., who had been shot and killed in 1922 while protecting a political rival from assassins (117).¹⁷⁷

Concluding the first chapter of the memoir, Nabokov beautifully describes a childhood vision of his father being tossed in the air three times by grateful villagers at Vyra. In this oft-cited scene, the young Nabokov "suddenly see[s] through one of the west windows a marvelous case of levitation," followed by an instant in which he recognizes "the figure of [his] father in his wind-rippled white summer suit...gloriously sprawling in midair, his limbs in a curiously casual attitude, his handsome imperturbable features turned to the sky" (31). Once, twice "he would fly up in this fashion, and the second time he would go higher than the first," the details of his imperturbable face and wind-rippled suit that much clearer through the framing of the window, until finally, on the third:

...there he would be, on his last and loftiest flight, reclining, as if for good, against the cobalt blue of the summer noon, like one of those paradisiac personages who comfortably soar, with such a wealth of folds in their garments, on the vaulted ceiling of a church while below, one by one, the wax tapers in mortal hands light up to make a swarm of minute flames in the mist of incense, and the priest chants of eternal repose, and funeral lilies conceal the face of whoever lies there, among the swimming lights, in the open coffin. (31-32).

Right away, Nabokov marshals his writing against the inevitable death of his father and the image of him lying in state surrounded by funereal flowers (a photograph of which was in the album he received from his siblings). After the doubled vision that renders his father's flying body vivid for the young Nabokov and the reader, on the third, he attempts to hold his father in this ascendant vision, to paint him in alongside the figures on a church ceiling and erase him from the memory and photograph of his actual funeral almost two decades later. Despite the momentary beauty of his insistence that his father remained thus suspended for good, his desire to stay his

¹⁷⁷ See also, among others, his extended account of his "ocular relation" with Polenka, of whom, for example, "there are two especially vivid aspects... that [he] would like to hold up simultaneously before [his] eyes in conclusion of her haunting image" (213); his cousin Yuri's death (199-200); his rendering of his parents' rooms at dusk (89).

father's funeral also evokes it in vivid detail. This magic carpet fold, while affecting and vivid in its rendering of his father at Vyra, cannot help but snag on the reality of his father's transience.

Similarly, it isn't until he recalls multiple images of his father from one day in 1911 that he is able to articulate any of the grief that followed his death a decade later. Convinced that his father has been pulled into a duel while he (just like the stereoscopic *Mademoiselle*) makes his way home "in the almost hallucinatory state [of his] snow-muffled" sleigh ride, the young Nabokov carefully visualizes "the beloved, the familiar, the richly alive image of my father at fencing" transposed into a second "so vivid" and "so repulsive" picture of him being stabbed or shot (190). The layering of these two images in his mind leads him for the first and only time in the text to an extended admission of "a very special emotional abyss that [he] was desperately trying to skirt, ... the tender friendship underlying [his] respect for [his] father" (191). The deflation of this horrifically solid picture—one so seemingly real as to cause him to feel for himself "the ripeness and nakedness of a madly pulsating heart about to be pierced"—with the revelation of the duel's actual cancellation, however, is only, once again, a temporary faltering (190). The paragraph announcing his father's safety concludes with the most detailed account in the whole autobiography of his father's death.

These verbal stereoscopic renderings of Nabokov's vision of his father seem always to teeter away from a making present his father's solid reality—the "large, cool hand resting on [his] head" upon realizing the duel's cancellation and his own insistence that as yet "no shadow was cast by that future event"—toward a surge of grief so powerful as to overwhelm any ability to sustain any depiction of him *as he was* (193). While these constructed images offer extremely compelling portrayals of mourning in memory, the stereoscopic images one might construct from his relation to the literal images of the text offer more circumscribed and less grief-stricken glimpses into their relationship.

At the very outset of *Speak, Memory*, where we also began, Nabokov describes his "awakening of consciousness as a series of spaced flashes, with the intervals between them gradually diminishing until bright blocks of perception are formed, affording memory a slippery hold" (21). He insists that this first moment of self-recognition occurs with the realization "that the twenty-seven-year-old being, in soft white and pink, holding my left hand, was my mother, and that the thirty-three-year-old being, in hard white and gold, holding my right hand, was my father" (21, 22). His father's resurrected Horse Guards uniform, worn that day "as a festive joke," inspires the four-year-old Nabokov's "first gleam of complete consciousness," and, according to him, alludes to certain strange "recapitulatory implications, since the first creatures on earth to become aware of time were also the first creatures to smile" (22).

Five chapters later, the constituent parts of this first bright block of perception resurface in the form of a photograph of Nabokov and his father taken in 1906. The eighth of twenty-two photographs, this is the first where anyone is seen smiling (and here it is everyone in the picture). Nabokov happily stands to his father's right with his arm around him as his father sits holding the little boy's right hand. This time it is the younger Nabokov in the farcical uniform—a brightly white sailor suit—and the caption, in keeping with his admission that he "remained keenly interested in the age of [his] parents and kept [himself] informed about it, like a nervous passenger asking the time in order to check a new watch" for years, reads, simply, "My father, aged thirty-five, with me aged seven, St. Petersburg, 1906" (128). Both this photograph and the described arrangement of the little boy between his two parents are also, noticeably, reduplicated with Nabokov's son Dmitri with the inclusion of a 1938 photograph and reconfiguration of young Dmitri's own coming into consciousness, holding the hands of his mother and father in the final passage of the memoir.

The effect of such revisitations across more than a hundred pages at time (rather than almost immediately as in the earlier examples) of text is twofold. First, like the photograph of the St. Petersburg house, the superimposition of the two moments with Vladimir Nabokov Sr. and Jr. lends greater significance to the charming but otherwise ordinary photograph of father and son. The picture not only captures the warmth of that particular moment in 1906 but also draws on the memory of a young boy's coming into awareness of himself and his parents and the "radiant and mobile medium that was none other than the pure element of time" (21). It also, of course, recalls his revelation of their counted years of finite existence, but it does so in a way that preserves the thrill of first sight without immediately imbuing it with a sense of everything to come. Conversely, the visual of the photograph offers a reconstruction of the earlier scene—first conceived spottily as "sun flecks through overlapping patterns of greenery," patches of "soft white and pink" and "hard white and gold"—much greater detail. In this sense, the layering of the two moments across verbal and visual text alike does the work of rendering both the reconstruction and subjective experience of particular memories more palpable as they were, even as their distance across the book's pages and three (or sixty) years of time highlights the gaps and fissures of memory in between.

Second, the simultaneous tenuousness and tender resonance of this doubling does the work of evoking the very difficulties and limitations of remembering that attend Nabokov's autobiography from the first to the last, effects amplified by the verbal and visual echoes with his own son Dmitri. The constant strain of memory's "arbitrary spectacles" repeatedly features in Nabokov's account of revisiting the autobiography in his 1966 foreword. He notes how when faced with certain difficulties of remembrance in the process of editing, "an object... kept bothering [him] every time [he] reread that passage in the course of correcting the proofs of various editions, until finally [he] made a great effort, and the arbitrary spectacles (which Mnemosyne must have needed more than anybody else) were metamorphosed into a clearly recalled oyster-shell-shaped cigarette case," unlocking with it multiple, crystalline memories of both him and his father (11-12). Unlike the other account he gives in the foreword of being able to bring "the sudden view... the anonymous servant" into recognizable focus entirely "by means of intense concentration," this earlier iteration describes the process as likewise prompted by previous versions of his own admittedly faulty textual accounts (12).

That is, while a certain ease and illusion of transparency are lost in the necessity of rejecting a photographic image as a transparent window onto one's past, Nabokov's recourse to the model and media of the stereographic image—perhaps, to a certain extent, *against* his wishes—evokes the flux and the fixity, the strain and the solidity, of memory in all its temporal dimensions. While he emphasizes the eventual success of his will to remember, of his uncanny ability to make present those "still concrete" people and places of his past, to create "momentary vacuums into which rushes all that [he] love[s]," the same "solid seeing" of such images also already retains traces of his own mortal limits and loss.

Contrapuntal Vision

In his exploration of the photographic essay genre's negotiation of such tensions, W.J.T. Mitchell begins with the provocative and enigmatic statement: "Photography is and is not a language; language also is and is not a 'photography.'"¹⁷⁸ For Mitchell, ultimately at stake in the

¹⁷⁸ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 281.

kind of “mutual ‘resistance’ of photography and writing” held in tandem with “freedom of exchange between image and text and their material ephemerality” we encounter in a text like *Speak, Memory* are “value and power in contemporary representations of reality... where images and words find and lose their conscience, their aesthetic and ethical identity.”¹⁷⁹ Like Nabokov, the authors of the texts Mitchell treats in his essay do not only face the task of negotiating the “crossroads between modernism and postmodernism,” but many of them also turn to photographic writing to confront the personal and political stakes of the antithetical modes of exile and return.¹⁸⁰

As Mitchell notes in his discussion of Edward Said and Jean Mohr’s 1986 collaboration *After the Sky*, “if photographs sundered from texts portray exile, photographs *with* text are images of return, sites of reconciliation, accommodation, acknowledgment,” however ambivalent.¹⁸¹ The commerce between the verbal and visual rendering of the Nabokovs’ St. Petersburg home, for example, is predicated on how Nabokov negotiates his inability to return as an exile permanently displaced both temporally and geographically by political circumstance. Or, as he puts it himself in his last revisions, ever attentive to the “contrapuntal genius of human fate,” his “first *conscious* return [to Russia as a young boy], seems to [him] now, sixty years later, a rehearsal—not of the grand homecoming that will never take place, but of its constant dream in [his] long years of exile” (97). The ability Marcel might have to take his present perception of the aged Duc de Guermantes and stereoscopically combine it with his vision of younger iterations of the same is not available to Nabokov, permanently exiled from the people and places of his past.

Photography offers instead an intriguingly incomplete proxy through Nabokov’s invocation of both stereologic and the stereoscope, as well as a necessary admission of even the most vivid and ecstatic memory’s tie to the transient and material. The “contrapuntal genius of human fate” in Nabokov’s alternative stereoscopic method finds its echo in Said’s own account of exile. Likewise drawing on both the musical notion of counterpoint and a kind of bilingual ecology of memory, Said furthermore maps the possibility of “originality of vision” on the very condition of exile rather than the kind of individual exceptionalism Nabokov claims for himself and his family:

Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness—that to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal... For an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another department. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally. There is a unique pleasure in this sort of apprehension, especially if the exile is conscious of other contrapuntal juxtapositions that diminish orthodox judgment and elevate appreciative sympathy.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 322, 281.

¹⁸⁰ Nabokov’s exile from Russia in 1918 is, for him, the central moment of his early life and the major dividing line of his autobiography: “The twenty years I spent in my native Russia (1899-1919) take care of the thetic arc. Twenty-one years of voluntary exile in England, Germany and France (1919-1940) supply the obvious antithesis” (275).

¹⁸¹ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 320.

¹⁸² Edward Said, “The Mind of Winter: Reflection on Life in Exile,” *Harper’s* (1984): 55.

In addition to interrogating the contemporary representation of what ‘really’ is from the vantage of physical exile, then, Nabokov might be said then to use the “other contrapuntal juxtapositions” created by photography in and alongside his verbal narratives to likewise ask the prior, related question of how we remember and render our past from the universal vantage of temporal remove from one’s past, which the condition of exile can only exacerbate—especially given the complexity of memory as both evidence and illusion, as non-linear and artificially (if ‘exactly’) constructed by verbal and visual representation.

In 1959, British publisher George Weidenfeld contacted Nabokov about suggestions for a Soviet history project. Nabokov wrote a letter expressing his keen interest in the idea and profound objection to Weidenfeld's decision to ask Louis Aragon to take up the task of writing such a history (on the basis of Aragon’s Communist affiliation). Certain that the accounts written by Soviet historians have “nothing in common with the actual sequence of events (in fact, they rewrote it several times in accordance with the newly developed 'party line'”) and that Aragon would simply follow suit, Nabokov bemoans “that this wonderful opportunity of setting the record straight should be missed and the Soviet lie get support from a scholarly work published in England.”

Interestingly, however, his proposed remedy for the situation is *not* to simply choose someone else with different sympathies and start anew. Rather, he simply “submit[s] one suggestion: It might be a good idea to have the 'history' written by Aragon annotated by some real scholar (not a political propagandist) who would be allowed to comment freely on the historical myth created in Moscow.”¹⁸³ In the attempt to set a tricky record straight—a record inevitably mired in various ideological, geographical, and chronological divides—truth emerges neither in pure mythmaking, nor from myth’s erasure. Rather, the closest approximation of historical truth can only come through the dialectical model of fiction’s constant (re)articulation *and* its simultaneous revision and contestation. Further complicating the question of which practices constitute fiction and which its contestation, Nabokov self-reflexively takes up this model a few years later in the painstaking reformulation of his own Russian history.¹⁸⁴

The history he decries as utterly erased from official Soviet accounts is at least partially his and his family’s.¹⁸⁵ If there were any opinions Nabokov held as strongly as he did the importance of independence and the inanity of overtly political novels and crude four-letter words, it was that totalitarian terror began with Lenin, not Stalin, forcing him and his family to flee their home; that the values of Western liberalism did indeed see the light of day in Russia in the years leading up to October 1917, because his father was among its most vociferous proponents, essentially losing his life as a result; *and* that the dangers of absorbing wholesale any one ‘historical’ account—even one’s own, isolated and imaginative though it might be—are all too real. Nabokov’s 1966 appropriation of a kind of autobiographical historiography as the work of the

¹⁸³ Nabokov, *Selected Letters*, 302.

¹⁸⁴ A quick glance at the respective forewords of the two editions (the first is only a short paragraph, the second runs for seven pages) is telling in this regard. The 1951 edition makes no claim to historical accuracy beyond an off-handed promise to be “as truthful as he could possibly make it”; the foreword continues, “If there are any lapses, they are due to the frailty of memory, not to the trickery of art.” Fifteen years later, Nabokov notes at length how the “almost complete lack of data in regard to family history” that attended the first edition has now been replaced with a laborious method whereby he “revised many passages and tried to do something about the amnesic defects of the original—blank spots, blurry areas, domains of dimness” through recourse to both the “arbitrary spectacles” of Mnemosyne and “specific documentation” (*SM* 12, 14).

¹⁸⁵ See Dana Dragunoiu, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011).

self-critical fictionist signals not the work of a totally disinterested aesthete but rather that of a shrewd and politically-conscious individual constantly engaged in interrogating the conditions of his Cold War moment.

Find What the Sailor Has Hidden

Sifting through the difficulties and fluctuations of focus that attend the process of revisiting autobiography as such also gives rise to a final problematic: the fraught nature of our desire *not* to remember. Of course, Nabokov's memoir, by turns invoking Mnemosyne, willfully straining the neutral smudge into beautiful focus, and celebrating memory as the vacuum filled by all that one loves, repeatedly emphasizes his desire to fully remember and render his past. And yet even this overt desire runs up against necessary complication through Nabokov's repeated attention "to certain camera-lucida needs of literary composition" (92). The garden pavilion from his childhood home that haunts his memories and dreams at least twice a year,

...when viewed through these magic glasses grew strangely still and aloof.... And when, after such richness [of colored panes], one turned to a small square of normal savorless glass, with its lone mosquito or lame daddy longlegs, it was like taking a draught of water when one is not thirsty, and one saw a matter-of-fact white bench under familiar trees. But of all the windows this is the pane through which in later years parched nostalgia longed to peer. (106-107)

Once again, the desires to color-tint and to view transparently, to see through magic glasses and to the matter-of-fact, function in a kind of contrapuntal tension. What and how we choose to remember in one moment is not what or how we desire to remember in another, and yet both—within their respective limitations—are necessary to the revisitation of joy and inarticulable grief alike.

Foster provides a lovely reading of this passage by juxtaposing it with a scene a few pages earlier. Describing his joy as a young drawing student with various color pencils, Nabokov admits to only belatedly understanding the delight of the "lanky albino among pencils." After having long neglected the white color pencil, he finally realizes that "far from being a fraud leaving no mark on the page, it was the ideal implement since I could imagine whatever I wished while I scrawled" (101). Comparing the colored pencil passage with his later, likewise belated revelation about the colored glass, Foster sees the two moments as illuminating the shift in Nabokov's understanding of memory, wherein the purely "matter-of-fact white bench under familiar trees" comes to matter more to him than the license the white pencil affords one to "imagine whatever [he] wished" (106, 101). That is, "though he still delights in the white pencil... now the 'matter-of-fact white bench' (SM 106) that he remembers seeing through the untinted glass fills him with an unappeasable desire for the literal truth. As Nabokov commits himself to autobiography, the quest for literal truth assumes new prominence in the art of memory."¹⁸⁶

While I certainly agree with Foster's reading of a renegotiated balance for Nabokov, I do think it important to note that insofar as scrawling with the white pencil becomes essential to his imagination, the unseen marks on the page are meaningful to Nabokov both because they are unseen (as Foster maintains) *and* because they do nevertheless leave marks on the page. Even in

¹⁸⁶ Foster, *Art of Memory*, 116.

the most explicit assertion of his imagination's free reign, Nabokov still feels compelled to anchor it in material traces; and even in the most explicit assertion of visibility, one must come to terms with a sense of loss (the parched return to a long gone draught of water). Reading these two scenes stereoscopically rather than as indications of two mutually exclusive expressions of memory yield a more nuanced understanding of the necessary interplay between "imagination" and "literal truth."

Keeping these tensions in mind, I would like to conclude this chapter with the memoir's own famous conclusion. Just before sailing the United States, Nabokov and his wife and son stand looking out to sea, marking the final synthesis of his self-proclaimed thetic and antithetic arcs of existence in Russia and European exile—and of the two major narrative arcs of *Speak, Memory* itself:

There, in front of us, where a broken row of houses stood between us and the harbor, and where the eye encountered all sorts of stratagems, such as pale-blue and pink underwear cakewalking on a clothesline, or a lady's bicycle and a striped cat oddly sharing a rudimentary balcony of cast iron, it was most satisfying to make out among the jumbled angles of roofs and walls, a splendid ship's funnel, showing from behind the clothesline as something in a scrambled picture—Find What the Sailor Has Hidden—that the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen. (309-310)

The ocular "stratagems" of waving "pale-blue and pink" (like the "blue-tinted or pink-shaded photograph" he dismisses in interview) and the overlapping patterns of bars and stripes of bike, cat, and balcony here give rise to the image of their ship, coming into focus "as something in a scrambled picture." There is something both "splendid" about the emergence of this image and distinctly melancholic in the memoir's final pivot to the limitation of "the finder who cannot unsee" what has finally been seen. Like the wobble of the presuming a driver in the first photograph, the way in which the object finally seen asserts a kind of advantage over the finder seeing gestures toward the inexorable limitations of memory as perhaps still occurring *within time* despite Nabokov's best attempts to approximate the contrary. The successful discovery, like the transmogrified smudge, marks in this manner the outer bound of possibility in the remembrance of things past, the indelibility—for better or worse—of "artificial but beautifully exact" past worlds" final material completion.

While Nabokov's stereoscopic method requires two images to converge and layer upon one another in the creation of a kind of "solid seeing," W.G. Sebald's response from a half-century's remove is to insist on maintaining the bifurcation between them. Critics often note the presence and influence of Nabokov in Sebald's work, primarily in *The Emigrants* (1994/1997) where Nabokov's figure features conspicuously in all four sections of the text. Few, if any, have commented on Sebald's recasting of Mademoiselle O's stereoscopic dreamland in his third novel *The Rings of Saturn* (1995/1998). Chapter Five of *Speak, Memory*, we recall, begins with Nabokov's proclaimed intent to save his real-life governess from the obscurity of his fictional renderings of her. He does so by conjuring up a memory of her by imaginative proxy: he was not present for her actual arrival in Russia yet vividly reconstructs the scene for the reader. Nabokov's dramatic and cumbersome Mademoiselle appears first seated in a wicker armchair and then in a stereoscopically doubled carriage leaving Siverski station. Chapter Five of *The Rings of Saturn* begins with the narrator falling asleep in an armchair as "rare archive images" appear on television in a BBC documentary about Roger Casement and Joseph Conrad. The narrator subsequently tries his hand at his own conjuring via imaginative proxy, attempting "to reconstruct from the sources, as far as I have been able, the story I slept through that night in Southwold."¹⁸⁷ One of the first images he offers: Conrad in a carriage, about to leave his family's Ukrainian estate for Russia. The materials and sources vary, but the narrative forms they take, and the play of visual proxy they require, remains much the same—to very different ends.

Drawing heavily on Conrad's own autobiographical writing, Sebald intervenes intermittently to make the resonance with Nabokov's tale even clearer. Nabokov's introductory paragraphs describe his travels abroad as a five-year-old boy with his mother and their return the next year to Russia where his father had been helping to foment the 1905 Revolution and legislative reform; Sebald begins his reconstruction with Conrad's travels in Ukraine almost fifty years prior to Nabokov's, a five-year-old boy with his mother returning to Conrad's father, who had been "helping pave the way for a revolt against Russian tyranny through his writings and by means of conspiratorial politics" (RS 104). After nearly two years of Russian exile in Vologda, Conrad and his mother experience a brief reprieve when she is allowed to convalesce from serious illness at her family's estate.

On the day of their return to Vologda, Conrad's own "good, ugly Mlle. Durand, the governess," whose "good-natured eyes only were dropping tears, and...[whose] sobbing voice alone...broke the silence with an appeal to me: '*N'oublie pas ton francais, mon cheri*,'" is transfigured by Sebald into the "ungainly Mlle Durand from Switzerland, the governess who has devoted herself to Konrad's education all summer with the utmost energy and who would otherwise avail herself of any opportunity to burst into tears, [who] valiantly appeals to her charge as she waves a farewell handkerchief: '*N'oublie pas ton francais, mon cheri*."¹⁸⁸ The ungainly, Swiss governess prone to vain theatrics is, of course, more Mademoiselle O than Mademoiselle Durand whom Conrad

¹⁸⁷ W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1998 (1995)), 103. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text as RS.

¹⁸⁸ Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record: Some Reminiscences* (New York: Cosimo, 2005), 53; RS 106-107.

fondly remembers as a woman who, “simply by playing with us... had taught me not only to speak French, but to read it as well. She was indeed an excellent playmate.”¹⁸⁹

“A bizarre, elongated carriage” takes Conrad and his mother back to Russia (*RS* 106). In Conrad’s account, the description of this carriage stops more or less there.¹⁹⁰ Sebald’s conveyance, however, reminiscent of Nabokov’s “two sleighs,” “is slung low between the wheels as if between two worlds drifting ever further apart” with the “young Konrad...settled [in it] for some time, watching from the dark the scene he will later describe” (*SM* 99; *RS* 106). While the scene Conrad recounts happens within one unbroken wide-angle view (family and friends and estate up close, the Russian policeman “in the distance”), in Sebald’s version the movement of the coach lurching forward marks the distinctly framed and fleeting images first of “friends and relations [who] vanish from Konrad’s view through the small window” and then, “when he looks out at the other side,” a second vision of “the district police commandant’s light, open trap, harnessed to three horses in the Russian fashion...a vizor... pulled down over [the commandant’s] eyes” (*RS* 107). Nabokov’s “two sleighs” follow one another “always at the same distance” to instantiate his stereoscopic dreamland’s combinatory, solid seeing (*SM* 99). Sebald’s layering of Conrad and Nabokov initially enacts this stereoscopic method, animating uncanny resemblances between these European émigré authors’ childhood experiences. The resemblances resonate from a remove of almost half a century—the same length of time that separates Nabokov and Sebald himself. But here the stereoscopic effect is also always coming undone. Sebald’s intervention emphasizes two unassimilable worlds, constantly threatening collapse, “drifting ever further apart.”

The scene is self-consciously removed from both the firsthand authority of Conrad’s autobiographical writing and the assurance of Nabokov’s “artificial but beautifully exact” reconstructions. The visions from one side, then the other, are only tenuously and fleetingly held together by the shifting gaze of a little boy “watching from the dark the scene he will later describe”—and by the narrator who attempts to reconstruct this “watching from the dark” (and his own failed watching from TV) over a century later. The transposition of similar images (“two sleighs”; Conrad’s and Nabokov’s childhood memories) engenders productively vivid and ultimately static scenes from the past. The synthesis of, rather than the movement between, two irreconcilable vantages (“two worlds,” home and family versus exile and police), would create alternatively a misshapen blur in Sebald’s recounting. Sebald—removed not only by time but also any semblance of first- or even second-hand experience—either cannot or will not draw together these images, refusing the ease and confidence of his predecessor’s accounts. He signals the divergence in his “attempt to reconstruct,” rewriting the sleeping narrator’s, Nabokov’s, and Conrad’s memories in a manner that is neither photographic nor stereoscopic but rather filmic. Quietly acknowledging the narrator’s personal memory of the scene as one initially mediated by the forgotten images of a BBC documentary, Sebald announces his method, contra Nabokov’s, as one that brings the fleeting fragment and disruptive power of juxtaposition to the fore rather

¹⁸⁹ Conrad, *Personal Record*, 53.

¹⁹⁰ In Conrad’s autobiographical account: an “elongated, bizarre, shabby travelling-carriage with four post-horses” (*Ibid.*). He continues to sketch the scene, “On the steps, groups of servants, a few relations, one or two friends from the nearest neighborhood, a perfect silence; on all the faces an air of sober concentration; my grandmother, all in black, gazing stoically; my uncle giving his arm to my mother...; at the top of the flight my little cousin...; the head governess, our dear, corpulent Francesca...; and the good, ugly Mlle. Durand, ... In the distance, half-way down to the great gates, a light, open trap, harnessed with three horses in Russian fashion, stood drawn up on one side, with the police captain of the district sitting in it, the vizor of his flat cap with a red band pulled down over his eyes.”

than enduring, layered synthesis. He highlights, in short, the necessary uncertainties such *un*solid seeing and retrospective conjuring from a generational remove entails. Blurring, oscillating, maintaining difference: in this chapter, I explore how Sebald's hybrid prose fictions inaugurate a memorial practice of filmic reading from a generational remove.

From firsthand witness to stereoscopic reconstruction to filmic oscillation, the literary succession from Conrad to Nabokov, Nabokov to Sebald—not to mention Sebald's own implicit alignment of himself as heir to this particular genealogy of European émigré writers—I highlight a shift in the latter half of the twentieth century not towards the open-ended play/anguish of postmodern memory (or absence thereof) but rather toward the bounded movements of an attenuated, if ambivalent, modernist orientation toward the past. The readings that follow explore what happens when we read images (those materially manifest, diegetically 'real,' and engaged metaphorically alike) in Sebald's oeuvre with what I call "memorial oscillation" between times and meanings in mind. Drawing on his development of a kind of nonsynthetic, anti-stereoscopic vision, I demonstrate how his vision of the past, built upon photography's 'failures' and the perennial danger of solipsistic projection in (post)memorial work, is predicated on motion rather than arrest, on multiplicity rather than singularity—in short, on the imaginative idiom of film rather than photography as such.

To do so resists the preponderance of criticism that frames Sebald's interrogation of memory, viscosity, and ethics primarily in terms of still photography. While this criticism emphasizes how the images that populate his hybrid fictions either block the past and instantiate traumatic loss or enable readers and narrators alike to project and reconstruct a past more or less continuous with the surrounding narrative—the two concerns central to any discussion of memory from a generational remove today—I argue by contrast that Sebald takes the very uncertainty this seemingly mutually exclusive opposition engenders as a starting point. Moving between continuity and discontinuity, opaque fact and imaginative projection, his use of images generates what Roland Barthes describes as a "third meaning" in his essay on the cinematic still by the same name.¹⁹¹ Such continual movement between real and unreal, self and other, produces a mode of uncertainty and an ethics, as Namwali Serpell proposes, that recognizes the importance of both empathy and alterity while neither negating nor synthesizing them.¹⁹² Faced with the multiple mediations of memory from a variously generational and experiential removes, one's steadfast desire for—if not exactly faith in—regaining time lost finds its closest realization in such filmic oscillation.

Problems of Generation

In *The Emigrants*, a work composed of four separate biographies linked by a central narrator reminiscent of the author himself, Sebald introduces a glass slideshow quite literally under the sign of Nabokov (the passage takes place directly under a reproduction of his photograph!).¹⁹³ An homage both to the purported resemblance between the Russian author and the narrator's elderly landlord, Henry Selwyn, and to Nabokov's recounted fascination with glass slides from his childhood tutor's otherwise tedious magic lantern shows, Sebald's slideshow

¹⁹¹ Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning," *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 52-68.

¹⁹² Namwali Serpell, "Oscillation," *The Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 45-78.

¹⁹³ W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1997 (1993)). Hereafter cited parenthetically in text as *E*.

challenges Nabokov's emphatic distinction between the private "loveliness the glass slides as such revealed when simply held between finger and thumb and raised to the light—translucent miniatures, pocket wonderlands, neat little worlds of hushed luminous hues!" and the "tawdry and tumid...jellylike pictures" they became when made to "blossom" for a larger audience (*SM* 166-67). The juxtaposition of these intimate, crystalline visions (like Nabokov's stereoscopic "solid seeing") with the uncertain, "jellylike pictures" of communal experience invite the questions I explore in this chapter: what can a viewer, estranged from the private "pocket wonderlands" of firsthand experience and the accompanying faith in arriving at that "delicate meeting place between imagination and knowledge" with fine-point precision, see at all? (167) To what extent are such visions theirs to claim in the first place?

In the spring of 1971, the narrator and his wife join Selwyn and Selwyn's friend Edwin Elliott in viewing images from the older men's trip to Crete exactly ten years earlier. Unlike the artful images of Nabokov's childhood experience, projected as accompaniment to his tutor's long-winded recitation of another work of imagination (a poem by Lermontov), this slideshow insist upon Henry and Edwin's 'real' encounters with 'real' places, the *ça a été* of their past experiences—and raise a number of concerns regarding the divisions of memory and experience between the two seated pairs along the way. To recall Woolf's description of memory in "A Sketch of the Past," that is, the moment of looking at an earlier image of oneself via glass here rather uncomfortably has an audience. The narrator observes Edwin's and Henry's reactions to seeing themselves projected: "I sensed that, for both of them, this return of their past selves was an occasion for some emotion. *But it may be that it merely seemed that way to me* because neither Edwin nor Dr Selwyn was willing or able to make any remark concerning these pictures, whereas they did comment on the many others showing the springtime flora of the island, and all manner of winged and creeping creatures" (*E* 16-17, my emphasis).

In a work constructed around the narrator's first-person account of four lives other than his, he flags an early discomfort with claiming any knowledge of others beyond what he himself has observed. Not only does the narrator equivocate about his ability to understand how these older men viewed their past selves in light of their distance from them, but he also has little help in learning more. As these particular images appeared, "trembling slightly," "there was almost total silence in the room" (17). Whenever an image that might offer roughly equal access to firsthand experiencer and outside observer alike appears, such as the general identification of spring flora and fauna, communal exchange is possible; whenever a photograph emphasizing how the experience depicted actually happened in the lives of only half of the people in the room emerges, unbridgeable silence.¹⁹⁴ The last slide, a landscape image of mountains and windmills on the Lasithi Plateau, presumably occupies the former category, but suddenly here too the room falls silent, highlighting the fragility of even that distinction. In this dense silence, all four—firsthand witnesses and secondhand observers alike—sit scrutinizing the image for "so long that the glass in the slide shattered and a dark crack fissured across the screen," creating a new memory around the image in the process (17).

¹⁹⁴ As Selwyn explains to the narrator some time later, "The years of the second war, and the decades after, were a blinding, bad time for me, about which I could not say a thing even if I wanted to. In 1960, when I had to give up my practice and my patients, I severed my last ties with what they call the real world. Since then, almost my only companions have been plants and animals" (*E* 21).

Beyond the narrator's generational and experiential distance from Henry Selwyn, Sebald also alerts the reader to the narrator's distance from the physical images themselves.¹⁹⁵ Nabokov can lovingly handle his glass images "between finger and thumb"; the narrator here only registers the shattering of the slide through the dark crack projected on the screen before him. The images Woolf's characters encounter behind panes of glass—even those of their pasts (with, of course, the exception of Septimus)—appear more or less directly through or on them, in the present moment; the images Nabokov sees when he holds up the glass slides to the light, the "neat little worlds of hushed luminous hues" that emerge from them, he likewise accesses—much as he claims he accesses his memories—directly, creatively, and in his continuous present. Conrad's and Nabokov's respective childhood memories endure as variously confident reconstructions. The images here, however, have neither the immediacy of firsthand experience nor the directness of a more or less unmediated access, nor even the promise of continuation, despite the intensity of the entire group's scrutiny in that moment. Instead: large swaths of silence and a darkened, broken screen. As a result, for the narrator, "that view of the Lasithi plateau, held so long till it shattered, made a deep impression on me at the time, yet it later vanished from my mind almost completely" (17).

From Woolf and Nabokov to Sebald, I move from the problems of how to envision one's own past in its dissonance with and necessary differentiation from communal accounts to the problem of how to recognize individual lives—one's own and others'—that appear indissociable from increasingly murky collective histories. As Margaret Olin describes the dilemma, rescuing "the intimate, individual, and personal" from the generalization of the "universal" takes on a new urgency for Sebald "in the face of the events of the twentieth century"—that is, according to Olin, in the face of the Holocaust and the Second World War.¹⁹⁶ In this regard, I would argue that it is an urgency born as much from the injunction to "never forget" as it is from the necessity to distinguish an individual remembering from individual lives remembered, particularly as original witnesses and their descendants pass on.

As Sebald explains, evoking an image familiar to readers of his final novel, "I feel you can't simply abdicate and say, well it's nothing to do with me. I have inherited that backpack and I have to carry it whether I like it or not."¹⁹⁷ For his eponymous character Jacques Austerlitz, the rucksack that he shoulders is a permanent addition to his person: indeed, the baggage becomes "the only truly reliable thing in his life."¹⁹⁸ While the question of inherited guilt no doubt looms large here, in this chapter I focus on how Sebald manages, rather than internalizes or disavows, these burdens. The permanent backpack suggests, after all, both the weight of constant presence and a sense of contained separation. But what exactly *are* the burdens that Sebald and Austerlitz have inherited? What must a non-Jewish German writer born in the last years of the war and his fictionalized Jewish *Kindertransport* survivor—both members of what Susan Rubin Suleiman has called the "1.5 generation"—carry on (and carry together)?¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁵ Highlighting his generational remove from Selwyn and Nabokov simultaneously, the narrator notes his landlord's resemblance to Nabokov and includes the latter's image as a proxy for the image of Selwyn he lacks.

¹⁹⁶ Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 98, 71.

¹⁹⁷ W.G. Sebald, *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2010), 51.

¹⁹⁸ W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Random House, 2001), 40. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text as *A*.

¹⁹⁹ See Suleiman, *Crises of Memory*.

Marianne Hirsch accounts for this negotiation of the powerful affective ties linking those who experienced the atrocities of the Second World War to those that came after as “postmemory.” This “affective link to the past” is consequently proper to the work of memory rather than history, Hirsch argues, and is “best mediated by photographic images” because of their ability “to solidify the tenuous bonds that are shaped by need, desire, and narrative projection.”²⁰⁰ Photography, in its documentation of people and places of the past, generates an affective power beyond and yet predicated upon its evidentiary function. It emerges as the central medium for Hirsch—and, of course, for Sebald as well—in the exploration of how one might both imaginatively inhabit and reanimate a pervasive traumatic past and recognize one’s perennial belatedness and remove from it at the same time in the present. As Suleiman points out, this takes on a particular complexity for members of the 1.5 generation who must negotiate the experience of both their own vexed childhood memories *and* the postmemorial practices that so powerfully inform them into adulthood. The generational movements that occur aesthetically from Conrad and Woolf to Nabokov to Sebald are thrown into focus alongside those that emerge historically between adult participants in and child survivors of the Second World War. The representation of Henry Selwyn, a war veteran and Jewish émigré, as Vladimir Nabokov takes on this dual resonance.

In all of his self-proclaimed “hybrid prose fictions,” Sebald plays with these doubled charges by mixing generic conventions as well as media. Each work draws upon a first-person narrator strikingly reminiscent of the author himself. Sometimes even sharing his name, these narrators open up the tantalizing possibility of redefining Sebald’s “prose fictions” as works of autobiography.²⁰¹ And yet, as Ann Pearson observes, “the apparently autobiographical detail, comes to seem more and more fictive as the inter-and intra-textuality of the narrative becomes apparent.”²⁰² These “I”s are not only enigmatic insofar as they both invite and refuse the correspondence between narrator and author, between fiction and memory, but also because they are often, like the panes of glass that rendered Woolf’s London provocatively transparent at the beginning of the century, so easy to overlook in favor of whom and what they reveal. That is, while Mark Anderson is right to insist that “Sebald does not hide his German identity behind these figures in a conventional literary relationship between author and protagonist, as if to suggest that he is his (Jewish) subject,” the fact that “all of Sebald’s books depend on [an] unbalanced narrative relationship between a protagonist whose richly documented life makes up the bulk of the story and a laconic, *virtually invisible* narrator to whom this story is told,” requires

²⁰⁰ The “consequence of traumatic recall but...at a generational remove,” an experience “not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation,” postmemory nonetheless warrants categorization as a form of memory because of how “deeply and affectively” the past is transmitted to subsequent generations (both “familial” generations like Austerlitz’s and “affiliative” ones like Sebald’s) so powerfully “as to seem to constitute memories in their own right.” As time passes, this work takes on increasing importance—and danger of distortion—in its attempt “to reactivate and reembody more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression.” Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” *Poetics Today* 29.1 (2008): 106, 111.

²⁰¹ According to narratologist Philippe Lejeune, an autobiography can be defined as a text where the author’s name is the same as that of the narrator within the text. See Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). As Mark Anderson notes, “his place is marked by a German narrator whose outward biographical details correspond ‘pretty much exactly’ with his own life.” Mark Anderson, “The Edge of Darkness: On W.G. Sebald,” *October* 106 (2003): 106.

²⁰² Ann Pearson, “‘Remembrance ... Is Nothing Other than a Quotation’: The Intertextual Fictions of W. G. Sebald,” *Comparative Literature* 60.3 (Summer, 2008): 267.

much closer scrutiny.²⁰³ The experiences Sebald's narrators give voice to in his four fictional works, *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn*, and *Austerlitz*, belong primarily to others, to those they each encounter and imagine through reading, archives, interviews, dreams, and the act of writing itself. At the same time, Sebald's narrators are not transparent windows onto the lives of others, but occasional ciphers (for the author himself perhaps) whose own lives and memories take shape largely through the search for and reconstruction of other people's experiences and memories, fictional and non-fictional alike. They mediate the recounted memories of others and in doing so engage in a process of reckoning with and creating their own. The question, freighted with the weight of Sebald's inherited "backpack," remains one of how.

Who says?

In the pages that follow Selwyn's slideshow and the narrator's early discomfort with presuming to know how the older man felt about what he saw, the speech markers separating the narrator's voice from Selwyn's begin to blur:

Dr Selwyn and I had a long talk prompted by his asking whether I was ever homesick. I could not think of any adequate reply, but Dr Selwyn, after a pause for thought, confessed (no other word will do) that in recent years he had been beset with homesickness more and more... For years the images of that exodus had been gone from his memory, but recently, he said, they had been returning once again and making their presence felt. I can still see the teacher who taught the children in the *cheder*... I can still see the empty rooms of our house. I see myself sitting topmost on the cart, see the horse's crupper.... I see the telegraph wires rising and falling past the train window... (*E* 18-19)

The narrator then returns quietly, parenthetically, to a distinction between voices, but one that inaugurates a "we" which now includes the narrator as much as it does Selwyn's family in the memory's recounting:

The high seas, the trail of smoke, the distant greyness, the lifting and falling of the ship, the fear and hope within us, all of it (Dr Selwyn told me) I can now live through again, as if it were only yesterday. After about a week, far sooner than we had reckoned, we reached our destination. We entered...we called...we disembarked...we learnt...we had gone ashore..." (19)

The first person singular morphs solely and repeatedly into the first person plural until Selwyn abruptly distances himself from the "we" to describe how "most of *the emigrants*, of necessity, adjusted to the situation, but some...persisted for a long time in the belief that *they* were in America" (19, emphases mine). "Dr Selwyn and I" become one "I," which becomes a "we," then a "they," before finally returning to "Dr Selwyn" and "me": "I grew up in London... and learnt English as if in a dream... said Dr Selwyn" (21, 20). The English translation here makes explicit the tension that inheres more subtly in the German original. While the passage in German is marked by Sebald's usage of the subjunctive tense that denotes reported speech, in practice the indicative and subjunctive can take the same form, such that the reader is repeatedly required to

²⁰³ Anderson, "Edge of Darkness," 106, emphasis mine.

work from context to distinguish which is which and when. As Katja Garloff argues, Sebald's "techniques of narrative embedding and an oscillation between indicative and subjunctive... reminds us of the space of fabrication and distortion that opens up the transmission of memories."²⁰⁴ A technique as idiosyncratic as (and, as we'll see shortly, one related to) Sebald's incorporation of photographic images into his texts, the constant oscillation of not only syntactical structures but also identification and disidentification emerges as key to the transmission of memory.

In fact, eschewing quotation marks altogether, Sebald's narrators absorb the words and styles not only of their older interlocutors but also of myriad literary and documentary sources—from Nabokov to Thomas Browne to Sebald's own great-uncle. If this strategy calls attention to how "intertextuality and documentation may thus be part and parcel of a common enterprise: destabilizing the narrative's reality in a textual play that keeps the reader continually uncertain," the uncertainty it produces requires us to ask not only what the narrator's ethical relation to Selwyn's memories is, but also whether or not Sebald's oft-unremarked incorporation of other authors' texts constitutes art or theft.²⁰⁵ Perhaps most intriguingly, it also compels us to consider how comparable the potential appropriation of another's memories is to the aesthetic repurposing of another's work in the first place.

As Sebald rather enigmatically declares in his essay on painter Jan Peter Tripp, "Remembrance, after all, in essence is nothing other than a quotation. And the quotation incorporated in a text (or painting) by montage compels us—so Eco writes—to probe our knowledge of other texts and pictures and our knowledge of the world."²⁰⁶ Investigating the manner and effects of this textual and memorial incorporation is a central concern of this chapter. Meanwhile, characters blur into narrators who blur into Sebald who blurs into other authors, constantly tipping the pendulum between fiction and memory, art and autobiography, self and other in a process that indeed raises the "question of what gives someone the right to tell another's story," particularly under the shady auspices of hybrid, (post)memorial fiction.²⁰⁷

If Sebald's narrative "embedding" and "oscillation" ultimately forego the attempt "to restore authenticity at all costs" and reveal instead "the conditions of a story's transmission," photography is undoubtedly a prominent—and problematic—feature of this transmission.²⁰⁸ Sebald highlights his preoccupation with the intersections of photography and memory, the documentary and the novelistic, on virtually every level of reading: materially, thematically, metatextually. His texts are strewn with photographic images; photography emerges as both a predominant interest of and metaphor for many of his characters and narrators in their pursuits of the past; hardly an interview with the author could transpire without some conversation about his thoughts on the medium. Facing a number of conventional associations photography inspires (and Susan Sontag helpfully catalogs for us): as "pieces of reality," "the raw record," an "instrument of memory," most critical accounts demonstrate how Sebald's preoccupation with photography in his texts constantly and unavoidably signals the *failures* of our access to the

²⁰⁴ Katja Garloff, "The Task of the Narrator: Moments of Symbolic Investiture in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*," in *Memory, History, Trauma*, ed. Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 166.

²⁰⁵ Pearson, "Remembrance," 264.

²⁰⁶ W.G. Sebald, "As Day and Night, Chalk and Cheese: On the Pictures of Jan Peter Tripp," trans. Michael Hulse, in *Unrecounted* (New York: New Directions, 2007), 84.

²⁰⁷ Garloff, "The Task," 166.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

past.²⁰⁹ As Anderson describes “the contradictory logic of this dual affirmation: every image, every ‘reality scrap,’ is precious and must be conserved as a memorial to what has disappeared. It can serve as a corrective to the unreliability of human memory. But also, every image lies, or is capable of lying, and must be subjected to careful scrutiny and interpretation.”²¹⁰ Sebald, unlike Nabokov, does not seek to construct the past through the stereoscopic combination of this contradictory logic; instead he underscores the unassimilability of this paradox, inviting his readers and narrators alike to move perpetually between these alternatives.²¹¹

Opaque and abstract rather than transparently referential, photography in Sebald’s work, some critics charge, “shows us nothing about the past.”²¹² The physical images Sebald incorporates into his texts require time to unpack and understand what it is they reference in their frequently foggy, grainy, abstract presentation. The process of identification tends only to highlight the impossibility of such understanding in the first place rather than instantly and accurately index its authenticity. Photography might be said to reveal the author’s “skepticism about the idea of visual immediacy” and a “critique of the ways in which images... take the places of the very events they depict.”²¹³ Photographs are not just vexed “reality scraps” but are rather insidiously capable of replacing past experience with present image. As Sontag describes this phenomenon (which Sebald, in turn, quotes in his essay on Tripp), “photography transforms reality into a tautology.”²¹⁴ In this reading, photography, doctored or not, does not index or describe the past so much as it creates it. And yet, to return to Anderson’s paradoxical “dual affirmation”: it is often all we have to go on.

If Sebald’s grainy, unmoored images and shattered and scratchy slides refuse the instantaneous, one-to-one indexical correspondence to “reality” that photographic discourse traditionally affords the medium, Olin proposes that the language of literature—because of its very detachment from claims to index reality or to instantaneity as such—pointedly goes further than photography in evoking the intimate and individual past in Sebald’s work.²¹⁵ Or, as she

²⁰⁹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 74, 164.

²¹⁰ Anderson suggests that for Sebald all “images must be suspect for the simple reason” that photographic manipulation was just as pervasive in Hitler’s Nazi Germany as it was in Stalin’s Soviet Russia (see Chapter Two): “for twelve years Nazi propaganda flooded Germany with doctored images masquerading as historical and ‘racial’ truth.” And yet too, because Germany is yet another “country thoroughly decimated by war, where the past was ruthlessly denied, forgotten, or covered over, the surviving remnants of history provide the only possible means of gaining access to the past” (“Edge of Darkness,” 109).

²¹¹ Stefanie Harris “The Return of the Dead: Memory and Photography in W.G. Sebald’s *Die Ausgegangenen*,” *The German Quarterly* 74.4 (Autumn, 2001): 379-391. In a more extreme reading of this “contradictory logic,” Harris argues that Sebald’s images are not just fraught with documentary unreliability but by definition “present the reader with that which the text alone cannot”: the traumatic effect of radical discontinuity that is “an essential component of [the photograph’s] temporal structure” (379, 384). Photography does not bring back the past by virtue of what it claims to represent (or falsely purports to represent) but rather “confronts us and touches us with the specificity of loss” (385). It signals absence, produces foreclosure rather than access.

²¹² Garloff, “The Task,” 163. By constructing hybrid texts that perform this failure, “Sebald both invokes and questions an idea that has gained much currency in contemporary trauma theory, namely that the instantaneous appearance and photographic acuity of a memory image are indexes of its authenticity” (Ibid). In its more conventional sense, if it is “meant to lend tangibility” to his characters’ testimonies and “furnish evidence of their non-fictionousness,” photography simply “fails to produce this effect.” Katja Garloff, “The Emigrant as Witness,” *The German Quarterly* 77:1 (Winter 2004), 84.

²¹³ Garloff, “Task,” 164.

²¹⁴ Sontag, *On Photography*, 111.

²¹⁵ In Olin’s fine-grained readings of Sebald’s intertextual dialogue with writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal, she similarly concludes that his work demonstrates photography’s inability by the end of the century to “produce access

asserts elsewhere in her readings of Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, where photography is concerned, we might consider instead how "the fact that something is in front of the camera matters; what that something is does not."²¹⁶ "What matters is displaced," Olin continues, such that "the most significant indexical power of the photograph may consequently lie not in the relation between the photograph and its subject but in the relation between the photograph and its beholder, or user, in what I would like to call a 'performative index' or an 'index of identification'"—an index, I would add, that emerges *over time* and, in Barthes's and Sebald's cases, in writing.²¹⁷ Their presence is important, but what they represent gets entangled in a constantly shifting chain of signification.

Highlighting their own broken relation to the past or performing the impossibility or continual diversion of such access in the first place, Sebald's photographs disrupt notions of both narrative continuity (a familiar enough claim) and *immediacy*—arguably one of photography's defining characteristics. For Hirsch, Sebald's work demonstrates, how "the index of postmemory (as opposed to memory) is the performative index, shaped more and more by affect, need, and desire as time and distance attenuate the links to authenticity and 'truth'."²¹⁸ The physical and diegetic images that perform the necessary impossibility of accessing the past and irreparably disrupt Sebald's narratives are also paradoxically those that provide the basis for processes of identification, connection, and continuity in his memorial narratives' articulation. They do so by virtue of their conventionally *unphotographic* presence.

Turning attention away from the photographic medium's questionable access to the past to what these images signal about the narrators themselves in the present of their stories' telling then, Silke Horstkotte asks what it might mean for these images, in their inability to "function as witnesses to the past" to serve instead as "representations of the narrator's subjective mental images."²¹⁹ Reading Sebald's photographic images through this reverse performative index of sorts returns our attention to the ethical knot at the center of these divergent readings. In the endeavor to imaginatively invest, project, and create the traumatic past so as to seemingly "constitute memories in their own right," it seems dangerously easy to turn the opacity and discontinuity of the photographic image into a blank screen onto which we can project our own narratives or problematically appropriate those of others.²²⁰ The passage where the narrator's "I" first merges with Selwyn's, we recall, is emphatically invested in what the older man can *see* in his memories ("I can still see... I can still see... I see... I see..."), with a particularly photographic acuity ("I see myself sitting topmost on the cart, see the horse's crupper....") (*E* 18-19). And what

to reality" where words, in their abstraction and generality, have seemingly already failed—a conviction that appears quite in keeping with the dense, image-shattering silence of the scene in *The Emigrants* above. Olin, *Touching Photographs*, 71.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 66, 68.

²¹⁸ Hirsch, "Generation of Postmemory," 123.

²¹⁹ Silke Horstkotte, "Visual Memory and Ekphrasis in W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*," *English Language Notes* 44.2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 118.

²²⁰ Hirsch, "Generation of Postmemory," 106. Horstkotte argues, "the inherent instability of the narrator's relation to his material, the elusive nature of the past, and the failure of photographic images to function as witnesses all suggest that the narrator's acts of looking are to be understood as an ethically problematic appropriation of that which lies outside the self" ("Visual Memory," 128). In a similar vein, Garloff proposes that if Sebald's postmemorial work "associates photography with the questionable stance of the bystander who observes without truly seeing, [...it] raises the question of the writer's guilt and complicity in the crime of genocide, leaves us with the impression that literary testimony is just as questionable as it is necessary" ("Emigrant as Witness," 90).

is the desire to access the past through photography if not, on some level, to see what another's eyes have once seen?²²¹

On the other hand, we have to ask what it looks like to remember one's life and others', to perpetually reckon with the baggage one has inherited and now carries, without a certain amount of projection and imaginative investment. There is also an ethical imperative to ask ourselves *why* members of older generations "could not say a thing even if [they] wanted to" about "the years of the second war, and the decades after" (E 21). As Sebald puts in it an interview with Joseph Cuomo, "even in talking to the people who you might want to portray, there are thresholds which you cannot cross, where you have to keep your distance... Yet at the same time, of course, the likes of us ought to try to say how they receive these stories. But there isn't a self-evident way of going about it... So one has to be very careful."²²² In an earlier interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Sebald similarly toggles between the two sides of this contradictory logic by describing first how,

when you get interested in someone, you invest a considerable amount of emotional energy and you begin to occupy this person's territory, after a fashion. You establish a presence in another life through emotional identification. And it doesn't matter how far back that it is in time. This seems to be quite immaterial somehow... if you are sufficiently interested, it nevertheless allows you to be present in that life or to retrieve it into the present, as it were.²²³

He concludes the interview, however, by admitting,

If you are the instigator of making people remember, talk about their pasts and so on, you are not certain whether your intrusion into someone's life may not cause a degree of collateral damage which that person might otherwise be spared. So there's an ethical problem there. And then the whole business of writing of course—you make things up, you smooth certain contradictory elements that you come across, the whole thing is fraught with vanity, with motives that you really don't understand yourself.²²⁴

It appears both necessary and impossible to maintain identification with others and their pasts *and* recognition of our requisite separation from them at the same time. Methodologically, photography in Sebald's work seems to highlight the violence of subordinating poetic language to photography *and* that of subordinating photography to the language of his first-person narratives. Both stances might subsequently dismiss Sebald's own insistence that his images "must not stand out; they must be of the same leaden grain as the rest" since they are "part of the text and not illustrations."²²⁵ I propose, however, that Sebald's insistence that we take the time to read physical photographic images in a manner continuous with the surrounding text requires a mode of reading that oscillates between rather than resolves the opposition of these negotiations with the past. Which is to say, the despondent note regarding the perennial difficulties of

²²¹ Roland Barthes famously begins *Camera Lucida* with his wonderment that, looking at a photograph of Napoleon's brother, he is now "looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor" (1).

²²² Interview with Joseph Cuomo, *Emergence of Memory*, 112.

²²³ Interview with Eleanor Wachtel, *Emergence of Memory*, 42

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

²²⁵ Sebald qtd. in Olin, *Touching Photographs*, 94.

representation to either produce access to the past or a way out of a solipsistic narration in the present certainly accords with much of the psychic anguish Sebald's characters experience; I propose, however, that it is not the final word but rather a point of entry for reading his engagement with memory—post and present.

Memorial Oscillation

Sebald's constant unsettling of conventions of genre and media—what Pearson calls the “textual play that keeps the reader continually uncertain”—enacts its own ethics of postwar memory. The photographic images that populate his hybrid fictions both block the past in their opacity and discontinuity *and* enable us to imaginatively project and reconstruct it through the narratives that surround them: it is neither possible nor desirable to resolve these two modes, but, reading photographic images differently, it is possible to move from one to the other. In such a reading, Sebald's fiction is as much about his narrators' own memories as it is their negotiation of others' memories from generational and experiential removes; rather than collapse them or negate one in favor of the other, his works oscillate between them. Continually moving between the poles of the real and unreal, self and other, generates an uncertainty and an ethics that affords both empathy and alterity while neither negating nor synthesizing them. As Namwali Serpell argues in her reading of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*:

In such a mode, identification is unavoidable, then impossible, then necessary once more. It is the fling of the gesture toward the other and the swing back that approximates ethics. To move thus between empathy and alterity produces neither hesitation nor complacency. Rather, oscillation is both extreme and self-aware, a full-flung excursion into the world of the other, checked by an intermittent reminder of the temporal and ethical limitations of that identification... We move in and out of identification—with characters, with their identifications—and come to experience identification as an extreme, error-prone, ongoing projection. The mode of uncertainty I call oscillation affords an ethics as intense but also as tenuous as bright light on a flimsy screen.²²⁶

Returning to the example of Selwyn's slideshow, we see an early enactment of this relational ethics that is simultaneously “intense” and “as tenuous as a bright light on a flimsy screen” in the long, dense silence where members of both wartime and postwar generations try to make sense of an image from the past that eventually shatters under their shared scrutiny. The movement between the earlier slides that by turns allows for and excludes collective identification founders in the attempt to arrest this last image, and highlights how “reconfiguring the dyadic structure of self and other as a movement allows us to attend to time as integral to ethics. *Ethics... is a process rather than an isolable moment; it entails dynamic relations rather than a standing model.*”²²⁷ While in Pynchon's postmodern novel par excellence, the oscillation entailed takes on the grand scope of entire worlds that either exist or don't, Sebald's oscillations are both more small-scale and intimate *and* more freighted with history, with “the events of the twentieth century.” Grappling with the enormity of war's atrocities, Sebald sets a process in motion bounded by tense: certain things *did* happen, certain people *did* exist. The perpetual uncertainty we face in reckoning with

²²⁶ Serpell, *Seven Modes*, 72.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 72-73, emphasis mine.

our own lives and pasts in the aftermath, however, involves no less intense or ongoing a process of ethical identification and disidentification. Like Woolf, Sebald binds the uncertainty of the spatial relation between self and other to that of the temporal relation between past and present iterations of selves and others—he anchors this uncertainty, that is, in the fraught testimony of the recorded image.

While acknowledging the centrality of still photography to Sebald's endeavor, I argue that keeping the reader "continually uncertain" in this regard requires a different relation to the visual images in his work than those enumerated in the critical accounts above. If, as Roland Barthes famously claims, "the referent adheres" in photography, the dissolution of a photograph and its referent severely undermines photography's ability to offer us a way to the real past; indeed, Barthes points out, "the photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both."²²⁸ While Barthes might thus insist that "a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see," the attention Sebald's images immediately draw to their own grainy, textured reproduction already resists such analysis. The time and duration his images require of the reader also raise questions as to the very visibility of this referent in the first place. Photography, in its fraught claims to adhere to its referents in isolated instants, cannot insist on reanimating the past *and* deny access to it, nor can it signal both unassimilable, traumatic discontinuity *and* an appropriative narrative of psychic projection; in its conventions of viewing and evocations of temporal multiplicity and experiences of duration, however, a filmic still can. (Film, not surprisingly, is also a key figure in Serpell's account of the ethics of oscillation.)

In his reading of the filmic still in his essay, "The Third Meaning" (1971), Barthes allows for a more capacious relation between photograph and photographed. If film is radically opposed to photography by virtue of the fact that "the *having been there* gives way before a *being-there* of the thing" in film, fostering a "more projective, more 'magical' fictional consciousness" instead of the "pure spectatorial consciousness" of photography, his reading of the filmic still frequently vacillates between these two temporal poles.²²⁹ In encountering a filmic still, the viewer is asked to identify the facts of the image's production (actors on screen, in costume, playing parts, the particular referentiality of *having once been there*) *and* invited to see its "diegetic horizon"—the fiction of the film's purported story (momentarily suspending consciousness of artifice to believe in the image's offer of a *being-there-now*—comparable perhaps to the present-tense in which we speak of literary texts).²³⁰ In reading a filmic still, there is another, "third meaning" that emerges, however, and begins "to blur the limit separating expression from disguise, but also to allow that oscillation succinct demonstration—an elliptic emphasis": the fragment affords more than what it communicates and signifies within the film proper. This third meaning, "suspended between the image and its description, ... does not copy anything... does not represent anything" but offers instead "a counter-narrative; disseminated, reversible, set to its own temporality."²³¹ A blurring, a demonstrated oscillation, an elliptic emphasis that is reversible, set to its own temporality: the third meaning is not the synthesis of two opposing meanings but rather the sustained possibility of movement between them. Within the context of gazing at an image, the oscillation is as

²²⁸ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 6.

²²⁹ Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 44.

²³⁰ Barthes, "Third Meaning," 57.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 57, 60.

significant as the distance between the “‘magical,’ fictional” and “pure[ly] spectatorial” and as subtle and contained as the “succinct demonstration” of a blink of an eye.

As Mary Ann Doane describes the filmic still, the resulting image is equally real (“surely referential... a record of time with the weight of indexicality”) and unreal (“always characterized by a certain indeterminacy, an intolerable instability... a record of time, but a nonspecific, nonidentifiable time, a disembodied, unanchored time”):

The image is the imprint of a particular moment whose particularity become indeterminable precisely because the image does not speak its own relation to time... The cinema hence becomes the production of a generalized experience of time, a duration. The unreadability and uncertainty concerning the image’s relation to temporality and to its origin are not problems that are resolved—they are, in fact, insoluble. But they are displaced through the elaborate development of structures that produce the image of a coherent and unified ‘real time’ that is much more ‘real’ than ‘real time’ itself. The resulting cinema delicately negotiates the contradiction between recording and signification.²³²

Arresting the filmic still, then, draws attention to this “different time-scale, neither diegetic nor oneiric,”—that is, neither narrative reality nor tantalizing dream—“a different film...the obtuse meaning can only come and go, appearing-disappearing,” without subordinating one’s reading to the tyranny of filmic succession.²³³ That is, Barthes identifies the “oscillation” between expression and disguise as *movement*—not the cinematic movement of “animation, flux, mobility, ‘life’, copy, but simply the framework of a permutational unfolding” that “can now be seen as the *passage* from language to *significance*”—or in Doane’s terms, the delicate negotiation of “the contradiction between recording and signification.”²³⁴ Bound by the parameters of a physical world that was once recorded and now signifies, the ethics of oscillation finds its expression here not so much in a “full-flung” swing but rather in a subtle tremor.

Evoking the multiple temporalities of the filmic image’s production and diegetic world even as it refuses them all, the still “is not a sample...*but a quotation*,” one that creates its own process and duration.²³⁵ The still, Barthes notes, thus attains a temporality closer to the “free” reading time of written texts, one not “totally committed to logico-temporal order.” The model of the filmic still, then, in its oscillation between reference and projection, recording and signification, expression and disguise, real and unreal, functions in a manner strikingly akin to Sebald’s careful negotiation of testimony, intertextuality, identification, and memory in his work. A filmic rather than photographic reading practice, I argue, offers not only a closer approximation to Sebald’s ethics of oscillation throughout his hybrid prose fictions but also profoundly resonates with his own explicit commentary about memory and the visual arts. If we read his images *not* strictly as a photographs, with their fraught “indexical feeling,” but as multivalent stills—images that are not a sample or slice of a larger whole but quotation, straddling recording and signification—we can gain new insight into his memorial method of filmic oscillation.

²³² Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 162-63.

²³³ Barthes, “Third Meaning,” 62.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 66, 65; Doane, *Emergence*, 163.

²³⁵ Barthes, “Third Meaning,” 66, emphasis mine.

In a pulsing dazzle of light

The memory of Selwyn's slideshow and the shattered image of the Lasithi plain return to the narrator only years later, when he sees Werner Herzog's *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974) in a London cinema. The narrator watches as on screen, Kaspar and his tutor sit in the garden as Kaspar describes

distinguishing for the first time between dream and reality, beginning his account with the words: I was in a dream, and in my dream I saw the Caucasus. The camera then moved from right to left, in a sweeping arc, offering a panoramic view of a plateau ringed by mountains...follies, in a pulsing dazzle of light, that kept reminding me of the sails of those wind pumps of Lasithi, which in reality I have still not seen to this day. (*E* 17-18)

A quick succession of dizzying clauses takes us from the narrator watching Kaspar recognize the difference between seeing in life and seeing in a dream; to the appropriation of his own vision by the camera, which cuts to an prolonged pan of flickering documentary footage (trembling, aged, jelly-like) presumably meant either to illustrate Kaspar's dream vision or, conversely, to re-establish what Kaspar sees in his dream as something the audience can somehow also see "in reality"; to the narrator's returned memory of the image of the Lasithi plateau, deeply impressed on him by that slideshow years before, though he finally then concludes, in his own recognition of the difference between the photographic image and the place it depicts, "in reality I have still not seen [the wind pumps of Lasithi] to this day" (18). Nor is that even the last of the torques Sebald applies to this otherwise seemingly straightforward vision of mountain and plateau. While Selwyn's Lasithi photo may be what the narrator recalls, Sebald's overt allusions also remind us that the poem that accompanied the young Nabokov's slides, courtesy of his tutor, similarly deal "with the adventures of a young monk who left his Caucasian retreat," showing "conventional peaks instead of Lermontov's romantic mountains" in a manner reminiscent of Kaspar's revelation of the difference between dreams and reality (*SM* 166).

Furthermore, as many viewers have noted and Herzog himself admits, the documentary footage that corresponds to Kaspar's dream of the Caucasus is in fact an extended pan of temples lining the plains of Bagan in Myanmar, thousands of miles away from the ostensibly German/Caucasian settings of this scene. Taking footage shot by his half-brother Lucki Stipetic years earlier, Herzog "modified the image by projecting it with high intensity on to a semi-transparent screen from very close distance so that the image on the screen would be the size of my palm. And then I filmed it with a 35-mm camera from the other side so the texture of the screen itself can be seen in the image."²³⁶ Through the repeated mediation of Nabokov's artistic "diminishing large things and enlarging small ones," the panoramic scene that evokes Kaspar's Caucasian dream as well as the narrator's own memory of Selwyn's Lasithi plain is painstakingly and emphatically the projected image of another screen—and another plain. In that regard, the resemblance between the images of the plains is arguably most acute not in the places they refer to "in reality" (or don't, in the case of Herzog's film) but rather in the way they both abruptly flicker into darkness, foreclosing access under the audience's distant, extended gaze: the

²³⁶ Paul Cronin and Werner Herzog, *Herzog on Herzog* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 107-08. Reminiscent of Nabokov's description of "a kind of delicate meeting place between imagination and knowledge, a point, arrived at by diminishing large things and enlarging small ones, that is intrinsically artistic" (*SM* 166).

photographic slide's dark fissuring and the film footage's engulfment in black that straight cuts to another garden scene.



Fig. 2, *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974), dir. Werner Herzog, 1:12:21



Fig. 3, *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*, 1:12:35



Fig. 4, *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*, 1:12:34

As a photograph, figure 1 cannot signify Bagan, the Caucasus, and Kaspar's dream; within the film, it asks us to synthesize them as one through our "more projective, more 'magical' fictional consciousness." As a filmic still which has "the diegetic horizon" that "the simple photograph... lack[s]" and yet is self-contained as an image that offers "the *inside* of the fragment," it is able to be all three without collapsing into one, generating what Sebald elsewhere calls "an analytical, not synthesizing, tendency" necessary both to art and memory.²³⁷ According to Barthes, the filmic still allows for three different levels of meaning: the first two correspond to the acts of communication and signification—that is, the production as seen by the audience (footage of a plain accompanies Kaspar's voiceover monologue) and the story it ostensibly means to tell (the eerie image of a faraway land flickers between documenting and refusing Kaspar's revelation about dreams). The third, "obtuse meaning," however, "is discontinuous, indifferent to the story and to the obvious meaning," and "this dissociation has a de-naturing or at least a

²³⁷ Barthes, "Third Meaning," 66, Sebald, "Night and Day," 89.

distancing effect with regard to the referent (to ‘reality’ as nature, the realist instance).”²³⁸ In this third instance, the image means not the Caucasus nor an eighteenth-century foundling’s dream but the transformation of the Bagan into the Caucasian plain of Kaspar’s dream; it is foreign footage re-projected and re-shot on and through another screen whose texture and lighting underscores the modern technology that made it (and is otherwise more or less transparently seen through in the rest of *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser’s* anti-Enlightenment tale). Appearing, disappearing, the filmic image is by turns illustrative of Kaspar’s dream of the Caucasus, symbolic of that dream’s separation from reality, an alternative vision of a film projection of a plain in Myanmar; and it is arguably somewhere in this oscillation between meanings and temporalities that the narrator is brought back to his memory of Henry Selwyn and the Lasithi Plateau, which he realizes in turn, “in reality [he has] still not seen [it] to this day.”

Reading an image as a filmic still “structures the film *differently* without...subverting the story,” and consequently “film and still find themselves in a palimpsest relationship without it being possible to say that one is *on top of* the other or that one is *extracted* from the other.”²³⁹ The still *coexists* with the film but does not merge with it; film and still appear simultaneously but are not seen one through the other. No single vantage takes priority. As Sebald notes in his essay on Tripp, where the “photographic image turns reality into a tautology,” art necessitates “ambiguity, polyvalence, *the resonance of a darkening and illumination*, in short, the transcendence of that which in an incontrovertible sentence is the case.”²⁴⁰ “An analytical, not synthesizing, tendency,” we recall, is thus required for both art and memory:

Remembrance, after all, in essence is nothing other than a quotation. And the quotation incorporated in a text (or painting) by montage compels us--so Eco writes--to probe our knowledge of other texts and pictures and our knowledge of the world. *This, in turn, takes time*. By spending it we enter into time recounted and into the time of culture.²⁴¹

To move beyond the failed tautology of photographic reality, beyond a search for a final synthesis toward a continuous analytical process, we need to learn to see both that which is incontrovertibly there and that which escapes it. Simultaneously “polyvalent” and resonant by turns of “darkening and illumination,” remembrance “takes time,” and by constantly reconfiguring our own knowledge of the world it moves us into the public sphere of historical and cultural memory. Far from claiming the assurance of the photograph’s definitive *ça a été*, Sebald’s memory aesthetic permanently depends on multiplicity and oscillation. This method of remembrance is neither impossible nor is it entirely divorced from the photographic image; it does, however, require us to rethink the relationship between photography and memory.

In the extended filmic pan of Kaspar’s dreamscape, it is the very the pulsing, trembling, migrating multiplicity of blurred references that leads the narrator back to the memory of the slideshow and the clear-sighted acknowledgement of what he had and had not seen “in reality.” The clarity of Nabokov’s “neat little worlds” is disfigured and compromised by time and the inevitable dispersion of encounters across a wider audience and larger globe. But the “trembling,” “jellylike” instability of these projected images is not a fact to despair of here. It is

²³⁸ Barthes, “Third Meaning,” 60.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 64, 67.

²⁴⁰ Sebald, “Night and Day,” 89, emphasis mine.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

precisely the “pulsing dazzle of light”—the “flickering effect and the moving in and out of darkness” that emerges from Herzog “not synchroniz[ing] the projector and the camera,” a second-order relation of seen to seer, or, again, “the resonance of a darkening and illumination”—“that kept reminding” the narrator of Lasithi in the first place.²⁴² Does the narrator remember Selwyn’s slideshow because of the film’s flickering light and fraught projection? Because of some imagined likeness between the Bagan/Caucasian and Lasithi plains? Through parallels between Kaspar’s dream of the Caucasus and the narrator’s memory of Nabokov’s magic lantern experience of the Caucasus? Through Selwyn’s resemblance (actual or imagined) to Nabokov? Because he projects his own relation to the image of the Lasithi plateau that he has not actually seen in person onto Kaspar’s revelation of the distinction between dream and reality? I would venture to say, yes.

The projected image the narrator sees of the Bagan plain does not offer the kind of one-to-one indexical relation or illustrational quality critics (and Sebald himself at times) seem to suggest is the goal with his engagement with photography in general—but I argue that Sebald’s work demonstrates how the production of access to a real past comes *not* from that kind of one-to-one correspondence, but through careful negotiation of the way that correspondence is constantly shifting and multiplied. Recognizing the disappointment of photography to deliver in this way is not new but it is, I argue, the starting point for a different way of seeing the past, one where the structure of the filmic still becomes a more suitable mnemonic idiom for Sebald. What one sees is and is not what one sees—there is a sense of perennial quotation and re-contextualization.

Herzog’s footage may “in reality” be of the Bagan plain, furthermore loudly trumpeting its own timely technological manipulation, but in the film it is *equally* the depiction of the 17th century German foundling’s dream of the Caucasus and actors in period costume dramatizing Kaspar’s revelation. Seeing them both—and even attending to the various permutations of dream and reality that the doubled narratives (Herzog’s within Sebald’s) entail—does not render the footage’s capacity to reveal its referent (the Bagan plain) a failure, but it does require a different way of seeing to understand the kinds of reality the projected images purport to represent. The “blurring” effect of layering of these vistas in fraternal triplicate invokes once again some of Nabokov’s stereoscopic technique to opposite effects (Barthes 67). For Sebald, the out-of-focus vision (or as he later puts it in *The Emigrants*, the “mist that no eye can dispel”) that these turns between real and unreal, between times and places it brings about is indicative of what it looks like to remember.

Heaps and Gaps

The second section of *The Emigrants*, about the narrator’s (and Sebald’s) quarter-Jewish schoolteacher Paul Bereyter, repeatedly emphasizes the stifling silences and unfilled gaps that constituted the alternative milieu “among which [he] grew up.” As a young child, Sebald’s narrator knew nothing about German cities but “patches of waste land on which stood ruined buildings,” such that he “had felt nothing to be so unambiguously linked to the word *city* as the presence of heaps of rubble, fire-scorched walls, and the gaps of windows through which one could see the vacant air” (*E* 30). Visible ruins, patches of wasteland, and yet no known explanations to describe what had once occupied the “gaps...through which one could see the

²⁴² Cronin and Herzog, *Herzog*, 108.

vacant air.” The story that Bereyter’s companion Lucy Landau fills in later, then, is explicitly that of “the meanness and treachery that a family like the Bereyters were exposed to in a miserable hole such as S then was, and still is despite all the so-called progress” (50). The stories of *families like the Bereyters* emerge as the absent centers of these *miserable holes*. But as Mme. Landau observes to the now adult narrator, “I do not find it surprising...not in the slightest, that you were unaware...it does not surprise me at all, since that is inherent in the logic of the whole wretched sequence of events” (50).

The recounted traumas of earlier generations that the narrator bears witness to throughout *The Emigrants* are, with the possible exception of Ambrose Adelwarth and Luisa Ferber’s, often not only second- but also sometimes even third- or fourth-hand testimonies. The central traumas of war and displacement are gestured at elliptically; the only firsthand accounts of others in the novel are written during either World War but focus almost exclusively on everything *but* the wars. One might attribute this oblique address to Sebald’s real anxieties about writing the lives of others as a non-Jewish German who grew up the product of a national “conspiracy of silence.” That may be true, but as Sebald explains in an interview with Michael Silverblatt, addressing this issue “obliquely, tangentially, by reference rather than by direct confrontation” is also a function of what he recognizes to be a belated over-familiarity with images of the war.²⁴³ “The main scenes of horror are never directly addressed,” Sebald continues, since “it is sufficient to remind people, because we’ve all seen images.”

If, as Hirsch proposes, certain key photographs have come to stand in for our collective memories of and associations with the Second World War, Sebald admits to his own wariness with how “these images militate against our capacity for discursive thinking, for reflection upon these things.”²⁴⁴ The photographic images that have come to fill the gaps of his childhood experience threaten to “paralyze, as it were, our moral capacity.” In his youth, for example, those holes left by the horrors of the war were first filled by the screening of documentary films of the liberation of Dachau or Belsen. As Sebald recounts to interviewer Joseph Cuomo,

I mean, one didn’t really talk about the Holocaust, as it is called, in the 1960s in schools, nor did your parents ever mention it, God forbid, and they didn’t talk about it amongst themselves either. So this was a huge taboo zone. But then pressure eventually saw to it that in schools the subject would be raised. It was usually done in the form of documentary films which were shown to us without comment. So, you know, it was a sunny June afternoon, and you would see one of those liberation of Dachau or Belsen films, and then you would go and play football because you didn’t really know what you should do with it.²⁴⁵

Images of concentration camps juxtaposed with sunny June afternoons, without comment, without context. Documentary film or oft-reproduced photograph—the question that no doubt haunts all of Sebald’s oeuvre inevitably emerges in our own work of quotation: *what should you do with it?* The challenge once more is one of working “by reference,” provoking analysis rather than synthesis, movement that activates rather than “paralyze[s]... our moral capacity.”

²⁴³ Interview with Michael Silverblatt, *Emergence of Memory*, 80.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ Interview with Joseph Cuomo, *Emergence of Memory*, 105.

In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald offers some of his fiction's most extended commentary on Nazi ideology and the atrocities it justified through oblique accounts of other documentaries students in his generation saw in school. As the adult narrator wanders the fishing town of Lowestoft, he describes in intricate detail a romanticized memory of a film about herring fishing he saw as a schoolboy in the 1950s:

I well recall one of those flickering short films that teachers could borrow from local film and slide libraries in the Fifties, which showed a trawler from Wilhelmshaven in almost total darkness riding waves that towered to the top of the screen. By night, it appeared, the nets were cast, and by night they were hauled in again. Everything happened as if in a black void, relieved only by the gleam of the white underbellies of the fish, piled high on the deck, and of the salt they were mixed with. In my memory of that school film I see men in their shining black oilskins working heroically as the angry sea crashes over them time upon time—herring fishing regarded as a supreme example of mankind's struggle with the power of Nature. Towards the end, as the boat is approaching its home port, the rays of the evening sun break through the clouds, spreading their glow over the now becalmed waters. One of the seamen, washed and combed, plays on a mouth organ. The captain with the air of a man mindful of his responsibilities, stands at the helm, looking ahead into the distance. At last the catch is unloaded and we see the work in the halls where women's hands gut the herring, sort them according to size, and pack them into barrels. Then (so says the booklet accompanying the 1936 film), the railway goods wagons take in this restless wanderer of the seas and transport it to those places where its fate on this earth will at last be fulfilled. (*RS* 53-54)

The parenthetical “(so says the booklet accompanying the 1936 film),” much like the earlier “(Dr Selwyn told me)” signals the narrator's awareness—though not yet fully the reader's—of his present distance from his childhood memory. He reveals his own discovery over a hundred pages later that this film that he remembered so clearly and with such awe is one of a series of Nazi propaganda films he had found while visiting his hometown the summer before:

However, after an interval of a hundred years [sericulture] was revived by the German fascists with that peculiar thoroughness they brought to everything they touched, as I realized with some surprise when, last summer, searching in the education office of the town I grew up in for the short documentary about North Sea herring fisheries which had been shown to us in primary school, I happened upon a film on German silk cultivation, evidently made for the same series. In contrast to the dark, almost midnight tonalities of the herring film, the film on sericulture was of truly dazzling brightness. Men and women in white coats, in whitewashed rooms flooded with light, were busy at snow-white spinning frames, snow-white sheets of paper, snow-white protective gauze, snow-white cocoons and snow-white canvas mailing sacks. The whole film promised the best and cleanest of all possible worlds, an impression that was confirmed when I read the accompanying booklet, which was intended for our teachers. (*RS* 219-20).

The relation between “the dark, almost midnight tonalities of the herring film” with the “truly dazzling brightness [of] whitewashed rooms flooded with light,” all “snow-white” comes to the reader as perhaps just as much of surprise as it had to the narrator “last summer.” The reader returns to the first film's account to be struck by not only the narrator's admission of

having already found the fishing documentary's accompanying booklet in the education office, but also by the revelation of the "gleam[ing...] white underbellies" that were there all along, underwriting the entire grand account of men and women joining forces in their "supreme example of mankind's struggle with the power of Nature," their catch "piled high" in "a black void," the "restless wanderer[s]" transported by trains "to those places where [their] fate on this earth will at last be fulfilled" (54). The narrator's strong "memory of that school film," juxtaposed with its inverted image of the "snow-white" Nazi vision of "the best and cleanest of all possible worlds," generates a multiplicity of meanings for the narrator, a multiplicity suffused simultaneously with personal memories and cultural knowledge of the war, that the more direct images of the liberations of Dachau and Belsen, given no comment or context by his teachers (though they were given detailed booklets for these earlier films), once failed to do for the author himself. The account of the film on sericulture continues:

Citing the Fuhrer's pronouncement, at the 1936 party rally, that Germany must become self-sufficient within four years in all the materials it lay in the nation's power to produce itself, the author of the booklet observed that this self-evidently included silk cultivation... Any number could be had for virtually nothing, they were perfectly docile and needed neither cages nor compounds, and *they were suitable for a variety of experiments* (weighing, measuring, and so forth) at every stage in their evolution. They could be used to illustrate the structure and distinctive features of insect anatomy, insect domestication, retrogressive mutations, and *the essential measures which are taken by breeders to monitor productivity and selection, including extermination to preempt racial degeneration*. —In the film, we see a silk-worker receiving eggs despatched by the Central Reich Institute of Sericulture in Celle, and depositing them in sterile trays. We see the hatching, the feeding of the ravenous caterpillars, the cleaning out of the frames, the spinning of the silken thread, and finally the killing, accomplished in this case not by putting the cocoons out in the sun or in a hot oven, as was often the practice in the past, but by suspending them over a boiling cauldron. *The cocoons, spread out on shallow baskets, have to be kept in the rising steam for upwards of three hours, and when a batch is done, it is the next one's turn, and so on until the entire killing business is completed.* (RS 220, emphases mine)

The fishermen "working heroically... mindful of [their] responsibilities" disappear in the haze of "rising steam," "the entire killing business" named clearly for what it is. But at the same time, it is *never* named for what it is. The image is one of silkworm cocoons suspended over a boiling cauldron, ostensibly meant to communicate the step-by-step instructions for local sericulture. The "memory of that school film" the narrator has is of a dark mass of caught herring piled high, cataloging the history of North Sea fisheries. And yet what the reader and narrator are likely to see when confronted with either filmic image by the end of the novel are visions of the camps' mass graves and burning bodies, as well as the familiar logic and rhetoric that gave rise to both.

The image of herring the narrator provides in his early recounted memory of the film—shored up parenthetically by his rediscovery of the film in its Nazi context years later—oscillates quietly between all of these meanings. It is at once an image of a pile of fish in a documentary, the narrator's naive remembrance of the heroic scene built up around it, and an acute, self-reproachful consciousness of the "appearing-disappearing" specter of that other, absent image almost lost entirely to the "black void" (or "miserable hole") save that ominous, pervasive "gleam of... white." The narrator does not rewrite his childhood memory of the film's imagery under the auspices of the new information he discovers but allows it instead to reverberate in this new

context and thereby engender new meanings in the “permutational unfolding” between initial impression and later signification. To land only on clear condemnation of the “snow-white” men and women is to stultify the process of reckoning with his earlier identification not with the bodies piled high but with the men working “heroically” to put them there. This is the work of remembrance as quotation that allows for analysis rather than synthesis, for a stay against the paralysis of our moral capacity.

This brings us, of course, to the Nazi documentary film that produces the one physical film still Sebald included in any of his hybrid prose fictions: the famous image of the woman resembling Austerlitz’s mother in the background of a propaganda film’s thoroughly whitewashed Theresienstadt. One of the most powerful—and most analyzed images—in Sebald’s oeuvre, critics tend to read the still as they might another photograph, albeit an important one. The Theresienstadt still is indeed one of the primary sites at which critics have staked their claims about photography’s dangers of projection or ultimate refusal of access to the past. I will revisit the scenes of Austerlitz’s watching to propose a different account. But first, I’d like to consider the chain of revelations that lands Austerlitz in the screening room of the Imperial War Museum—and the narrator to his possession of this account—in the first place.

The Edge of Vision

Kristallnacht, or “The Night of Broken Glass,” made the escalation of sanctioned violence against the Jewish community visible the world over and inspired, among other things, the rapid loosening of British immigration restrictions. Within weeks, Great Britain welcomed the first of the *Kindertransport* trains that would take children like Jacques Austerlitz, a Czech Jew, away from German-occupied territories to the UK. *Austerlitz*, as the description on its back cover succinctly announces, is the story of a young boy who arrives in England on a *Kindertransport* in 1939 and is told nothing of the family he left behind; who only as an older man begins to remember his childhood and search for more information about his past. The pages of the novel itself, however, make no admission of any of this until the reader is almost halfway through its roughly three hundred pages. Instead, for 140 pages, the narrator (a non-Jewish German scholar resembling Sebald) takes us through a series of conversations he has with a solitary architectural historian across three decades and two countries about seemingly everything *but* this aspect of his personal history.

After a gap of almost twenty years, the narrator re-encounters Austerlitz in the bar of London’s Great Eastern Hotel by strange coincidence—or, as he describes it, “Contrary to all statistical probability,” according to “an astonishing, positively imperative internal logic” (A 44). Over the next hundred pages, the narrator relates Austerlitz’s account of his childhood, raised by a cold Welsh minister and his wife, his years away at school, his close friendship with a schoolmate, Gerald Fitzpatrick, and Gerald’s family, a visit he and his mentor made to a dilapidated country estate in the 1950’s, his academic career and his nervous breakdowns. Finally—at least for the reader of jacket covers who has long anticipated this moment—Austerlitz tells the narrator about overhearing a radio program in a bookshop one day:

I was listening to two women talking to each other about the summer of 1939, when they were children and had been sent to England on a special transport. They mentioned a number of cities...but only when one of the couple said that her own transport, after two days traveling through the German Reich and the Netherlands, *where she could see the great sails of the windmills from the train*, had finally left the Hook of Holland on the ferry *Prague* to

cross the North Sea to Harwich, *only then did I know beyond any doubt that these fragments of memory were part of my own life as well.* (141, emphases mine)

Shattered or not, *The Emigrants'* image of windmill sails dotting a landscape resurfaces subtly but with a vengeance once more. In Sebald's final novel, it ushers in the name Prague and forces back the deluge of a half-century's forgetting, throwing a sunken Czech past into an "almost overexposed" high relief (143).

The revelation is shocking not only because of its seemingly belated introduction, but also because of the way Austerlitz frequently describes his lifelong *inability* to visualize his past throughout the first half of the novel. As a child he "often lay awake for hours...trying to conjure up the faces of those whom I had left...but not until I was numb with weariness and my eyelids sank in the darkness did I see my mother bending down to me just for a fleeting moment, or my father smiling as he put on his hat" (A 45); as a young man, he remembers being particularly entranced by the sense of time he experienced through a landscape where "All forms and colors were dissolved in a pearl-gray haze; there were no contrasts, no shading anymore, only flowing transitions with the light throbbing through them, a single blur from which only the most fleeting of visions emerged" (95); as a troubled adult, wandering the streets and stations of London all night, he "thought several times that among the passengers coming towards me in the tiled passages, on the escalators plunging steeply into the depths, or behind the gray windows of a train just pulling out, I saw a face known to me from some much earlier part of my life, but I could never say whose it was...I began seeing what might be described as shapes and colors of diminished corporeality through a drifting veil or cloud of smoke, images from a faded world" (127). These fleeting, fuzzy, faded images that haunt Austerlitz dissolve—much as the shattered slide in *The Emigrants* does—the distinctions between memory, perception, dreams, and hallucinations, but it is not until much later in his life (and likewise well into the novel) that they take on any urgency, if not necessarily more clarity.

Just before telling the narrator about his discovery in the bookstore, Austerlitz describes how "in the middle of these dreams...somewhere behind his eyes, he had felt these overwhelmingly immediate images forcing their way out of him, but once he had woken he could recall scarcely any of them even in outline" (A 139). His inability to physically contain such overwhelming images that he can nonetheless barely remember in outline come morning, leads him to the realization of "how little practice I had in using my memory, and conversely how hard I must always have tried to recollect as little as possible, avoiding everything which related in any way to my unknown past... As far as I was concerned the world ended in the late nineteenth century" (139). But the moment he hears the woman on the radio recount *her* memory of seeing the windmills dotting the Dutch landscape through a train window en route to the ferry *Prague*, his own memory surfaces in startlingly crisp detail:

I was too alarmed by this sudden revelation to be able to write down the addresses and phone numbers given at the end of the program. I merely saw myself waiting on a quay in a long crocodile of children lined up two by two, most of them carrying rucksacks or small leather cases. I saw the great slabs of paving at my feet again, the mica in the stone, the gray-brown water in the harbor basic, the ropes and anchor chains slanting upwards, the bows of the ship, higher than a house, the seagulls fluttering over our heads and screeching wildly, the sun breaking through the clouds, and the red-haired girl in the tartan cape and velvet beret who had looked after the smaller children in our compartment during the train journey through the dark countryside. Years later, as I now

recalled again, I still had recurrent dreams of this girl playing me a cheerful tune on a kind of bandoleon, in a place lit by a bluish nightlight. (141-42)

Given the tenacity with which his memories have refused to surface until this moment, there seems to be nothing “mere” about him suddenly seeing his childhood self with such shocking clarity that even the flecks in the pavement sparkle anew. The return of this striking memory and its persistence such that “years later” he could “recall again” his “recurrent” dreams seem a remarkable triumph, one that of course sets into motion the second half of the novel in which Austerlitz tells the narrator about his search for traces of his parents and his past. But the fact that the specific image that sparks all of this is so reminiscent of the multiply laden photographic glass slide from *The Emigrants* is significant; it quietly signals that the questions of first- and secondhand experience, shared memory, fictionality, and one’s responsibility to the past in light of all of these things will reverberate throughout this later work too. The ever-lurking photographic analogy—one Sebald himself capitalizes on in describing Austerlitz’s subsequent translation into the Prague of his past on the next page as “much too bright, almost overexposed”—brings its own difficulties in a narrative that in its very structure already forecloses so much access to reader, narrator, and central protagonist alike (143).

We encounter an early skepticism about the nature of this sudden revelation through Austerlitz’s history teacher and mentor André Hilary who warns that “All of us, even when we think we have noted every tiny detail, resort to set pieces which have already been staged often enough by others” (A 71). Refracting Austerlitz’s experience of memory in which he feels “overwhelmingly immediate images *forcing their way out of him*,” then, is Hilary’s view that we “try to reproduce the reality, but the harder we try, the more we find the pictures that make up the stock-in-trade of the spectacle of history *forcing themselves upon us*” (139, 72, emphases mine). Lest we think that the directionality of Austerlitz’s fugitive memories forcing their way *out* might somehow ensure their validity, a real return of the repressed, his account of Hilary’s theory continues, “Our concern with history... is a concern with preformed images *already imprinted* on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered” (71-2). To return to some of the critical discussion with which we began, Hilary provokes Austerlitz, the narrator, and the reader alike to consider how much we can trust the images we recover of the past—public, personal, or otherwise—to exceed the “stock-in-trade of the spectacle of history” and come to a closer approximation of the truth. More importantly, perhaps, Hilary’s theory furthermore draws our attention to the potentially warping effect of our desire for such concrete images in the first place, “images at which we keep staring, while the truth lies elsewhere” (72).

While Hilary’s examples, like Austerlitz’s own foreshortened sense of history, focus on the pre-photographic Napoleonic Wars (and the Battle of Austerlitz, in particular), his language clearly resonates with Sontag’s critique of photography in the twentieth century (which, of course, Sebald himself quotes directly) as problematically constitutive of our sense of reality, of historical event, and even of ourselves, such that people could now “feel that they are images, and are made real by photographs.”²⁴⁶ Sontag, however, takes Hilary’s indictment of “preformed images” that distract us from the truth, in a slightly different direction: “Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of

²⁴⁶ Sontag, *On Photography*, 16.

understanding, which starts from *not* accepting the world as it looks.²⁴⁷ While Hilary's theory leaves us hopelessly staring at the wrong images, Sontag's opens up the possibility of a kind of staring, gazing, or glancing resistance; whatever the duration, refusing the world *as it looks* requires, of course, both looking and refusal in the process of understanding—Anderson's "dual affirmation," a kind of filmic reading that insists upon both sides *and* elicits a third, unseen meaning from the oscillation between them. In the uncertain movement between images forcing their way out and images forcing themselves upon us, we open space for a different relation to the work of remembrance.

In describing his passion for photography, Austerlitz draws his sense of his own flawed memory and photography's possibilities together. If his mind's images contain only blurred, faded, indistinguishable shapes, his camera allows him to focus on and capture "the shape and the self-contained nature of discrete things" (A 76). The images of his photography and his memory share a certain fleeting quality that "entranced" him, particularly "the moment when the shadows of reality, so to speak, emerge out of nothing on the exposed paper, as memories do in the middle of the night, darkening again if you try to cling to them, just like a photographic print left in the developing bath too long" (77). Curiously, Austerlitz's account has memory and photography function doubly as tenor and vehicle in one space: photographic images emerge "as memories do"; memories darken "just like a photographic print left in the developing bath too long." In the text's endeavor to make the "the shadows of reality...emerge out of nothing," the question of which one is a figure for the other (and when) is seemingly paramount.

The fleeting quality of the photographic print—unlike his memories—is not a given but only one potential outcome, one due, he says, to clinginess, to an error of human desire that refuses to let an image go. At the same time, however, we see the analogy oscillate once more: it is not *clinginess*, after all, that leaves a print in the developing bath too long, but its opposite, neglect. The ephemeral moment of careful convergence—when a photograph can emerge like a repressed memory, and a memory is recovered in time for it to live on out of one's hands like a well-developed photograph—is the most one can hope for. All of this for content that is, pace Hilary and Sontag, admittedly suspect in the first place. We see in this once more the inversion of Nabokov's method: rather than draw elements together to construct the *solid*, artificial but beautifully *exact*, visions of his stereoscopic dreamlands, Sebald's come together only to once again crumble, disappear, or fall out of focus both when we look away and when we don't, recalling both the movement of cinematic temporality and the "permutational unfolding" of the filmic still rather than the eternal "outside of time" that often characterizes still photography.

Austerlitz's recovered memory also raises doubts regarding the authenticity of the photographic quality with which he sees himself on the quay—or in the earlier, haunting memory of meeting the Eliases for the first time at the Liverpool Street Station.²⁴⁸ It posits itself on the one hand as irrefutable evidence for a thing having taken place, that photographic stamp of traumatic authenticity Garloff proposes Sebald both stages and refutes, regardless of one's own memory of it, and on the other, as proof of the necessarily fictitious and constructed elements of many of our memories. It is, after all, as much a photographic commonplace to see oneself externalized in an image, as it is a logical impossibility for one to have a faithful memory of

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁴⁸ "And I not only saw the minister and his wife, said Austerlitz, *I also saw the boy they had come to meet...* As it was, I recognized him by that rucksack of his, and for the first time in as far back as I can remember I recollected myself as a small child, at the moment when I realized that it must have been to this same waiting room I had come on my arrival in England over half a century ago" (A 137)

oneself from the outside.²⁴⁹ Echoing Hilary, the nature of Austerlitz's returned memory also underscores the question of whether or not this image is indeed Austerlitz's or one imprinted on him from outside. The photographic acuity with which the initial memory of his emigration returns is predicated on projection and identification with the other woman's recounted memory on the radio. The space of memory emerges as neither the external verification of internal processes (these photographs square with my memories, therefore my memories must be real) nor the projection of inner sentiment onto the outside world (I identify myself with these images, therefore they are real), but in the uncertain space in between. That is, the kind of uncertain oscillation between expression and disguise, reference and projection, is as much a facet of the experience of recovering firsthand memory for Austerlitz as it is one of the narrator's (and subsequently the reader's) secondary work of piecing the fragments altogether.

There is, then, another revelation that Sebald signals as key to the narrative's recovery of Austerlitz's memory: the development of a certain double rather than stereoscopic vision on the part of the narrator. Just before the narrator encounters Austerlitz in the Great Eastern Hotel, setting off the long conversation that leads to the revelation of Austerlitz's recovered memory, he goes to visit Czech ophthalmologist in London because of some eye trouble:

Even when I glanced up from the page open in front of me and turned my gaze on the framed photographs on the wall, all my right eye could see was a row of dark shapes curiously distorted above and below—the figures and landscapes familiar to me in every detail having resolved indiscriminately into a black and menacing cross-hatching. At the same time I kept feeling as if I could see as clearly as ever on the edge of my field of vision, and had only to look sideways to rid myself of what I took at first for a merely hysterical weakness in my eyesight (A 35).

Photographs in particular split in twain before him: the troubled right eye turn the familiar “figures and landscapes... into a black and menacing cross-hatching”—photographic images rendered in the idiom of artificial reproduction or an artist's sketch; his left, untroubled eye, presumably still sees the photographs clearly, “objectively,” as they are. The vision that sets one up for encountering the past doesn't result from closing one eye or the other, but looking “sideways,” pivoting between either “edge of [his field of vision]” with both eyes. The narrator internalizes the metaphors Hilary and Austerlitz propose: he moves from taking in the photographs on the wall to having images literally taken from of his eyes as a specialist shoots “a series of photographs of my eyes, or rather... of the back of the eye through the iris, the pupil, and the vitreous humor” (38). Having just performed this back and forth with his own physical sight, the narrator looks once more to the edge of his vision, this time to “the edge of the agitated crowd,” and recognizes “a figure who could only be Austerlitz” (39).

A chance meeting for the narrator, a carefully crafted choice on the part of the author (or narrator as ostensible author of the text), the former describes how, “As far as I remember, I was overcome for a considerable time by my amazement at the unexpected return of Austerlitz” (A 40). He continues in his amazement, which Austerlitz counters by proposing how, “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 before entered in his life. Having said this, Austerlitz fell silent, and for a while, it seemed to me, he gazed into the

²⁴⁹ See Daniel Schacter, *Searching for Memory* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

farthest distance. Since my childhood and youth, he finally began, looking at me again, I have never known who I really was” (44). He begins his tale of recovered—and ever-recovering—memory with the revelation of impeded vision in his childhood. Like the narrator who has, by virtue of his eye condition, started to see both what is and isn’t there in the images before him, “it was only a few days ago” that Austerlitz “remember[s] how one of the two windows of my bedroom was walled up on the inside while it remained unchanged outside, a circumstance which, as one is never both outside and inside a house at the same time, I did not register until I was thirteen or fourteen”—shortly before Hilary reveals Austerlitz’s true name to him (45). This memorial double-consciousness, recognizing the conditions “both outside and inside” even as one acknowledges the impossibility of registering them clearly at the same time, becomes a central feature of Austerlitz’s search for his past.

As he eventually describes his search for the Theresienstadt film, Austerlitz explains, “I kept thinking that if only the film could be found I might perhaps be able to see or gain some inkling of what it was really like, and then I imagined recognizing Agata, beyond any possibility of a doubt, a young woman as she would be by comparison with me today, perhaps among the guests outside the fake coffeehouse, or a saleswoman in the haberdashery shop, just taking a fine pair of gloves carefully out of one of the drawers” (A 245). He continues his description of “wishful fantasies such as these”: “I imagined seeing her walking down the street in a summer dress and lightweight gabardine coat, said Austerlitz: among a group of ghetto residents out for a stroll, she alone seemed to make straight for me, coming closer with every step, until at last I thought I could sense her stepping out of the frame and passing over into me” (245). When he does finally get hold of the film, Austerlitz describes his disappointment with how he saw an “unbroken succession of strangers’ faces emerge before me for a few seconds,” and “at first [he] could get none of these images into [his] head; they merely flickered before [his] eyes as the source of continual irritation or vexation” (249).

Under the constraints of cinematic succession, none of these images stick, enter “into” his head in the way he hopes his mother will likewise step “out of the frame and [pass] over into me.” So he subverts it, “having a slow-motion copy of this fragment from Theresienstadt made.” Just as Barthes describes the “different film” the filmic still allows one to uncover, Austerlitz now finds “a different sort of film altogether”: the original images of “cheerful spectators” return in “a funeral march dragging along at a grotesquely sluggish pace... mov[ing] in a kind of subterranean world, through the most nightmarish depths... to which no human voice has ever descended” (250). As with the Nazi documentaries about herring and silkworms, we learn to see how the same image might contain mutually exclusive visions, and how the traversal between them creates a new space for remembering. In viewing this “different sort of film,” slowed to the pace of “the fluidal pictures and electrographs taken by Louis Draget in Paris around the turn of the century,” Austerlitz discovers a woman who “looks, *so I tell myself as I watch*, just as I imagined the singer Agata from my faint memories and the few other clues to her appearance as I now have, and I gaze and gaze again at that face, which seems to be *both strange and familiar*” (251, emphases mine).

This extensive, eight-page description of Theresienstadt and the search for (and possible discovery of) Agata seems to founder on a few lines that follow:

I also spent several days searching the records for the years 1938 and 1939 in the Prague theatrical archives in the Celetna, and there, among letters, files on employees, programs, and faded newspaper cuttings, I came upon the photograph of an anonymous actress who seemed to resemble my dim memory of my mother, and in whom Vera, who had already

spent some time studying the face of the woman in the concert audience which I had copied from the Theresienstadt Film, before shaking her head and putting it aside, immediately and without a shadow of doubt, as she said, recognized Agata as she had then been. (252-3)

The comparable discovery of a “photograph of an anonymous actress who”—like the woman in the film—“seemed to resemble my dim memory of my mother,” and which furthermore carries the emphatic verification from their former neighbor Vera who “immediately and without a shadow of doubt...recognized Agata as she had then been” versus “shaking her head and putting [the film still] aside”—garners little additional comment and none of the enthusiasm one might expect of someone who had exhausted so much time and energy in his search. While many critics tend to read this moment as announcing photography’s ultimate failure to provide access to the particularities of past or as alternatively indicative of the “perils of postmemory,” in which images like that of the woman at Theresienstadt become mere “screens on which we project present or timeless needs and desires and which thus mask other images and other concerns”—all certainly very real concerns—I want to suggest a shift in emphasis away from the ostensible final products toward the continuous mode of reading and uncertainty Austerlitz’s filmic still engenders.²⁵⁰ What if Austerlitz’s clear preference for the still over the photograph is not a mark of his delusion but actually a moment of clear-sightedness?

Recalling his earlier revelation about the nature of photography and memory, Austerlitz’s painstaking search for an image of his mother does not lead to clinginess—or neglect. He lets both of the images go, entrusting them to the narrator and, ultimately, the reader. As opposed to the narrator’s precipitous identification with Henry Selwyn’s “I” and what it “can still see” in *The Emigrants*, Austerlitz emphatically uses the more distanced language that that narrator reserves for his second section on his schoolteacher Paul Bereyter, the repetition of the projective, yet distanced, “I imagine”: “I imagined recognizing Agata, beyond any possibility of a doubt... I imagined seeing her walking down the street.” He does so not because he necessarily believes that he will find her, or that it will ever be possible to recognize her, like Vera, “immediately and without a shadow of doubt,” but with the much more modest, if more complicated, goal of “perhaps be[ing] able to see or gain some inkling of what it was really like” (A 245). And this, arguably, he *does* gain—not through the final positive identification of Agata, but rather through the painstaking process of reading and re-reading of the film as a series of stills. Austerlitz recasts the fragments of the film as an extended series of quotations from the original, and in doing so, opens up a “different time-scale, neither diegetic nor oneiric,” one that allows recognition of the Theresienstadt Film’s weary, funereal meaning—an “inkling,” perhaps, “of what it was really like.”²⁵¹ Austerlitz’s search for the past does not thus reveal the failures of photography so much as it offers up an alternative reading practice that “blur(s) the limit separating expression from disguise, but also... allow(s) that oscillation succinct demonstration—an elliptic emphasis” (57).

The resulting “counter-narrative; disseminated, reversible, set to its own temporality,” does not supplant the more apparent story of Agata’s loss within the Nazi machinery, but it does offer the kind of bifocal historical vision that Sebald attributes to Tripp’s “bearer of the secret.” In the still’s pervasive, oblique reference, which never quite supplants the larger film’s own communication (audience members at a musical performance) or signification (Nazi agenda of

²⁵⁰ Hirsch, “Generation of Postmemory,” 120.

²⁵¹ Barthes, “Third Meaning,” 62; A 245.

justifying the camps to the rest of the world), we see Sebald's techniques move us between these local identifications rather "paralyze" us with regard to this image—the only one within his hybrid prose fictions to actually depict Holocaust victims in a Nazi concentration camp.

The continual uncertainty that Sebald's play with media and genre and quotation ultimately affords the reader is not one that simply leaves us stuck at the revelation that "memory does not so much restore the past as take the true measure of bottomless loss," freezing us, as it were, in our sense of photography's failures.²⁵² Instead it attempts to generate a different relation to these remnants through an ethical "oscillation... both extreme and self-aware" and a formal one as subtle and slight as "an elliptic emphasis."²⁵³ In the multiplicity of vision staged both by Sebald's mixture of photographic and verbal texts and narratorial identifications, his works allow us as readers similarly to learn to see in a manner that keeps us engaged in a work of remembrance that is analytical rather than synthetic, that forestalls the dangerous and devastating temptation to look for only one meaning, one stable referent, in the photographic images that now flood our world.

The Silent Leap

One of Sebald's last works was the collaboration with artist and lifelong friend Jan Peter Tripp entitled *Unrecounted* (2004). Published posthumously, the collection of poems and images also includes an essay by Sebald doggedly wresting Tripp's work from comparison with the strictly photographic. As his translator Michael Hamburger notes in the volume's introduction, "By defending a friend's work... he tells us more about his own practices in a different medium than he could make explicit in his imaginative works."²⁵⁴

A remarkably precise, almost photographic aesthetic does indeed characterize Tripp's work. At times it is practically impossible to distinguish the artist's work from photography, though in this particular painting, *Ein leisen Sprung* (*The Silent Leap*), the photographic quality is displaced. Sebald introduces the image alongside his account of how the "most convincing trompe-l'oeil" celebrated art critic Ernst Gombrich ever saw "had simulated a cracked pane of glass in front of the painted surface."²⁵⁵ If the successful trompe-l'oeil's "power of suggestion and the attitude of expectation aroused in the viewer reciprocally reinforce each other," Tripp's *Ein leisen Sprung* accomplishes this by deflecting the expectation of verisimilitude onto the appearance of a mediating glass screen. The soft hues and shading of the man's watercolored likeness come into stark contrast with the sharp lines of cracked glass so evocative of the real thing "that instinctively one puts out one's hand to touch" not the man, but the glass in between.²⁵⁶ Recalling the broken glass that both propels Austerlitz's emigration and underscores the limitations of



Fig. 5 Tripp's *Ein leisen Sprung* (1974)

²⁵² Benjamin Kunkel, "Germanic Depressive," *Village Voice*, June 6, 2000, 125, qtd. in Pearson, "Remembrance," 274.

²⁵³ Serpell, *Seven Modes*, 72; Barthes, "Third Meaning," 57.

²⁵⁴ Michael Hamburger, introduction to *Unrecounted* by W.G. Sebald, 11.

²⁵⁵ Sebald, "Night and Day," 88.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

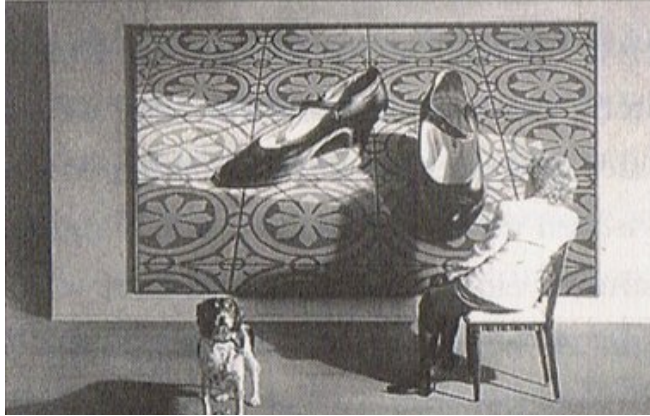


Fig. 6 Painting by Jan Peter Tripp reproduced in *Unrecounted*

collective memory in *The Emigrants*, *Ein leisen Sprung* silently compels its viewers to attend specially to the surface rather than the image projected through it, though neither view is possible without the other. In all three instances, the shattered glass reminds us of the play between the sense of transparent access to another moment, place, or person and the reality of that access's necessary foreclosure and bifurcation.

Attempting to extricate his friend's work from what he sees as Tripp's facile

categorization in the photorealist tradition, Sebald pays close attention to the minutiae of his images and insists that "the inherent quality of a picture by Tripp... cannot be attributed to that identity with reality which all its viewers admire without fail—or its photographic reproduction—but to the less apparent points of divergence and difference." What in Tripp's work might at first glance appear "its purely objective and affirming nature," is in fact "carefully modified" from the "photographic material that is their starting point."²⁵⁷ He goes on to catalogue these divergences of color, sharpness, placement, emphasis, and subtleties of content, such that "those happy errors occur from which unexpectedly the system of representation opposed to reality can result." The serendipitous emergence of "the system of representation opposed to reality" via these hairline faults between "purely objective" presentation and Tripp's art as such is freighted by their co-existence within the representational space of the picture. *Ein Leisen Sprung* asks the viewer to recognize the ways in which the painting approximates both raw recording and painstaking signification, both the realization of artifice and the pleasure of illusion, creating a third meaning where the viewer can see this striking photographic likeness and yet meditate upon a "system of representation opposed to reality."

Or, one might think of this third meaning as one in which we consider the directionality of the work's title "A Silent Leap." If the shattered glass is meant to index this leap, it raises the question of whether or not that leap is ours as viewers into the illusory world of the man's likeness or that of the man attempting to enter our own 'reality.' The kind of uncertainty the broken glass generates in this regard is, I argue, at the heart of Sebald's work of remembrance. In his tirade against his friend's categorization as a photorealist, Sebald insists upon how Tripp—like Proust and like Sebald himself—takes "ephemeral moments and configurations... out of their sequence, salvag[ing them] as it were, for ever by... impassioned and patient work."²⁵⁸ This, in turn, is the work of quotation, of remembrance: taking an ephemeral moment out of its sequence, demanding time to reckon with and understand how it "compels us... to probe our knowledge of other texts and pictures and our knowledge of the world." Tripp's work is not photographic in its emphasis on time, duration, and dual insistence on the "purely objective" and "the system of representation opposed to reality"—it's filmic.

Sebald concludes his essay on Tripp with a reading of a last painting, one in which a woman sits in a gallery, her back to the viewer, looking at a painting that was ostensibly made of

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

her. Gazing at the image, pondering “the history of her shoes and an inexplicable loss,” she “never guesses that the disclosure of her secret lies behind her.” Meanwhile, in the left foreground, a dog, the “bearer of the secret, who runs with ease over the abysses of time,” sits facing out toward the audience, gazing upon us with a strangely bifurcated vision: “His left (domesticated) eye is attentively fixed on us; the right (wild) one has a little less light, strikes us as averted and alien. And yet we sense that it is the overshadowed eye that sees through us.” What might it look like to seek out the past with a gaze more akin to this dog’s than the woman’s—to look both toward the world as it is communicated, “objectively,” and to see “through” it, “averted, alien, [with] a little less light,” and thus see the past “more accurately than we do”?²⁵⁹ Rather than sit and search for a certain meaning or identification with the image as the woman in Tripp’s painting does, encounters with the Theresienstadt still, the Nazi herring documentary, Herzog’s film and Selwyn’s slideshow invite us to look at the past with one wild and one domesticated eye that can identify intimately, individually and can recognize necessary, objective distance by turns. Much as Sebald describes the comparable power of Tripp’s work, his own oscillating ethics of memory “confronts the extinction of the visible world in an interminable series of reproductions” through “the deconstruction of phenomenal forms.”²⁶⁰ Or, as *Austerlitz*’s narrator puts it, he “had only to look sideways to rid myself of what I took at first for a merely hysterical weakness in my eyesight” (A 35).

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 95.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 89.

Blind Spots and Empathy Gaps: Blindness and Insight in Teju Cole's *Open City*

In April 2011, two months after the publication of his novel *Open City*, the Nigerian American novelist and critic Teju Cole woke up to a startling revelation: half of his vision was gone. In his essay “Blind Spot,” published online in *Granta* a few months after the novel came out, he writes that he woke up with “a grey veil across the visual field of [his] left eye.”²⁶¹ Cole later quotes a passage from his own novel in which the protagonist, a psychiatrist named Julius, describes knowledge of others as analogous to the physiology of sight:

Ophthalmic science describes an area at the back of the bulb of the eye, the optic disk, where the million or so ganglia of the optic nerve exit the eye. It is precisely there, where too many of the neurons associated with vision are clustered, that the vision goes dead. For so long, I recall explaining to my friend that day, I have felt that most of the work of psychiatrists in particular, and mental health professionals in general, was a blind spot so broad that it had taken over most of the eye. What we knew, I said to him, was so much less than what remained in darkness, and in this great limitation lay the appeal and frustration of the profession.²⁶²

Rather than seeing them as two incompatible modes of relation, Cole emphasizes that blindness and connection are intimately linked even in the most primitive of visual technologies: the human eye. The “million or so” neural pathways to visual knowledge converge not in greater collective sight but in a gaping hole, blindness rather than insight. Attentive to the tantalizing transparency of glass, photography, and film, Cole’s work demonstrates how the more avenues we supposedly have available to vision, the less we might actually see in our present digital age. Learning to recognize and navigate this situation becomes the essential task of not just the mental health professional tasked with care for his patients, but of the twenty-first-century “global citizen” and critical reader looking to recognize and remember others as well. Both *Open City* and Cole’s Internet-based projects map a digital optics that encompasses, on the one hand, unprecedented virtual access—instantaneous worldwide connectivity—and, on the other, the blind spots and empathy gaps of twenty-first century memory and cosmopolitan ethics. Unlike his modernist predecessors in this project, for Cole the operative narrative mode for disclosing history is neither stereoscopic nor filmic vision, neither mirror nor window; it is instead one marked repeatedly, if counterintuitively, by *blindness*.

Big Blind Spot Syndrome

The night before he went half-blind, Cole writes in “Blind Spot,” he had stayed up late to finish reading Virginia Woolf’s diary, the last pages recounting the year leading up to her suicide in 1941. The Germans were bombing Britain in earnest; Woolf meanwhile worked on completing her memoir and the novel that would become *Between the Acts* (1941). The “epiphanic

²⁶¹ Teju Cole, “Blind Spot,” *Granta*, August, 20, 2012.

²⁶² Teju Cole, *Open City* (New York: Random House, 2012), 238-239. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text as *OC*.

moments that intermittently illuminated the gloom” of Woolf’s depression in her last months radiate with such intensity from an ocean and seven decades away that when Cole finally falls asleep, it was “in the glare of her words.” Oddly, the sudden partial blindness he wakes up with the next morning doesn’t alarm him so much as it prompts him to wonder, “Was I like those highly suggestible people who, out of sympathy with something written, drift into an area of darkness?”²⁶³

Woolf’s late diary entries reveal not only her trademark moments of radiant epiphany, but also the nervous tension that builds in exhausting waves as the air warfare continues. “The war is like desperate illness,” she writes in May 1940, “For a day it entirely obsesses; then the feeling faculty gives out; next day one is disembodied, in the air. Then the battery is re-charged, & again—what? Well, the bomb terror. Going to London to be bombed.” A far cry from the inviting, transparent sheen of *Mrs. Dalloway*’s London with which I began, the city the Woolfs returned to four months later was reduced to material: “Heaps of blue green glass in the road... Glass falling... windows broken but house untouched... Glass on the stairs... Park houses with broken windows, but undamaged...” By the next day, panes of glass signify only destruction wrought from above, not visual access: “The windows shake. So we know London is raided again.”²⁶⁴

Tracing Woolf’s heaps of shattered glass in the road, Cole’s identification with her experiences on the ground during the aerial bombardment leads him to a darkened dead end rather than luminous transparency, to the sudden onset of papillophlebitis—or “Big Blind Spot Syndrome,” as it is more commonly known. As the day wears on, Cole can “hardly see out of [his] right eye, and not at all out of the left.” He heads toward the train station from the eye clinic “almost completely blind,” a journey that transports him from the present into “the era of the earliest photographs” in which “the whole street [becomes] a collage, foggy in parts, clear in others, grainy in the distance.” His sense of depth and levels, foreground and background, likened to that of a collage, is reduced to an artificial function of his flickering sight rather than his perception of real physical distance: “each house looked much the same as the next, polygonal, almost flat, neither more or less substantial than the sky above... The view seemed on the perpetual verge of vanishing.” Against this flattened background, Cole describes how he himself “felt like a cut-out diminished and simplified because the sense of sight on which I was so dependent flickered with each step.”²⁶⁵

Whereas Vladimir Nabokov built his multidimensional, stereoscopic train-station dreamland out of the multiplication and layering of sights real and imagined—photographic documentation and mnemosyne’s “arbitrary spectacles”—Cole’s comparable construction here is a disconcertingly stripped down and diminished vision. A failure of stereoscopic compression, the scene is a flattened and simplified image, born out of almost complete blindness and reminiscent of the crude graphics of an early video game. Unlike Nabokov, the architect of his own vivid stereoscopic dreamland, Cole is passively immersed in his, as the syntactical construction of the quotation from “Blind Spot” above repeatedly insists: Cole is “cut out, “diminished,” and “simplified” because of the flickering and fading “sight on which [he] was so dependent.” The luminous insight into the lives of others afforded by the transparency of glass gives way to a

²⁶³ Cole, “Blind Spot.”

²⁶⁴ Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary*, 285 (May 20, 1940); *Ibid.*, 317-318 (September 10, 1940). Woolf mentions shaken or broken windows and glass at least sixteen times in the last year of her diary entries.

²⁶⁵ Cole, “Blind Spot.”

broken, darkened violence wrought, unseen, from above. The crystalline production of three-dimensional stereoscopic memory-images collapses into Cole's virtual absorption into a collage composed of flat, geometric cutouts from an earlier era. These modifications of Woolf and Nabokov's models of vision, as I will demonstrate shortly, reflect the parameters of Cole's own optics in *Open City*, while his overt dialogue with W.G. Sebald's work clarifies their distinctly digital character.

As "Blind Spot" continues, Cole takes the train to New York City to see the Russian eye specialist Dr. L., just as the narrator of *Austerlitz* takes the train to London to see the Czech eye specialist, Zdenek Gregor. Like Dr. Gregor, Dr. L. takes "a series of photographs of [Cole's] eyes, or rather... of the back of the eye through the iris, the pupil, and the vitreous humor" (A 138). The eye problems that *Austerlitz*'s narrator experiences make familiar "framed photographs on the wall [...resolve] indiscriminately into a black and menacing cross-hatching," through which he recognizes Jacques Austerlitz at the Great Eastern Hotel. Cole's syndrome transforms printed language into "words [that] refused to resolve in the meaningless hieroglyphics of my right eye and in the total darkness of the left." Sebald's narrator is diagnosed with "central serous chorioretinopathy," a condition that "occurred almost exclusively in middle-aged men who spent too much time reading and writing" (A 138). Dr. L diagnoses Cole with "Big Blind Spot Syndrome... a young man's disease," that "just happens... on its own."²⁶⁶ If we consider the millions of ganglia leading to blindness that Cole describes in *Open City* and quotes in his essay, this young man's disease might be understood as a response to an overabundance of information, whereas the older man's comes from the strains of intense scrutiny and overuse.

Cole's affinity with Sebald is one of the most constant themes of the critical conversation around his work. Cole no doubt courts such comparisons by writing multiple essays in homage to the German author, including one distinctly vertiginous Sebaldian account of Cole's visit to the latter's grave in Norwich.²⁶⁷ The city as palimpsest, the ever-present haunting of a sedimented collective past, the wide-ranging cultural references, the narrative refusal to distinguish dialogue via quotation marks that characterize Cole's *Open City*—these all so clearly harken back to Sebald's prose fictions that one wonders if Cole's recent attempt to distance himself doth indeed

protest too much.

And yet, if one reads Cole's work through the lens of twenty-first-century digital technology, it is not at all difficult to see where the two diverge. It is in fact in this divergence that the most interesting dialogue between the two authors—one an adamant luddite, the other an Internet sensation multiple

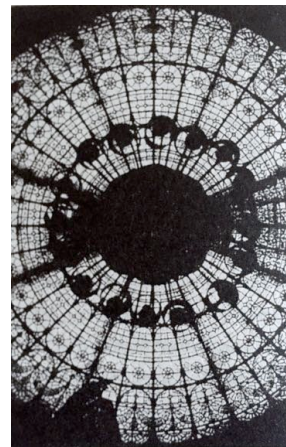


Fig. 7 Retinal Scan, Cole, "Blind Spot," *Granta*; Fig. 8 Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 139

²⁶⁶ Cole, "Blind Spot."

²⁶⁷ Teju Cole, "Always Returning: A Visit to W.G. Sebald's Grave," *New Yorker*, July 30, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/always-returning>.

digital media over—is thrown into the sharpest relief.

The photographs that accompany the visits to the ophthalmologist in Cole’s and Sebald’s respective tales illustrate these key differences nicely. The striking digitally rendered image above on the left, from the retinal scan Cole underwent, opens his *Granta* essay. The reproduced, grainy black and white photograph of the domed roof of the Great Eastern Hotel above on the right accompanies *Austerlitz*’s narrator’s trip to the eye doctor. The disease of a middle-aged man versus that of a young man; blackened crosshatching versus meaningless hieroglyphics; a digital versus an analog image of blindness. While the image of Cole’s retinal scan literally renders his eye, the photograph in *Austerlitz* more immediately resembles an eye, its latticework like an artist’s crosshatchings. The veins and ganglia of Cole’s image, to an untrained eye, could belong to anyone, anything, any body part, for all that they are the technically more precise and accurate of the two.

Sebald asks us to adopt bifurcated vision when looking at the past: one eye fixed in the physical present, one eye looking to an imagined past—or, as the narrator of *Austerlitz* with his own ophthalmic difficulties suggests, with one eye constantly searching the edges of its thwarted vision. In both the technologies Sebald invokes and in the physical structure of his vision of the past, his model is analog. That is, his method “operates by the manipulation of continuously variable physical quantities... which are analogues of the quantities being computed.”²⁶⁸ The abstractions of Sebald’s visual strategy always bear some reference to a physical quantity. The roof of the Great Eastern Hotel, with its flecked, pupil-like dome, evokes the eye as one generally encounters it. A digital model, by contrast, presents information as a “series of discrete values (commonly the numbers 0 and 1), typically for electronic storage and processing.”²⁶⁹ The information presented is divorced from physical analogues: “meaningless hieroglyphics,” the digital image is comprised of the 0s and 1s abstractions of binary code that has nothing to do with an eye, or with resembling an eye, in and of itself. Or, as Julius himself describes his thoughts after his nightly walks around Manhattan in *Open City*, “my futile task of sorting went on until the forms began to morph into each other and assume abstract shapes unrelated to the real city, and only then did my hectic mind finally show some pity and still itself, only then did dreamless sleep arrive” (*OC* 7). For all that the digital image ostensibly provides greater detail and precision, in its abstraction and isolation from physical analogues, it does not necessarily provide greater insight: this is the younger generation’s Big Blind Spot. But what exactly does it occlude?

The Empathy Gap

A closer look at some of Cole’s extensive work in digital media is instructive. On January 14, 2013, Cole tweeted a series he called “Seven Short Stories About Drones.”²⁷⁰ Each of the seven tweets begins with the famous first line of a celebrated novel and concludes abruptly with a drone strike. The violence encapsulated in these very short stories reverberates across multiple registers. First, and most immediately, are the vivid descriptions of the physical damage caused by these strikes. We call him Ishmael only to realize that he “was immolated at [his] wedding.” Buck Mulligan’s morning shave is interrupted when “A bomb whistled in. Blood on the walls. Fire from Heaven.” Okonkwo was both “well known throughout the nine villages” and

²⁶⁸ OED, “Analog.”

²⁶⁹ OED, “Digital.”

²⁷⁰ See Appendix A for the complete Twitter series.

dismembered: “His torso was found, not his head.” With monumental works like Hermann Melville’s *Moby Dick* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses* hacked down to 140 characters or less, the series prompts a sense of violation from its readers (perhaps especially those who felt a faint flush of pleasure at recognizing all seven original texts in the first place) as they encounter new, brutally blunt endings to these familiar narratives—and to the characters who inhabit them.

In that reflexive regret for the unseemly deaths of Clarissa Dalloway and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, readers confront the dissonant jangle of fact and fiction that makes these little tweets so powerful. The signature artistry of famous novelists runs up against the technical jargon of drone warfare’s “signature strike,” “unmanned aerial vehicle,” and “Predator drone.” Imaginative fiction collides with virtual warfare—both of which rely on mediated “vision.” The series might be read as pointedly targeting either a certain readership (the readers familiar with these literary texts but less familiar with the details of drone warfare) or the “insider/outsider” dyad implicit in both military and literary discourse (readers for whom the literary references are as, if not more, opaque as the language of military drones). Either case, we momentarily rue the untimely ends of fictional characters in a gesture that simultaneously challenges us to reflect on the very real deaths of those regularly killed for being “a young man of military age” at a gathering that, from a drone’s-eye view anyway, looks more like a training camp than a wedding. It challenges readers to consider whom we see and whom we don’t. Cole promptly capitalizes on this discomfort by Tweeting a link to an extensive ProPublica article entitled, “Everything We Know So Far About Drone Strikes.”

In an interview with *Mother Jones* a few months later, Cole attributed the dissonance we experience reading in his drone stories to what he sees as an “empathy gap.”²⁷¹ To confront this gap is essentially to ask the question, “What does it mean to be just to the others out there whose lives we do not think about?” One answer, according to Cole, is “simply tell their stories.” In another Twitter series called “Small Fates,” the author attempts to do just that, transforming real news stories from Nigeria into poignant, wry tweets seen the world over. “Some moms make empty threats. Not Anyah, of Lafia, who brought Joseph into this world and, over a land dispute, took him out of it,” Cole tweets; or, “With a snap, an electrical pole in Sabo fell on Okolie’s car. With a crackle, it began to electrocute it. With a pop, he escaped.” Most Twitter feeds run on a steady stream of the banal, the casual, and the familiar, but the (now-defunct) “Small Fates” project aimed to “put something into people’s day that... was completely different from what they were seeing... a kind of intricate and decontextualized detail about lives that you knew nothing about.” Much as “Seven Short Stories About Drones” illuminates an empathy gap by unexpectedly diverting a reader’s gaze away from iconic literary fictions toward the grim realities of drone warfare, the tweets that comprise Cole’s “Small Fates” punctuate an individual’s daily Internet reading with unanticipated glimpses into a life and fate far removed from his or her own.

It seems a straightforward enough start. How indeed can we care about the fates of others if we never know or bother to remember anything of their existence to begin with? The Internet in general and Twitter in particular appear to be especially effective fora for such introductions and reminders across a widespread audience. Satellite networking technologies allow us to perpetrate violence from a world away, to build and sustain these empathy gaps; Cole’s online writing suggests that they also afford the means by which we might bridge them. But the Internet, of course, also troubles the very category of “the others out there” in the first place. As

²⁷¹ “Teju Cole on the ‘Empathy Gap’ and Tweeting Drone Strikes,” Interview with Sarah Zhang, *Mother Jones*, March 6, 2013.

Cole remarks later in the same interview, “home” for him is now admittedly both that place in Brooklyn he “can pinpoint [...from the plane]” and any spot on the globe “where there’s good wifi.” The local becomes less a designation of physical proximity than one of virtual connection to others. If that’s the case, who and where exactly are the others *out there*?

As digital media theorist Ethan Zuckerman observes, “when we encounter content on the Internet, physical distance is largely irrelevant,” but this requires us “to consider another sort of distance, a distance between the familiar and the unfamiliar” (69). Zuckerman’s work reframes Kwame Anthony Appiah’s 2006 *Cosmopolitanism* for this digital context. This is clearly an issue at play in Cole’s work, the cosmopolitan scope of which critics are always keen to note; *Open City*’s Julius makes a point of sending Appiah’s work to his new acquaintance Farouq in Belgium just after its publication. Cosmopolitanism, according to Appiah, entails two basic qualities. First, cosmopolitans share “an interest in the beliefs and practices of others, striving to understand, if not accept or adopt, other ways of being.” Secondly, they “also take seriously the notion that they have obligations to people who are not their kin, even to people who have radically different beliefs,” and they “act on... their obligations.”²⁷² The difficulty that the contemporary cosmopolitan faces, then, belongs to the “central paradox of this connected age,” namely “that while it’s easier than ever to share information and perspectives from different parts of the world, we may now often encounter a narrower picture of the world than in less connected days,” by dint of our own curiosity or lack thereof.²⁷³ As Cole’s narrator Julius puts it, “most of these Americans don’t know any place, other than what’s right in front of their noses” (*OC* 53).

As the previous chapters in this dissertation have sought to demonstrate, the onslaught of technological modernity in the twentieth century occasioned crises of memory through one’s newfound visual access to others and to the past. In the twenty-first century, Cole’s work shows us, technology’s new crisis of memory radically reconfigures the role of *interest* in our relation to the world at large. In addition to the difference between the older and younger man’s eye diseases discussed above, we might note another key distinction between Sebald’s and Cole’s characters in their orientations towards uncovering the connections to the past. Where Sebald’s narrators in texts like *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz* go to tremendous lengths over many months and years to search for clues and details about their relations, Cole’s narrator Julius travels all the way to Brussels only to make a half-hearted attempt to look up his grandmother in a phone book and give up on the search within a few minutes. He becomes interested in the Internet café employee sitting in front of him instead. This is a matter less of the past’s opacity to vision and more of the present’s temptations to distraction.

Cole’s Twitter series thus offer a helpful distillation of the concerns that pattern the complex weave of *Open City*, and make explicit the ethical stakes of “global citizenry” in an age where drones and tweets claim to connect us all to a larger world “out there.” These online texts gesture toward a palpable uneasiness about how these technological shifts ramify in our relation to “here,” to “home” as seen both from thousands of miles above and through one’s computer screen. *Open City*’s outsider vision and negotiation of distance between here and there, offered primarily through its narrator’s renderings of the past in the present, have garnered significant critical attention in the six years since the novel’s publication. This attention tends to focus on questions of cultural cosmopolitanism and historical memory through the nineteenth-century

²⁷² Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006). Zuckerman, *Rewire*, 24.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 19.

lenses of the *flâneur* and *fugueur*. By contrast, in the following readings of both *Open City* and its reception, I propose that the Big Blind Spot Syndrome we find in his work depends on a new dynamic of physical distance and virtual proximity that radically reconfigures the terms of cosmopolitanism—and memory—in the present day. Continuing to frame the discourse of cosmopolitanism primarily in terms of access leads us, I argue, to our own dangerous blind spots. These challenge us to consider, “What does it mean to be just to the others out there whose lives we do not think about?” in an age when the others we fail to see “out there” may just as readily be right in front of us all along.

Family Ties and Global Networks

Moving in a steady flow of Cole’s characteristic “intricate and decontextualized detail[s],” *Open City* follows the meandering thoughts and walks of its peripatetic narrator more than it does any clearly articulable plot. Accompanying Julius through the streets of post-9/11 New York and Brussels, readers discover that their guide is a well-educated and worldly psychiatry resident—an aficionado moved more by Mahler than Mingus who reads Roland Barthes while on vacation, a loner who spends his nights off alone attending lectures by Polish poets or movies about Idi Amin. Half-Nigerian and half-German, born and raised in Nigeria but educated in the United States from college on, Julius has lived away from his “home” for almost fifteen years when the novel begins. His unique vantage point, as critics are quick to note, reveals a “cosmopolite’s detachment from his American experience” that “haunt[s] the book” and its presentation of “a worldly foreigner’s New York.”²⁷⁴ Which is to say, if we “need a flâneur to see interesting things in the city,” Julius’s “acute, and sympathetic, eye” provides just that.²⁷⁵

Specifically, his narration allows us “to see, with an outsider’s eyes... a place of constant deposit and erasure.”²⁷⁶ As Cole himself puts it in a 2010 interview with BBC Radio, Julius “just happens to be hypersensitive to the eraser marks that are present in the city.” A walk by Ground Zero, for example, dredges up not only “the day America’s ticker stopped,” but also the “bustling network of little streets... [that] had been obliterated in the 1960s to make way for the World Trade Center buildings”; the vanishing of “the old Washington Market, the active piers, the fishwives, the Christian Syrian enclave that was established [there] in the late 1800s,” and so on; and the “communities [that had been] here before Columbus ever set sail” (*OC* 58-59). Julius is “often drawn to the layers of sedimented historical suffering on which the city rests,” and he frequently manages to bring them to the surface of his narration with marked eloquence and sensitivity.²⁷⁷ On a global scale, the novel, via its narrator, develops what Karen Jacobs identifies as a literal and figurative optics of historical memory, an optics that reveals how, over half a century after the Second World War, “Judaic history textur[es] our vision of Africa and vice versa.”²⁷⁸ His cosmopolitan identity and sprawling cultural literacy help us to see not only “a slightly different, or somewhat transfigured” New York but also the overlapping global afterimages of African and Jewish genocide and diaspora that are writ large in his explicit dialogue with writers and photographers such as W.G. Sebald and Martin Munkásci.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁴ Claire Messud, “The Secret Sharer,” *New York Review of Books*, July 14, 2011.

²⁷⁵ James Wood, “The Arrival of Enigmas,” *New Yorker*

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ Wood, “Enigma.”

²⁷⁸ Karen Jacobs, “Teju Cole’s Photographic Afterimages,” *Image & Narrative*, 15.2 (2014): 90.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*; Wood, “Enigma.”

Afterimages, Jacobs notes, that emerge in the “very moments when we avert our gaze from these photographs’ constitutive grains, dots, and lines”—that is, in moments of *unseeing*.²⁸⁰ If, as Zuckerman claims, most of us suffer from a kind of myopic attention to interests that directly concern us in the present, Julius seems to offer an alternative model for the contemporary.

Yet for other critics, Julius’s approach signals either the *failure* of aesthetic cosmopolitanism to produce any real “worldly change” or a cunning diversion from the vexed psychic life of Julius himself.²⁸¹ Julius’s “cosmopolitan range of reference” belies how we might “do better to read [his reflections] in relief,” not for what they say about the world he describes, but rather “for what they say about him... emotional space [that] is much more important than the public-facing attitudes of the cultural dandy.”²⁸² We “find beneath Julius’s calm but fragmented account of the ‘open city’ another, darker topography, of neurosis, rupture, and violence,” a darkness that both reveals suppressed collective histories and aims to conceal the narrator himself from view. Julius is “so busy seeing—and showing us what he sees—that he hopes, himself, to remain unseen.”²⁸³

And what readers see when they turn their attention to Julius rather than the city he lays bare isn’t pretty. While Julius is certainly a “worldly foreigner” with an “acute, and sympathetic, eye,” at times he is just as clearly a callous and admittedly self-absorbed aesthete. He leaves his ailing mentor Professor Saito to die alone practically mid-conversation because he had always imagined that Saito’s last words to him would be more eloquent than they actually are (*OC* 180); he makes knowingly empty promises to visit Saito regularly throughout his protracted illness (14), to pray for a Liberian detainee after hearing and seemingly sympathizing with his harrowing tale of survival (64), and to keep in touch with a close childhood friend when he moves to America (157). In an unsettling gesture that presages *Open City*’s closing revelation of sexual violence, Julius watches women marching in a “Take Back the Night” protest as they pass under his window only to shut the window and picture the “endless stream of pit bulls, Jack Russells, Alsatians, Weimaraners, mutts...” that he saw in Central Park earlier that day (23). With “the vigor of ticking things off [his] list,” he refuses contact with a patient whom he knows to be severely depressed because he doesn’t want to be bothered while he’s on vacation (102). She commits suicide in his absence. For all that Julius’s job essentially makes him a professional listener, he repeatedly tunes out others—Professor Saito, his mother—as they try to share with him their own memories of struggles for civil rights or of growing up in war-torn countries.

Through Pieter Vermeulen’s reading, we might see how “Julius’s posture as a cosmopolitan *flâneur* is shadowed by the contours of [a] more sinister, and mostly forgotten, nineteenth-century figure of restless mobility: the *fugueur*,” a term that signifies a “runaway.”²⁸⁴ If the *flâneur* “was part of an emerging [late nineteenth-century] discourse that exalted mobility and tourism... the *fugueur*’s ‘ambulatory automatism’ served as the shadow side of this new-won mobility... It was associated with *vagabondage* and the unbearable boredom of modern life.” Successful cosmopolitanism occasions action, attempts to bridge the empathy gap as such. Julius repeatedly stops short of this goal: his narration “renders stories of violence and suffering legible” while it “self-consciously refrains from composing them into an occasion for empathetic

²⁸⁰ Jacobs, “Photographic Afterimages,” 87.

²⁸¹ Pieter Vermeulen, “Flights of Memory: Teju Cole’s *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism,” *Journal of Modern Literature*, 37.1 (Fall 2013): 54.

²⁸² Giles Foden, review of *Open City* by Teju Cole, *The Guardian*, August 17, 2011.

²⁸³ Messud, “Secret Sharer.”

²⁸⁴ Vermeulen, “Flights of Memory,” 42.

identification.” The *flâneur* revels in newfound access to and immersion in the world at large; the *fugueur* recoils from it, distancing himself from the identification that access might bring. Cole’s novel, according to Vermeulen, thus “converts the spectacle of traumatic suffering into an assertion of the heroism of inexpressiveness.”²⁸⁵

But the *fugueur*, like the *flâneur*, needs to be attentive to such spectacles in the first place, and Julius isn’t attentive—or, more accurately, is only selectively so. As Jacobs notes, Julius’s particular “engagement with afterimages” of historical violence, his “averting [his] gaze” from the physical images before him, leads him “to contend not with a dark but a *light* double”—that is, to express “experiences and forms of knowledge that otherwise would never achieve representability or comprehension” by allowing submerged histories to flicker through more visible and familiar scenes of violence.²⁸⁶ Julius often renders some “stories of violence and suffering legible” at the cost of others. Take, for example, his depiction of life in postwar Germany. In a singular moment of vulnerability, his mother tells him about her childhood in Magdeburg, “things [he] had had only the shadowiest idea about, things that she now moved hesitantly into lighter shadow” (OC 79). In this instance, Julius notably helps us glimpse Germans suffering (rather than the suffering they caused) in the Second World War and its aftermath.

Describing the conversation with his mother, Julius admits, “because I wasn’t attentive, many of the details eluded me” (OC 79). Julius fills in aspects of her childhood by conjecture “only years later.” His mother’s account is limited to all that she couldn’t know, remember, or say. Compare the version of her story that he relates, transmogrified into a grim historical vision of the days after Germany’s surrender, with the few details “about her girlhood, about pianos and blueberries” that he recounts dismissively of what she actually says to him:

She had been born in Berlin, only a few days after the Russians had taken over the city, in early May 1945. *She had no memory, of course, of the months that followed. She couldn’t have known* the absolute destitution, the begging and wandering with her mother through the rubble of Brandenburg and Saxony. But she had retained the memory of having been aware of this hard beginning: *not the memory of the suffering itself but the memory of knowing that it was what she had been born into.* The poverty of life in Magdeburg, when they had finally returned there, had been intensified by the horrors each relative, neighbor, and friend had endured during the war. *The rule was to refrain from speaking:* nothing of the bombings, nothing of the murders and countless betrayals, nothing of those who had enthusiastically participated in all of it. *It was only years later, when I became interested in these things for my own sake, that I surmised* that my oma, heavily pregnant, had likely been one of the countless women raped by the men of the Red Army that year in Berlin, that so extensive and thorough was that particular atrocity, she could hardly have escaped it.

It was unimaginable that this was something she and my mother had ever discussed, but Mother herself would have known, or guessed it. She’d been born into an unspeakably bitter world, a world without sanctity. It was natural, decades later, losing a husband, for her to displace the grief of widowhood onto that primal grief, and make of the two pains a continuity. (79, emphases mine)

Julius continues,

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 54, 52.

²⁸⁶ Jacobs, “Photographic Afterimages,” 96, 101.

I listened with only half an ear, embarrassed by the trembling and the emotion. I couldn't see why she was telling me about her girlhood, about pianos and blueberries. Years later, long after we became estranged, I tried to imagine the details of that life. It was an entire vanished world of people, experiences, desires, a world that, in some odd way, I was the unaware continuation of. (79-80)

He sees no purpose in her “telling me about her girlhood” other than what it can tell him about himself: it is, after all, only when he becomes “interested in these things for [his] own sake,” that Julius tries “to imagine the details of that life,” seeing the relevance to himself as “the unaware continuation” of this “vanished world.”

As he reflects on his recent breakup with his girlfriend Nadège a few pages earlier, Julius glosses over her perspective on their relationship on similar grounds: “she had her list of complaints but they seemed petty to me, and there hadn't been anything in them I was able to make sense of or relate to my life” (*OC* 70). And again, as he reads aloud and discusses an article about civil unions with his homosexual mentor Professor Saito, Julius does so “at a certain distance” (171). Preoccupied by his own fear of a bedbug infestation, he performs what he calls his “party trick, to continue a conversation of this kind and remain the whole while perfectly distracted.” With a touch of remorse otherwise absent from his accounts of conversations with women like his mother or Nadège, Julius reluctantly concedes that Saito's “recent encounter with the bedbugs troubled [him] more than what [Saito] had suffered in other ways: racism, homophobia, the incessant bereavement that was one of the hidden costs of a long life” (173).

Rather than effectively undermine Julius's ability to “be just to the others out there whose lives we do not think about,” the self-absorption, obfuscation, and willful rewriting that characterizes his exchange with these characters become, for some critics, part of the necessary conditions for being just. As Jacobs notes, while “the (always delimited) knowledge of the other is further complicated and mitigated by the subject's traumatically limited self-knowledge... such limits arguably figure among the preconditions for the formation of afterimages in Cole, which emerge also as methods of expressing experiences and forms of knowledge that otherwise would never achieve visual representability or comprehension.”²⁸⁷ In other words, Julius's representations may be limited by his personal failings, but they are still meaningful because it is through the idiosyncratic reach of his mind that Cole gives us knowledge about our collective past that we would not otherwise have.

James Wood goes further in his *New Yorker* review of *Open City* to propose, “Julius suggests that perhaps it is sane to be solipsistic.” Offering what Wood characterizes as “a brave admission about the limits of sympathy... Julius sets out only to put people's lives on paper, and not to change them, as Farouq, his secret sharer and alter ego, would want to do. But then it is because Julius sets out not to change Farouq's life but to put it down on paper that we know Farouq so well.”²⁸⁸ What for Vermeulen is the novel's argument about the failure of aesthetic cosmopolitanism to respond to the suffering of others, becomes for Wood the very condition for allowing the novel's readers their own opportunity for response. Echoing Cole's preliminary solution to the “empathy gap,” Julius might be said to be there to “simply tell their stories,” as Cole himself does in his “Small Fates” series. Indeed, Julius takes a certain pride in how

²⁸⁷ Jacobs, “Photographic Afterimages,” 101-102.

²⁸⁸ Wood, “Enigma of Arrival.”

effectively he had “learned the art of listening... the ability to trace out a story from what was omitted” (*OC* 9). Yet, as his account of his mother’s childhood demonstrates, the simple task of telling “their stories” is complicated from the outset by Julius’s own acts of self-interested omission as a storyteller.

By contrast to his narrator, Cole admits a certain discomfort with the absences that structure “Small Fates”: “I’ve always referred to it as a troubled project in the sense that I’m trying to tell stories about people who are not here in a way to tell their own stories.” In what ways? They are not here because they are in Nigeria (and his readers presumably are not). They are not here because they are often, well, no longer alive. They are not here to speak because Cole is speaking for them. The smudgy deictic “here” gestures simultaneously to a geographical place, an ontological status, and a narrative function. Again we confront the question: where is the “out there,” the other side of these empathy gaps that we are ethically bound to acknowledge? The novel intensifies this problem: in Julius’s version of his mother Julianne’s story, she remains pointedly “out there” not because he can’t reach her, not because she’s not alive, not because she’s incapable of giving voice to her own experiences, but rather because of Julius’s own *lack of interest* in listening to her tell her story, both as an adolescent and in Nigeria now. His simultaneously solipsistic and historically attuned description of his mother’s childhood takes us far from bridging any gaps to her or her story. The question of what we lose in gaining the insight his rendering offers us instead looms uncomfortably large.

Julius’s imagined account of the submerged, often unacknowledged stories of the defeated Germans comes in inverse proportion to our capacity as readers to learn much of anything about Julianne—a woman who in her very name, abrupt departure to the United States as a young adult, and enigmatic estrangement from her own mother, arguably functions as a double for the narrator as much as his young, angry male Moroccan counterpart Farouq. Nonetheless, Wood’s review insists on privileging the measured sophisticate Julius’s relationship to the agitated autodidact Farouq, “his secret sharer and alter ego,” and strikingly declines to acknowledge any number of the shadow-like (and shady) relationships he has with women in the novel—his mother, his *oma*, Nadège, the phantom sister he repeatedly dreams of having, and, even Moji Kasali.²⁸⁹

Signaling quite literally the return of the repressed, Moji is a childhood acquaintance whom Julius in all likelihood raped when they were teenagers—and then promptly forgot. Their chance encounter in a New York City supermarket sparks what appears to be the rekindling of an old friendship of sorts until the revelation of the rape drastically reconfigures the reader’s—and Julius’ own—sense of the novel in a startling and chilling denouement. None of this would one anticipate from Wood’s account, which trains our gaze on the comparably more palatable and well-appointed counterweight to Julius—Farouq, a young Moroccan man who helps run an Internet café in Brussels and is well-versed in critical theory, fluent in several languages, and passionately invested in geopolitics—and, of course, on the ultimate bravery of Julius’s admitted solipsism with regard to his representation of him.

In a similar vein, Jacobs curiously transposes the significance of Moji’s rape onto that of Julius’s grandmother instead. Jacobs introduces the two events together as paired examples of “*Open City*’s recurrent losses and silences...from the most public and collective of losses (beginning

²⁸⁹ Wood does, however, note Julius’s sexual encounter with a Czech woman whose name Julius promptly and rather smugly forgets as part of a much larger summary of the “best, and longest, episode in the book” in which Julius befriends Farouq.

with the negative space of Ground Zero, to Native Americans' loss of their collective past), to the most private (from the silence of Julius's oma about her rape in Russian-occupied Berlin through which his mother was conceived, to his own silence about his role in the rape alleged by Moji Kasali, the sister of his boyhood friend)." Focusing on their respective silences, Jacobs aligns Julius's *oma*—a likely victim of rape—not with Moji but rather with *Julius*, through syntax that also has the effect of obfuscating what exactly "his role in the rape alleged by Moji Kasali, the sister of his boyhood friend" really is. In Jacobs's account, Julius's grandmother's "rape in Russian-occupied Berlin through which his mother was conceived" appears as indisputable fact; Moji's rape remains an allegation with no clear perpetrator. The genealogical link of victimhood from his grandmother to his mother to Julius is certain; Julius's relation to "the rape alleged by Moji Kasali" is hazy. Jacobs perhaps inadvertently concretizes this associative logic by ensconcing the former as a definitive feature of the novel in her synopsis: "Cole's *Open City* is an elliptical, partial, first person retrospective of Julius' upbringing in Lagos, Nigeria, by a German mother (born of rape in Russian-occupied Berlin in May 1945) and a Nigerian father."²⁹⁰ The rape of Moji, however, Jacobs relegates to a belated and parenthetical example of a moment of "narrative suspension and deflection" in the text, and only in terms of the uncertainty of Moji's *accusation* of rape at that: "such moments of crisis (including when Moji accuses Julius of rape while they were teenagers in Nigeria) return us to the problem of epistemology" and "the subject's [i.e. Julius's] traumatically limited self-knowledge."²⁹¹

In Julius's rewriting of his mother's memories, Julius in fact only "*surmised* that [his] oma, heavily pregnant, had likely been one of the countless women raped by the men of the Red Army that year in Berlin, that so extensive and thorough was that particular atrocity, she could hardly have escaped it" (*OC* 79, emphasis mine). In other words, if his grandmother was indeed raped by the Russians, she would have already been "heavily pregnant" with his mother when it happened. Horrifyingly, the fact that she was already very pregnant would not have spared her from rape, "so extensive and thorough was that particular atrocity," but neither would it mean that her daughter was the product of it. Julius admits that he is enveloped in his own "limited self-knowledge" and insistence that "in the swirl of other people's stories, insofar as those stories concern us at all, we are never less than heroic." But even he confronts the fact that he could find none of the "characteristic tics that reveal the essential falsehood of [bad stories—badly imagined, or badly told]" in what Moji said about him raping her, that, indeed, "she had said it as if, with all of her being, she were certain of its accuracy" (243, 244). Julius squarely faces a failure either of his professional judgment or his moral one.

I dwell on these critical accounts not to take them to task, but rather to consider what insights these peculiar oversights and contortions in (not) accounting for the novel's ending might reveal. To recall Cole's self-quoted passage from *Open City*, blindness and insight go hand-in-hand; and we need look no further than Farouq for Paul de Man's famous theorization of such critical reading practices in his collection of essays of that name. Farouq reminds both Julius and the reader:

²⁹⁰ Jacobs, "Photographic Afterimages," 92-93.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 101. Miguel Syjuco even goes so far as to suggest that "such a twist... feels unnecessary, either a misstep by a young author or an overstep by a persuasive editor. Could the denouement not simply have comprised the undramatic culmination of the book's ideas?" Miguel Syjuco, "These Crowded Streets," Review of Teju Cole's *Open City*, *New York Times*, February 25, 2011.

I am sure you know what Paul de Man says about insight and blindness. His theory has to do with an insight that can actually obscure other things, that can be a blindness. And the reverse, also, how what seems blind can open up possibilities. (*OC* 127)

In a sense, Woods's and Jacobs's accounts run into trouble by focusing too intently on the historical insights Julius reveals rather than those he himself obscures. As a result, these otherwise sensitive and astute critical readings perform the same kinds of obfuscation and misreading that the narrator enacts and that his narrative tellingly invites. In an age where, "our challenge is not access to information; it is the challenge of paying attention [...a challenge...] made all the more difficult by our deeply ingrained tendency to pay disproportionate attention to phenomena that unfold nearby and directly affect ourselves, our friends and our families," critics celebrate Julius as a figure who can navigate the connected world with greater insight and broader interest than most of us can or do.²⁹² There is little room for this sensitive *flâneur* with a keen eye, the sophisticated cosmopolite and bravely solipsistic purveyor of other people's stories and otherwise unacknowledged historical afterimages, to be a misogynist and rapist as well.

And yet, as Moji herself pointedly puts it to Julius in their confrontation: "Things don't go away just because you choose to forget them" (*OC* 245). Readers attuned to the narrative's omissions are quietly and repeatedly confronted with Julius's inability to see or care for people in his immediate life. As Dr. Saito observes, rather presciently, in describing a former colleague of his to Julius: she was "an intelligent, sensitive individual but someone with whom he could never agree. He admired and disliked her" (10). Saito continues, "It's a puzzle...she was a good scholar, and she was on the right side of the struggles of the time, but I simply couldn't stand her in person. She was abrasive and egotistical, heaven rest her soul. You can't say a word against her around here, though. She's still considered a saint" (10).

Unsurprisingly, those who are more skeptical of Julius's cosmopolitan aspirations are much more willing to cite and acknowledge Moji's rape and its role in the novel. Yet their strong emphasis on Julius's personal failings—the notion that "the public-facing attitudes of a cultural dandy" are little more than a smokescreen for his damaged psyche—unduly undermine what I believe Wood and Jacobs are right to identify as the powerful effect (and act in its own right) of making another's story known. For better *and* worse, Julius is beautifully adept at telling us about Farouq the thwarted Moroccan student in Brussels, Saidu the young Liberian man awaiting deportation from the U.S., and Pierre the Haitian shoeshine man in the New York City subway—far more so than he is at telling us about, say, his mother, Nadège, or Moji. And his meditations on the sedimented histories of spaces like Ground Zero, Trinity Church, or the unscarred cityscape of Brussels—an "open city" that was spared destruction through prompt surrender to the Germans—are arguably no less moving or resonant on their own terms for his deeply problematic relationship to women throughout the novel.

Which is to say, Cole's novel tasks us with seeing two seemingly opposed sides of Julius at once. Through one lens, we see Julius's overt commitment to engaging "the beliefs and practices of others" in his traversals of the city and the globe, his investment in "the notion that [we] have obligations to people who are not [our] kin, even to people who have radically different beliefs"—even if he ultimately refuses to act on it.²⁹³ And through the other, we grasp Julius's dangerously solipsistic lack of concern for the lives of others, particularly women and those

²⁹² Zuckerman, *Rewire*, 19-20.

²⁹³ Zuckerman, *Rewire*, 24.

ostensibly nearest to him at that. The novel redefines the scope of ‘home’ and the ‘familiar’—those subjects of immediate interest to us—and challenges us to adapt our reading practices accordingly. In the sections that follow, I tease out how his novel’s play with abstraction, distance, and virtuality rewrites the coordinates of ethical remembrance for our present age.²⁹⁴ I demonstrate how Cole takes up the distinctly digital optics of manipulable distance and virtuality to illuminate what connection to another person and to one’s own past in the twenty-first-century looks like—and doesn’t.²⁹⁵

Aerial Vistas

In a time when one can sit in an air-conditioned room in Nevada while closely watching and killing people on the ground in Pakistan, when a tweet about a life in Nigeria can pop up on your phone between a picture of your best friend’s cat and a link to live footage of a protest in Ferguson, when “home” is both a specific flat in Brooklyn and anywhere there’s good wifi—in short, in a time when virtual access to the world at large is not only possible but easy, commonplace, and immediate, Cole challenges us reconsider what and where the real gaps in our vision are.

Harkening back both to Woolf’s late diary entries and my discussion of Cole’s “Seven Short Stories About Drones” above, Julius’s city is often depicted or imagined aurally. He associates his journeys throughout New York City neither with the physical press of the crowd on the street à la Baudelaire’s *flâneur* nor with the thrill of being “in people’s eyes, in the swing, tramp and trudge” of the city that opens *Mrs. Dalloway*, but rather with the heightened distance of birds in flight and the disembodied, global connections of the World Wide Web:

Not long before this aimless wandering began, I had fallen into the habit of watching bird migrations from my apartment, and I wonder now if the two are connected. On the days when I was home early enough from the hospital, I used to look out the window like someone taking auspices, hoping to see the miracle of natural immigration. Each time I caught sight of geese swooping in formation across the sky, I wondered how our life below might look from their perspective, and imagined that, were they ever to indulge in such speculation, the high-rises might seem to them like firs massed in a grove. (3)

To imagine the geese looking down on “our life below” is to imagine them indulging in speculation akin to Julius’s own, speculation that would return the developed urban landscape to the natural world of “firs massed in a grove,” much as Julius’s sensitivity to the erasure marks of

²⁹⁴ The dark side of the twenty-first century *fugueur* isn’t just that of the traveler who wanders without memory, dissociating from his present and losing connection to his past—it is the agent who feels him or herself to be safely unnoticed and removed, who picks what to see and what not to see with seeming immunity, and who enacts violence by virtue of that very remove.

²⁹⁵ The debate around the late-nineteenth century figures of the *flâneur* and *fugueur* that has shaped much of the critical conversation around Cole’s novel centers on how one responds to the shocks of unprecedented access to a larger world, to the foreign encounters physical mobility newly affords. These readings rely in part on the premise that the greater good and much harder task is not being decent to and interested in the people like you that you encounter every day, but rather to embrace this novel mobility and segue into an active concern and interest in the lives of people far removed from you in time and space, to be the successful cosmopolitan, the empathetic bridger of gaps the world over. As a kind of corollary, if you cannot be sympathetic in the relationships closest to you, it is either ethically suspect or delusional to express interest or concern for others far away.

history transforms Ground Zero into a vision of pre-Columbian New York City. The “natural migration” quickly takes on militaristic and technological valences as Julius extends the net cast by the birds-eye view of these “rare squadrons” of “geese swooping in formation across the sky,” to encompass not only his own nighttime wanderings around the city, but also the murmur of Internet radio announcers in his apartment. Unlike Woolf’s experiences in London, the feeling of being “disembodied, in the air” as squadrons fly overhead connotes not terror, but comfort and communion for Julius as he listens to “voices speaking calmly from thousands of miles away... disembodied voices [that] remain connected in my mind, even now, with the apparition of migrating geese” (4-5). Within the first few pages of the text—and without needing to leave his apartment window—Julius knits the wandering that structures the novel together with the pleasure he takes in historical, visual, physical, and affective *distance*. It is an isolation that particularly appeals to Julius insofar as it means his “every decision... was inconsequential” (7).

This detachment sets the stage for a peculiar form of connection, then, which motivates many of his interactions throughout the novel that follows. Avoiding local radio stations, “which had too many commercials for [his] taste,” Julius “instead [turns] to Internet stations from Canada, Germany, or the Netherlands” (4-5). It is with these calm, bodiless voices from abroad that Julius imagines intimate identification:

I turned the computer’s speakers low and looked outside, nestled in the comfort provided by those voices, and it wasn’t at all difficult to draw the comparison between myself, in my sparse apartment, and the radio host in his or her booth, during what must have been the middle of the night somewhere in Europe. Those disembodied voices remain connected in my mind, even now, with the apparition of migrating geese. (4-5)

Through the strains of classical music from the Internet and apparitions of geese in flight, Julius easily imagines himself in the position of the radio host in a booth on the other side of the world, collapsing thousands of miles into the space of his sparse apartment. It is a rather strange and beautiful vision of the cosmopolitan promise of a connected world, as much a given for Julius as “the miracle of natural migration.” But Cole is quick to undermine it.

While Julius revels nightly in the beautiful fugue created by the mingling of his voice reading books aloud with that of classical music announcers on the Internet and the vision of birds in flight, next door, readers soon discover, one of his neighbors has died. Julius has gone months without even noticing. The momentary self-repudiation that he “had noticed neither her absence nor the change—there must have been a change—in [her husband Seth’s] spirit,” the recognition that “it was not possible, even then, to go knock on his door and embrace him, or to speak with him at length [because it] would have been false intimacy” immediately segues into embarrassment that Seth might have stopped by Julius’s apartment to complain about the volume of his music during those months that he hadn’t even noticed Carla’s absence (21). But, Julius concludes, “eventually I satisfied myself that it was before, and not after, his wife’s death. I felt a certain sense of relief at this, which was taken over almost immediately by shame. But even that feeling subsided; much too quickly, now that I think of it” (21). The glimmers of empathy and remorse—which I will return to at the end of this chapter—are reabsorbed here into Julius’s need to preserve what he later describes as “the idea of [himself] that he presented... the listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else’s life and struggle,” one he “had fallen in love with” himself (70). His sardonic, removed recognition of this *idea of himself* evacuates his acts of listening and compassion of meaning beyond that of signifying the stock roles of “the listener, the compassionate African.”

Later, at a photographic exhibit of work by Martin Munkácsi, Julius takes in an aerial image made from a zeppelin of “young Germans lying in the sun... bodies filling every available space... a flat abstract pattern against the field,” while standing next to an old man who had fled Berlin as a child around the time that the photograph was taken (153). What begins with an image of “a flat abstract pattern” of human bodies seen from above, turns into a conversation with a man who “was entering a memory” of his life on the ground as a young Berliner in the 1930s through it. Rather than sharing the fact that his mother and grandmother “had been there, too, as refugees near the end of the war and afterward, and that [he was himself], in this distant sense, also a Berliner,” Julius admits that, even “if we had talked more, I would have told him only that I was from Nigeria, from Lagos.” A moment of possible connection and identification with this man, and the painful history they are both implicated in, collapses into the abstracted notion of Julius as “the listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone else’s life and struggle.”

Towards the end of the novel, readers realize that Julius has tellingly displaced the pivotal conversation with Moji at her boyfriend’s house party with another scene and another view from above out on the terrace. Whereas the scene with Moji forces Julius to reckon with the fact that he not only raped her as teenagers but also completely forgot her afterward, the terrace scene recalls the opening pages of the novel, in which Julius connects bird’s-eye views with his wandering around the city without consequence and with his communion with the disembodied voices of Internet radio hosts. He describes his fascination with how “from up there on the twenty-ninth floor, I could take in, in a single glance, the dwellings of millions” (240). For Julius, strikingly, the view presents him with a sense of not millions of people but rather millions of *computers*: “The way the tiny lights winked across the miles of air made me think of all the computers in all those homes, most of them sleeping now, with their single lights silently toggling between on and off” (240). The dwellers at home “sleeping now” are not owners but their computers; the synecdochic relation between the visible lights and the individual homes they signify suggest to Julius a network of computers toggling off and on before any actual people. From these abstracted, technologically mediated heights, Julius perversely recalls “the pleasant sensation of flirting with Moji, not with any expectation, but for the pleasure of it,” as he “noticed this time, less tension, less conflict, in [his] interaction with her.” Only after he narrates, on the next page, having left the party and encountering smashed windows and “glass on the road, and blood as well,” from a car accident he sees while walking home, does he cycle back to fill what the reader recognizes as the glaring blind spot of his confrontation with Moji on the terrace that evening (241-242).

To make the case that digital technology alienates people from one another by supplanting interaction with a person with interaction with a device is neither new nor particularly exciting. But what Julius is doing here is *not* supplanting human interaction (whatever that might mean) with mediating digital devices. For all of his enjoyment of Internet radio and Farouq’s Internet cafe in Brussels, Julius is not grafted to a smartphone, nor does he spend any considerable time in front a computer throughout the novel. Instead, repeated references to these technologies underscore how Julius applies the modes of engagement they afford—disembodied, virtual connection; mobility without consequence; reconfigured values of proximity and distance; the anonymity of stock or generic identities—to his supposedly unmediated human interactions.

Reverse Modeling

As Julius notes on his flight back to New York from Brussels, the tricky thing about aerial vision is that it makes it difficult to distinguish between a virtual model and the things modeled. As the plane descends, his view of “the city in its true form... a thousand feet below” is suddenly supplanted by his memory of “the sprawling scale model of the city... at the Queens Museum of Art.” Distorting the relation here much as he replaces his confrontation with Moji with a meditation on millions of blinking computer lights, displaces his mother’s actual testimony with an imagined historical narrative, and refuses connection with the memories or suffering of individuals standing right in front of him in favor of Internet radio voices and generalizations about himself as “the compassionate African,” Julius notes, “in this case, it was the real city that seemed to be matching point for point, my memory of the model... Even the raking evening light falling across the city evoked the spotlighting used at the museum” (*OC* 150-151). Unlike a photographic portrait or streetscape, there’s scarcely any distinguishing the real from the virtual at the height of a thousand feet or more.²⁹⁶ As in Munkàsci’s aerial photograph, even lithe young bodies lounging in a park dissolve into “a flat abstract pattern” from such a distance.

Cole’s Tumblr, *Op Cit*, a “page for and about the novel *Open City*,” which he maintained for six months from September 2010 through March 2011, similarly plays with the blurring of references through the explicit interaction of digital and print texts. Its title *Op Cit* evokes by turns the latinate shorthand for a previously cited work, an abbreviation of the novel *Open City*, and the homonymic *opposite*.²⁹⁷ True to its most immediate meaning, *Op Cit*’s posts offer up source texts for some of Julius’s mediations—research articles on the collapse of the honey bee population (December 11), anatomy textbook entries on optical nerves and blind spots (October 18), translated passages from Paracelsus (October 1) and Roland Barthes (October 14), and so on—each duly marked at the bottom by the words “op. cit.” and their corresponding moments in *Open City*: pages 199, 299, 237, 4 & 111. The blog reproduces numerous images described or referred to in the text: a photograph by Munkàsci (January 10; pg. 152), a painting by John Brewster (September 27; pgs. 38-39), and links to audio and video recordings of music and discussions of texts that Julius refers to throughout the novel. This all appears straightforward enough for an online compendium of references from the novel. But by insisting on its references to the novel, *Op Cit* curiously sends us to a “work previously mentioned or quoted” that, for almost all of its entries, effectively did not yet exist: *Open City* was not published until February 2011. In another reversal of references, many of the novel’s citations essentially predate its existence; the website provides readers with a hypertext that has no text. Or, rather, for the six months of *Op Cit*’s day-to-day functionality as a Tumblr page, the webpage claimed to trace its own “point for point” version of a novel that the reader had to put together by reverse inference, flipped, abbreviated, and, at least temporarily, total in its abstraction.

Julius—and Cole’s web presence—might, at least initially, have us wonder at the perfect similitude and virtual interchangeability of one for another, particularly from the great distances that both aerial vision and the Internet afford. But they also contain within themselves hairline fractures and almost imperceptible hiccups that betray the violence underlying? such transactions. These tiny incongruities appear, pointedly, at ruptures where memory enters. The only post on *Op Cit*, for example, to appear after the novel’s publication—after the Tumblr might

²⁹⁶ Indeed, this blurring of distinctions becomes part of the operational appeal for the drone operators like those in *Seven Stories*, many of whom described the experience of remote killing as akin to playing a video game.

²⁹⁷ Teju Cole, *Op Cit*, <http://op-cit.tumblr.com>.

actually be able to serve its nominal purpose as a kind of concordance for the book—is this one from March 14, 2011, entitled “*Illustrirte*”:

“Because of an early spelling mistake, the masthead of the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung* was printed with a spelling error all through the fifty years of its existence.”

István Deák, *Weimar Germany’s Left-Wing Intellectuals: A Political History of the Weltbühne and Its Circle*, 1968, p.40

op. cit., p. 153

Readers with the novel now handy can thumb through to the explanation provided by the elderly German man Julius encounters on page 153 at the Munkàsci exhibit,

The spelling was a mistake—what was printed on the newspaper was *illustrirte* instead of *illustrierte*, he said—and that had been the case since the first issue. In the first issue, the gentleman said, it had been an error, but later, it became a kind of trademark for the magazine and was left unchanged. This was familiar to him, he said, because he remembered the magazine from his childhood. It had come to their house weekly when he was a little boy in Berlin.

Illustrierte means illustrated in German; *illustrirte* means, well, nothing at all. But through a small human error, it became the signature of Germany’s pioneering, nonpartisan mass-market illustrated magazine for half of a century (from 1891-1941).²⁹⁸ From 1941-1945, however, the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, fully co-opted as a Nazi propaganda outlet, regained the proper “original” spelling it never actually had. Modeling the title after generic linguistic convention, the Nazis performed a small “correction” that signaled, via the old man who “remembered the magazine from his childhood,” the violent overwriting of five decades of the *Illustrirte*’s existence as an independent photojournalistic periodical.²⁹⁹

Julius’s ability to see “the real city... matching point for point, my memory of the model” from the airplane likewise founders on the temporal snag of a small, violent detail: “the persistence, in the model, of the World Trade Center towers, which, in reality, had already been destroyed” (151). Cole’s novel draws World War II and 9/11 together earlier as well. While walking past Ground Zero, Julius observes, “Atrocity is nothing new, not to humans, not to animals... In our time it is uniquely well organized, carried out with pens, train carriages, ledgers, barbed wire, work camps, gas” (58). But in the twenty-first century, there is this key difference: “this late contribution, the absence of bodies. No bodies were visible, except the falling ones, on the day America’s ticker stopped” (58).

Julius’s reversal of the relation between real thing and conventional model, between bodies visible and invisible, along these lines recurs throughout the novel, though with increasing difficulty as he is forced repeatedly to give up his lofty vantage, confront his isolation, and to

²⁹⁸ Robin Lenman and Angela Nicholson, eds. *The Oxford Companion to the Photograph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁹⁹ The violence here is manifest on a number of levels, not least of which in the “Aryanization” of the journal in the 1930s.

enter instead into the scenes he is so quick otherwise to equate with their abstracted twins. Chapter Sixteen of *Open City* opens with a series of rapid-fire blows to Julius's general sense of self-satisfied solitude: he discovers that Professor Saito, whom he had left dying, mid-conversation, weeks before, has passed away; he calls Nadège, who asks him to "[refrain] from calling" and informs him that she is getting married (*OC* 184); he sees a young man "caring for... an older relative of his; his father, perhaps, or an uncle" with the solicitude he refused his mentor Saito (186); all of which culminates in a trip to the post office, where he mails Farouq a copy of Appiah's *Cosmopolitanism*. There Julius finds himself repulsed by the only person who seems willing or able to engage with him, the postal clerk, "TERRENCE MCKINNY, WRITER/PERFORMANCE POET/ACTIVIST" (187).

Fleeing, Julius takes the subway to Chinatown, where he discovers a shop that, much like the museum model of Manhattan, "was a microcosm of Chinatown itself, with an endless array of curious objects" (190):

In the midst of this cornucopia sat an old woman, who, having looked up briefly when I came in, was now fully reabsorbed in her Chinese newspaper.... I felt as if I had stumbled into a kink in time and place, that I could easily have been in any one of the many countries to which Chinese merchants had traveled and, for as long as trade had been global, set up their goods for sale. And, right away, as though to confirm this illusion, or at least to extend it, the old woman said something to me in Chinese and gestured outside. I presently saw a boy in ceremonial uniform walk by with a bass drum.... I followed them with my eyes until the procession trickled beyond the last of the bronze Buddhas that sat looking outward from the shop's window.

What begins as an "illusion," another generalized scene in which Julius "could easily have been in any one of the many countries to which Chinese merchants had traveled," takes on a decidedly different character by virtue of Julius's presence *in*, rather than above, this scene. Earlier in the novel, Julius similarly recounts where "the intensity of the rain blurred my sight, a phenomenon I had noticed before only with snowstorms, when a blizzard erased the most obvious signs of the times, leaving one unable to guess which century it was" (36). This blurring and obfuscation of vision, "overlaid the park with a primeval feeling, as though a world-ending flood were coming on, and Manhattan looked just then like it must have in the 1920s or even, if one was far enough away from the taller buildings, much further in the past."

From beyond the shop, the old lady and I heard the first series of notes from the trumpet, playing for two bars... Whether it expressed some civic pride or solemnized a funeral I could not tell, but so closely did the melody match my memory of those boyhood morning assemblies that I experienced the sudden disorientation and bliss of one who, in a stately old house and at a great distance from its mirrored wall, could clearly see the world doubled in on itself. I could no longer tell where the tangible universe ended and the reflected one began. This point-for-point imitation, of each porcelain vase, of each dull spot of shine on each stained teak chair, extend as far as where my reversed self had, as I had, halted in mid turn. (191)

"This point-for-point imitation... doubled in on itself," such that he "could no longer tell where the tangible universe ended and the reflected one began," is unlike the city matching the remembered museum model in that it includes Julius and his "reversed self." The synaesthetic

memory that reveals the seams of this doubled world is not someone else's (the elderly Berliner) or part of a collective history (the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers), but his own boyhood memory of school assemblies in Nigeria:

This double of mine had, at that precise moment, begun to tussle with the same problem as its equally confused original. To be alive, it seemed to me, as I stood there in all kinds of sorrow, was to be both original and reflection, and to be dead was to be split off, to be reflection alone. (191)

Entering this memory, Julius again prioritizes virtual reflection over its source—"this double of mine" becomes the agent of the sentence while he is simply relegated to "its equally confused original." But here, he arrives at the impasse between the two in his recognition that "to be alive... was to be both original and reflection," and its alternative, death, "was to be split off, to be reflection alone." The effect is to plunge Julius into one of the rare moments in the novel where he actively registers any feeling—here, "all kinds of sorrow."

The Startling Intricacy of Weeds

In the pages just after the Chinatown scene, Julius is in Central Park having a picnic with some friends and Moji when the group notices first "a plane traveling at such a height above us that the grumble of its jets was barely audible... then only its faint contrail... and just as that faded, we saw three white circles growing... appearing to fall upward at the same time they were falling down" (*OC* 194). Soon, "everything resolved, like a camera viewfinder coming into focus, and we saw the human shape within each circle. Each person, each of these flying men, steered his parachute... and watching them I felt the blood race inside my veins." These bodies literal fall from the distant heights of a plane and toward the group on the ground, bridging the gap between abstract white circles and clearly identifiable human form. This collapse fills Julius with awe and brings him to yet another moment of embodied recognition as he feels "the blood race inside [his] veins."

In the subsequent chapter, his sense of generic identification and anonymous belonging shatters as two men on the street with whom he had previously imagined himself sharing "a gesture of mutual respect based on our being young, black, male; based, in other words, on our being 'brothers'" rob and beat him mercilessly (212). The "quick, preplanned choreography" of the event leaves Julius "conscious of a man on the ground being beaten"—himself. Sitting on the ground afterward, Julius looks up "above [him]" to where "the evening lights of the apartments came on... light shining from interiors I could see but not reach seemed to promise that life was continuing." Far below his view from Moji's boyfriend's terrace, on the ground, bleeding and broken, these lights signify to Julius that "people were returning home from work, or preparing dinner, or finishing the last fragments of the afternoon task" (213). He sits "in the street looking into a nettle-choked ditch. The intricacy of the weeds startled." This is a far cry from the untouchable remove and flat abstraction of an aerial vista.

Back in the safe remove of his own apartment, Julius tends to his wounds, makes some tea, and watches, unseen, the neighbor opposite. Unlike Clarissa Dalloway's epiphanic moment of seeing and being seen by the old lady opposite at the end of Woolf's novel, Julius comes to a moment of apparent clarity while watching the "young woman" in the building opposite praying by lamplight—his "own apartment was dark" (*OC* 215). Despite the initial reflection it prompts—"others are not like us, I thought to myself, their forms are different from ours"—Julius finds

himself thinking of “others’ stories of being mugged... but now: me... As I examined the bruises, a herd of thoughts clattered through me: Why had this same body hale so often hurried past its lovers?” (216) The forced confrontation with the limits of his own body and others opens up a moment of clarity as he recognizes his part among others rather than above or removed from them, and among the lovers—Nadège, the Czech woman in Brussels, and in a perverse deployment of the word, Moji—he has callously moved past. As soon as Julius reaches this revelation, the young woman opposite “stopped praying... and switched off the lamp,” leaving both of them in the dark.

In these moments leading up to his confrontation with Moji, Julius repeatedly confronts his physical embodiment, his proximity to death, and the machinations of his own memories. He has a broken memory of his father’s funeral, which, unlike his retelling of his mother’s past, demonstrates a self-awareness and unease regarding the facility with which public memories can displace private ones. “The memory of the day wasn’t secure,” Julius admits, “because it was a public event and was as such taken over by other people’s concerns” (*OC* 227). Flagging a self-consciousness otherwise absent from his overwriting of his mother’s story with his subsequent historical research, Julius describes how he “had complicated the memory of the day, not with other burials, of which I had attended only a few, but with depictions of burials—El Greco’s *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, Courbet’s *Burial at Ornans*—so that the actual event had taken on the characteristics of those images, and in doing so had become faint and unreliable” (228). In his admission of how much he has obfuscated his memory of his father’s funeral, readers gain some of the novel’s clearest insights into Julius’s mind.

Falling in and out of focus

The confrontation with Moji closes the penultimate chapter of the novel, which has, until almost the very last been narrated retrospectively from an undisclosed present tense. The final chapter, however, brings readers and novel fully into the narrative present as Julius describes the new office he has been decorating and settling into since “Monday,” an announcement he heard “yesterday afternoon” for concerts at Carnegie Hall, and his attendance at a performance of Mahler’s Ninth Symphony that night (247, 249). After the concert, Julius remembers finding himself momentarily trapped on a fire escape overlooking “Times Square’s neon inferno,” and this late aerial vista surprisingly becomes a meditation on the “unreachable” light from above that “would arrive in due time, and cast its illumination on other humans” (256). The dilation of distance runs both ways, as he reflects on how he “had come so close to something that it had fallen out of focus, or fallen so far away from it that it had faded away” (256).

Evoking the various modes of Julius’s blindness towards others and himself, as well as that of critics caught between the glare of the novel’s cosmopolitan reach and its stark empathy gaps, *Open City* concludes with Julius stuck “halfway... [his] entire being... caught up in a blind spot” (256). In the aftermath of his confrontation with Moji, readers might understand this impasse as one in which Julius is bound, on the one hand, by his professional understanding that what we know of the mind “is so much less than what remained in darkness,” and, on the other, believing that one “must assume that the room of his own mind is not, cannot be, entirely opaque to him” (238, 243). In that same vein, this momentary temporal and ethical clarity draws attention to another narrative impasse: are readers to take Julius as having narrated the entirety of the novel from the position of having already encountered Moji and their forgotten past, or as having recounted each episode more or less just after they happened? The difference would determine

whether Julius is aware or delusional along the way regarding his self-incriminating callousness toward Moji and others, whether his looking to remember is a practice of blindness or insight.

The final pages of the novel return Julius to a bird's-eye view of the city as he contemplates the early history of the Statue of Liberty as a working lighthouse whose "flame... guided ships into Manhattan's harbor," just as "that same light... fatally disoriented birds." "The birds, many of which were clever enough to dodge the cluster of skyscrapers in the city"—perhaps able, to recall the novel's opening, to navigate them "as firs massed in a grove"—"somehow lost their bearings when faced with a single monumental flame" (258, 3). At every level, Cole's novel demonstrates the fragile and ongoing oscillation between blindness and insight that no longer corresponds solely to visual access—technological or otherwise.

From Woolf to Nabokov to Sebald to Cole, transparent visual access becomes as much an opening for violence as for collectivity. The "careful reconstruction" of "artificial but beautifully exact" worlds through stereoscopic layering transforms into virtual immersion within a manifestly flat, simplified, and abstracted scene (*SM* 270). The analog model gives way to a blindness marked by distance, virtuality, and abstraction that characterize *Open City's* narrator and his relation to other people and his own past. But it also opens up a cosmopolitan point—or port, in the case of the Statue of Liberty—of entry, one that literalizes the present dangers and the allure of looking to remember one's own past in its connection to the world at large.

APPENDIX A

 **Teju Cole** 
@tejucole 

Seven short stories about drones.
9:02 AM - 14 Jan 2013
🔄 239 ❤️ 74

 **Teju Cole** 
@tejucole 

1. Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. Pity. A signature strike leveled the florist's.
9:04 AM - 14 Jan 2013
🔄 307 ❤️ 103

 **Teju Cole** 
@tejucole 

2. Call me Ishmael. I was a young man of military age. I was immolated at my wedding. My parents are inconsolable.
9:06 AM - 14 Jan 2013
🔄 286 ❤️ 95

 **Teju Cole** 
@tejucole 

3. Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather. A bomb whistled in. Blood on the walls. Fire from heaven.
9:08 AM - 14 Jan 2013
🔄 271 ❤️ 83

 **Teju Cole** 
@tejucole 



4. I am an invisible man. My name is unknown. My loves are a mystery. But an unmanned aerial vehicle from a secret location has come for me.
9:11 AM - 14 Jan 2013
🔄 349 ❤️ 137

 **Teju Cole** 
@tejucole 




5. Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was killed by a Predator drone.
9:13 AM - 14 Jan 2013
🔄 501 ❤️ 171

 **Teju Cole** 
@tejucole 

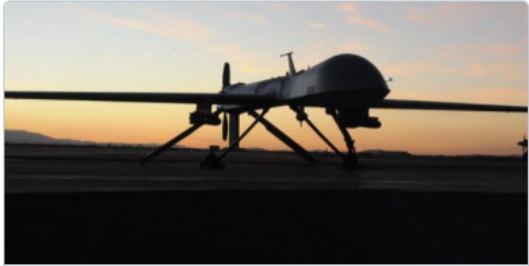
6. Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His torso was found, not his head.
9:15 AM - 14 Jan 2013
🔄 252 ❤️ 86

 **Teju Cole** 
@tejucole 

7. Mother died today. The program saves American lives.
9:16 AM - 14 Jan 2013
🔄 303 ❤️ 118

 **Teju Cole** 
@tejucole 

Everything we know so far about drone strikes:
propublica.org/article/everyt...
9:18 AM - 14 Jan 2013



Everything We Know So Far About Drone Strikes
The U.S. is conducting drone strikes in in at least three countries beyond Iraq and Afghanistan. Here's a reading guide to propublica.org

🔄 134 ❤️ 55

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