Untimely Forms

Late Modernism, War, Essayistic Form

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Hilary Term, 2024

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Acknowledgments

I wish to express my gratitude, first, to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which co-funded my doctoral studies together with Magdalen College, Oxford, and the Clarendon Fund. I am grateful, too, to Ruggero Savinio, for granting me permission to consult his father's papers at the Gabinetto G.P. Vieusseux, in Florence; to the staff at the Taylor Institution, where a great deal of this thesis was written, and at knjižnica Novigrad-Cittanova, where some of it was completed; to the Trieste Joyce School, for funding my participation in the school, and for an unforgettable week in *la nostra bella Trieste*.

To my supervisor, Marina MacKay, who discerned the potential of this thesis when it first began to change shape: for her keen eye and rigorous reading, for her attentiveness, but most of all for her wit and good humour.

To the late Laura Marcus, to Rebecca Beasley, and to Kate McLoughlin, who provided valuable insights and recommendations in the early stages of this project.

To Claudio Magris, for his hospitality, for his gentle irony and generosity—and for showing me, too, that if things go the way they do, they might perfectly well go otherwise.

To Ella, Helena, Sanah, Donatella, Claudia, Alessia, and Clementina, for their enduring friendship.

To Silvia and Alberto, for all the dinners, laughs, and conversations *al piano di sopra*; to Silvia especially, for her time and patience in our making of *Ashore*, and for opening my eyes to the marvels of the camera-eye.

To my parents, for their support during my studies; to my brother, ever reliable in the quiet simplicity of his friendship; to my dear mother especially: this thesis I dedicate to you.

And to Jakov: for all the journeying, and all the loving. *Hvala*.

Abstract

This thesis argues that the geopolitical crises of the middle to late twentieth century catalyzed the emergence of a literary practice I call 'long-form essayism'.

The literary essay has long stood accused of being secondary or ancillary, next to more established genres like poetry or the novel. In recent years, however, the rise of hybrid categories like essayistic fiction and creative nonfiction, in concomitance with renewed debates concerning the novel's viability, has led to growing interest in the essay form. My thesis makes an intervention in the ongoing revival of essay scholarship by showing how essayistic form offered a rich repertoire of technical resources in the service of writers anxious to confront the violence of the Second World War—whether anticipated, lived, or remembered—without resorting to the descriptive capabilities of fiction alone. Neither short nor minor, the book-length essays in my thesis revive older, supposedly outmoded genres of writing—among them, the philosophical dialogue, the commonplace book, the spoof encyclopaedia, the aphorism, the ramble—which can be placed under the main rubric of literary essayism. This loose body of writing, I contend, emerged in the last years of the interwar period as a formal riposte to the looming violence of war, and has since then solidified into a highly inventive and formally exuberant model for writing historical crisis, especially at the scale and pace of long-form prose.

My thesis is chronologically organized in two parts. Part One focuses on three works written during the Second World War, namely Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Cyril Connolly's *The Unquiet Grave*, and Alberto Savinio's *Nuova enciclopedia*. Part Two moves to the end of the century, from the 1980s to the 1990s, when, I argue, the end of the Cold War and the return to Europe of armed conflict in the form of the Yugoslav Wars (1991-1999) occasion the return, too, of long-form essayism after decades of relative dormancy, most notably in Claudio Magris's *Danube* and W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*.

Illustrations

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Welcome to the twentieth century, out of which your century grew as surely as a column of black smoke grows from an oil fire.

Clive James, *Cultural Amnesia* (2007)

INTRODUCTION

On Essayistic Form

The essay, it is often said, began as a gathering of quotations, and so this study, too, shall begin the same way. Consider the following:

> The whole world is living more or less in a state of war; and a state of war produces any literary form more easily than the essay.[1]
>
> Only the totalitarian systems of this century turned walking without a purpose into a crime. Since the time of G. K. Chesterton and Virginia Woolf the essay has been a dead genre.[2]
>
> The personal essay […] has withered in the blasts of war.[3]

This thesis tracks down the many deaths and rebirths of a literary form caught in the blasts of the twentieth century. It argues that far from having withered under the rubble of war, essayistic form afforded some of the most inventive ways of recording and representing the geopolitical upheavals of the past century. Whereas the essay was once dismissed as a form too tactful, too genteel, in a word, too outmoded for the age of global war, this study sets out to describe how one particular strand of essayistic prose made a virtue of its purported untimeliness in order to cast light—slantwise—on some of the most urgent and fundamental questions of its day. The following introduction will unfold the central terms of my argument as they appear in the subtitle of my thesis, though *à l'envers*: from essayistic form to war, and from war to late modernism. Before doing so, however, I want to go back to the three quotations above: to the exact time and place, that is, of their utterance.

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[1] Katharine Fullerton Gerould, 'An Essay on Essays', *North American Review*, August 1935, pp. 409–18 (p. 415).
[2] Michael Hamburger, 'An Essay on the Essay', in *Essayists on the Essay: Montaigne to Our Time*, ed. by Carl H. Klaus and Ned Stuckey-French (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), pp. 91–93 (p. 92).
[3] Agnes Repplier, 'The American Essay in War Time', *Yale Review*, January 1918, pp. 249–59 (p. 253).

The first of these is taken from a piece published in 1935 by the American critic Katharine Fullerton Gerould, and entitled, rather fittingly, 'An Essay on Essays'. In it, Gerould lambasts the 'rage for "fact-finding"' and the 'corruption of propaganda' for putting paid to the subjective meditation so vital to essayistic writing: a lamentable consequence, she contends, of the 'state of war in which we are unfortunately living'.[4] Of course, it would be another four years (six, if we count U.S. intervention) before the official eruption of hostilities that precipitated World War Two, but Gerould's claim can be read as registering a broader sentiment, so recurrent throughout that pervadingly war-minded decade, that a future global conflict appeared all but inevitable, turning the period's supposed peacetime into an anxiety-ridden wartime. And in wartime, decried Gerould, 'the essay is nowhere' to be found, if by essay one considers a literary form that is at once gentle and genteel, detached and discreet, allergic to all facts and figures, with idle rumination and the light touch as its sole methods and aims.[5] Where Stephen Spender was claiming, also in 1935, that the crises of the day ought 'to turn the reader's and writer's attention outwards from himself to the world', and where even old-time modernists like Virginia Woolf were putting the old-fashioned essay to more polemical uses, the staunchly conservative Gerould sniffed at 'our new planetary self-consciousness', with its sense of urgency and doom.[6] 'The perfect essayist', Gerould allowed, 'could write a good essay on Hitler or on hogs, and I should be enchanted to read it—but he has not done it yet, and I am not yet enchanted'.[7]

Gerould's jeremiad was not, however, the first of its kind: only between 1933 and 1935, in fact, at least three other such essays on the death of the essay were published in various

[4] Gerould, p. 417.
[5] Gerould, p. 416.
[6] Stephen Spender, *The Destructive Element: A Study of Modern Writers and Beliefs* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), p. 205; Katharine Fullerton Gerould, 'Information, Please! A Call for a Plebiscite of Magazine Readers', *Saturday Review of Literature*, 29 December 1934, pp. 393, 395 (p. 393).
[7] Gerould, 'Information, Please!', p. 395.

Anglo-American periodicals.[8] As early as 1905, Woolf had written a piece entitled 'The Decay of Essay-writing', and in 1922, in a review for the five-volume *Modern English Essays*, later reprinted as 'The Modern Essay', she again pointed to a 'tired, apathetic world', one full of 'busy people catching trains in the morning' and 'tired people coming home in the evening', as a disagreeable change in circumstances for the kind of hushed attentiveness required by the essay.[9] The eleventh *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1910-11), meanwhile, closed its entry on the essay with the somewhat resigned forecast that 'the essay may die of exhaustion of interest'.[10] Even the cause of death established by Gerould was not entirely new, for already in 1918 another American critic, Agnes Repplier, had decried—in what is the third of my opening quotations—that the essay, or at least what she called the personal essay as opposed to the treatise or article, 'had withered in the blasts of war'.[11] Published toward the end of the First World War, Repplier's 'The American Essay in War Time' opens with the grimly funny complaint made by a college professor whose essay on Sir Thomas Browne, sold to an English review in the spring of 1914, never made it to print after the intervening outbreak of war. The reason, Repplier holds, is as simple as it is dismaying, for

> if we open an index to periodical literature, and see how many columns are headed 'European War', we understand why there is no room left for the essay. If we look next at the columns bearing the sub-title, 'Atrocities', we know why there is no heart left in the essayist.[12]

[8] See Amy Loveman's 'A Disappearing Art', *Saturday Review of Literature*, 23 July 1932, p. 1; John Waters's 'A Little Old Lady Passes Away', *The Forum and Century*, 90.1 (July 1933), 27-29; and Elizabeth Drew's 'The Lost Art of the Essay', *Saturday Review of Literature*, 16 February 1935, pp. 485-486. For a useful commentary on the 1930s discourse concerning the essay's decline, especially in North America, see Ned Stuckey-French, 'Why Does the Essay Keep Dying, and What Do Little Lord Fauntleroy and the "Lavender-Scented Little Old Lady" Have to Do with It?', *CEA Critic*, 61.2/3 (1999), 30–36.
[9] Virginia Woolf, 'The Modern Essay', in *Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 13–22 (p. 20).
[10] Edmund W. Gosse, 'Essay, Essayist', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature, and General Information*, 11th ed., ed. by Hugh Chisholm, 29 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910-11), IX, pp. 776-78 (p. 778).
[11] Repplier, p. 253.
[12] Repplier, p. 250.

There was, it is true, a great deal of turmoil in the old Europe of Montaigne or Charles Lamb (Repplier concedes) but 'no plunge of barbarism', and certainly nothing to take them 'by the throat' and strangle their 'serenity'.[13] The Great War, by contrast, has ushered in a new era of mass horror and atrocity, so that one would need far greater powers of detachment to ignore the unfolding tragedy in favour of personal jottings and belletrist trifles. Repplier's postmortem on the essay thus displays all the finality of a hyperbole: 'the personal essay, the little bit of sentiment or observation, the lightly offered commentary which aims to appear the artless thing it isn't,—this exotic, of which Lamb was a rare exponent, has withered in the blasts of war'.[14]

I shall hold in abeyance, for the moment, the image of the university professor writing about Sir Thomas Browne against the din of far-off wars, at least until the final chapter of this thesis, when this very image will return in the eccentric shape of a book-length essay devoted to both Sir Thomas Browne *and* war-ravaged Europe. That book is W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, published in Britain and the United States in 1998, precisely eighty years after Repplier's elegy on the essay. Suffice it to say, for now, that it was one of Sebald's translators, the German-British poet and critic Michael Hamburger, who lends the second, and final, quotation inaugurating this thesis. In a piece self-reflexively entitled (once again) 'An Essay on the Essay', and first published in 1965, Hamburger makes the familiar case that 'the essay is an outmoded genre', as outmoded indeed as the arts of letter-writing, of conversation, of walking for pleasure.[15] As with many other such claims, this one was not entirely new, either: already in 1881, Leslie Stephen (Woolf's father) had noted that essay-

[13] Repplier, p. 249.
[14] Repplier, p. 253.
[15] Hamburger, p. 92.

writing ‘is as much one of the lost arts as good letter-writing or good talk’.[16] But while Stephen (and later his daughter) may have chalked up the decline of essays, or at least of a particular kind of essay, to the bustle and speed of the modern metropolis, Michael Hamburger, having fled Nazi Germany as a child, had a much darker history to look back on: the essay, he granted, ‘has come to terms with the overcrowded streets of large cities’, but not at all ‘with prison yards and extermination camps’, which make this rambling, evasive form of writing perversely ill-timed or untimely; that is to say, ‘shameless, egotistic and insolent’.[17] If the essay has long been ‘a dead genre’, then, it is because amid ‘the totalitarian systems of this century’ it has become nearly impossible, or so argues Hamburger, to ‘take walks without a bad conscience’, or without at least being ‘too much aware of a crisis’.[18] And what is the essay, in one of its most enduring of tropes, but an idle, untroubled walk?

Untimely Forms is a study of walks taken with a bad conscience. I do not mean to suggest, by this, that this thesis will investigate forms of writing that are overtly political or committed, or that self-consciously tilt towards the genres of journalism or reportage, though some of the most canonical essayists in English (such as Bacon, Sontag, Orwell) have also been numbered among the most political. I am interested, rather, in prose forms that did not so much discard as repurpose the oblique ways, ironic detachment, and rambling drift most commonly associated with the essay, so as to make it fit for a new age of total war and total state. As such, none of the works I corral here display the strident accents of the manifesto or polemic. ‘We need to get away from polemic’, Gerould petitioned, ‘we need the essay rather particularly, just now’.[19] Brian Dillon, too, has more recently claimed, in his own essay on the

[16] Leslie Stephen, ‘The Essayists’, in *Men, Books, and Mountains: Essays by Leslie Stephen*, ed. by S. O. A. Ullmann (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), pp. 45-73 (p. 64). Originally published in *The Cornhill Magazine* (1881).
[17] Hamburger, p. 93.
[18] Hamburger, p. 92.
[19] Gerould, ‘An Essay on Essays’, p. 417.

essay, that against 'polemics' and 'boisterous critical opinion' he gravitates rather toward 'obliquity, essays that approach their targets, for there must be targets, slantwise'.[20] What is perhaps even more surprising is that even a writer as politically *engagé* as Orwell could have voiced views that were not, in fact, very unlike those of his more conservative counterparts across the pond: for the best books written during the Great War, he chimed in 'Inside the Whale' (1940), 'were nearly all the work of people who simply turned their backs and tried not to notice that the war was happening'.[21] So, for example, against the 'public-spiritedness' and 'bomb-explosions' of wartime, Orwell imagined the relief he might have felt, as a soldier in the trenches, had he read about 'the hesitations of a middle-aged highbrow with a bald spot' (a reference to Eliot's *Prufrock*).[22] Only, of course, by the time Orwell came to write this influential essay, 'another European war' had already broken out, making his defence of modernist inwardness and subjectivity—of 'helplessness, even of frivolity'—in the midst of unprecedented crisis as much a critical appraisal of the past as a newly-useful prescription for the present: a licence of retreat, that is, toward all that is individualistic and idiosyncratic, out of key and out of time.[23]

Essayistic Form

I chose to begin by way of these assorted necrologies in order to emphasize the insistence with which, throughout much of the past century, the essay has been debated to (quite literal) death. The essay, it seems, is always *in articulo mortis*. In this at least, it arguably shares the

[20] Brian Dillon, *Essayism* (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2017), p. 14.
[21] George Orwell, 'Inside the Whale' [1940], in *Selected Essays*, ed. by Stefan Collini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 801–114 (p. 111). Orwell, however, is not concerned with the essay so much as with the novel (and with Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* [1934] in particular), and with how the novel could still mobilise the seemingly old-fashioned tactics of earlier modernists in its defence against political collectivization and wartime propaganda.
[22] Orwell, pp. 111–12.
[23] Orwell, p. 112.

same fate as the novel, for though claims about the death or obsolescence of the novel can be traced back to at least as early as 1752, it was around the middle of the twentieth century, following the technical accomplishments of modernist fiction, that they reached their ostensible apogee.[24] Think, again, of Orwell's famous pronouncement, in 1940, that in the new era of totalitarianism the novel is 'as surely doomed as the hippopotamus'.[25] But just as with the novel, each hand-wringing complaint about the decline of the essay has typically been only the prelude to some further advancement of it; announcements of birth or rebirth, in other words, are quickly plastered over existing notices of death. And today, after more than half a century of undue neglect, the essay is not only alive and well, but in the midst of a veritable revival of interest, both as an object of academic research and as a literary practice in its own right. Indeed, though a number of studies on the essay sporadically appeared at the turn of the last century, it is only recently that the critical needle has so abruptly swung the other way, registering—with as many as six volumes published since 2020—something like a hypertrophic reaction: a compensatory response, as it were, to decades of relative indifference.[26] These volumes usually take the collaborative shape of a *Companion*, a *History*, a *Handbook*, or an *Anthology*, each with its own theory and history of the form. Others, meanwhile, are single-author studies usually devoted to a particular period within the longer history of the genre, such as David Russell's *Tact* (2018), which handles the kind of

[24] One critic already concluded, in 1752, that 'all the variety of which this species of literary entertainment is capable, seems almost exhausted, and even novels themselves no longer charm us with novelty'. Quoted in John Tinnon Taylor, *Early Opposition to the English Novel: The Popular Reaction from 1760–1830* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1943), p. 13.
[25] Orwell, p. 112.
[26] See *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present*, ed. by Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); *The Essay at the Limits: Poetics, Politics and Form*, ed. by Mario Aquilina (London: Bloomsbury, 2021); *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay*, ed. by Mario Aquilina, Nicole B. Wallack, and Bob Cowser (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022); *The Cambridge Companion to the Essay*, ed. by Kara Wittman and Evan Kindley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); *The Cambridge History of the British Essay*, ed. by Denise Gigante and Jason Childs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024); *The Cambridge History of the American Essay*, ed. by Christy Wampole and Jason Childs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

genteel essay whose purported death in the twentieth century was to be so keenly lamented.[27] Others still focus on the essay as it cross-pollinates and expands into other media, literary or otherwise: this is the case with Stefano Ercolino's *The Novel-Essay, 1884–1947* (2014) and Nora Alter's *The Essay Film after Fact and Fiction* (2017).[28] And yet, despite the recent boom in scholarship on the essay, there is currently no study that adequately accounts for the kind of phenomenon I propose to investigate here, nor any critical language as yet attached to it.

Let me begin, emphatically, by staking out the singularity of my own endeavour by specifying what my study isn't: this is not a survey of the essay as it shifts and changes throughout the twentieth century, nor is it a contribution to modernist studies from the newly dusted quarters of the once-forgotten essay. In some important sense, this is not perhaps even a study of the essay, for not all—indeed, almost none—of the works I assemble here 'look like' the essays most commonly theorized and anthologized in the foregoing volumes, if by essay we take to mean, that is, a prose piece that 'is not too long and is *about* something'.[29] One is an aphoristic journal and commonplace book; another a personal encyclopaedia; others still display subtitles that very clearly market them as travel narratives, framing them now as *A Journey through Yugoslavia*, now as *A Sentimental Journey from the Source to the Black Sea*, now as *An English Pilgrimage*. One way of looking at them, at least for the moment, would be to indulge less in the writerly impulses or genetic circumstances that first stirred them into being, than to becoming attuned, I suggest, to the awed confusion that invariably marked their reception. For the question most insistently solicited by each and

[27] David Russell, *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).
[28] Stefano Ercolino, *The Novel-Essay, 1884-1947* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Nora M. Alter, *The Essay Film after Fact and Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).
[29] Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy, 'Introduction: On the Difficulty of Introducing a Work of this Kind', in *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present*, ed. by Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 1–30 (p. 5).

every one of them was—and still remains—the same: what is the literary work at hand a work *of*? At times, the bewildered reviewer responded by reeling off one generic tag after another, in the hope of casting the net as wide as possible ('history, politics, archaeology, anecdote, conversation, polemic, prophecy, and jokes'); at others, by conceding to wary—and weary—admissions of doubt ('I am not sure what it is—history, spiritual autobiography, philosophy, criticism'); in some cases, by humbly lapsing into reverential wonder ('It is like nothing I've ever read'); more rarely, by concurring, with Benjamin, that all great works of literature spawn a genre of their own, with its obligatory cortège of imitators and parodists ('this book is a very special genre almost unknown').[30] In today's literary parlance they might be shelved, rather glibly, as genre-bending—or more vaguely still, as creative nonfiction—though none of them were, strictly speaking, altogether novel, just as Montaigne's *Essais* were not, in themselves, entirely without precedent.[31]

The most felicitous phrase I have chanced on, in this regard, is 'essayistic semi-fiction', which was coined, not coincidentally, by Michael Hamburger himself, three decades after his rueful essay on the essay. 'I think', he wrote to his friend W.G. Sebald in 1995, 'you have hit on a most satisfactory form of essayistic semi-fiction, which gives rope to both observation and imagination'.[32] As a descriptor, the phrase remarkably goes some way toward capturing the particular blend of fiction and fact, of essayistic drift and narrative impulse, that will be my focus in the coming chapters. But while 'essayistic semi-fiction' makes for a charmingly

[30] Carl Rollyson on Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, in *Rebecca West: A Life* (New York: Scribner, 1996), p. 205; Patrick Taylor-Martin on Claudio Magris's *Danube*, in 'But I Go On For Ever', *Listener*, 13 July 1989, p. 26; Susan Sontag's jacket-blurb review of W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* (1996); Irwin Edman on Cyril Connolly's *The Unquiet Grave*, in 'Musings of a Troubled Soul', *Saturday Review of Literature*, 17 November 1945, p. 12.

[31] The rise of 'creative nonfiction' is particularly tied to creative writing programmes in the United States, such as the University of Iowa's Nonfiction Writing Program. On the history of the term, see Ned Stuckey-French, 'Creative Nonfiction and the Lyric Essay: The American Essay in the Twenty-First Century', in *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present*, ed. by Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 293–312.

[32] Quoted in Carole Angier, *Speak, Silence: In Search of W.G. Sebald* (London: Bloomsbury Circus, 2021), pp. 347–48.

unusual shorthand, the vexed relationship between the essay as genre and the essay as a mode of writing—between essaying and the essay, that is—is as old as the thing itself. Already in 1612, Francis Bacon, author of the first published book of English essays and thus, in some way, a secondary founder of the genre, pointed that 'the word is late, but the thing is ancient', offering as an early specimen of such 'dispersed Meditations' Seneca's *Epistles to Lucilius*.[33] This sense of the essay in the adjectival mode, only in part attached to a specific genre, transpires, too, from György Lukács's 1910 essay on the essay, which enlists, as notable examples of the form, such generically varied texts as Montaigne's *Essais*, Plato's dialogues, and Kierkegaard's imaginary diaries and short stories.[34] Claire de Obaldia spoke of an 'essayistic spirit' in her influential study of 1995, indexing not so much a codified genre as a style or an attitude, a loose and exploratory disposition toward the world.[35] Brian Dillon has more recently made the case for 'essayism'—a 'habit of thinking, writing and living' that is 'tentative and hypothetical'—while Réda Bensmaïa went so far as to define the essayistic as 'the moment of writing before the genre, before genericness—or as the matrix of all generic possibilities'.[36] A supergenre, supragenre, pregenre, antigenre: the essay, it seems, is each and none of these things at the same time. I shall clarify at the outset, however, that I am less interested in the work of classification, for as the many essays on essays (or meta-essays) that I have mentioned so far would seem to attest, this is a game most often entertained by essayists themselves, who have not only made resistance to definition 'part of its [the essay's]

[33] Francis Bacon, 'Preface' to *Essays* [1612], in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. by James Spedding et al., 15 vols (London: Longman & Co.,1860–4), XI, p. 340.
[34] György Lukács, 'On the Nature and Form of theminne Essay: A Letter to Leo Popper', in *Soul and Form*, ed. by John T. Sanders and Katie Terezakis, trans. by Anna Bostock (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 16–34 (p. 18).
[35] Claire de Obaldia, *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).
[36] Dillon, p. 20; Réda Bensmaïa, *The Barthes Effect: The Essay as Reflexive Text*, trans. by Pat Fedkiew (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 91–2.

peculiar work', but a covert way, too, of shoring up their own status, making a virtue out of deformity, or even, in some cases, a form out of formlessness.[37]

With this in mind, it bears noting, however, that of all the obituarists for the essay cited above, Michael Hamburger was the only one to acknowledge, in his 1965 piece, that though the essay may be dead, 'the spirit of essay-writing walks on irresistibly, even over the corpse of the essay', to make itself at home elsewhere, 'outside the genre'—in the prose of Robert Walser and Jorge Luis Borges, say, or in the kind of essayistic semi-fictions, as he called them, that W.G. Sebald would begin to write much later.[38] This was certainly a prescient claim, and in more than just one sense: for if the essay is to be read as a literary mode that survives by cannibalizing other forms of writing, it means, too, that its survival is predicated on more than just its own decline as an obsolescent genre. And the other moribund genre with which the essay's fortunes are routinely conflated is that of the novel. Or, to put it differently: if the language spoken by the essay is currently enjoying a renaissance, it is in no small part due to novelists looking at novel ways of either renouncing or renewing—they amount to the same thing—the novel form. In a 2009 essay entitled 'The Rise of the Essay', Zadie Smith called this 'novel-nausea', and found that not only she, but a host of other novelists, too, were clearly suffering from the same symptoms: a certain discontent, even a revulsion with the 'well-made' (J. M. Coetzee) or 'well-behaved' (Teju Cole) or 'standard' (W.G. Sebald) novel, with its tired trappings of character and plot and setting standing out to the jaundiced eye like exposed 'wheels grinding and going on'.[39] '"She said, and walked across the room"—there's something trite about it', Sebald once confessed, before forcefully declaring that 'my medium

[37] Karshan and Murphy, 'Introduction', p. 5.
[38] Hamburger, pp. 92–93.
[39] Zadie Smith, 'The Rise of the Essay', *Guardian* (2009), now available at <https://www.youmightfindyourself.com/post/252362834/zadie-smith-on-the-rise-of-the-essay/> [accessed 20 December 2023]; J. M. Coetzee, jacket blurb for David Shields's *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (2010); Teju Cole, 'Pitch Forward', *Guernica*, 15 March 2013 <https://www.guernicamag.com/pitch-forward/> [accessed 20 December 2023]; James Atlas, 'W.G. Sebald: A Profile', *Paris Review*, Summer 1999, p. 282.

is prose, not the novel'.[40] Karl Ove Knausgaard concurred: 'the only genres I saw value in', he wrote at one point in what is (ironically) a novel, namely *My Struggle*, 'were diaries and essays, the types of literature that did not deal with narrative, that were not about anything, but just consisted of a voice'.[41] Geoff Dyer, too, admitted to an 'impatience' with novels as 'I get older', accounting for his preference for the discursive against the purely imaginative.[42] Teju Cole quickly followed suit, anointing the essay as an exemplary answer to his own novel nausea.[43] The essayistic, in this view, is what novelists turn to when they run out of ideas, or else when they grow sick and tired of the 'necessary "and then, and then" which sits at the heart of all imagined narratives'.[44]

Of course, the kind of novel (or idea of the novel) which many of these arguments rely on itself turns out to be, not infrequently, a convenient myth—rather a 'platonic Bogeyman' than a tangible entity—so that one would do well to concede, as does Zadie Smith, that 'even the most conventional account of our literary "canon" reveals the history of the novel to be simultaneously a history of nonconformity'.[45] But for all the appropriate caveats one might put in place, the novel nausea can still be observed, and felt, all the same. Inextricably linked with the rise of essayistic form, then, is a familiar, perhaps all too clichéd discourse concerning the death of the novel, which unavoidably stands as a 'key figure within numerous of the most important proclamations of the essay's current renaissance'.[46] This is the case, most emphatically, with David Shields's *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (2010), which

[40] Atlas; W.G. Sebald, *'Auf Ungeheuer Dünnem Eis': Gespräche 1971 Bis 2001*, ed. by Torsten Hoffmann (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2011), p. 85. Translation mine.
[41] Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Man in Love*, trans. by Don Bartlett (New York: Vintage, 2013), p. 497.
[42] Geoff Dyer, 'The Novelistic Essay and the Essayistic Novel', in *Writers on Writers*, presented at the Key West Literary Seminar, Key West, FL, 2013, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?310427-4/novelistic-essay-essayistic> [accessed 18 May 2021].
[43] Cole, 'Pitch Forward'.
[44] Smith, 'The Rise of the Essay'.
[45] Smith, 'The Rise of the Essay'.
[46] Jason Childs, 'Assaying the Novel', in *The Essay at the Limits: Poetics, Politics and Form*, ed. by Mario Aquilina (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 183-195 (p. 187).

not only grows out of a declared discontent with the novel ('something has happened to my imagination', Shields muses, 'which can no longer yield to the earnest embrace of novelistic form'), but also goes on to announce, more bluntly, that '[t]he novel is dead. Long live the antinovel, built from scraps'.[47] And scraps are just what Shields uses, stitching together his call to arms out of hundreds of fragments—sentences, aphorisms, paragraphs, quotations—in support of essayistic form as that which is 'seemingly unprocessed, unfiltered, uncensored': the '"raw" material' of life, writes Shields, with a clear nod to Samuel Johnson's famous condemnation of the essay, in 1755, as 'an irregular undigested piece'.[48] It follows, therefore, that the kinds of novels Shields gravitates toward 'are ones which bear no trace of being novels', resembling rather, with their vanishing plots and roving subjectivities, 'a form of thinking, consciousness, wisdom-seeking'; novels, that is, 'so meditative they're barely disguised essays' (examples he cites are Coetzee, Houellebecq, Kundera, Bernhard, Sebald).[49]

That the essay should have become something so capacious, so irregular, so anti-definition—'a "Make It New" for a new century', as J. M. Coetzee put it—as to accommodate any desire nauseated novelists might have, however, makes for a somewhat puzzling development, if one considers the more recent history of the form.[50] For it's not too long ago that the essay cut a much slighter figure when placed next to the novel. Here is Aldous Huxley, in 1959: 'What is true of the novel is only a little less true of the essay. For, like the novel, the essay is a literary device for saying almost everything about almost anything'.[51] And here is Cynthia Ozick, in 1998: unlike the novel, the essay is 'a fireside thing, not a conflagration' (and as a fireside thing, she adds, the essay can hardly convey 'the inferno of catastrophe or war').[52]

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[47] David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2010), pp. 199, 115.
[48] Shields, p. 5; Samuel Johnson, *Johnson's Dictionary: A Modern Selection*, ed. by E. L. McAdam and George Milne (London: Franklin Classics, 1963), p. 167.
[49] Shields, pp. 203, 118, 203.
[50] See J. M. Coetzee's jacket-blurb of Shields's *Reality Hunger*.
[51] Aldous Huxley, 'Preface', in *Collected Essays* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), pp. v–ix (p. v).
[52] Cynthia Ozick, 'She: Portrait of the Essay as a Warm Body', in *Essayists on the Essay*, ed. by Carl H. Klaus and Ned Stuckey-French (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), pp. 151-158 (p. 156).

And Rebecca Solnit, in 2000: the essay is 'a kind of literary birdcage capable of containing only small chirping subjects, as distinct from the lion's den of the novel'.[53] The essay, in other words, has long been considered (when it was considered at all) as the novel's neglected handmaiden: unassumingly modest, neatly contained, peaceably tame. And yet, central to the form's current revival is the idea that such a conception of the essay is a belated development, one dating back to at least the nineteenth century, when the novel, as Denise Gigante rightly observed, 'became more plainly fictional and the critical essay more plainly critical, their shared roots in the Enlightenment Republic of Letters withered and […] forgotten'.[54] For much of the eighteenth century, however, the English novelists saw many affinities between essays and novels. Fielding, for instance, prefaced each of the eighteen books of *Tom Jones* (1749) with an essay, while Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759) is as much a loose collection of anecdotes, digressions, meditations, and sermons as a novel. 'From Fielding through Eliot and Tolstoy, Musil and Kundera', Scott Black argued, 'novelists have interleaved their plots with inset reflections that suggest a history of the essay branches into the history of the novel', thus making the development of one inseparable, it seems, from that of the other.[55]

But while reinstating the essayistic at the heart of the novel has now become a fairly common move among contemporary writers, it's important to note that many revisionist accounts of the genre such as David Shields's often repurpose an argument already made, in an influential essay entitled *The Art of the Novel* (1986), by the Franco-Czech novelist Milan Kundera. Kundera, too, suffered from novel nausea, well before such a thing spread to the size of a writerly epidemic in more recent years, and in this book-length essay he pointedly denounced how, following 'the two greatest novelistic works of the eighteenth century',

[53] Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Penguin, 2000), p. 124.
[54] Denise Gigante, 'Introduction', in *The Great Age of the English Essay: An Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. xv–xxxiii (p. xvii).
[55] Scott Black, 'Tristram Shandy, Essayist', in *On Essays*, ed. by Karshan and Murphy, pp. 132–149 (p. 132).

namely Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist* (1796) and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, the novel had pitifully turned its back on the riotous ebullience of its origins, instead saddling itself with 'the imperative of verisimilitude', with 'realistic settings' and 'chronological order'.[56] The result, Kundera holds, is that the novel quickly withered into 'a cemetery of missed opportunities', despite, as Teju Cole later added, 'the best efforts of Woolf, Joyce, and Mansfield [*sic*]'.[57] It fell to a clutch of Central European (and German-speaking) novelists of the early twentieth century, claimed the Central European Kundera, to reclaim the novel's unexplored formal possibilities—above all, its taste for discursive inquiry and formal play. And they did so, Kundera argued, by dint of a new literary practice, that of 'the *specifically novelistic essay*', which, unlike the woodenly didactic *roman à these* or the more ill-defined novel of ideas, 'does not claim to bear an apodictic message but remains hypothetical, playful, or ironic'.[58] Kundera's chief examples of such 'thinking novels' are those of two Austrian writers from the interwar—Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities* ('not a novel at all', by its author's own admission, 'but an essay of monstrous dimensions'), published between 1930 and 1943, and Hermann Broch's trilogy *The Sleepwalkers* (1930)—though one might also enlist into this canon Kundera's own novels, most notably *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), which freely mixes narrative segments with essayistic incursions into such topics as kitsch.[59]

[56] Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, trans. by Linda Asher (New York: Grove Press, 1988), p. 15.
[57] Kundera, p. 15; Cole, 'Pitch Forward'.
[58] Kundera, p. 65. Though its interest in 'ideas' clearly makes it more amenable to essayistic discursiveness than other, more plainly imaginative types of fiction, the novel of ideas need not necessarily be essayistic in form, as the examples of dystopian, utopian, speculative, and science fiction amply testify. The use of ideas, in this context, more often pertains to content rather than form, and for this reason, the novel of ideas will not be a primary concern in my discussion. On the novel of ideas, see Michael LeMahieu, 'The Novel of Ideas', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction since 1945*, ed. by David James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 177-191.
[59] Musil's original German ('überhaupt kein Roman, sondern ein Essay von ungeheuren Dimensionen') is cited in de Obaldia, *The Essayistic Spirit*, p. 222, n. 112.

Kundera's lament about the untapped possibilities of essayistic fiction has since become something of a mantra for critics (and novelists) eager to revise the relationship between the novel and the essay. 'I have always liked Kundera's insistence that the novel at its invention was charged with possibilities, that it was unsettled and wild', Teju Cole approvingly noted, just before making his own endorsement in favour of all things essayistic.[60] Geoff Dyer, too, dutifully saluted 'the Montaigne-ism of Kundera' in a keynote address he gave in 2013 on the novel and the essay.[61] Less often remembered, however, is the ideological context—and function—pertaining to Kundera's claim. A voluntary exile who had fled Soviet-ruled Prague for Paris, Kundera eulogized the decline of the novel even as he condemned 'the blissful smile' with which this decline is usually announced: what Zadie Smith later referred to, in her own way, as the 'grave-dancing' of jaded novelists.[62] 'I have already seen and lived through the death of the novel', Kundera warned, 'in the world where I spent much of my life and which is usually called totalitarian', for it was there, Kundera adds, 'in the empire of Russian Communism', that the 'relative, ambiguous world of the novel' came to a halt, via 'bans, censorship, and ideological pressure'.[63] The pronouncement, affixed as it is to the very opening of *The Art of the Novel*, was ostensibly intended as a cautionary tale from beyond the Iron Curtain, or rather from a world—that of Central Europe—which the West had, in Kundera's view, unduly forgotten and betrayed. As such, Kundera's obituary sounds no different from that written, two decades earlier, by Michael Hamburger with respect to the essay: for the German-Jewish refugee as much as for the Czech dissident, the obsolescence of one literary form as much as of the other is to be ascribed to the rise of totalitarian violence in the twentieth century. And yet, just as for Hamburger the essay could assert its spirit 'outside

[60] Cole, 'Pitch Forward'.
[61] Dyer.
[62] Kundera, p. 13; Smith, 'The Rise of the Essay'.
[63] Kundera, p. 13.

the genre', most notably within the precincts of the novel, so for Kundera the novel could be revitalized, in turn, by recovering the forgotten possibilities of the essayistic.

I will return to this idea in more detail in the rest of this study, but it will be sufficient to say, for now, that if Kundera writes about the forgotten legacy of the eighteenth-century novel—and about the need, moreover, for a 'specifically novelistic essay' predicated on this legacy—it is in order to invest it with an anti-totalitarian function newly fit for the Cold War. His was, in short, a fundamentally ideological strategy premised on literary works—and forms—purportedly anti-ideological. It is small wonder, then, that Kundera's professed love for Sterne should have been couched in the polemical language of a declared anti-Communist:

> Lately, it has become a habit to speak ill of the eighteenth century, to the point that we hear this cliché: The misery that is Russian totalitarianism comes straight out of Europe, particularly out of the atheist rationalism of the Enlightenment, its belief in all-powerful reason. I do not feel qualified to debate those who blame Voltaire for the gulag. But I do feel qualified to say: The eighteenth century is not only the century of Rousseau, of Voltaire, of Holbach; it is also (perhaps above all!) the age of Fielding, Sterne, Goethe, Laclos.[64]

Another way of saying this would be, perhaps, to point out that the eighteenth century was not only the century of Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, with its systemic-totalizing ambitions of cataloguing the known and ordering the real, but the century, too, of Diderot's other literary pursuits, from dialogues as rambling as *Rameau's Nephew* (1805) to the aforementioned novel *Jacques the Fatalist*, with its much less serious-minded display of 'anecdotes, stories, reflections': imaginative as well as discursive, less encyclopaedic than fragmentary, more partial than unitary.[65] And this, as we shall see in the coming section, is a wholly apposite way of reframing the question Paul Saint-Amour posed in what must surely

[64] Kundera, p. 160.
[65] Kundera, p. 82.

count as one of the most inventive studies to have probed the intimate (if vexed) relationship between literary form and total warfare, namely *Tense Future* (2015).

Late Modernisms and War

Saint-Amour's central insight in *Tense Future* is that the eighteenth-century *Encyclopédie* was 'an effaced but major precursor' to some of modernism's most celebrated fictions of the interwar, from Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End* (1924-28) through to Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) and Musil's magnum opus, with their notoriously episodic structures, polyphonic styles, inventorying tendencies, and massively inclusive portrayals of culture and society.[66] If these interwar fictions took on such levels of scale and length, in other words, it is because they turned to the *Encyclopédie*—in itself a monumental attempt at 'warehousing Enlightenment knowledge against the possibility of its loss'—as a template for archiving, in their own turn, 'a city, a national culture, historical moment, or worldview against the eventuality of its erasure' in a new war.[67] This was, in short, 'encyclopaedic modernism': a loose canon of literary fictions whose hybridizing of novel and encyclopaedia became legible, for Saint-Amour, as a formal (and pacifist) riposte to 'an interwar moment traumatized by both a past conflagration and the prospect of a worse future one'.[68]

Though it owes a great deal to *Tense Future*, there are several important ways by which *Untimely Forms* will also mark a crucial departure from it. The first of these directly pertains to the chronological parameters of my thesis, which deliberately straddles two intervals: the

[66] Paul K. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 9.
[67] Saint-Amour, pp. 9, 182.
[68] Saint-Amour, p. 10.

Second World War, on the one hand, and the last two decades of the century, on the other. There are a few reasons—and benefits—for following such a truncated chronology. For while Saint-Amour insistently refuses to be bound by period—he begins with 1945 Hiroshima and ends with Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973)—his is an account largely concerned with the 1920s, or, better yet, with how the psychodynamics of mass dread commonly associated with the Cold War already emerged as a palpable threat during the 1920s. *Untimely Forms*, by contrast, will begin where *Tense Future* stops: in global war unleashed, rather than simply anticipated. What happens, in other words, to the encyclopaedic armour built by the anxious modernisms of the interwar once that interwar has shed its prefix to finally become *war*?

The answer I propose marks the second means by which my study will depart from Saint-Amour's, for where Saint-Amour reads the encyclopaedic as the novel's response to the premonitory anxiety of the interwar city, this thesis uncovers a cluster of literary works that confront the period's unprecedented descent into war and violence not by flaunting encyclopaedic gravitas, but by more modestly donning the essayistic lightness typical of other, less prestigious though by no means less prodigious forms of prose. To recover these forgotten blueprints is to cast a sidelong glance beyond that most monumental of eighteenth-century monuments—the *Encyclopédie*—so as to find there, nestled in its periphery, a strand of writing pronouncedly essayistic (essays, yes, but sentimental journeys, too, and commonplace books, spoof encyclopaedias, philosophical dialogues, discursive novels) that many had long thought dead or outmoded, but which proved newly invigorating once the first bombs began to fall. And so, where *Tense Future* exclusively professes devotion 'to works whose encyclopedism collides with the history and conventions of the novel', *Untimely Forms* looks beyond the novel toward the very kind of generic exuberance and irregularity commonly associated with the modes of the essay.

Untimely Forms is, to sum up, about a kind of writing once brushed or brandished as ill-suited or out of date, expiring or dead, even as it was finding new ways of speaking to (and of) its times. There is a deliberate echo, in my title, of what Fredric Jameson referred to elsewhere as 'unseasonable forms'. This was Jameson's earliest way of signalling the persistence, well into the second half of the twentieth century, of a modernist aesthetics most convincingly exemplified, in his reading, by the likes of Borges, or Beckett, or Nabokov: prose stylists, that is, 'who had the misfortune to span two eras and the luck to find a time capsule of isolation or exile in which to spin out unseasonable forms'.[69] The emphasis Jameson placed on such accidents of birth—to be firmly neither in one era, nor in the next—was thus a way of drawing attention to the relatively awkward period of the mid-century and the immediate decades on either side of it. Seen from this angle, the argument about one writer's or another's taste for 'unseasonable forms' became a way of aesthetically sequestering and thus making visible the afterlives of a correspondingly unseasonable modernism—a late modernism, to be more precise, long past its zenith.[70] Which finally brings my discussion to the question concerning my own use of this literary-historical category.

To forego, as I do, a period designation in favour of a literary-historical category—and one, no less, that is as comparatively new and contested as late modernism—is not only to capitalize on modernism's institutional prestige in the hope of drawing attention to lesser known forms and figures, but also to commit one's argument to certain interpretive and conceptual assumptions. And the governing assumption that animates my own claim on late

[69] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), p. 304.
[70] Apart from the continued relevance of late modernism, recent scholarship has offered important period alternatives such as the 'mid-century' and the 'long 1930s'. On the mid-century, see Claire Seiler's *Midcentury Suspension: Literature and Feeling in the Wake of World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019). On the long 1930s, see the special issue of *Critical Quarterly* edited by L. Mellor and G. Salton-Cox, *The Long 1930s*, 57.3 (2015), 1–9.

modernism is its increasing centrality as a term that has come to stand not only for an ever-increasing body of texts more or less modernist in style and temper, but for a mode of writing (and reading) particularly attuned to geopolitical crisis. That late modernism emerged out of the century's many crises of individual and national sovereignty has become, indeed, one of the most convincing arguments made in its support—though not, of course, the only one. Marina MacKay was one of the first critics to propose a modernism 'beyond the Blitz' when she argued, in *Modernism and World War II* (2007), that the overlap between one and the other proved more than just 'historical coincidence'.[71] Leo Mellor's *Reading the Ruins* (2011), meanwhile, showed the extent to which wartime representations of blitzed London were indebted to the aesthetic possibilities offered by the modernisms of the previous twenty years, so that, for example, surrealist forms which 'had seemed outlandish and contrived' in peacetime now became a powerful 'explanatory tool' for capturing the shattered lives of a bombed metropolis.[72] How daily life became a privileged site for registering 'world-systemic distress' is also the subject of Thomas Davis's *The Extinct Scene* (2015), which similarly ties late modernism to the interwar emergence of new hybrid forms—ranging from the historical novel through to documentary film and the war travelogue—galvanized by rising geopolitical disorder.[73]

Of all the signal features that have variously been ascribed to late modernism, however, it is with what John Whittier-Ferguson has called 'revisions and repetitions' that my own discussion will be chiefly concerned.[74] Building on Tyrus Miller's field-defining account of late modernism as 'a distinctly self-conscious manifestation of the aging and decline of

[71] Marina MacKay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 1.
[72] Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 93.
[73] Thomas Davis, *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 2.
[74] John Whittier-Ferguson, *Mortality and Form in Late Modernist Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 15.

modernism', Whittier-Ferguson's *Mortality and Form in Late Modernist Literature* (2014) contends that, as old-time modernists like Woolf, Eliot, Stein, and Lewis aged, the late works they produced in the 1930s and 1940s correspondingly became less and less concerned with ideas of novelty or originality than with 'catchphrases, clichés, conversational filler, recycled parts of other books, cultural commonplaces—the devices that allow articulation to go on, even when there's not much new to say'.[75] This, then, is an aging modernism in the red, marked by a deflationary spirit of creative (as well as bodily) exhaustion, and one for which, as Whittier-Ferguson aptly suggests,

> "Make it new" […] might be more aptly formulated […] as "Make it again." And even that phrase, less hortatory than its earlier version, can easily become for each of these authors also a question resonant sometimes with determination, sometimes with despair: "Make it again?"[76]

By thus showing the kinds of stocktaking and revisions prompted by this half-question, Whittier-Ferguson emphatically goes on to connect such 'turns and returns' at the level of style to the 'fact of the large-scale sociopolitical catastrophe that is the return of war'.[77] The repetition of world war is met, in other words, with a repetition of the written word: 'quotation, rather than original speech, is the textual device' most congenial to the late modernist.[78]

Though I share Whittier-Ferguson's sense of late modernism as 'inventively exhausted prose', my scope will extend beyond his select clutch of familiar, Anglo-American modernists.[79] By which I mean to say that the concern with *idées reçues* and the already-

[75] Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 7; Whittier-Ferguson, p. 26.
[76] Whittier-Ferguson, p. 6.
[77] Whittier-Ferguson, p. 9.
[78] Whittier-Ferguson, p. 19.
[79] Whittier-Ferguson, p. 9.

said—with quotation and revision—that Whittier-Ferguson uncovers in late modernist production emerges in my thesis not so much on the granular scale of individual sentences in the late works of individual writers, but as a period-wide return to larger narrative forms often conceived in themselves—irrespective, that is, of any writer's age—as old and mothballed, outmoded and dated. Or, to put it more succinctly: if 'revisions and repetitions may be about all that's left' for those coming to terms with modernism's legacies, as Whittier-Ferguson conjectures, then the essayistic may have been, for some, the late modernist form par excellence, for it was precisely as a gesture of quotation that, to quote Phillip Lopate, 'the whole modern essay tradition sprang'.[80] Montaigne's *Essais*, for instance, began as a sprawling outgrowth of the commonplace book—that early modern tool for recording (and annotating) quotable excerpts from the works of others—and so, too, did Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), or even earlier, proto-essayistic compendia as Erasmus's *Adagia* (1500). Thus, by so often beginning life in the form of a commentary on the words of others, and by obsessively quoting those same words, the works I collect here render structural, through their allegiance to the essayistic mode, the recursiveness so often ascribed to the late modernist moment.

A further advantage of looking at late modernism through the prism of this form is that it offers a salutary corrective to what is, in my mind, the novel's relatively undisputed monopoly of focus in recent accounts of late modernist production. Whittier-Ferguson's inaugural reading of Woolf's *The Years* (1937) is especially instructive, for despite reminding us that Woolf's novel began as an 'essay-novel', it is on its final, that is to say novelistic instantiation that Whittier-Ferguson anchors his close reading, thereby occluding the importance of the fundamentally citational essay in the context of Woolf's turn to 'received

[80] Whittier-Ferguson, p. 15; Phillip Lopate, 'What Happened to the Personal Essay?', in *Essayists on the Essay*, pp. 127–36 (p. 131).

ideas, and familiar, if botched, quotations from English literature'.[81] Julia Jordan's more recent *Late Modernism and the Avant-Garde British Nove*l (2020) is another case in point. For though she, too, reads late modernism as 'suffused with anxiety about its own adequacy in the light of its status as necessarily imitative and derivative', it is solely in the province of the novel that this uncertainty is registered—and in a type of novel, what's more, that makes experimental use of techniques ('accident, error, and indeterminacy') more commonly associated with the procedures of the essay.[82] This is not to say, of course, that such a cluster of traits and tropes did not prove newly subversive in relation to the postwar novel, but that they appear decidedly less 'novel' when one remembers that for centuries they were invoked to designate, often disparagingly, the errant and accidental ('methodically unmethodical', in Adorno's words) ways of the essay.[83] *Untimely Forms* is thus an attempt to widen the field's generic horizons so as to reinstate essayistic form as a vital component in the stories that have been told—and keep being told—about the great efflorescence of late modernist writing in the 1940s and beyond.

I have used the term 'beyond' advisedly, for though late modernism is mostly conceived as an interwar and later a wartime phenomenon, more recent accounts have pushed its confines to cover not only the immediate postwar, but the very tail-end of the century and the start of the twenty-first. Such is the case of Julia Jordan's study of the postwar novel, which casts its net over the 1950s and 1960s, and such is the case, too, of Doug Battersby's *Troubling Late Modernism* (2022), which places late modernism's usual suspects (Beckett and Nabokov) in the more unusual and recent company of the younger John Banville, J. M. Coetzee, and Eimear McBride, whose novels (it is, once again, only novels) are read as exploiting earlier

[81] Whittier-Ferguson, p. 9.
[82] Julia Jordan, *Late Modernism and the Avant-Garde British Novel: Oblique Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 6.
[83] Jordan, p. 2; Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', trans. by Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique*, 32 (1984), 151–71 (p. 161).

modernist techniques in the service of more 'troubling affective attachments'.[84] It should be noted at the outset, however, that late modernism's ongoing chronological expansion is a clear byproduct of a wider shift brought about in the past two decades by the New Modernist Studies, under whose aegis modernism has exploded into modernism*s*, and a familiar canon of experimental poetry and prose originally condensed in the Paris and London and New York of the 1890s-1920s (Joyce, Proust, Eliot, Pound, Woolf, and so on) has given way instead to a global, ever-widening field, in both geographic and temporal terms. Rebecca Walkowitz's *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (2006) perfectly captures this expansionist impulse, as well as offering, with chapters not only on Conrad, Joyce, and Woolf, but also on Kazuo Ishiguro, Salman Rushdie, and W.G. Sebald, an early and compellingly persuasive model for my own transperiodizing approach and truncated chronology.

As such, my inclusion in Part Two of writers who were born during the Second World War, and whose scholarly expertise in German-speaking modernism greatly informed, moreover, their own turn to literary prose later in the century, builds on the field's current expansion, while being motivated, too, by reasons pertaining to the essay form more specifically. For just as any grasp of the essay's current revival would be partial without properly recognizing how, and why, it owes many of its formal energies to an earlier, mid-century encounter with catastrophe, so too would any account of essayistic prose in wartime be impoverished, I argue, without glancing forward to the moment of its belated reverberation at the end of the twentieth century. Indeed, it was only then, once a number of second-generation writers born too late to fully register the effects of the Second World War nonetheless set about memorializing that same war, that the formal achievements from the earlier half of the

[84] Doug Battersby, *Troubling Late Modernism: Ethics, Feeling, and the Novel Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 2.

century began to be mined, canonized, and put to new uses. And this is why, against perhaps more appropriate categories like metamodernism—David James's and Urmila Seshagiri's taxonomic ploy to shore up the uniqueness of modernism proper against contemporary fictions marked by inventive, self-conscious relationships *with* that modernism—I have instead preferred to bring the set of texts and writers in both parts of my thesis under the main rubric of late modernism.[85] For these later writers, too, the consciousness of repeated historical crises, from the Cold War threat of nuclear catastrophe to totalitarian violence and the return to Europe of armed conflict, was of a piece with an apprehension of lateness—individual, epochal, creative—that found expression in the turns and returns of essayistic form, whether at the level of subject matter, or of style and syntax and form.

Having thus survived the many mid-century proclamations of its demise, followed by decades, too, of postwar irrelevance, of 'drought and doubt, exclusion from the pantheon of genres, and a lack of academic recognition', from the 1980s onward—and against the backdrop, moreover, of new dramatic changes and geopolitical upheavals—literary essaying forcefully came back, at the scale and pace of long prose.[86] Which is, after all, altogether in keeping with the unstable history of the essay form, with its 'successive phases of literary dominance and abeyance', during which, to quote Kathryn Murphy and Thomas Karshan, 'family resemblances skip generations, realize potential in unexpected ways, mutate, recur, lie dormant for decades, then spring to life again'.[87] Such intermittency will account not only for the expansive chronology of my study, with its straddling and replotting of two distinct intervals that are usually kept separate within more conventional literary histories of the twentieth century, but also for the deliberately transnational range of my selected texts.

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[85] David James and Urmila Seshagiri, 'Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution', *PMLA*, 129.1 (2014), 87–100.
[86] Douglas G. Atkins, *Tracing the Essay: Through Experience to Truth* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005), p. 11.
[87] Dillon, p. 14; Karshan and Murphy, 'Introduction', p. 8.

Indeed, while most of the recent studies on the essay have tended to exclusively focus on its Anglo-American permutations, my thesis intends to do justice to the indelibly transnational (specifically European) dimensions of this form—one that was inaugurated in France, most productively practiced in Britain, and most thoroughly theorized in Central Europe—by embracing works written in languages other than English, most notably in German and Italian. *Untimely Forms* will thus unspool its argument across various quarters of Europe, and at different moments in time: from blitzed London and occupied Rome through to end-of-the-century Norwich and postwar Trieste. Above all, my thesis is bookended by one region in particular, as is, one could argue, the short century with which I am largely concerned: that of the former Yugoslavia, whose tragic geopolitical vicissitudes over the past hundred years or so instigated, in my reading, some of the century's most spectacular engagements with essayistic prose, especially in Britain.[88]

Untimely Forms

Untimely Forms is organized into two parts. Part One focuses, as should be apparent by now, on the years clustering in, and around, the Second World War, through literary works directly concerned with the anticipation and then the accomplished fact and aftermath of the war. I begin my discussion, in Chapter One, with a book—Rebecca West's two-volume epic *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*—that usefully bridges the dark close of one decade (the 1930s) and the yet more devastating start of a new one (the 1940s). On its surface the travel account of 'a typical Englishwoman' in late-thirties Yugoslavia, just before the country's collapse and

[88] I borrow the phrase 'short century' from the subtitle of Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991*, which plots the past century by framing it from the outbreak of the First World War to the end of the Cold War, though unlike Hobsbawm, I slightly extend his *terminus ante quem* to 1995, so as to bookend the century within the two main events of the Sarajevo *attentat*, on the one hand, and the Sarajevo siege, on the other.

invasion at the hands of the Nazis, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* is, I argue, one of the earliest and most formally daring examples of how the period's violent crises could turn the conventionally modest essay into an elephantine form for writing the whole world—or, in the words of West herself, for inventorying an imperilled country 'down to its last vest-button'.[89] At over 1,200 pages, *Black Lamb* no doubt takes to its extreme the period's obsession with encyclopaedic synthesis, and yet, as my discussion also shows, West's book constantly undercuts such totalizing ambitions by tarrying, essayistically, on the local and the contingent. This tendency toward digression makes *Black Lamb* not only a book about the coming war, or about the peoples and customs of Yugoslavia, but a book about itself, or rather about its own status as a literary object engaged, as were Montaigne's *Essais* before it, in constantly defending a form that was, by West's own admission, 'insane'.[90] Insofar as it weds, then, the leisurely pace of meditative self-inquiry with a frenzied imperative to bear witness even as the tragedy abroad turns into war at home, West's magnum opus shows, pace her American counterparts, how a good essay could yet be written 'on Hitler or on hogs' (or lambs).

The subsequent pair of chapters moves toward the later stages of the conflict by way of two authors that might make for unusual yet wholly apposite shelf-fellows: the British editor-critic Cyril Connolly and the Italian polymath Alberto Savinio, two like-minded critics and literary wits who, unbeknownst to one another, spent the war years crafting some of the century's most exuberant, if unduly forgotten experiments with essayistic form. If my discussion of West unpicks a latent tension between the urge to archive and the will to digress, these chapters instead demonstrate how, by the end of the war, the pieties and pretensions of encyclopaedic modernism wholly came undone. In Chapter Two, I explore the

[89] *Selected Letters of Rebecca West*, ed. by Bonnie K. Scott (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 169.
[90] *Selected Letters of Rebecca West*, p. 169.

curious case of Cyril Connolly's *The Unquiet Grave* (1944), a slim book of chance *pensées* and choice quotations that was once voted the best literary work to come out of wartime Britain, before quickly going out of print. Its avowed mission was nothing less than to keep culture alive by quoting one French aphorism or Latin maxim after another, though as this chapter shows, such a high-minded impulse belied a much more personal urge to find consolation, on one hand, for the harsh deprivations of daily life in wartime and, on the other, to compensate for the creative struggles and failures of a novelist manqué, one doomed, in the words of Roland Barthes, 'to the essay compared to the novel'.[91] The idle pleasures of essay-writing become, in other words, a pacifist riposte to the harsh realities of wartime, while essayistic practice itself is upheld as a fitting substitute for the ailing novel, in a move that surprisingly anticipates the ongoing revision of the relationship between novels and essays.

Chapter Three extends this line of inquiry by moving from blitzed London to occupied Rome, where a polymath genius once famed for his avant-gardist exploits in painting and music now spent his time in hiding by compiling a personal encyclopaedia entirely made of anecdotes, sketches, and literary jottings. This is the case of Alberto Savinio's *Nuova enciclopedia*, an unfinished project that occupied its author from 1941 until his death in 1952, before being posthumously published in 1977. Against prevailing consensus that reads Savinio as a tolerant, cosmopolitan dilettante, quaintly aloof from politics and polemics, my discussion historicizes Savinio's whimsical anthology by locating it in the turbulent context of wartime Italy, both before and after the collapse of Mussolini's regime. Far from being an isolated return to the kind of genteel, cloistered detachment the war had seemingly made irrelevant, Savinio's appropriation of the essay form betrayed, by contrast, the compromised position of

[91] Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 89.

a critic who had once supported the regime and its military campaigns, and who was now in need of a mode of writing capable of resolving (or rather dissolving, if not even absolving) the personal as well as collective guilt of post-fascist Italy. This chapter thus argues that if Savinio secured his place in the canons of cosmopolitan modernism as an artist of proudly European faith, it was largely owing to a literary form—the most European, for Savinio, of all literary forms—whose *bona fide* humanism and anti-totalitarian credentials he laboured to make his own.

The long thread that runs from Europe to the essay has long been a common concern of the genre, so much so, in fact, that as Paul Michael Lützeler has pointedly noted, 'in no other literary genre have the pressing political and cultural questions of Europe been addressed so directly and so diversely as in the essay'.[92] This is certainly true for the authors I examine in the first part of my thesis, during a global war in which no less than the very idea (and existence) of a peaceful, united Europe was at stake. But as a privileged locus of essayistic inquiry, the question of Europe proved even more urgent in the minds of the Cold War generation of writers to whom I turn in Part Two. Though they are seldom put in dialogue with one another, Claudio Magris and W.G. Sebald share a number of important affinities: both were academics who specialized in Austrian literature; both turned away from academic writing toward more creative forms of literary prose in their mid-forties; both were immediately acclaimed as European (rather than simply Italian or German) masters of prose; both are non-Jews who wrote on Jewish émigrés out of a deep identification with Jewish diaspora; both were preoccupied with the oft-unacknowledged atrocities perpetrated in the past by their respective countries; both knew of each other's work; and both, I contend, revived essayistic form as an itinerant meditation on memory and trauma.

[92] Paul Michael Lützeler, *Die Schriftsteller und Europa: von der Romantik bis zur Gegenwart* (München: Piper, 1992), p. 24. Translation mine.

The relationship between a united Europe and a unifying *Essayismus* (to borrow Musil's coinage) emerges at its most acutely self-conscious in Chapter Four, which explores the Cold War moment and subsequent legacy of Claudio Magris's *Danube* (1986), a literary journey along the titular river, from its source in the Bavarian hills down to its delta on the Black Sea. My discussion shows how *Danube* became one of the key texts in the 1980s debate on Central Europe, largely conceived at the time—among such dissidents as Milan Kundera, György Konrád, and Czesław Miłosz—as a byword for transnational unity and liberal democracy in opposition to Soviet rule. As a literary guide into 'a forbidden Europe that is suddenly free', *Danube* proved, indeed, a masterwork of chance timing, its English translation appearing virtually on the eve of the fall of the Berlin Wall.[93] But as I contend in this chapter, the book's immediate relevance and near-canonical status had as much to do with the formal singularity of its style and design as with the geopolitical circumstances of its publication. A self-proclaimed novel-essay, or as Magris called it, 'a drowned novel', *Danube* pieced together its image of Central Europe out of the textual forms that first gave rise to this multicultural, multilingual ideal half a century or so earlier, in the chaotic years of interwar Austria, when literary essaying became the most fitting medium for writers keen to shore up a vanishing memory of multicultural coexistence against the encroaching rise of totalitarian violence.[94] Magris's expansive play with essayistic form was, in other words, every bit as fundamental as his rambling journey in showing how a lost ideal of unity could yet become reality in a Europe-to-come.

Chapter Five traces one violent aftermath of these pre-1989 formulations in the work of W.G. Sebald, most notably in *The Rings of Saturn*, his 1995 travelogue (or rather essayistic semi-fiction) chronicling a gloomy jaunt along Suffolk's shoreline. I ask what Sebald meant

[93] Nicholas Shakespeare, 'Navigator in History's Tumult', *Daily Telegraph*, 2 June 1990, p. 11.
[94] Claudio Magris, 'Danubio e post-Danubio', *Rivista di studi ungheresi*, 7 (1992), 21–32 (p. 25). Translation mine.

exactly when he opined that his medium was prose, not the novel—and how it could be that a mode of writing that was, by Sebald's own admission, 'not of this time', yet became one of the period's most undeniably distinctive.[95] Answering this question will involve reading Sebald less as an angel of history obsessed with past violence, as critical commonplaces go, than as a writer thoroughly (if indirectly) engaged with his own present. Taking its cue from Sebald's occluded remark that it was the 1990s wars in the former Yugoslavia which first gave him the idea for *The Rings of Saturn*, my discussion registers the muffled vibrations of this conflict—the first on European soil since World War Two—across the pages of a book that has long been misrecognized as only being about catastrophe in the past tense. Sebald never explicitly mentions this latest eruption of violence in his book, handling it rather with the essay's proverbial obliquity. The effect this obliquity has when applied to ongoing atrocities is, I suggest, to write these atrocities out of the present, and thus out of history, in a move that, far from making Sebald the lonely anomaly he is so often made out to be, ends up fully aligning him with the intellectual temper of his age—the 1990s' so-called end-of-history climate.

Though one can only suspect whether Sebald's example might have given heart to Agnes Repplier's aggrieved professor (*The Rings of Saturn* bookends its long account of calamity with literary musings on Sir Thomas Browne), it is a fact that he casts a very long shadow over today's literary landscape. My epilogue offers a brief survey of this landscape by singling out works that continue, in one way or another, to adapt and amplify the expressive affordances of long-form essayism against the manifold challenges of our own century. But while this once-neglected mode of writing has arguably become common currency in today's literary marketplace, my study aims neither to establish a canon nor to prescribe hard criteria

[95] Michael Silverblatt, 'A Poem to an Invisible Subject', in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. by Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), pp. 77–86 (p. 78).

for admittance into such a canon. What *Untimely Forms* offers is less a canon than a way of reading works that exist under the pressure of historical crisis and that endure and express this same pressure by displaying various degrees and intensities of literary essayism.

By charting one critical development in the longer history of essayistic prose, and by tessellating it on to a wider narrative about war and catastrophe, my ultimate ambition is to bring to light the expressive potential of a form that has very seldom been recognized as one, and which, in Lukács's memorable phrase, 'always speaks of something that has already been given form'; or in the equally memorable words of Adorno, a form which 'catches fire, without scruple, on what others have already done'.[96] Taken together, the coming chapters will stipple a picture of what may be called, in sum, a scattered *arrière-garde*: of literary works dotted wide with words borrowed, models reclaimed, and forms newly ablaze.

[96] Lukács, p. 26; Adorno, p. 152.

PART I

An Essay-Writer must practise in the Chymical Method, and give the Virtue of a full Draught in a few Drops. Were all Books reduced thus to their Quintessence, many a bulky Author would make his Appearance in a Penny-Paper: There would be scarce such a thing in Nature as a Folio. The Works of an Age would be contained on a few Shelves; not to mention millions of Volumes that would be utterly annihilated.

Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, no. 124 (1711)

CHAPTER ONE

'A form insane': Speaking Ideas in Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*

> The essay is, after all, a sort of secular sermon, inducing skepticism, and written by the snake.
> —William Gass, 'Emerson and the Essay' (1982)
>
> Not a good novel. All raw, uncooked, protesting… interest in ideas; makes people into ideas… that must be avoided. But ideas are sticky things.
> —Virginia Woolf on Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point*, diary entries, 1935.

In *Abroad* (1980), his landmark study of interwar travel writing, Paul Fussell wagered that if 'you want to raise a laugh in a publisher's office, enter with a manuscript collection of essays on all sorts of subjects'; and if you want to raise 'an even louder laugh', added Fussell, 'contrive that your essays have a moral tendency'.[97] Though no longer true, Fussell's pronouncement speaks to a period, already surveyed at some length in my introduction, when the essay was still thought as being 'too old-fashioned for generic credit', and thus in need of a more robust narrative trellis—like travel—to even get to print. Fussell turns to one example in particular, again framing it in the subjunctive:

> if one approached a publisher in 1940 with a collection of assorted ethical and historical essays one would have less chance of success than if one arranged them as "A Journey through Yugoslavia" and titled the whole immense work *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, as Rebecca West did.[98]

Fussell's was only one in a long series of efforts to domesticate a book notoriously doomed, as one of its great admirers—Geoff Dyer—once put it, 'to repel attempts to articulate the awe

[97] Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 204.
[98] Fussell, *Abroad*, pp. 204, 206.

that it inspires'.[99] So far as attempts go, however, it was not a very good one. For by 1940, seven years, that is, before she became *Time*'s number one woman writer, Rebecca West would surely have had no great difficulty in getting her essays to print, as had been the case only a decade or so earlier, in 1928, with one such collection of essays—*The Strange Necessity*—freely expatiating on the meaning of art, national identity, and empathy. It is true, however, that even West was deeply aware of the challenges posed by the form of her new project, to the extent that, midway through her narrative, she stops to reflect on 'this book, which hardly anybody will read by reason of its length'.[100] In a letter from 1941, shortly after the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia had bestowed on her book a chilling timeliness she could not have foreseen, West turned her qualms into a question:

> Why should I be moved in 1936 to devote the following 5 years of my life, at great financial sacrifice and to the utter exhaustion of my mind and body, to take an inventory of a country down to its last vest-button, in a form insane from any ordinary artistic or commercial point of view—a country which ceases to exist?[101]

Though this might be taken as a clever bit of self-promotion—the debilitating yet heroic gestation of her work presumably reminding us of her cherished Proust, secluded in his cork-lined bedroom with swelling piles of notebooks—*Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* has famously been impervious to generic classification. Partly, as Geoff Dyer speculates, because '*Black Lamb* takes up two subjects: the first is Yugoslavia, and the second is everything else', a fact that left West's biographer, Carl Rollyson, clutching at as many as ten labels: 'characters, dramatic scenes, dialogue, description, reportage, autobiography, literary criticism, philosophy, theology and feminism'.[102] Marina MacKay was the first to recover the book's

[99] Geoff Dyer, 'Rebecca West: *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*', in *Otherwise Known as the Human Condition* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2011), pp. 184–92 (p. 186).
[100] Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1993), p. 773. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as *BL*, followed by the page number(s).
[101] Selected Letters of Rebecca West, p. 169.
[102] Dyer, p. 185; Carl E. Rollyson, *Rebecca West: A Life* (New York: Scribner, 1996), p. 209.

importance as a neglected record of late modernism, detecting in its thousand-odd pages a last vestige of the fragmentary, myth-making sensibility one also finds in Joyce, whose *Ulysses* West criticized for its 'gross sentimentality', or in Ezra Pound, whom she had had a hand in employing as literary editor for the suffragist *New Freewoman* (later *The Egoist*) in 1913.[103] Benjamin Huebsch, West's American publisher, marvelled that she may have created 'a new and fascinating method of presenting history', and Seamus O'Malley has recently gone as far as to claim that *Black Lamb* is the pinnacle of 'modernist historical narrative', though one with 'enough invented and fabricated material' in it 'to qualify [it] as a fictive text', if not a 'historical novel'.[104]

Less controversially, one might heed the book's own subtitle—*A Journey through Yugoslavia*—and concur that *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* is, all things considered, a travelogue, and one, moreover, that proudly displays all the requisites of the genre: two endpaper maps of the country (Figure 1), showing routes travelled by road, rail, and sea; chapter headings and sub-headings by region ('Croatia') or city ('Zagreb') or activity ('Expedition'); a bibliographical note, citing as many as sixty scholarly sources; an index of places and names; thirty-two illustrations, mostly photographs; and a polychrome dust jacket featuring the Old Bridge in Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

[103] MacKay, pp. 44–70; Rebecca West, *The Strange Necessity* (New York: Doubleday, 1928), p. 3.
[104] Cited in Seamus O'Malley, *Making History New: Modernism and Historical Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), n. 83, p. 240; O'Malley, pp. 178, 149.

Thus, when the original two-volume edition (1,239 pages in total, or half a million words) was published in 1941, *Black Lamb* was hailed by some as 'the magnification and intensification of the travel book form', if not its very 'apotheosis'.[105] But though it obviously courts a genre that found in the interwar period its golden age, as Paul Fussell famously argued, the size and scope of *Black Lamb* make it a relatively unusual companion next to more canonical examples of the genre such as Robert Byron's *Road to Oxiana* (1937) and D. H. Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia* (1921), with their witty and entertaining exploration of exotic locales, or even, to cite closer analogues, Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) and Isherwood's and Auden's *Journey to a War* (1939)—books that wed the familiar motions of



Figure 1. Map of 1937 Yugoslavia, drawn by Bip Pares. From the inside cover of the first edition of Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, 1942.*

[105] Katherine Woods, 'Rebecca West's Brilliant Mosaic of Yugoslavian Travel', *New York Times*, 26 October 1941, p. 4.

travel with more direct or politicized forms of war reportage from the period's global hotspots.

In this chapter, I will argue that it is only by treating the book's self-consciousness about its 'insane' form as integral *to* this very form—rather than as a problem to be solved—that we may come closer to understanding the rhetoric of excess with which West imbues her project. At once a thematic motif and formal device, the self-reflexivity that marks *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* aligns it, I suggest, with a mode of writing that has long been synonymous with both resistance to—and insistence on—the labour of definition: that is to say, with the essayistic. I have already showed, in my introduction, the extent to which essays on essays have been a staple of the form since its inception; Thomas Karshan put it best when he wrote recently that, though 'essays defy the recognized categories of theory and genre, they have for that very reason often felt required to offer the apology of a self-description'.[106] Already in Montaigne, baffled by the novelty of his own book, we find a good deal of apologetic self-reflexivity: 'how often and perhaps stupidly have I extended my book to make it talk about itself'.[107] How often, I ask, has West extended her own (already gargantuan) essay-book to make it speak of, and for, itself? Karshan points out that these self-descriptions have generally taken the form not of theoretical axioms, but 'of a series of perennial images and metaphors', most of them direct translations of the etymological roots of the French *essai*: a try, trial, taste; a sally or experiment; an apprenticeship.[108] Max Bense captured this most aptly when he pronounced, in 1947, that 'he writes essayistically who writes while experimenting, who turns his object this way and that, who questions it, feels it, tests it'.[109]

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[106] Thomas Karshan, 'What is an Essay? Thirteen Answers from Virginia Woolf', in *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present*, ed. by Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 31–54 (p. 33).
[107] Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, ed. & trans. by M. A. Screech (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 1212.
[108] Karshan, p. 33.
[109] Max Bense, 'Über den Essay und seine Prosa', *Merkur*, 1.3 (1947), 414–424 (p. 418).

Or as Sir William Cornwallis put it even more crisply in 1600, the essay is like 'providence that tastes before she buys'.[110] And of testing and tasting, as we shall see soon, there is indeed plenty in *Black Lamb*, which has this to say about the nature of literary creation, and of essayistic enquiry in particular:

> An artist is goaded into creation […] by his need to resolve some important conflict, to find out where the truth lies among divergent opinions on a vital issue. His work, therefore, is often a palimpsest on which are superimposed several incompatible views about his subject; and it may be that which is expressed with the greatest intensity, which his deeper nature finds the truest, is not that which has determined the narrative form he has given to it. (*BL* 1145)

This is the first of many apologetic self-descriptions the present chapter will focus on, and one that is all the more useful for sowing the seed of my own argument: namely, that the 'narrative form' West outwardly gave to her project belies, on the contrary, a set of formal impulses that have long gone undertheorized or, worse, misrecognized. Which is to say that the focus on *Black Lamb*'s overt design as a travelogue has all too often obscured its self-conscious allegiance not only to the essay, but to a technique that far from making it 'insane' or out of place, places *Black Lamb* at the end point—both chronologically and formally—of a period between the wars marked by an increased interest in hybrid forms of prose poised between novels and essays. This technique consists in the set-piece dialogue, recited by characters who are made to expatiate, eloquently and (most often) implausibly, on grand ideas and high-flown matters. It is through the many such dialogues that punctuate her journey—long, overwrought, stilted, at times moralizing—that West not only lays out her ideas about empire or war, but turns her theme upon itself so as to comment, indirectly, on the formal singularity of her endeavour. By thus focusing on the conversations West stages in

[110] Sir William Cornwallis, *Essayes* [1606-10], ed. by Don Cameron Allen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1946), p. 190.

her book as a means of speaking to us *about* that same book, and by furthermore locating this ventriloquizing within an interwar context already attuned to such hybridizing of fiction and the essay, the present chapter will show how *Black Lamb* brings its ideas—and itself—into expression.

'to prove one's point'

Ironically conceived, at first, as a 'snap book', *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* describes an Easter journey West and her husband made in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia around the spring of 1937.[111] In reality, the narrative of this one single journey was stitched together from three separate trips: the first, in 1936, while on a lecture tour for the British Council; the second, in 1937, in the company of her husband; and the third, in 1938, to further research her book. Woven in and out of this personal journey is, what's more, a 'complete explanation of the course of history' from the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century A.D. to the fall of Yugoslavia in 1941, an explanation that is all the more sweeping for being imbued, moreover, with almost theological levels of historical myth-making. This is most obvious in the two sacrificial myths of the book's title: the 'black lamb' West sees slaughtered at a fertility rite in Macedonia, and the 'grey falcon' which, according to an epic poem she hears in Kosovo, explains why the Serbs fell to the Turks in 1389, ushering in five hundred years of occupation. West typically co-opts these myths in the service of modern-day analogies, so that the Serbian prince who had chosen defeat at the hands of the Turks becomes 'a member of the Peace Pledge Union', while the British liberals who support appeasement 'want to receive the Eucharist, be beaten by the Turks [i.e., the Germans], and then go to heaven'. (*BL* 911-12)

[111] Rollyson, p. 192.

Despite her insistence on applying the lessons of a mythical past to the present, however, West's book is usually forced to keep apace with a gruesome history that constantly outpaces it, as she confesses in her Epilogue when, looking back at her project, West observes that 'the most horrible thing about it is that, in order to carry out my intention and show the past in relation to the present it begot, I have to end it while there rages round me vileness equal to that which I describe' (*BL* 1126). By the end of 1941, Hitler's Wehrmacht had invaded Yugoslavia, while the bombs so ominously feared on her travels had finally landed on Britain, thereby casting *Black Lamb*'s 1937 narrative under the constant shadow of tragic hindsight, from the book's opening dedication ('To my friends in Yugoslavia, who are now all dead or enslaved'), through its closing image of blitzed London ('bombs dropped; many were maimed and killed', *BL* 1130), down to—even—the odd footnote in the middle ('I was about to discover the reason for this from a Viennese historian when the Anschluss came, and there was silence', *BL* 256).

By manifestly interfering with the structuring conceit proper to travel writing—the onward movement of a journey, that is—the enmeshed temporalities in *Black Lamb* make it at once more recursive and discursive. West's narrative, in other words, constantly loops backwards and forwards, sometimes tarrying on an individual event—say, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914—for as many as fifty pages; at others, by registering local details—a Mozart sonata on the radio, a crocus in a field—which then become the occasion for longer, more elaborate flourishes on such matters as art and the meaning of experience. Having thus chronicled the reign of a fourteenth-century Serb ruler for about twenty pages, West telescopes the sweep of past history back into the space of one single moment in the present:

> Because of his death many disagreeable things happened. For example, we sat in Prishtina, our elbows on a tablecloth stained brown and puce, with chicken drumsticks on our plates meagre as sparrow-bones, and there came towards us a man and a woman; and the woman was carrying on her back the better part of a plough. (*BL* 894)

The present at hand—a scene of squalor and ill-treatment—is shown side by side with the past that ostensibly brought it into being—the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans—and this, in turn, is then followed by general commentary on the dynamics between men and women. Perhaps the best term for such hopscotching is the one Osbert Sitwell coined for his own travel essays in 1950: a portmanteau of 'discourse' and 'discursive', he wrote, the word *discursions* is 'a new name for a particular kind of essay', in which 'a traveller formulates his loose impressions as, for example, he sits in a train, looking out of window, and allows the sights he so rapidly glimpses, one after another, to break in upon the thread of his interior thoughts'.[112]

It is as well, then, that *Black Lamb* should set its Prologue in the wagon-lit of a sleeper train en route to Zagreb, with a wakeful West calling over to her husband:

> "My dear, I know I have inconvenienced you terribly by making you take your holiday now, and I know you did not really want to come to Yugoslavia at all. But when you get there you will see why it was so important that we should make this journey, and that we should make it now, at Easter. It will all be quite clear, once we are in Yugoslavia." (*BL* 1)

Though it remains unanswered—'my dear', it turns out, is already asleep—West's apostrophe carries rhetorical weight on more than just one level. It signals, first, the scope and breadth of the incipient narrative, for which the Prologue, with its layering of personal memory with collective history, acts as both a summary and a rehearsal of sorts.[113] It is, moreover, not only an apology but an apologia, so far as it acknowledges the inconvenience of the upcoming journey (and of the 'wretched, complicated book' that recounts it) even as it holds forth a

[112] Osbert Sitwell, *Winters of Content and Other Discursions on Mediterranean Art and Travel* (London: Duckworth, 1950), p. 9.
[113] For a detailed comparison between West's Prologue and Proust's '*Ouverture*' in the *Recherche*, see Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 72–75.

defence of its importance, for the benefit of 'husband' and reader alike.[114] And lastly, it dramatizes—and by so doing introduces—the text's reliance on a technique that will become exceedingly instrumental to the book's structure: namely, the stylized dialogue between characters made to exchange opinions and ideas. This may sound counterintuitive at first (after all, isn't this rather a case of failed communication?), but it is precisely by short-circuiting her inaugural bid to converse—and to converse, what's more, on matters of some importance—that West draws attention, with a move at once ironic and self-reflexive, to the artifice by which so many of her observations will be relayed in the course of her journey, and with which my discussion is henceforth concerned.

The last scene of West's 1937 journey takes place in Vienna, where West and her husband are sojourning on their way back to London. In this brief vignette, no more than six pages long, West tells of a 'golden-haired girl who presented herself one evening at my hotel on what I found an embarrassing errand' (*BL* 1083): that of interviewing her as the subject of a thesis. Dismayed and perplexed, West objects that she was 'a writer wholly unsuitable for her purpose', partly because the bulk of her writing was by then scattered across multiple periodicals, and partly because she had never written 'to make a continuous disclosure of my own personality to others, but to discover for my own edification what I knew about various subjects which I found to be important to me' (*BL* 1084). And so, continues West,

> I had written a novel about London to find out why I loved it, a life of St. Augustine to find out why every phrase I read of his sounds in my ears like the sentence of my doom and the doom of my age, and a novel about rich people to find out why they seemed to me as dangerous as wild boars and pythons, and that consideration of these might severally play a part in theses on London or St. Augustine or the rich, but could not fuse to make a picture of a writer, since the interstices were too wide. (*BL* 1084-85)

[114] Cited in Rollyson, p. 192.

By thus flinging her writer's net beyond the reach of the critic, West thwarts her student's attempt to pigeonhole her 'into a recognized school', much to the chagrin of her young interlocutor, who looks down at her notes 'with some sullenness' (*BL* 1085). West's unorthodox positioning with regards to modernist and political grouping—the effect, among others, of a seventy-year-long career—has often been remarked at length, but I suspect that her disclaimer may be doing more here than simply setting her apart from her own contemporaries.[115] For by stressing the knobby, uneven quality of her literary output, and by further signalling its utility only in relation to herself, West seems rather at pains to model her oeuvre after the one master of literary self-discovery whom, it soon turns out, she elects as one of her direct forebears: namely, Michel de Montaigne. West's emphasis on personal edification seems wholly lifted, in fact, from one of Montaigne's most celebrated essays, 'Of Practice', in which a close brush with death prompts its author's famous warning that 'here you have not my teaching but my study: the lesson is not for others; it is for me'.[116]

For its part, *Black Lamb* was far from being an exercise in speculative self-indulgence, addressed as it was not only to West's own compatriots in Britain, but even more urgently to Britain's transatlantic ally—the United States—where the book first appeared, during the last days of neutrality, as an 'unlikely, unwieldy slab of interventionist appeal'.[117] As such, there might be sufficient reasons not to take this brief lecture at its face value, for though West goes on to insist that her dismay at the girl's 'embarrassing errand' was not to be mistaken as a

[115] David Farley speculates that this was partly because, despite being 'at the center of the creative swirl that characterized literary modernism at its most experimental', West doesn't fit 'neatly into early definitions of modernism that put a premium on aesthetic integrity and wholeness', her oeuvre being 'too diverse in scope and genre'. See David G. Farley, *Modernist Travel Writing: Intellectuals Abroad* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010), p. 146.
[116] Montaigne, p. 424.
[117] Debra Rae Cohen, 'Rebecca West's Palimpsestic Praxis: Crafting the Intermodern Voice of Witness', in *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain*, ed. by Kristin Bluemel (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 151–68 (p. 157). At least one American reviewer picked up the book's plea: 'the Epilogue', wrote Louis Adamic shortly before the U.S. entered the conflict, 'should be widely and carefully read in the United States these days… [for its] sharp, powerful cry against defeatism'. See Louis Adamic, 'Journey Through Yugoslavia', *Saturday Review of Literature*, 18 October 1941, pp. 5, 31 (p. 31).

'proof of modesty' (*BL* 1085), and that her eclectic forays really are too tentacular for the selective rigours of literary scholarship, her book accomplishes precisely what she herself disclaims. Which is to say that, where West's psychobiography of St Augustine or *The Thinking Reed*, her 1936 novel about the wealthy, might make for wholly unrelated undertakings, *Black Lamb* fills the 'interstices' between them by weaving together such disparate threads—theological meditation as well as socialist polemic—into a single, sprawling plait.

That West might be camouflaging a literary defence of her book under the guise of a conversational vignette becomes even more evident when her Viennese interviewer inquires after her main influences. Enlisting Ibsen among her earliest models (her nom de plum is taken, indeed, from Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*), West makes the case that the Norwegian playwright 'corrected the chief flaw in English literature, which is a failure to recognize the dynamism of ideas' (*BL* 1085). West then launches into a scathing diatribe against her fellow men of letters, who

> write of ideas as if they were things to pick and choose, even though the choice might be pushed to the extremity of martyrdom, as if they could be left alone, as if they came into play only as they were picked and chosen. But that ideas are the symbols of relationships among real forces that make people late for breakfast, that take away their breakfast, that make them beat each other across the breakfast-table, is something which the English do not like to realize. Lazy, bone-lazy, they wish to believe that life is lived simply by living. (*BL* 1085-86)

West's first book (in 1916) was a critical biography of Henry James, and so it is not surprising to find here the dining-room echoes of a charge first levied by her biographee, who wrote once that if the English novel has no 'consciousness of itself behind it', that was because the philistine English believe, unlike the far more discriminating French, that 'a

novel is a novel, as a pudding is a pudding, and that our only business with it could be to swallow it'.[118]

West's own attempts at proving how 'it is ideas which make the world go round' (*BL* 1086), however, sound at times no less contrived than those of her literary compatriots. Thus the raging tantrum a young Croat throws over a plate of cold soup becomes, for West, an unmistakeable symptom of anti-imperialist ardour: rather than shouting at the soup, notes West, her fellow diner in Dalmatia 'was shouting at the Turks, at the Venetians, at the Austrians, at the French' (*BL* 129), in a word, at all those who had occupied his land at one time or another. The sudden leap from cold soup to colonial exploitation might be somewhat strained, if not downright preposterous, but as a piece of anti-imperialist critique it was surely borne out of West's will to correct what she saw as Edward Gibbon's chief flaw as a historian: namely, the omission from history's pages of 'the little things that fill the days with bitterness'.[119] West's ideas, by contrast, are never too lofty to be placed amongst bread rolls or soup dishes—a rhetorical strategy, that of nesting the political into the folds of the mundane, to which I will return soon. Suffice it to say, for now, that West manufactures the last scene of her journey in the shape of an inset mini-essay whose ostensible purpose is to indirectly secure *Black Lamb*'s place in a literary genealogy that is at once European (which is to say French) and intellectually-minded, and whose faults and merits she goes on to dissect in the rest of her conversation with the Viennese student.

Disappointed at last by Ibsen, who 'cried out for ideas for the same reason that men call out for water, because he had not got any', West laments that even writers like H. G. Wells and Bernard Shaw eventually failed to satisfy her 'appetite for ideas'—unsurprisingly so, she

[118] Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', in *The Future of the Novel: Essays on the Art of Fiction*, ed. by Leon Edel (New York: Vintage, 1956), p. 4.
[119] Rebecca West, 'What Gibbon Left Out', in *The Vogue Bedside Book*, ed. by Josephine Ross (London: Vermillion, 1984), pp. 122-124 (p. 123).

adds, given how Shaw's socialism was nothing more than 'a belief that it would be a nicer world if everybody were all clean and well fed' (*BL* 1086.). Her chief source of intellectual nourishment, in the end, turns out to be French, despite the remonstrations of her Austrian interlocutor, a lover of all things Teutonic. In reply to the girl's mocking scorn, West simply runs the gamut of French literary history, in an impassioned litany that cites one after another no less than sixteen authors, from Rabelais and Pascal to Balzac and Proust.[120] When her interviewer objects by resorting to Goethe, West predictably returns to Montaigne, quoting this time from the last of his *Essais*, 'On Experience', in a passage that implicitly pits the agreeably temperate, self-ironic genius of the French humanist against the obtuse, blank-faced hubris presently on display in the Third Reich. By this point, however, the English novelist and the Austrian student are farther apart than they were at the outset of their conversation, for:

> there was as yet nothing in her which could appreciate what he [Montaigne] meant when he said that […] it was no use thinking to leave our humanity behind, for if we walked on stilts we still had to walk on our legs, and there was no way of sitting on the most elevated throne save on the bottom. (*BL* 1087)

That West should be quoting from the last lines of the last one of Montaigne's *Essais* is doubly significant, for by doing so she turns them not only into an earthy rejoinder to the Nazi *Übermensch*, tragically forgetful of 'our humanity', but makes them, too, into an oblique allusion concerning the method of her own book, which frequently punctures its more grandiose pronouncements by resort to deft, Montaigne-like anecdotes of a comic, trivial, or bathetic nature.

[120] As further proof of *Black Lamb*'s double (or rather treble) timeframe, and thus of the dramatic irony this consequently imposes on much of the narrative, West later footnotes this scene with the wartime realisation that 'I could not now tell the golden-haired girl in Vienna so confidently that her ignorance of French had cost her the knowledge of a great culture and civilization, since she could answer the longest list of names which I could give her with the single word, "Pétain"' (*BL* 1131).

It seems quite likely, though, that West's defiantly unread visitor was a wholesale invention: the girl, it soon turns out, is a native (albeit Germanized) Croat whose embarrassment at being a Slav simply serves to prove West's thesis about the corrupting influence that 'Central Europe exerts on its surroundings' (*BL* 1088). West herself, after all, admits as much when she introduces this scene by observing that the above thesis 'was to be demonstrated to me in Vienna by a golden-haired girl' (*BL* 1083). If one compares this scene to the more factual travel diary West kept during her 1937 journey, moreover, one finds that the debate around Goethe and Germany's corrupting influence occurred not with a girl, but with West's Yugoslav guide, Stanislav Vinaver, named Constantine in the book: 'after dinner', West briskly jotted, 'got Vinaver going by denying greatness of Goethe. He talked brilliantly but showed that German thought had poisoned him'.[121] And while in the book West was 'grieved' (*BL* 1087) by the girl's love for Goethe, in her real-life exchanges with her guide she appeared far more playful ('got Vinaver going'). It is clear, then, that having a made-up student (and one who, unlike Vinaver/Constantine, is deeply embarrassed about her Slavic roots) ask her about her writing and her influences is a much more effective way, in West's view, of 'proving her point' about the Third Reich, and of summarizing along the way the cast and method of her own book.

This method of scene-setting was, to be sure, not entirely new to West. 'The Strange Necessity', the central essay from West's eponymous collection of 1928, was similarly staged around a semi-fictional conceit: a trip to Sylvia Beach's famous Parisian bookshop to purchase a collection of poems (Joyce's *Pomes Penyeach*), followed by a stroll along the city's boulevards. As Debra Rae Cohen has rightly noted, this essay 'serves as the clearest signpost toward what she would attempt in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*', but while 'The

[121] Rebecca West, Diary of 2nd Yugoslavian Trip, vol II, entry for May 12, 1937, Yale University, Beinecke Library, GEN MSS 105, Box 28, f. 1220. For a detailed comparison between West's diary and *Black Lamb*, see Montefiore, pp. 204–10.

Strange Necessity' simply unfurled the meandering course of West's thoughts against the backdrop of a 'sun-gilded autumn day' in Paris, *Black Lamb* ventriloquizes its vast wealth of ideas under the more obtrusive guise of the dialogue, and against the much wider backdrop of a country on the verge of collapse.[122] It is far from accidental, in this regard, that aside from Montaigne's *Essais*, one of the few other works West makes a point of praising in her conversation with the Viennese student is Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*, an eighteenth-century philosophical dialogue that juxtaposes two speakers—an anonymous 'Moi' and a buffoon-like 'Lui'—in defence of opposing worldviews or ideas. The reference is, once again, more deliberate than may first seem, for by the time she mentions this rambling dialogue in the closing of her book, West has already written several (and similar) ones of her own in *Black Lamb*.

The recourse to set-piece conversations serves, usually, to better convey the fraught state of politics West finds everywhere in Yugoslavia, such as what she refers to as the 'temperamental incompatibilities' (*BL* 590) between Serbs and Croats—and by which she actually (and more condescendingly) means, in fact, the Croats' own 'oppositionist temperament' (*BL* 601) in all matters of national unity. Thus, rather than simply telling us about the grievances nursed by most Croats against a centralized, Serb-ruled Yugoslavia, West stages a heated debate between her guide, the patriotic Serb Constantine, and one Valetta, a no less patriotic Croat, who are made to quarrel over a lively lunch at which forks are flung, shouts hurled, and jam pancakes gulped down in anger: further proof, it seems, of how ideas really can make people 'beat each other across the breakfast-table', rather than simply being the dull commodities Shaw and Goldsworthy and Wells unduly make them out

[122] Cohen, p. 151; West, *The Strange Necessity*, p. 197.

to be. The ensuing debate is all the more noteworthy for being precisely the kind of narrative conceit West had disparaged in her earlier book-length essay, 'The Strange Necessity':

> It is more than doubtful if a theme which presents itself to a writer in the form of a contrast can ever be the occasion of great art. To say "I am going to write a book about the contrast between two characters", instead of saying, "I am going to write a book about two characters", is like saying, "I am going to write a beautiful book", for both beauty and contrast lie in the eye of the beholder.[123]

West, then, takes issue with fictional narratives that reveal (impudently) the cogs and wheels of their inner workings, and that obtrude thereby as overly affected or 'volitional', as do—for West—those of Joyce or Mansfield.[124] There may be nothing more alien to narrative art, West holds, than wanting 'to prove one's point', which leads to prose fictions 'as wooden and made for a purpose as a clothes-horse'.[125] But that is, of course, what she herself does in *Black Lamb*, a book that is rife, indeed, with clunky dialogues of all sorts.

In Zagreb, for instance, West comes under 'the net of an extremely complicated conversation about literature' while dining with a group of poets and intellectuals from Croatia's capital. The tenor of the debate is such that West's husband can effortlessly reel off judgements of the following kind:

> Conrad has no sense of tragedy at all, but only of the inevitable, and for him the inevitable was never the fulfilment of a principle such as the Greek *ananke*, but a *déroulement* of the consequences of an event. (*BL* 59)

And West's Yugoslav guide, a former student of Bergson in the days of pre-war Paris, can just as nimbly reply:

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[123] West, *The Strange Necessity*, p. 7.
[124] West, *The Strange Necessity*, p. 8.
[125] West, *The Strange Necessity*, pp. 8, 7.

> the sense of inevitability in a work of art should be quite different from the scientific conception of causality, for if art were creative then each stage must be new, must have something over and above what was contained in the previous stages, and the connexion between the first and the last must be creative in the Bergsonian sense. (*BL 59)*

Such is her fellow diners' 'raging polyglot intellectual curiosity' (*BL* 63) that West is forced to marvel at the ease with which these people 'could make such universal statements' (*BL* 60), though 'so far as talk was concerned', this was, adds West, 'a representative day in Zagreb' (*BL* 62). But for all her surprise, West may as well have been referring to her own book, the latter being sometimes no less sweeping in judgement than its polyglot characters. When, for instance, West sees two young soldiers standing guard inside Zagreb's Cathedral, full of pathos and piety, the sight stirs her into unabashed pontification:

> In Yugoslavia there was an intensity of feeling that was not only of immense and exhilarating force, but had an honourable origin, proceeding from realist passion, from whole belief. (*BL* 58)

The resulting certitude inevitably led some critics to rebuke West for being 'uninhibitedly judgemental, sweepingly certain about things which no one on earth can be certain', and even West's husband was compelled, at one point of the journey, to dampen one of her verdicts by cautioning that 'that is perhaps something of an over-statement' (*BL* 200).[126] Commenting on the dynamics between husband and wife, Mary Ellman compared West to a balloon, 'given over to piercing perceptions and lightning intuitions', and West's husband to a 'masculine Ballast', with his 'sound, solid, careful thoughts' keeping her mind from soaring too close to the sun.[127] 'Wherever he goes', Ellman glossed, 'his mind carries a knapsack full of precise and irrefutable facts—the Serbian soybean crop yields of 1932 and 1933, that sort of

[126] Victoria Glendinning, *Rebecca West: A Life* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987), p. 167.
[127] Cited in Glendinning, p. 167.

thing'.[128] But as we will see shortly, this division of labour was itself a structural device of West's own invention, devised mostly for dramatic effect. 'My husband', in this sense, is not only made to reel off lists and figures in support of his wife's flashes of intuition, nor is he merely placed by her side to temper some of her more daring judgements. He acts, rather, as a thinly-disguised mouthpiece for ideas and opinions West herself expounds elsewhere in the book. Hence the 'irritatingly starchy and stylised' texture of the book's dialogues, as one reviewer noted.[129]

I will delve into what is, to my mind, the book's dialogic centrepiece in a moment, but it bears noting for now that far from being an oddity (or a defect) of West's prose alone, the use of idea-driven dialogues—at once stylized and rhetorically overwrought—is a phenomenon of peculiarly interwar flavour. 'Implicit in this type of novel', argued Frederick Hoffmann in 1946,

> is the drama of ideas rather than of persons, or, rather, the drama of individualized ideas. The structural requirements of such a novel are perhaps simpler than they at first appear. One requirement is to get these people, or as many of them as is possible, together in one place where circumstances are favorable to a varied expression of intellectual diversity. The drawing-room, the party, the dinner—these are all favorite points of structural focus.[130]

The supreme example of the form would be, perhaps, Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924), with its alpine stock of dramatis personae plotlessly conversing about time and death against the idyllic stage set of a Swiss sanatorium, but by the time Aldous Huxley came to write *Point Counter Point* (1928), a novel whose very title suggests the to-ing and fro-ing of

[128] Cited in Glendinning, p. 167.
[129] Lesley Chamberlain, 'Rebecca West in Yugoslavia', *Contemporary Review*, 1986, 262–66 (p. 265).
[130] Frederick J. Hoffman, 'Aldous Huxley and the Novel of Ideas', *College English*, 8.3 (1946), 129–37 (p. 133).

a debate, the artifice was already prime for satire. As Huxley's narrator remarks in one of the many self-reflexive segments of his novel:

> The great defect of the novel of ideas is that it's a made-up affair. Necessarily; for people who can reel off neatly formulated notions aren't quite real; they're slightly monstrous.[131]

The deliberate irony here is that the censure should itself be put in the mouth of a character who is a novelist, thereby signalling the genre's tongue-in-cheek willingness, as Sianne Ngai has rightly noted, 'to court the accusation of relying on overly transparent stylistic devices'.[132] Proust, too, had the narrator of his novel quip that 'a work in which there are theories is like an object with its price-tag still attached', and though pieces of Proust's literary criticism are later smuggled in as the interior monologue of (who else) his narrator, the latter is quick to disparage writers who write 'intellectual works'.[133] West herself, as we have seen, had taken issue with novelists 'constantly tampering with one's imaginative knowledge […] to prove one's point', before proceeding to do precisely that.[134] Such was the professed (if not always practiced) aversion to mouthpiece characters that, as Michael Wood observed, 'the novels of Mann and Musil, in their devotion to essayism, looked rather like defiances of an orthodoxy', one in which, to put it simply, 'showing is primary, telling confined to its proper, minor place, and reflection outlawed'.[135] It is unsurprising, then, that a novel as garrulous as *Point Counter Point* should have garnered so much opprobrium from Huxley's peers: 'I have a horror of the Aldous novel: that must be avoided', wrote Virginia

[131] Aldous Huxley, *Point Counter Point* (New York: Modern Library, 1928), p. 351.
[132] Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), p. 110.
[133] Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. by Ian Patterson, 6 vols (London: Allen Lale, 2002), VI, p. 190.
[134] West, *The Strange Necessity*, p. 8.
[135] Michael Wood, 'Rational Distortions: Essayism in the British Novel after Borges', in *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present*, ed. by Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 277–92 (p. 278).

Woolf, shortly after abandoning her own attempt, in *The Pargiters* (later published as *The Years*, in 1937, and *Three Guineas*, in 1938), to integrate essayistic commentary with old-fashioned storytelling.[136] Hemingway, meanwhile, was even more unsparing than Woolf:

> For a writer to put his own intellectual musings, which he might sell for a low price as essays, into the mouth of artificially constructed characters which are more remunerative when issued as people in a novel is good economics, perhaps, but it does not make literature.[137]

The excoriation may certainly be valid, were it not for the fact that Hemingway then went on, in *Green Hills of Africa* (1935), to cast his major essay on American literature in the form of a dialogue in which an Austrian is made to ask who the great writers are, much as West's Viennese student does in *Black Lamb*. 'But tell me. Please tell me', the Austrian pleads, rather unconvincingly, prompting Hemingway to deliver his now-classic remark that 'all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*'.[138]

All this is to say that, by the end of the interwar, the use of a select cast of characters as ready-made mouthpieces for authorial opinion had solidified, indeed, into one of the defining staples of what Michael Levenson has called, rather fittingly, a 'discursive Modernism of ideas and theories', in contrast to the jolting, show-don't-tell avant-gardes that have since entered the critical mainstream.[139] As Ngai rightly notes, however, this has meant that the integration of theory into narrative fiction pushed novelists toward a number of techniques—direct commentary by narrators, personified allegories, and intellectual debates among characters—which by the very fact of smuggling the didactic impulses of ancient drama and

[136] Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Anna Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols (New York: Harcourt, 1982), IV, p. 281.
[137] Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribner, 1932), p. 153.
[138] Ernest Hemingway, *Green Hills of Africa* (New York: Scribner, 1935), pp. 19, 22.
[139] Michael H. Levenson, *Modernism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 20.

philosophy into a form otherwise perceived as modern, run directly counter *to* that form's professed modernity.[140] As such, the will to ideas in a novel not only 'makes itself felt as an exaggerated will to manner or even mannerism', but—and what is perhaps even more egregious—it seems 'to repeatedly violate' the unspoken orthodoxy cited above, whereby, as Northrop Frye put it, 'an interest in ideas and theoretical statements is alien to the genius of the novel proper, where the technical problem is to dissolve all theory into personal relationships'.[141] It follows, therefore, that when a novelist gives in to that most equivocal and clunky and suspect of things—a novel that wants to essay—the resultant work inevitably comes closer to the seemingly antiquated protocols of the essay or the sermon or the dialogue, rather than those of narrative as such. How *Black Lamb* foregrounds this generic instability even as it attempts to evade it is the focus of the remaining part of my discussion, which will move now to what is, in my view, the central dialogue in *Black Lamb*.

'My husband said these things'

Given the context sketched out above, the dramatic scenes that punctuate *Black Lamb* stand out as a markedly singular example of idea-driven narrative from the period, precisely for the very simple fact that, despite being many things, *Black Lamb* is not—so far as novels go, which can be very far—a 'novel'. If West took such pains to market her book as a *Journey through Yugoslavia*, and to equip it moreover with photographs and maps, it was because, unlike novels proper— where the intrusion of stylized, conceptually-loaded conversations, as Ngai glosses, 'obtrude[s] as archaic even when deployed in an experimental way'—travel narratives seem, by contrast, much more amenable to the sudden, starchy presence of ideas,

[140] Ngai, p. 118.
[141] Ngai, pp. 113–14; Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 308.

even when spoken aloud.[142] This would explain why West's novels, from her 1918 debut *The Return of the Soldier* through to *The Thinking Reed*, are not nearly as stylized as *Black Lamb*, despite being declarative in their own right; why West wanted her book 'not only to be about a journey but to convey the sense of presenting itself as a journey'; why Hemingway, too, lodged his dialogue-essay on American literature in a travel book; and why, moreover, *Black Lamb* never attracted the same degree of critical scorn otherwise heaped on clunky novels as *Point Counter Point*, or else doled out to forbiddingly dull 'production[s] of the Teutonic mind' such as Mann's or Broch's books (though at least one reviewer found in the scope of West's book a 'touch of the Germanic').[143] In fact, one could go as far as to argue that what usually stands out as kitsch or crude in a novel is not only more easily absorbed in a travel book, but has the advantage there of being hailed as a trademark of *good* travel writing, so far as it sets it apart from the simple, merely informative Baedeker. In Paul Fussell's own words: the 'secret' of the travel book is precisely to make 'essayistic points seem to emerge empirically from material data intimately experienced', whether from wayside conversations or train-window musings.[144]

That a work so keen to capture the uneasy *zeitgeist* of a continent on the brink of another global war should have committed its wealth of ideas to a sparse clutch of characters that never number more than three (at times four) travelling companions is, then, not so surprising: despite their obvious scarcity, West's fellow travellers are always made to act and speak on behalf of wider communities. West and her husband, banker Henry Andrews, are the liberal *bien pensant* of London's upper-middle class, duly critical of Britain's flaws yet convinced, as convinced one ought to have been—West thought—on the eve of an incumbent

[142] Ngai, p. 113.
[143] Rollyson, p. 215. The phrase 'ponderous production of the Teutonic mind' was used to describe, contemptuously, Hermann Broch's *The Sleepwalkers*, in a review published in the *Saturday Review*, 12 November 1932, p. 51; on the touch of the Germanic in West, see Chamberlain, p. 262.
[144] Fussell, *Abroad*, p. 96.

war, that their 'national faith is valid, as the Ottoman faith was not' (*BL* 1060). West's Jewish Serb guide goes from personifying the ebullient vitality of Yugoslavia, for West the post-1918 Versailles state par excellence, to embodying the looming tragedy of European Jewry. But the best case in point is Constantine's German wife Gerda, who enters the stage as a caricatured mouthpiece of Nazi ideology dispensing hatred for anything non-Teutonic, all the more so if Slavic or Jewish (and worse still if combined, as in her husband's case). As Janet Montefiore rightly remarked, the relations 'between this couple and Mr and Mrs Henry Andrews (that is, Rebecca West and her husband), though outwardly trivial, produce most of the book's personal drama'.[145] By the time Gerda leaves the travelling group toward the end of the book, she is no longer, or not exclusively, a shorthand for the Third Reich but 'an international phenomenon' of imperialist aggression across time and place, 'the determining element in the Austro-Hungarian Empire all through the nineteenth century' (*BL* 803).

This allegorical abstraction—from obnoxious guest to Nazi emissary to universal evil—takes place in what is one of the central passages of the entire text: the lengthy monologue that West's husband intones, in Skopje, following Gerda's departure. The speech, which reads like a foray, part-historical and part-philosophical, into Gerda's imperialist mindset, stretches almost uninterrupted across eight pages and eleven paragraphs, in the manner (again) of a self-standing mini-essay. 'Gerda has no sense of process', so West's husband begins, 'that is what is the matter with Gerda. She wants the result without doing any of the work that goes to make it' (*BL* 799). The seemingly improvised harangue that follows quickly moves from the private—Gerda's deficiencies as a wife, mother, and travelling companion—to the public arena of international politics. For, argues 'my husband',

> This is the conqueror's point of view. It was the Turks' point of view in all their aggressive periods. Everybody who is not Gerda is to Gerda "a dog of an infidel," to be

[145] Montefiore, p. 200.

> treated without mercy. If she could get hold of our money by killing us, and would not be punished for it, I think she would do it, not out of cruelty, but out of blankness. Since she denies the reality of process, she would only envisage our death, which would be a great convenience to her, and not our dying, which would be a great inconvenience to us. She has shut herself off from the possibility of feeling mercy, since pain is a process and not a result. (*BL* 800)

But even as she proceeds to sketch out the affinities in brutality between the Ottoman Empire and Gerda's Third Reich, West still threads her analytical needle in and out of a recognizably domestic fabric. Thus, in one further variation on the motif of ideas as 'the symbols of relationships among real forces' (*BL* 1086) that take away people's breakfast or turn their soup cold, West distils the conqueror's disregard for process in Gerda's proud inability to bake bread:

> It does not occur to her that she had better learn to bake bread instead of buy it, for since her social value depends on her not doing so, she regards this as a sentence of death. Therefore she wants to take results that belong to other people: she wants to bone everybody else's loaf. (*BL* 802)

And boning someone else's loaf is precisely what Gerda does in one of the most darkly comic segments of the book, when, having just remarked on the gluttony of English people ('These people', she erupts, 'are always eating and drinking', *BL* 751), Gerda picks up West's pastry roll and begins to eat it. This ineptitude might make for a laughable trifle; its consequences, however, are much less farcical: 'there is no way to be safe from her [Gerda] except to treat her as if she were, finally and exclusively, a threat to existence' (*BL* 800). For, adds Henry Andrews, 'there may be enough Gerdas concentrated in separate areas to make her in effect a nationalist phenomenon': it was so with the Ottomans, cartoonishly caricatured by West as a brutish army unfit for life in peacetime, and so philistine as to have 'no word in their language to express the idea of being interested in anything' (*BL* 302); and so it was, too, with the 'parasite city of Vienna', which 'howled out all the time to be given other people's

loaves', and which is now 'speaking again, through Hitler' (*BL* 803). The crescendo that leads from the Turks to the Austrians, and from the Austrians to the Nazis, at last pushes Henry Andrews's oration into the pitched tones of a tocsin:

> Gerda is here, and Europe is in her soul Macedonia. If Europeans have not the virtues of the Macedonian peasant, our life is lost. All that we are and do means nothing, all that our ancestors were and did means nothing, unless we are naturally the equals of the peasant women […] whose fingers never forgot the pattern that an ancient culture had created as symbols for what it had discovered regarding life and death. (*BL* 805)

For all its pathos-laden and 'Churchillian' (to quote Marina MacKay's phrase) appeal to national resolve, the oration intoned by 'my husband' may be less interesting for its psycho-historical sketch of Gerda, or for the urgency of its call to arms, than for the formal excess this urgency imposes on the shape of West's book.[146] The monologue (West interjects only once, and then only to corroborate her husband's point) is, indeed, the most spectacular case in *Black Lamb* of what we might call dialogic bloating—or what Hermann Broch dismissed, for his part, as 'conversational padding'.[147] That West should couch her political critique in the form of a long, stiff monologue is all the more ironic for being (once again) precisely the sort of thing she had censured Joyce for: namely, that 'in his monologues on aesthetics, in his unfolding of his theory concerning Shakespeare, he [Stephen Dedalus] enjoys the unnatural immunity from interruption that one might encounter not in life but in a typical Freudian wish-fulfilment dream'.[148]

Henry Andrews's own immunity from interruption (which compelled at least one male critic to suggest, rather insultingly, that *Black Lamb* 'could do duty as a marriage manual') is, however, just as implausible as Stephen Dedalus's—as is, for that matter, the impressive

[146] MacKay, p. 69.
[147] Cited in de Obaldia, p. 195.
[148] West, *The Strange Necessity*, p. 11.

extent of West's mnemonic mastery.[149] For if, we might ask, she did not invent it outright, how could she have remembered so rhetorically polished a monologue without first recording it? West did scribble a few notes in the travel diary she kept during her 1937 journey, but these were substantially different from their reworked version in *Black Lamb*. Gerda's departure, for example, is said to have left Henry Andrews 'speechless' with rage—quite the opposite from the wordy oration he musters in *Black Lamb*.[150] The whole speech, to sum up, seems a fabrication orchestrated on the basis of West's own convictions and parroted, in turn, by her convenient proxy, 'my husband'. So implausible was the talk's actual likelihood (Henry Andrews even cites verbatim two excerpts from Charles Eliot's *Turkey in Europe*) that in the end West feels obliged to alert us to the fact that:

> My husband said these things while we drank our beer, while we took a little walk by the embankment and watched the carters take their horses into mid-stream of the lowered river, while we lunched off paprika stew and yoghourt, and later, in our bedroom, while I sat by the window and mended the clothes that had just been brought back to us by a gipsy laundress dressed in saffron and ultramarine. (*BL* 806)

It is almost as if, then, West were compensating for the implausibility of the preceding speech by stressing instead the mounting plausibility of its recalled context, a move which only ends up drawing further attention, however, to the theatricality of the whole set-up. As an elaborate piece of scene-setting, this passage may be read, indeed, as a latter-day descendant of Laurence Sterne's famous sermon in the second volume of *Tristram Shandy*, and of the droll way, to be more precise, in which Sterne had introduced his inset essay on conscience with a page-long description detailing the oratorical stance of its performer, Corporal Trim (Figure 2). 'He stood before them with his body swayed', Sterne wrote, 'and bent forwards just so

[149] Peter Wolfe, *Rebecca West: Artist and Thinker* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), p. 148.
[150] Travel diary, vol I, entry for May 5, 1937. West only refers to the 'plain fact he was so enraged by her conduct at lunch, to say nothing of the whole past week', and the resentment is not political so much as personal.

far, as to make an angle of 85 degrees and a half upon the plain of the horizon'.[151] In West as much as in Sterne, it is the copious overabundance of detail which gives the lie—or rather the fiction—away.



Figure 2. Corporal Trim reading the Sermon. From the Frontispiece to the second edition of Tristram Shandy. *William Hogarth, 1760, private collection.*

The cumulative, intensely pictorial effect of West's brisk rundown also echoes a similar passage in 'The Strange Necessity', which has West pausing her commentary on Joyce for a two-page summary enumerating all the things she had been doing while pondering *Ulysses* ('I had been to my dressmaker… I had been to a milliner's shop… I had lunched in a divine

[151] Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. by Ian Campbell Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 97.

house… I had called at a bank…').[152] The (uniformly male) reaction to this earlier piece had been, at the time, nothing short of outraged, with Beckett taking swipes at West's bold juxtaposition of an acclaimed (male) masterpiece with (female) hats and dresses: a cheap 'mixing of categories' which—William Carlos Williams concurred—could only be explained by the fact that the trespasser was a 'scared, protestant female'.[153] In a 1958 letter to Richard Ellmann, who was then finishing his biography of Joyce, West later justified her method in 'The Strange Necessity' by arguing that, far from having made a category mistake on the level of content, hers had been a conscious experiment with form, insofar as she had 'copied the form, killed stone dead since by T. S. Eliot, of criticism in a personal and almost fictional framework, such as Remy de Gourmont and several other French writers had used'.[154] She was not, to be sure, the only one to have done so, for by the late 1920s, Virginia Woolf, too, had been busy mixing literary vagaries with shopping errands and leisurely strolls around the city. Thus in 'Street-Haunting: A London Adventure' (1927), published a year before *The Strange Necessity*, Woolf goes on an evening ramble across London on the pretext, she tells us, of purchasing a pencil, turning along the way to questions of urban life, commodity culture, books, and individual experience. The affinities between West's essay and Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, also published in 1928, are even more marked, the latter using a stroll through the quadrangles of Oxbridge as a pretext, this time, for a series of observations and arguments on gender and female education (Woolf's essay began as a series of lecture talks to female students at Cambridge), much in the same way as West turns her travels in Yugoslavia into a narrative clutch for wider considerations on feminism and war. In a sense, then, *Black*

[152] West, *The Strange Necessity*, pp. 44–45.
[153] William Carlos Williams, 'A Point for American Criticism', *Transition*, 15 (1929), pp. 157–66 (p. 161). For a full account of the exchange, see Austin Briggs, 'Rebecca West vs. James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, William Carlos Williams', in *Joyce in the Hibernian Metropolis* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1996), pp. 83–102.
[154] Rebecca West, Letter to Richard Ellmann, 7 November 1958. Rebecca West Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

Lamb is the baroque culmination of a mode of writing—premised, as West had noted, on 'a personal and almost fictional framework'—that had first germinated in these earlier (shorter) essays, and that *Black Lamb* pushed to its limits via the use of elaborate dialogues which, though once criticized as woodenly crude, are now embraced precisely insofar as they allow her to double down on the kind of generic hybridity ('a fault in logic […] unimaginable in a person of orderly mind', according to William Carlos Williams) that had proved so irksome to her male critics.[155]

If the interview with the Viennese pupil turns into *Black Lamb*'s (somewhat belated) literature review—identifying precursors, navigating the current field, diagnosing its ills—the monologue intoned by 'my husband' hides, in the folds of its geopolitical broadside, what becomes legible as the book's most overt self-description. For it is apparent that West is not only explaining, through 'my husband', just why she came to Yugoslavia ('You were looking in the magic crystal and seeing our future', her husband says, *BL* 805), but also why she wrote about it as she then did. Indeed, it has become a commonplace of much essay-writing, at least since Montaigne's avowal that 'I am not portraying being but becoming', to dwell on the form's status as process rather than mere product.[156] The essay is not only thought fixed on the page, but thought thinking itself: a medium, that is, for thinking aloud. Or, as Katharine Fullerton Gerould averred in 'An Essay on the Essay': the basis of the essay is 'meditative process', which 'permits you to see a mind at work'.[157] For much of its history, this has obviously taken the form of written speech in the first person, but as Lukács observed in 1910—and as Walter Pater had already observed some years prior—the essay's self-reflexive monologism might be seen, in fact, as a modern-day variation of the Platonic dialogue, with its dialectical method of truth-seeking by trial and error, or better yet, by

[155] William Carlos Williams, p. 161.
[156] Montaigne, p. 907.
[157] Gerould, 'An Essay on Essays', p. 412.

question and answer.[158] Seen in this light, the will to stylized dialogism so manifest in *Black Lamb* is a way to act out on paper—and by so doing to let the reader in on—the inner workings of the mind. West's emphasis on 'process', in other words, operates not only as some kind of psychological inoculation against the infectiously dogmatic mindset of the fascist, but as a shorthand, too, for a mode of writing that self-consciously foregrounds its allegiance to essayistic enquiry by returning this same enquiry to its effaced origins in the philosophical dialogue.

That the characters entrusted with fleshing out the mind's motions should be divided, moreover, along manifestly national lines, is another strategy West uses to dramatize her book's dialogic process. And nowhere does this achieve more comic absurdity than in the conversation—'excessively disagreeable in its imbecility' (*BL* 751)—that follows Gerda's snatching of West's pastry roll, in the Macedonian town of Ohrid. The object of debate is, trivially enough, the coiffure of American women, with West stressing the use of permanent waves, and Gerda objecting (on the authority of a single American lady she once met on a Danube steamboat) that 'every night they screw up their hair into little curls with toilet paper' (*BL* 751). 'There, is that not strange', chimes Constantine, 'you have been to America and she has not, and yet she knows something about the Americans that you do not' (*BL* 751). 'I tell you, she is a fool' (*BL* 751), Gerda then scoffs, switching into Serbo-Croat (we are not told how West, who spoke very little of the language, could nonetheless detect the jibe). It is finally at this point that what seemed a mere squabble is made into an allegory for that 'second Anglo-German war' (*BL* 1089) of which, by the end of her journey, West has become certain:

[158] Lukács refers to Plato as 'the greatest essayist who ever lived or wrote', in Lukács, p. 29. See also Walter Pater's *Plato and Platonism* (1893).

> ‘I suppose this is the kind of conversation one will have in Hell,’ said my husband. ‘One can’t do anything with it, it’s so silly,’ I said. ‘I wish to God I thought it was from all points of view,’ said my husband, ‘but I think it is a part of something rather large. It is the kind of conversation a Roman woman might have had if she had been travelling with a Carthaginian woman in the third century before Christ. Eat up your roll and we will go. By God, she has eaten the second one too.’ (*BL* 751)

Once again, it becomes patently clear that ‘my husband’ is not only reciting West’s own ideas, but also drawing attention, if only circuitously, to her own method in *Black Lamb*, from the quick swerves between the trivial (the roll) and the tragic (war), to the use of classical precedent, as later in her Epilogue West will again compare herself to ‘a Roman woman’ (*BL* 1089) in the years before the sack of Rome. What both this deadpan vignette and Henry Andrews’s more elaborate monologue show, then, is a certain, even deliberate crudeness of method. For throughout much of *Black Lamb* West makes a strawman of people and nationalities, so that, where Gerda is made to stand for the obtuse evils of imperialism, and where the Turks are mocked for their supposed lack of interest in the world around them, the Slavs are endlessly praised for their natural bent for speculation, or for what might be called, rather, their essayistic impulse. This ethnographic credo is so pervasive that West reads it into nearly every sight she passes on her travels, so that, for example, a couple of Austrian barracks West glimpses in Bosnia are made to speak the false message that ‘“All is now known, we can therefore act without any further discussion”: a statement idiotic in itself and more so when addressed to the essentially speculative Slav’ (*BL* 351).

The culmination of this process—of ideas as individual characters, and individual characters as national collectives—comes toward the end of West’s journey. In Montenegro, the last Yugoslav region West visits before returning to London, West’s travelling party comes across an old woman walking up and down a mountain slope. Having lost her entire family during the Great War, survived imprisonment in a concentration camp, and remarried to a much more abusive husband, the woman has nothing left to do but roam the Montenegrin uplands

in order to probe, via 'painful speculation' (*BL* 1012), the tragic course of her life. 'If I had to live, why should my life have been like this?', the woman wonders, 'If I walk about up here where it is very high and grand it seems to me I am nearer to understanding it' (*BL* 1012). At first welcoming the woman as yet another instance of what she identifies, in her stereotypically essentialist ethnography, as the Slavs' bent for inquiry, West immediately casts this figure as Gerda's allegorical opposite: as a woman, that is, deeply embedded in the realities of 'process' (*BL* 1012). To be a Slav—this is the gist of West's ethnographic reductions—is to be, above all, essayistic; to be a Turk (or a modern-day German), by contrast, is to forgo any interest in the world. In a passage that loosely paraphrases one of her cherished aphorisms from Pascal, already quoted in its entirety at the end of the Prologue, West thus writes:

> This woman was of no importance. It is doubtful whether, walk as she would on these heights, she would arrive at any conclusion that was of value even to herself. She was, however, the answer to my doubts. She took her destiny not as the beasts take it, nor as the plants and trees; she not only suffered it, she examined it. As the sword swept down on her through the darkness she threw out her hand and caught the blade as it fell, not caring if she cut her fingers so long as she could question its substance, where it had been forged, and who was the wielder. (*BL* 1012)

The essayist ultimately anointed as the modern-day descendant of Montaigne is thus an elderly woman bearing the brunt of patriarchal failure, international and domestic alike—first, in the form of Austria-Hungary's bellicose imperialism, and then as marital abuse at home. And so, while this passage obviously turns to Pascal's metaphysical cry as its point of reference, its worldly concerns (and targets) are clearly those of the suffragette (West had been closely involved in suffrage politics since her school days, and her first publications had been for the suffragist *Freewoman*, from 1911 to 1912). West's antidote to what she sees as Britain's intellectual atrophy and political defeatism is, in short, to follow in the footsteps of this Montenegrin pilgrim, and to stake the practice of essaying—a congenial mode that weds

artistry and enquiry—against imperialist militarism and patriarchal oppression alike (though, in West's account as much as in Woolf's, these are one and the same).[159]

We are a far cry, of course, from the blithe *jeu d'esprit* of 'The Strange Necessity' or 'Street-Haunting', buoyed up by their women's freedom in and around the metropolis. For despite exploiting the form's quintessential device, which Osbert Sitwell would later identify in his *discursions* as the interplay between interior thoughts and moving environs, West's book turns the intimate, urbane musings of her earlier stroll around Paris into an epic tapestry which purports to catalogue, as if by a hundredfold expansion, the 'vest-buttons' of an entire country. And while the avowed motive that had inspired her earlier journey in 'The Strange Necessity' had been something as trivial as the purchase of a book (or that of a pencil for Woolf), in her later book West is rather more grave when she clarifies that she set out to Yugoslavia in order to find out 'how I shall die, and why' (*BL* 22). By thus jettisoning the formats of metropolitan flânerie in favour of the 'painful speculation' (*BL* 1012) of a war survivor trailing the mountains, *Black Lamb* upends some of the very coordinates that had come to define West's use of the 'personal and almost fictional' essay, and which were best summarized by Woolf herself, in 1922:

> The principle which controls it [the essay] is simply that it should give pleasure; the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure. Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end.[160]

Black Lamb's prose, like West's prose elsewhere, might certainly make for a pleasing distraction, but neither the readerly pleasures supposedly aroused by the essay nor the

[159] For an account of how West uses her literary practice in order to fashion herself as a distinctly female public intellectual, see Marina MacKay, 'The Lunacy of Men, the Idiocy of Women: Woolf, West, and War', *NWSA Journal*, 15.3 (2003), 124–44. MacKay points out that, like Woolf's *Three Guineas*, *Black Lamb* sets itself up as 'self-referential and performative: analytical writing by women that identifies as publicly redemptive the act of women's writing' (p. 142).
[160] Woolf, 'The Modern Essay', p. 13.

armchair escapism most often associated with it are West's primary concern here; the book's energies, as Montefiore noted, 'belong to the literature of witness and of history more than to the pleasures of escape'.[161] *Black Lamb*, in other words, is less keen on lulling its readers along the rhythm of its peregrinating prose than in jolting them awake with its painful speculations.

Writing to West shortly after the publication of *Black Lamb and Grey Flacon*, historian Lewis Namier pointed to the book's ostensible 'artlessness', or rather how it seemed to him that 'there is no more system or completeness in it than in the colour-scheme of wild flowers in a field'.[162] That the essay seems artless is, of course, one of its greatest tricks, as West explained in response to Namier:

> Artlessness! […] How I worked to get that effect. I wanted people, not the great and good, but just people—to learn what the South Slav situation is and its importance to them. They couldn't learn anything about that situation without following a long, complicated story, making many more demands on their powers of concentration than they were accustomed to concede. To get them to go the way I wanted them I deliberately gave the story the loose attractiveness of various pleasant things in life—such as wild flowers in a field. Again and again I broke sequences and relaxed tension to get the lethargic attention of the ordinary reader along the road.[163]

The heavy use West makes of clunky, stylized dialogues as vehicles for the promulgation of ideas clearly speaks, then, to the pragmatic needs of wartime propaganda ('If I wanted my civilization to survive under attack […] I had to be willing to fight for it', West avers, *BL* 1061). But as I have showed in this chapter, West does more than simply prod her readers along, in that she turns these same dialogues into a set of mirrors which *Black Lamb* variously holds up to itself, so as to constantly defend and define itself anew. As such, like many essayistic massifs of the interwar, from Proust's magnum opus to Musil's unfinished

[161] Montefiore, p. 180.
[162] Cited in Rollyson, p. 215.
[163] Cited in Rollyson, p. 215.

novel, *Black Lamb*, too, could veritably go on ad infinitum, duly justifying its own cast while also cataloguing Yugoslavia's 'vest-buttons'—at least, that is, as long as the air-raid made it possible. For as the war foretold turned into war unleashed, the din of ventriloquized ideas that had grated the ears of so many critics of the 'Aldous novel', to quote Woolf's phrase again, and that had reached its ostensible acme in *Black Lamb*, dwindled more and more into the hushed, solitary recital of quotations—while 'the pleasant things in life' became, as we will see in the coming chapter, less and less a means to an end, than an end in itself.

CHAPTER TWO

'An art-form slumbered': Cyril Connolly's *The Unquiet Grave*

> By necessity, by proclivity, and by delight, we all quote.
> —Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Quotation and Originality' (1868)

> The only thing that remains for us latecomers to do is to pick up the faded petals and keep them, discoloured as they are, to scent our lives.
> —Vernon Lee, *Miss Brown* (1884)

In early 1933, Alice Mary Hadfield arrived at Amen House, the London offices of Oxford University Press, as newly-appointed editor of the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, a role which entailed 'working with Charles Williams in his capacity as a walking encyclopaedia of literature'.[164] The idea of an anthology of quotations was first entertained by Oxford University Press in 1915, but it took almost two decades for the project to begin in earnest. The 1930s were, after all, a decade hungry for reference books: Harvey's *Oxford Companion to English Literature* (the first of that series) came out in 1932, only four years after the publication in full of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The first edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, on the other hand, was finally released in October 1941, making it a publishing venture entirely bookended by war: it germinated at the beginning of one world war, and it reached completion in the midst of another. Writing half a century later, Alice Mary Hadfield recalls the extent to which military violence had been bound, if only obliquely, with the burgeoning market of reference books:

> Those mid-1930's were rich publishing years, while in the world outside Mussolini invaded Abyssinia in 1935, and in 1936 civil war began in Spain with active

[164] Alice Mary Hadfield, *Charles Williams: An Exploration of His Life and Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 126.

> involvement from English left-wing militants and writers. Middle-aged people remembered 1914 and saw another war approaching.[165]

And yet, for all such apprehension, the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, as its current editor notes, 'reflected little of the period leading up to the Second World War'.[166] Winston Churchill is honoured with one quotation only, while Neville Chamberlain is entirely omitted, including his ill-fated pledge, upon his return from Munich, that 'I believe it is peace for our time'. The only hint of gathering storm was a line pronounced by Hermann Göring in 1936, sandwiched in-between a quip from Cervantes and a dictum by Kant: 'Guns will make us powerful; butter will only make us fat'.[167] Incidentally, Göring's bellicose motto is the second-last quotation of the entire anthology.

The third edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, published in 1979, welcomed amongst its pages the pithy sayings of an English critic, Cyril Connolly, who had died just five years prior to its publication. Half of the entries under his name were taken from a slim, eccentric volume that had outlived, by then, the brief celebrity it had enjoyed during wartime: *The Unquiet Grave* (1944). Jotted down on three notebooks kept by Connolly between the autumns of 1942 and 1943, this hybrid 'experiment in self-dismantling', as Connolly has it, was in itself an anthology of quotations, assembling a plethora of extracts—by turns ironic and disabused—from Connolly's mid-century library.[168] The effect was much like that described by Elizabeth Knowles in relation to the 1941 edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*: opening its pages, she notes, 'is rather like walking into a traditional study lined

[165] Hadfield, p. 126.
[166] 'History of the Dictionary', in *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, ed. by Elizabeth Knowles, 8th edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. xii–xviii (p. xiv).
[167] 'Hermann Goering', in *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, ed. by Alice Mary Smyth, 1st edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 575.
[168] Cyril Connolly, *The Unquiet Grave* (London: Curwen Press, 1944), p. 3. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as *UG*, followed by the page number(s).

with leather-bound volumes'.[169] Indeed, just like its encyclopaedic predecessor, which sampled high literature ranging from Shakespeare to Byron, Connolly's own anthology betrayed an unmistakeably belletrist bent. Open the book at any point, and you are guaranteed to find aphorisms by Pascal and La Rochefoucauld, maxims by Sainte-Beuve and Chamfort, slivers of wit from de Quincey and Cocteau. Nestled from cover to cover was then a personal encyclopaedia of sorts, a commonplace book corralling quotations from the French, Latin, and (albeit less often) Italian; an exuberant compendium, to sum up, larded with rueful reminiscences of interwar travel next to witty disquisitions on such disparate matters as religion, marriage, the vegetable world, surrealism, and air conditioning.

As Brian Dillon observed, 'nobody at the time appears seriously to have asked what Connolly thought he was doing with the book's form', though incidentally, the most appropriate gesture toward generic classification also appears to have been the first. [170] As John Lehmann wrote in his survey of British wartime literature, published in the January 1945 issue of *Horizon*, Connolly's book was, all things considered, an essay. Of course, at little more than a hundred pages (just one twelfth of Rebecca West's monumental tome), it's easy to see why Lehmann should have bundled it under the category of the (conventionally short) essay, while placing a work like *Black Lamb* on the scholarly shelf instead.[171] But length alone (already, as Rebecca West showed, an ill-suited metric for tracking the changing trajectories of this prose alloy) doesn't come near enough to capturing the generic exuberance—the sheer novelty—of a work like *The Unquiet Grave*. That John Lehmann should have called it an essay, in fact, will begin to sound more like a symptom of uneasiness: that of a critic who

[169] Knowles, p. xiv.
[170] Dillon, p. 60.
[171] John Lehmann, '"The Battle of the Books": A Letter', *Horizon*, January 1945, pp. 5–7 (p. 6).

reaches for the essay's ragbag—that most capacious and unwieldy of forms—after all other, more taxonomically pliant genres have been discarded.

All the same, it is perhaps as well that the term 'essay' should have lent itself to Lehmann, as I believe it did, as some sort of generic stopgap in his effort to describe Connolly's book. For it is my contention in this chapter that *The Unquiet Grave* owes much of its singularity precisely to its use of a compensatory logic—the essay as supplement—that has long attended the genre's conception of itself, and which Connolly invests, in turn, with a personal urgency that proved particularly resonant in wartime. What I mean to suggest, perhaps in a most literal sense, is that *The Unquiet Grave* operates as a form of compensation—as substitute or supplement. At one level, what the book labours to offset, with its purple prose and overripe excess, with its choice quotations and discursive flourishes, are the more prosaic, though no less vexing hardships of wartime: those, for instance, of hunger and confinement. And to these I will devote the opening three sections of this chapter, in the first of which I will offer a brief survey of *The Unquiet Grave*'s initial reception by locating it in a wartime context highly attuned to the uses (and abuses) of literary flamboyance. The second section will delve into one case of thwarted pleasure in particular, showing how wartime rationing on the one hand, and Connolly's obesity on the other, informed the stylistic texture of Connolly's book, before proceeding to focus, in the third section, on the forgotten delights of interwar travel, which as Osbert Sitwell claimed from the 'travel-shorn days' of 1950, is 'to the mind of a cultivated man, what vitamins are to his body'.[172]

Taken together, the first three sections of this chapter show how Connolly circumvents the documentary urgencies typical of so much 1930s criticism (exemplified by the essays of his schoolfriend Orwell) in order to return to a more familiar version of the essay as the one

[172] Sitwell, p. 9.

sketched by Woolf in 1922, with her claim that '[t]he principle which controls it [the essay] is simply that it should give pleasure'.[173] To read *The Unquiet Grave* as an essay is, in this sense, to read it as a book organized around pleasure, especially around the re-creation of bodily rapture; as 'a basking' indeed, to quote Woolf again, 'in the sun of pleasure'.[174]

But perhaps even more importantly, what this chapter contends is that Connolly's flamboyant excess in *The Unquiet Grave* had to do not only with a reaction against material deprivations in wartime, but with a typically late modernist sense of literary exhaustion or depletion, owing to the fact that, as Connolly himself laments, 'Proust, Joyce and Virginia Woolf have finished off the novel' (*UG* 16). The overripe texture of Connolly's prose, in this sense, is not so much a sign of luxurious abundance from the past as the ironic expression, that is, of a running out of ideas in the present. And this I will demonstrate in the two concluding sections of this chapter, which focus more directly on the formal singularities of Connolly's book, notably his use of quotation. What the form of *The Unquiet Grave* tries to compensate for, I argue here, is the creative barrenness of a would-be literary genius who turns his book of fragments into a rough draft standing in place of a masterpiece yet to come. As such, given its self-declared status as something secondary, *The Unquiet Grave* illustrates some of the most resonant features of modernism at mid-century: above all, a concern with the already-said, with quotation and recapitulation, and with the sense of creative exhaustion gripping those, like Connolly, coming after modernism's most daring experiments.

The Unquiet Grave offers us then an opportunity to consider how it is that a literary work could be made largely out of quotations; and why it was that precisely this taste for the essayistic fragment should have spurred a fantasy of peacetime that turned out to be, in reality, a record of wartime.

[173] Woolf, 'The Modern Essay', p. 13.
[174] Woolf, 'The Modern Essay', p. 13.

‘to quote as many passages as he could’

Though *The Unquiet Grave* was obviously no reference guide, as such it was often perceived (and dismissed) by critics who saw in it ‘merely an anthology, a collection of extracts chosen with “outremer” [overseas] snobbery and masquerading as a book’.[175] Connolly, however, averred that his book couldn’t have looked otherwise. For this was ‘inevitably a war book’, and one whose compiler, Connolly wrote,

> was determined to quote as many passages as he could from the French […] to prove how near and necessary to us were the minds and culture of those across the channel who then seemed quite cut off from us, perhaps for ever. [176]

Connolly’s urgent plea should make clear, by now, why I have begun this chapter with a brief excursus into the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*. What Alice Mary Hadfield only hinted at indirectly, in short, Connolly states explicitly: the compiler’s cataloguing zeal is directly proportional to the threat of total war. To catalogue means to preserve—add quotations into the bargain, and one is effectively shoring up the known in its smallest unit. Thus, stranded in blackout London amid the rubble of the Blitz, Connolly laboured to stave off the dread of wholesale obliteration by surrounding himself with other, altogether more refined fragments fetched (and thus, in some way, rescued) from his library. If this sounds at all like trivial business, one need only recall the fate that befell Rose Macaulay’s own library, entirely destroyed, together with the rest of her house, during one of the many air-raids that hit London in 1942. Sifting through the wreckage, Macaulay reportedly came across ‘a charred, curled page from one of the twelve volumes of the Oxford Dictionary’, without doubt the

[175] Cyril Connolly, ‘Introduction’, in *The Unquiet Grave*, 2nd edn. (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1951), pp. xi–xvi (p. xi).
[176] Connolly, ‘Introduction’, p. xii.

most precious book she owned, 'my Bible, my staff, my entertainer my help in work and my recreation in leisure'.[177] And despite eventually replacing many of these volumes, Macaulay never really recovered from the trauma of their loss. 'I have plenty of books again now', she admitted years later, 'but I am still haunted and troubled by ghosts, and I can still smell those acrid drifts of smouldering ashes that once were live books'.[178]

Connolly's literary fragments, then, clearly worked as an attempt to exorcise the dread of actual, bombed fragments. And yet, for all his claims that his was a war book, *The Unquiet Grave* says conspicuously little about the dire circumstances in which it was written, and against which it weaved its fabric of quotations. In this, I suggest, it follows the same logic as the first edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, whereby a retrospective acknowledgement of war (this is a war book, or this was compiled against the advance of war) is reinscribed into the pages of an anthology that seems, on the contrary, to elliptically evade all such overt references to conflict. Beset, for instance, by the private grief of a divorce, and stung by the advance of middle age, Connolly finds consolation in the remembrance of halcyon days when war was something happening somewhere else to someone else. So it is, then, that 'head-lines about the Spanish war soaked in sun-bathing oil' are tossed pell-mell on a deflated car seat next to 'wet bathing-dresses wrapped in towels', with Connolly steering his car 'round the dangerous corner of the Rue d'Antibes and down the coast road by the milky evening sea' (*UG* 63-64). This undated vignette—a short memory of past holidaying along the French Riviera with his wife—Connolly simply entitles 'Back-streets of Cannes'.

[177] Rose Macaulay, 'Book-Building after a Blitz', *Saturday Review of Literature*, 6 June 1942, pp. 15–16 (p. 15); Jane Emery, *Rose Macaulay: A Writer's Life* (London: John Murray, 1991), p. 268.
[178] Rose Macaulay, 'Books Destroyed – and Indispensable', *Listener*, 14 July 1949, p. 63. Macaulay would later fictionalize the loss of her library in a short story published in the semi-propagandistic collection *London Calling*, intended for audiences in the United States. See Rose Macaulay, 'Miss Anstruther's Letters', in *London Calling*, ed. by Storm Jameson (New York: Harper Brothers, 1943), pp. 299–308.

But by the time Connolly began jotting down his plight in mid-war London, unfettered travel around the Continent had become a luxury long forgone, giving a sense that, to quote Macaulay once again, 'travel is over, like one's books and the rest of civilization'.[179] Connolly was thus devoting much of his time to *Horizon*, the monthly periodical—a relic of the modernist little magazine—that he edited from 1939 to 1950. And it's under his magazine's imprint that *The Unquiet Grave* was first published, with a limited run of a thousand copies sold directly from his office. Advertising it in the December 1944 issue of *Horizon*, Connolly explained that the purportedly anonymous submission told of 'a year's journey through the mind of a writer who is haunted by the turbulent Mediterranean figure of Palinurus'.[180] As a minor figure drawn from Virgil's *Aeneid*, Palinurus lends himself easily to an author keenly aware of his own misfortune: he is Aeneas's tillerman, who is murdered and left unburied on foreign shores after falling overboard in his sleep. As the chosen pseudonym of a novelist manqué, 'approaching forty' and 'moth-eaten with self-pity' (*UG* 65), however, there was little doubt as to Palinurus's real identity, even among Connolly's contemporaries.

In Connolly's mind, of course, the myth of Palinurus was to provide the contours of plot, anchoring an otherwise loose agglomerate of fragments to the classical order afforded by 'an initiation, a descent into hell, a purification and cure'.[181] And yet, despite Connolly's efforts to dignify his personal plight through the universalizing varnish of myth, going so far as to devote the book's Epilogue to an exegesis of the relevant passages in the *Aeneid*, Connolly-Palinurus is no Leopold Bloom. What most stands out from his book is rather the hand-wringing of an eccentric, at times pathetically self-absorbed mind—a disappointed, middle-aged viveur now confined to the foggy dreariness of bombed London. For all its recidivist adherence to the mythical method of 1922, then, the book's epic impulse eventually tapers off

[179] Macaulay, 'Book-Building after a Blitz', p. 16.
[180] Cyril Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon*, December 1944, pp. 367–69 (p. 367).
[181] Connolly, 'Introduction', p. xii.

into solipsistic reverie—or, as Connolly would have it, 'the concept of life as an arrogant private dream' (*UG* 84).[182]

Thus, while Connolly's avowed pursuit was to 'proclaim his faith in the unity and continuity of Western culture in its moment of crisis', *The Unquiet Grave* ends up sounding more selfish than that, and unabashedly so.[183] Evelyn Waugh didn't fail to register this when he referred to *The Unquiet Grave* as 'Cyril's lament'.[184] George Orwell, too, heard in *The Unquiet Grave* 'a cry of despair from the *rentier* who feels that he has no right to exist, but also feels that he is a finer animal than the proletarian'.[185] And while Rebecca West's entire project had been spurred into being by lengthy disquisitions on state-sanctioned violence, *The Unquiet Grave* persistently labours *against* total war's hegemonic pretensions—even, one might say, against those that lay claim to one's very attention. This is not to suggest, of course, that air-raids and bomb shelters find no mention in the pages of *The Unquiet Grave*, although such mentions are indeed more sporadic than its literary quotations, but rather that wartime circumstances seem to force themselves on Connolly in spite of his willingness to avert his gaze elsewhere. Take, for example, this acoustic vignette of bucolic life in the country, where the horror of wholesale death disturbs Connolly's fantasy merely as a faint echo:

> Houses in the country: the morning awakening of a house, voices of women in the courtyard, the chickens, ducks, geese and dogs being let out; the parrot stropping its beak on the bars of the café; […] Sunday papers, taps running; and the drone of fighter-squadrons overhead. (*UG* 72)

[182] Connolly's epic vagaries didn't go unremarked at the time. Evelyn Waugh, for one, chides the book's 'factitious unity' for being based on an 'innocent and ingenious imposture', that of a classical mythology that only succeeded in impressing 'the literary ladies at the Dorchester Hotel'. See Evelyn Waugh, 'A Pilot all at Sea', *Tablet*, 186, 10 November 1945, pp. 225–26 (p. 225).
[183] Connolly, 'Introduction', p. xii.
[184] *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. by Michael Davie (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1976), p. 609.
[185] George Orwell, 'Review', in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: As I Please, 1943-1945*, ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, 4 vols (London: Penguin, 1970), III, pp. 318–20 (p. 320).

And so: if *The Unquiet Grave* can be read as a war book at all, I suggest, it is by dint of its insistence on anything that is *not* war. And not-war essentially boils down, for Connolly, to food, wine, and travel—to all those pleasures, in a word, that had been foreclosed by the onset of military conflict. '[S]ensation of what is lost', sighs Connolly in one of the many telegraphic-like dispatches punctuating his book, 'lost love, lost youth, lost Paris,—remorse and folly' (*UG* 18).

Writing in 1950 for a revised edition of *The Unquiet Grave*, Connolly felt compelled to explain how such an unflinching attention to pre-war bliss could have been sustained in the midst of—and by turning a blind eye to—the utmost destruction. His self-exculpatory response rehearses a line that had already peppered many of his editorials for *Horizon*. Take, for example, the one penned on *Horizon*'s fifth birthday, in December 1944—the same issue which advertised (perhaps not so coincidentally) *The Unquiet Grave*'s recent publication. 'Accused of "aestheticism", "escapism", "ivory-towerism", "bourgeois formalism", "frivolity" and "preferring art to life"', Connolly affirms, 'it [*Horizon*] pleads on all these counts "guilty and proud of it"'.[186] And what Connolly said of *Horizon* one year after its first issue, in January 1941, might be equally applied to *The Unquiet Grave*: 'all-pervading though the War has become, it has never been allowed to dominate the essential literary values which *Horizon* upholds'.[187] The defence mounted for *The Unquiet Grave* in 1950, on the other hand, loses some of the combative tone of wartime, but not its spirit: '[t]o evoke a French beach at that time', says Connolly, 'was to be reminded that beaches did not exist for mines and pill-boxes and barbed wire but for us to bathe from'.[188] And it is only by remembering this,

[186] Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon*, December 1944, p. 367.
[187] Cyril Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon*, January 1941.
[188] Connolly, 'Introduction', p. xii.

Connolly adds, that we can understand 'the author's obsession with pleasure'.[189] Cannes, then, instead of Dunkirk; Saint-Jean-de-Luz instead of Utah Beach.

For all the criticism levelled at him by the likes of Waugh or Orwell, Connolly's hedonistic fantasies of pre-war delight still struck a chord with several writers of the time. Elizabeth Bowen voted *The Unquiet Grave* the best literary work published in Britain during wartime. Aldous Huxley foretold that Palinurus's existential bleakness (Huxley dubs it 'Palinurmia') 'might easily become contagious', just like Byronism before it.[190] Raymond Mortimer likewise predicted 'writers hundreds of years hence poring over a twentieth-century classic entitled *The Unquiet Grave*', and even detected in the book's eccentric 'solicitude for the *mot juste*' an untimely taste for essayistic wit.[191] Irwin Edman, stressing the book's generic singularity, similarly foretold that it 'will be caviare [*sic*] to the general, not because it is pretentious or esoteric, but because it is a very special genre almost unknown in contemporary *published* writing', though 'there must be many private records and notebooks that resemble Mr. Connelly's [*sic*] spiritual record of a year in his own life'.[192] The book proved so popular, indeed, that in September 1945 Hamish Hamilton published a revised trade edition which sold 3,500 copies by year's end.[193] What's more, Connolly's escapist flights of fancy even found a welcome admirer in someone as heavily invested in the conflict as Hemingway, who spoke approvingly of Connolly's flaunted indifference to war. 'I always get involved in wars', confides Hemingway, 'but I admired the way you did not. It would be wrong for me not to fight but it was many times righter for you to do exactly as you did'.[194]

[189] Connolly, 'Introduction', p. xii.
[190] Letter to Cyril Connolly, 5 November 1946, in *Letters of Aldous Huxley, 1894-1963*, ed. by Grover Smith (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), p. 555.
[191] Quoted in Jeremy Lewis, *Cyril Connolly: A Life* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p. 387.
[192] Irwin Edman, 'Musings of a Troubled Soul', *Saturday Review of Literature*, 17 November 1945, p. 12.
[193] Lewis, p. 383.
[194] Letter to Cyril Connolly, 15 March 1948, quoted in Lewis, p. 387.

Connolly, for his part, praised Hemingway for something that he himself had laboured to accomplish in *The Unquiet Grave*, namely saturating 'his [Hemingway's] books with the memory of physical pleasure, with sunshine and salt water, with food, wine and making love, and with the remorse which is the shadow of that sun' (*UG* 64). This is as apt a statement of intent for *The Unquiet Grave*, albeit a covert one, as it is of any of Hemingway's own novels. But if a keen eye (or nose) for the sensorial texture of daily life is a distinction claimed by both writers, its literary effects are much less those of two kindred spirits. For, unlike his American supporter, Connolly deliberately carries over his longing for luxuriance into a literary medium that becomes, in itself, luxurious: that is to say, florid. And so, to rebel against the dietary poverty enforced by food rationing, Connolly lays out a verbal feast replete with morsels of wit and aphoristic crumbs, belletrist delicacies and slices of style. Choice quotations become, for their part, a pithy antidote to propagandistic monosyllabism. To such state-sanctioned injunctions as 'Waste the Food and Help the Hun', or 'Make Do and Mend', Connolly retorts with aphoristic sayings of this kind, by La Rochefoucauld: 'Le seul honnête homme est celui qui ne se pique de rien' (*UG* 78) [the only honest man is the one who doesn't care about anything].

Paul Fussell is, to my knowledge, the only critic to have paid sustained attention to the question of stylistic excess during World War Two, something that he calls, in a cultural study entitled *Wartime*, the period's 'very un-wartime copiousness'. [195] In brief, Fussell saw wartime deprivation as *the* driving force behind such eccentric little books as *The Unquiet Grave*, while a magazine like *Horizon* could safely be crowned 'one of the high moments in the long history of British eccentricity'.[196] One operated very much like a relief valve evacuating current barbarities by dint of high-pressure finesse; the other ('a cultural act [...]

[195] Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 227.
[196] Fussell, *Wartime*, p. 211.

as stubborn as Churchill's political behaviour') was bent upon keeping 'a rich and satisfying culture alive' by publishing some of the finest writing during the war.[197] But Connolly was, of course, not the only case in point, and in a brilliantly (and wittily) executed chapter appositely titled 'Compensation', Fussell runs the gamut of those writers for whom 'painful wartime dearth of clothing, cigarettes, and gasoline', aggravated by abeyance of 'subtelty, irony, and sensitivity', could be redeemed by 'labyrinthine sentences and rococo usages', verbal abundance and urbane wit.[198] Literary pomp afforded, in sum, what Fussell dubs a 'compensatory fantasy of not-war'.[199]

And compensating gestures of not-war, Fussell reminds us, could be detected even in usually unshowy writers as Evelyn Waugh, who confessed to (and disavowed) something akin to Connolly's stylistic indulgence when, in 1959, he wrote his preface for a revised edition of *Brideshead Revisited* (1945).[200] Waugh blamed the verbal excesses of the original text on 'the circumstances in which it was written', in early 1944:

> a bleak period of present privation and threatening disaster—the period of soya beans and Basic English—and in consequence the book is infused with a kind of gluttony, for food and wine, for the splendours of the recent past, and for rhetorical and ornamental language, which now with a full stomach I find distasteful.[201]

Rose Macaulay, though, had found it distasteful enough even in the harsh days of postwar austerity, lamenting, in a 1946 piece for *Horizon*, that Waugh's book 'flowers too often into an orchidaceous luxury of bloom'.[202] The irony of course, as Fussell notes, is that a piece of

[197] Fussell, *Wartime*, pp. 211, 209.
[198] Fussell, *Wartime*, p. 225.
[199] Fussell, *Wartime*, p. 223.
[200] Waugh's self-rebuke was symptomatic of a general suspicion of stylistic flamboyance in postwar Britain. For an overview of the survival of stylistic excess in such postwar writers as Anthony Burgess, Angela Carter, and Martin Amis, see Ben Masters, *Novel Style: Ethics and Excess in English Fiction since the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[201] Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 1962), p. 7.
[202] Rose Macaulay, 'Evelyn Waugh', *Horizon*, December 1946, pp. 360–76 (p. 372).

criticism so flowery in turn—reproducing what it purportedly lambasts—cannot but betray the reviewer's own appetite for richness. And Macaulay was, to be sure, a writer well attuned to the pleasures of the everyday: in 1934, as Alice Mary Hadfield was laboriously compiling the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Macaulay was printing a 700-page anthology titled *The Minor Pleasures of Life*. This ravenously sprawling compendium assembled, as its title suggests, past literary records on solace and bliss, duly arranged under such thematic headings as 'Bathing', 'Collecting', 'Eccentricity', 'Sloth', 'Smells', and 'Travel'. Macaulay's own pleasure as a compiler, however, lay not only in seeing so many of her favourite delights shared by just as many of her favourite writers, but in the very language with which these pleasures had variously been brought into expression. For her anthology, Macaulay concedes, 'wears an air disproportionately 17th century', kindled in part by her preference for (to quote only a few) John Aubrey, Sir Thomas Browne, Robert Burton, Francis Bacon.[203] And so, to those who might have accused her of baroque excess, Macaulay simply responded with a shrug of her shoulders:

> from the rich and sonorous prose and lovely verse of its earlier years, through the graceful Latinized elegance of its middle period, to the lounging, easy urbanity of its close, [seventeenth-century literature] is so entrancing that it lures one, like a siren, to dwell with it.[204]

Taken together, the table of contents in Macaulay's anthology, with its neatly alphabetized sources of pleasure, could well be used as a rough sketch for the written profile of a bon vivant like Connolly, who did in fact own a copy of her book, and who, like Macaulay, wrote *The Unquiet Grave* as an ode to idle bliss. The memory of a past sojourn in the small Alpine town of Kitzbühel, for instance, becomes an occasion for Connolly to catalogue 'several

[203] Rose Macaulay, *The Minor Pleasures of Life* (London: Gollancz, 1934), p. 7.
[204] Macaulay, *The Minor Pleasures of Life*, p. 7.

varieties of pleasures': sensual delights, like 'lying in a thick peat-bath on a rainy evening', or vanity boosts, like 'flirting in the Tiefenbrünner, or buying local jackets and *lederhosen*' (*UG* 66). But just as in Waugh's or Macaulay's case, luxuriance of expression was just as important as expression of luxuriance, and Connolly's hope was that, so long as war was waged, dearth and death could be redeemed, if only illusorily, by means of florid diction, purple prose, quick wit. One need only gloss over such overwrought passages as Connolly's eulogy to his lemurs: 'on distant shores they lie', Connolly writes of his cherished pets, 'yet never far from those rocks where the flowering cistus out-blanches the salt-encrusting spray' (*UG* 83). The final sequence of sibilant alliterations that crowns this sentence was very likely Connolly's attempt at imitating, onomatopoeically, the rhythmic splash of sea waves (years later, he would even pronounce the sea's reflux as the real-life source of classical elegiac metre).[205] The effect, though, is less that of an elegiac 'susurrus' than of a slow hiss—punctured pathos deflating into sentimental bathos.[206] Still, what John Pearson said of Osbert Sitwell's wartime fiction might just as well apply to Connolly's *The Unquiet Grave*: '[t]he verbally deprived could gorge themselves upon this convoluted prose, and relish the extravagance with which he recreated a suddenly familiar world which everyone had lost'.[207] It's hardly surprising that Nancy Mitford should have done precisely that, betraying her own wartime hunger for culinary sophistication when she confessed that she had been '*gobbling* about it [Connolly's book] the whole evening' (my italics).[208]

What first resembled yet another symptom of serious-minded, encyclopaedic zeal, then, now begins to look more like a wordy (and worldly) feast on the subject of pleasure. This is not to

[205] Cyril Connolly, 'The Elegiac Temperament', in *Ideas and Places* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1953), pp. 271–80.
[206] Connolly, 'The Elegiac Temperament', pp. 271–72.
[207] John Pearson, *The Sitwells: A Family's Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), pp. 381–82.
[208] Letter to Cyril Connolly, 29 November 1944, in *Love from Nancy: The Letters of Nancy Mitford*, ed. by Charlotte Mosley (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), p. 130.

say, however, that *The Unquiet Grave* disavows any kinship with the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*. For, in addition to being a viveur, Connolly was, above all, a man of letters. But if any resemblance still links *The Unquiet Grave* to its encyclopaedic predecessor, it is for reasons that go well beyond the kind of cataloguing fervour later glossed by Alice Mary Hadfield. The spirit animating Connolly's book comes closer, in fact, to what another contributor to the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Bernard Darwin, wrote in his introduction to the same:

> It is difficult to-day not to deal in warlike metaphors, but perhaps the truest and most perfect use of the dictionary is essentially peaceful. Reviewers are apt to say of a detective story that it is 'impossible to lay it down till the last page is reached'. It is rather for books of reference that such praise should be reserved. No others are comparable with them for the purposes of eternal browsing. They suggest all manner of lovely, lazy things, in particular the watching of a cricket match on a sunshiny day.[209]

In her foreword to *Personal Pleasures* (1935), a collection of some sixty essays written, this time, on the subject of her own pleasures, Macaulay betrays a similar sense of drowsy idleness when she confesses that she could have easily kept on cataloguing her favourite past-times forever, 'leaving no joy unspelt, unwrit, no mirthful hour unsung'.[210] And William Gass, in 1985, makes this abandonment to idle pleasure into the very kernel of the essay as form, noting that 'the essay is unhurried (although Bacon's aren't); it browses among books; it enjoys an idea like a fine wine; it thumbs through things'.[211] Cynthia Ozick concurs: the essay's genius is 'bound to leisure, and even to luxury, if luxury is measured in hours'.[212] So much can be said of *The Unquiet Grave*, too: it came into being as 'inevitably a war book', but its function was by turns consolatory and compensating, in a word, peaceful. For *The*

[209] Bernard Darwin, 'Introduction', in *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, ed. by Alice Mary Smyth, 1st edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), pp. v–xi (p. x).
[210] Rose Macaulay, *Personal Pleasures* (London: Gollancz, 1936), p. 13.
[211] William H. Gass, 'Emerson and the Essay', in *Habitations of the Word* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), pp. 9–49 (p. 25).
[212] Ozick, p. 156.

Unquiet Grave is, above all, about the pleasures of peacetime—about all the 'lovely, lazy things' that leave one wanting for more and more, and without which, Darwin concludes, we are left with nothing but 'a sense of privation'.[213]

'If all the world loved pleasure as much as Palinurus there would be no wars'

L. P. Hartley once joked that, despite being a fluent speaker of French, Connolly was 'very weak in verbs, for he has learned all his French from menus in which there are only nouns', rather than, say, from the pages of his beloved Pascal.[214] Hartley's facetious remark might have only been a light-hearted jibe at Connolly's stoutness (Waugh had these aplenty), but it shows, however inadvertently, that Connolly's literary pretensions could not be separated from his gustatory indulgence. Connolly was indeed a gourmand, and *The Unquiet Grave* makes no secret of it, relishing in the memory of delicatessen food, exotic fruits, and fine wine almost as if their simple enunciation could compensate for their physical absence. Thus, Connolly informs us, 'a truffle placed near a fresh egg will impregnate it with its odour', while 'the smell of cigar-smoke, of coffee being roasted, or of wine-barrels and of herbs in cooking are irresistible' (*UG* 37).

Connolly's attention to the sensorial texture of his memories—and of the prose entrusted with re-creating them—is above all of a visual kind. Take, for instance, this list of fruits that Connolly sketches in painstaking detail, in a sort of verbal analogue to one of Caravaggio's overripe still lifes:

> the musky golden orb of the sugar-melon or the green and brown seaweed markings of the tiger cantaloup, the scales of the pine-apple or the texture of figs and nectarines, the

[213] Darwin, p. xi.
[214] Quoted in Lewis, p. 267. Fussell, too, is unsparing in his irreverent assessment of Connolly as 'irrecoverably British for all his touching attempts to be French'. See Fussell, *Abroad*, p. 74.

> disposition of oranges and lemons on the tree or the feign-death coils of the old vine-serpent. (*UG* 7)

What mostly stands out from such pictorial or even photographic passages in *The Unquiet Grave* is Connolly's overt reliance on one of the essay's ordering devices par excellence: the list. At a basic level, of course, essays display an affinity with lists insomuch as they both share a taste for paratactic, associative flows—for the sudden verticality of juxtaposition, versus the sinewy horizontality of narrative. By the very act of adding one thing after another, however, lists can also create 'a sense of abundance, overflow, excess'; in a word, as William Gass notes in 'I've Got a Little List', they can be made to perform a function that is, above all, rhetorical.[215] That Connolly should structure *The Unquiet Grave* around lists—be it of fruits, quotations or street names—sounds much less bizarre, then, if we remember that these printed festoons were made to compensate for a foregone sense of luxury and peacetime stability. Rose Macaulay is, once again, a case in point. For it's hardly surprising that, upon losing her entire library to the Blitz, Macaulay had been smitten with just one such case of enumerative compulsion:

> [w]hen the first stunned sickness begins to lift a little, one perceives that something must be done about lost books. One makes lists; a prey to frenetic bibliomania, I made lists for weeks. […] A list of the books I had had; that is the saddest list; perhaps one should not make it.[216]

Later still, Macaulay even went on to wed the daily presence of ruins in the postwar world with the pleasures of listing them in a sprawling anthology entitled *Pleasure of Ruins* (1953). Connolly's lists, of course, are decidedly more comical, consisting at times of nothing more than a string of synonyms summoned to conjure one particular thing. Here's Connolly on yet

[215] William H. Gass, 'I've Got a Little List', *Salmagundi* (1996), 20–38 (p. 35).
[216] Macaulay, 'Book-Building after a Blitz', p. 15.

another fruit: '[t]he quince, coing, membrillo, marmelata, pyrus cidonia or portugalensis' (*UG* 36). Connolly is not satisfied with referring to this golden-yellow pome by just its English name, and so he reaches for its equivalent in, respectively, French, Spanish, Portuguese (though he might be confusing *marmelo*, the fruit, with *marmelada*, quince cheese), and Latin. The self-standing paragraph which begins with this list is preceded by a sententious meditation on Western civilisation, which ends on the ominous warning that '[o]ne by one, the Golden Apples of the West are shaken from the tree' (*UG* 36). The associative leap leading to Connolly's polyglot list seems obvious enough: the quince, he says, is 'the emblem of the civilization of Europe, with its hard tough flesh, bright colour and unearthly savour' (*UG* 36-37). And yet, for all his Spengler-like talk of Western decline, Connolly does not end this passage, as one might assume, with a swift return to his thoughts on war-torn Europe. Instead, he has his Palinurus drift sideways into yet another reverie on the quince: '[t]he simple flowers, the astringent fruit which ripens only in the south, the mysterious pips full of emulgent oil—all are significant' (*UG* 37). In an inversion of the rhetorical hierarchy yoking vehicle to topic, the quince sidelines all talk of civilisational collapse. Surely, under wartime restrictions, there is more pleasure in tarrying on the subject of quinces than in anatomising a war-ravaged Europe, or so Connolly must have thought.

But lists, for all their excesses, can only do so much to quench an appetite frustrated by war—despite Gass's quip that 'a phrase like "voluminous juice"' can be more satisfying than 'the apple's taste'.[217] Macaulay knew this well ('one can't list them all [lost books], and it is best to forget them now that they are ashes'), and so did Connolly.[218] Dissatisfied therefore with the cataloguing drudges of a pomologist, Connolly resorts to turning his Palinurus into a

[217] Gass, 'I've Got a Little List', p. 34.
[218] Macaulay, 'Book-Building after a Blitz', p. 16.

vegetable creature, part-human and part-fruit, in a dream of advancing middle age so bizarre as to verge on the surrealist:

> I saw myself […] a creature inhabited entirely by parasites, as a caterpillar is occupied by the grubs of the ichneumon fly. Gin, whisky, sloth, fear, guilt, tobacco, had made themselves my inquilines; alcohol sloshed about within, while tendrils of melon and vine grew out of ears and nostrils. (*UG* 67)

Elsewhere this nightmarish vision turns into full-blown paranoia, with Connolly giving vent to what he dubs the 'Vegetable Conspiracy', or the conviction that man 'has been marked down by the vine, hop, juniper, the tobacco plant, tea-leaf and coffee-berry for destruction' (*UG* 79). That Connolly's parasitic plants should all be associated with substances that are more or less addictive, of course, betrays his eccentric ravings as something more akin to scapegoating. This much he had done in his earlier book of literary journalism-cum-autobiography, the tellingly entitled *Enemies of Promise* (1938), where the parasitic weeds listed in George Crabbe's poem 'The Heath' become shorthand for the various dangers vitiating literary talent: politics, drinking or drugs, journalism, worldly success, sex, and familial duty.[219] Accordingly, Connolly named each chapter of this earlier book after the plant (charlock, poppies, thistles) corresponding to each of the above vices. *The Unquiet Grave* continues this trope by chalking up the personal failures of a would-be literary genius to a fantasy of mankind helplessly at the mercy of cunning, parasitic plants. 'Others merely live', Connolly admits, 'I vegetate' (*UG* 54).

For all such frenzied delusions, though, Connolly is usually rather unsparing when it comes to anatomising his shortcomings as a writer: '[a]pproaching forty, I am about to heave my carcass of vanity, boredom, guilt and remorse into another decade' (*UG* 65). I suspect,

[219] Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (London: Routledge, 1938), pp. 85–86.

moreover, that Connolly's misgivings about wasted talent might have especially rankled with the memory of another, decidedly more felicitous (and therefore all the more offending) conjunction between middle age and literary greatness: Joyce's own fortieth, which saw the publication (in 1922) of one of modernism's masterpieces, *Ulysses*. *The Unquiet Grave* is, by contrast, a complaint over lapsed promise, 'a search for the obstruction which is blocking the flow from the well' (*UG* 3), to such an extent, in fact, that it opens with the very question of the masterpiece, like *Enemies of Promise* before it: '[t]he more books we read, the sooner we perceive that the true function of a writer is to produce a masterpiece and that no other task is of any consequence' (*UG* 1). This is an overture from which, to quote Brian Dillon, the book 'cannot recover', and Connolly must have felt the same when, halfway through *The Unquiet Grave*, he dismissed it as '"brilliant",—that is, not worth doing' (*UG* 64).[220]

For all his self-reproaches, however, Connolly turns, time and again, to those very pleasures he condemns as detrimental for literary greatness. Hamstrung by gluttony and sloth alike in his efforts to live 'according to reality which alone makes good writing possible' (*UG* 64), namely poverty or 'mental suffering' (*UG* 2), Connolly speculates instead about the possibility of a chemically produced work of art. The passage—a mock-recipe with riffs of post-Romantic drug use (think of Rimbaud or Verlaine) anticipating the postwar psychedelic experiments of Huxley and the American beatniks—is worth quoting at length:

> When we decide to write, we should first plan the proportions involved. Proportions of heart and head, of judgement and imagination. 'A peach of an essay', 'a melon of a poem', 'a quince of a book',—we must let ourselves be impregnated by an archetypal form. Then we should treat the personality with the right mixture till the glaze (style) is suitable—'for my philosophical novel with a milligramme of nostalgia, I am taking ephedrine twice a week, opium once, with a little mescaline to loosen my imagery, and massaging of the nape of the neck to stimulate the thalamus after the monthly orgy. I

[220] Dillon, p. 55.

> am writing two-thirds standing up in the early morning, one third lying down in the afternoon. My supervisor is a Jungian.' (*UG* 54)

Unsurprisingly, Connolly designates the final output of so bizarre a process by reference (once again) to fruits. An essay, in short, can be made as pulpy as a peach; a poem as inviting as a melon. A certain kinship transpires thus between writing and the body, whereby literary production is turned into a bodily function.

That Connolly himself should have been so acutely alert to creativity's dependence on the body is rather apt, considering that the book's most quoted aphorism is, after all, one on obesity: '[i]mprisoned in every fat man a thin one is wildly signalling to be let out' (*UG* 44). Elsewhere, Connolly jots down his new-year resolutions: 'lose a stone, then all the rest will follow' (*UG* 18). If obesity is 'a mental state', moreover, 'a good writer must be in training' (*UG* 19)—an alternative, albeit a more taxing one, to the chemical concoctions mentioned above. At times, Connolly attempts to masquerade his much-lamented stoutness (and panting breath) under the guise of metaphysical dread, claiming that 'now and then the mere being in the world is enough to give me a violent claustrophobia' (*UG* 23). No sooner has Connolly confessed to his existential straits, however, than their thinly-disguised source (obesity) creeps back in a parenthetical aside: '(or is it a physical shortness of breath which creates the sensation of claustrophobia […]?)' (*UG* 23).

Connolly's attention to the bodily dimension of writing puts him in the company of another literary essayist of the time, Walter Benjamin, who committed suicide while fleeing Nazi capture in 1940. In his 1929 essay 'The Image of Proust', Benjamin coins an expression—'physiology of style'—which particularly resonates with the way in which Connolly crafts his

own prose in *The Unquiet Grave*.[221] The gist of Benjamin's essay is that Proust's desultorily long sentences were a direct result of his asthma, which, Benjamin contends,

> became part of his art—if indeed his art did not create it. Proust's syntax rhythmically and step by step reproduces his fear of suffocating. And his ironic, philosophical, didactic reflections invariably are the deep breath with which he shakes off the weight of memories. […] His sentences are the entire muscular activity of the intelligible body.[222]

Connolly was unlikely to have read Benjamin's essay, but he ventures a conjecture which bears striking resemblance to Benjamin's own. To wit: if Benjamin questions whether Proust's asthma percolated into his style, or whether his style triggered his asthma, Connolly wonders in turn whether his claustrophobia is an effect of some metaphysical angst, or whether in fact it's his obesity that makes his writing 'pessimistic; moth-eaten with self-pity' (*UG* 65). Earlier, Connolly rephrases this question in relation to two of his literary heroes and fellow pessimists, Leopardi and Pascal:

> [a]re they pessimistic because they are ill? Or does their illness act as a short cut to reality—which is intrinsically tragic? […] In many of Pascal's reflections one detects not only the scientific accuracy, but the morbidity and peevishness, the *injustice* of Proust. (*UG* 17)

What Benjamin designated as Proust's 'symbiosis between this particular creativity and this particular malady', Connolly simply dubs as Proust's injustice, in a jibe at the latter's ill-temper.[223] His perpetrator (or victim), on the other hand, Connolly nicknames 'wheezing

[221] Walter Benjamin, 'The Image of Proust', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 201–15 (p. 214). Another famous modernist referent is Joyce's use of 'peristaltic prose' in the 'Lestrygonians' episode of *Ulysses*, where the fits and starts of Joyce's sentences are made to imitate the contractions of the intestinal muscles during digestion. On physiology of style, or modernist style more broadly, see Ben Hutchinson, *Modernism and Style* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
[222] Benjamin, 'The Image of Proust', p. 214.
[223] Benjamin, 'The Image of Proust', p. 214.

Proust', placing him in the distinguished yet unhappy company of 'sick Pascal and his mouldy troupe; gaunt Kierkegaard, hunch-backed Leopardi, […] and limping Epictetus' (*UG* 51). The missing item in this list, Connolly would have us think, is panting, potbellied Palinurus.

Though Connolly stops short of making any connection between Proust's asthma and his style, the question of his own breathlessness recurs throughout much of *The Unquiet Grave*, especially in relation to writing. Early in the book, Connolly compares his claustrophobia to

> being pinned underneath the hull of a capsized boat, yet being afraid to dive deeper and get clear. In those moments it seems that there must be a way out, and that through sloughing off the personality alone can it be taken. (*UG* 8)

Again, Connolly's displacement of obesity onto more incorporeal matters—this time, personality—is given away by the ironical use of such verbs as 'sloughing off', with its explicit nod to the animal shedding of dead skin. Elsewhere, when Connolly proposes 'that it is only by some desperate escape, like Pascal's, that I can breathe' (*UG* 23), the remedy becomes more literary than physiological, which is to say that Connolly seeks his escape by dint of a particular mode of writing, one which, like Pascal's, strives for 'rapidity, detachment and intellectual impatience' (*UG* 16).

Above all, Connolly's claustrophobia had much to do with his forced confinement in blackout London, 'the former capital of the world', now reduced to 'dirt and weariness'.[224] And the solution that Connolly devises for this kind of breathlessness has less to do with his pen than his feet—with, that is, some actual form of desperate escape. Of course, under wartime restrictions on movement, and with most of the Continent still under Nazi occupation, Connolly's journey could be a remembered one only. It was, Connolly wrote, a

[224] Connolly, 'Introduction', p. xi.

'ritual flight' (*UG* 60), transporting him to the cherished sites of his interwar holidays around France. In this sense, Connolly follows in the footsteps of another of his asthmatic precursors, Laurence Sterne, who begins the seventh volume of *Tristram Shandy* with a resolution to continue writing by fleeing his asthma across the Channel. 'I will gallop, quoth I, without looking once behind me, to the banks of the *Garonne*', Tristram Shandy vows.[225]

Curiously, Connolly's first signed appearance in print, at the age of twenty-three, had been a 1927 review of Sterne's oeuvre, entitled 'Distress of Plenty', which even more curiously happened to mention—long before *The Unquiet Grave*—Virgil's tale of Palinurus. 'The intensity that Sterne lacked in emotion', Connolly argued then, 'he retrieved in style'.[226] For all he knew, Connolly might have been foretelling the course of his own literary career, since those are precisely the same terms critics later employed to describe *The Unquiet Grave*. Connolly, on this reading, may as well have been the distress of plenty, as Sterne before him, but as one critic wrote, his prose style 'is redeeming; its richness and elegance cast a glow over his darkest moments of self-reproach'.[227] And while, moreover, Sterne's (and Proust's) novels could be read as an essayistic lung, their sprawling digressions continually delaying the asthmatic contraction of death, so too does *The Unquiet Grave* become, with its essayistic reminiscences of past travels, an airy receptacle capable of ventilating the tightening claustrophobia of wartime London. This Connolly accomplished as Sterne had before him: by leaving one's shortness of breath behind, and by setting out to France.

[225] Sterne, p. 386.
[226] Cyril Connolly, 'Distress of Plenty', in *The Condemned Playground* (London: Routledge, 1945), pp. 21–26 (p. 24).
[227] Michael Shelden, *Friends of Promise: Cyril Connolly and the World of* Horizon (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), p. 110.

‘Tout mon mal vient de Paris’

In late 1926, a twenty-three-year-old Connolly sailed down the Danube from Budapest to Costanza, taking in the sights of Belgrade and Bucharest before finally reaching the Black Sea. By then, of course, Connolly had already spent much of his undergraduate years skipping about the Continent, revelling in what was to become one of his obsessions. It was this juvenile ramble around Eastern Europe, in fact, that eventually provided the subject matter for what Connolly hoped would be his literary debut: a travel book. Cecil Beaton was even approached for a cover design, and an advance was made, but the short travelogue, of which only three pages survive, never reached booksellers’ shelves. Perhaps, as Jeremy Lewis ventures, because it had been written in what Lewis mockingly dubs ‘the ill-fated form of a guide book to the Balkans’—a phrase all the more ironic for being strikingly redolent of Rebecca West’s own description of her wartime project on Yugoslavia as a ‘wretched, complicated book that won’t interest anybody’.[228] More probably, though, because Connolly himself never truly committed to its completion: one of the earliest signs of that indolence he was to condemn, two decades later, in Palinurus’s ‘will-to-failure or repugnance-to-success, a desire to give up at the last moment’ (*UG* 104).

At any rate, that Connolly’s first literary work should have been a travelogue testifies to the central role that travel was to assume in his later life, especially during the war, when an entire series devoted to travel and emigration regularly began to appear in the pages of *Horizon*, under the enticing title ‘Where Shall John Go?’.[229] If *The Unquiet Grave* was, by its author’s admission, a war book, it was also an ‘intellectual voyage’—a feat of armchair

[228] Lewis, p. 161; Rollyson, p. 192.
[229] For a closer analysis of *Horizon*’s travel column in the context of mid-century travel writing, see Annabel Williams, ‘Late Modernist Travel Literature, 1930-1949: Home, Nationalism, and War’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2018).

escapism spurred by Connolly's enforced stasis in wartime London.[230] As such, the book is rife with travel reminiscences from the idyllic sites of Connolly's interwar holidays (mostly the Dordogne valley and French Riviera), which are elevated to the status of 'sacred names' (*UG* 18) or 'holy places' (*UG* 80), in what effectively amounts to a personal topography-cum-hagiography. Such is Connolly's quasi-religious fervour that he apostrophizes his favourite places as if they were deities: '[s]treets of Paris, pray for me; beaches in the sun, pray for me; […] summer rain on quays of Toulon, wash me away' (*UG* 47). Elsewhere, as with his quinces, Connolly does no more than simply list—'Quai Bourbon, Quai d'Orléans, Quai d'Anjou' (*UG* 81)—as if uttering a magical incantation capable of reviving the streets and squares that 'would seem extinct for ever' (*UG* 85).

In the first part of *The Unquiet Grave*, Connolly inserts a circular map, entitled 'The Magic Circle' (Figure 3), depicting a highly stylized version of several south-western French regions, from Périgord and Quercy in the north down to Guyenne and Gascogne in the south. Needless to say, the sudden appearance of a map in what had previously announced itself as a belletrist work alerts us to one of the most recognizable features of the travel genre. Connolly's drawing, however, is no ordinary map, as the maps in Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* certainly were: it is circular rather than quadrilateral, displaying neither scale nor compass rose. Plainly, then, there is a parody at work here: Connolly disables the cartographic apparatus of more conventional travel books as if to reiterate that his journey is a purely imagined one.[231]

[230] Connolly, 'Introduction', p. xii.
[231] For another insightful reading of Connolly's 'Magic Circle' map, see Annabel Williams, pp. 215-18.

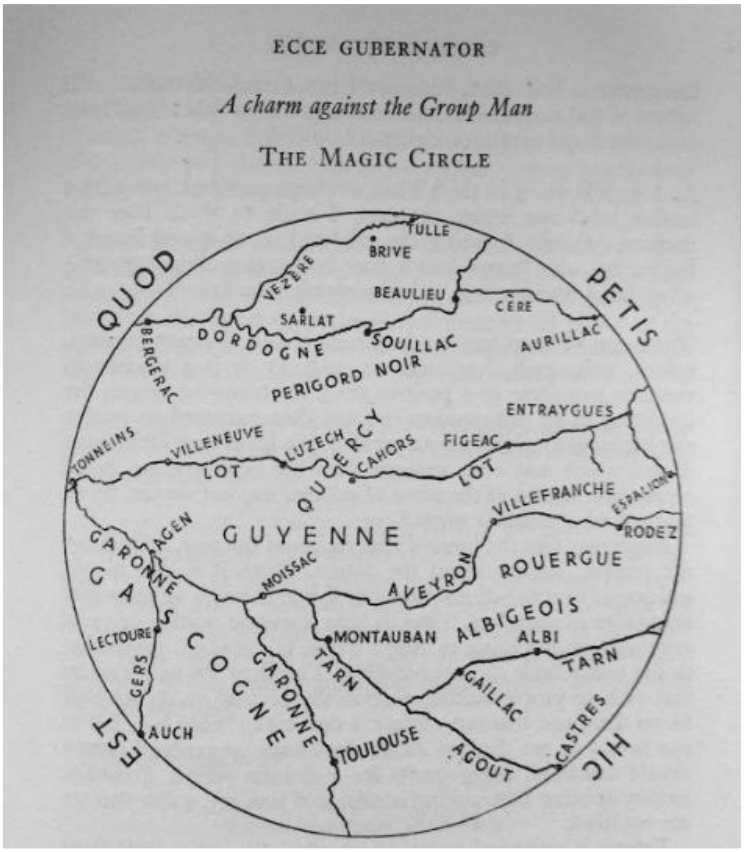


Figure 3. ‘The Magic Circle’, from Cyril Connolly’s *The Unquiet Grave* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1945), p. 21.

That said, there is a decidedly more sinister irony nestling in this playful parody of generic norms. For by dint of its very circularity, Connolly’s ‘Magic Circle’ is made to resemble an optical lens—a whimsical telescope facing the earth rather than the sky, a pseudo-satellite *ante litteram*. Less fancifully, though, the map can be (mis)taken for the aiming device of a reconnaissance aircraft, surveying its target area in preparation for an air-raid. The focusing reticule of this sight in disguise would easily correspond to the fine network of lines designating the rivers Dordogne, Guyenne and Gascogne, which are, together with their various tributaries and scattered communes, the only topographic feature in Connolly’s otherwise bare map. Connolly’s ‘Magic Circle’, in this sense, makes graphically explicit that ‘all-encompassing cartographic gaze’ looming, as Saint-Amour reminds us, in many city

novels of the 1920s.[232] The resemblance must have been all the more striking to a Londoner who had become, by then, all too familiar with the daily drone of German doodlebugs. Or, for that matter, to those R.A.F. pilots who, by Stephen Spender's account, had written to *Horizon*'s offices claiming that 'so long as *Horizon* continued they had a cause to fight for'.[233]

The shadow cast by war over Connolly's sacred map is rendered even more obvious by the first paragraph that follows it—consisting, predictably enough, of a list:

> Peace-aims: (1) a yellow manor farm inside this magic circle;
> (2) a helicopter to take me to
> (3) an office in London or Paris and
> (4) to my cabin at Almuñecar or Ramatuelle. (*UG* 21)

Curiously, the manuscript version of *The Unquiet Grave* had this same four-point list preceded by quite a different heading: 'war-aims'. As Annabel Williams points out, Connolly's reference to 'war-aims' parodies an earlier questionnaire by Mass Observation, which asked the public to consider 'the problem of war-aims, of what we are fighting for', before collating responses into a four-point list.[234] I suspect that Connolly expurgated this earlier nod to war so as to deny it, once again, its oft-lamented monopoly over public (and private) discourse. This would be entirely in line, after all, with the kind of aspersions Connolly seldom missed a chance to cast on the large-scale mobilisation brought on by the conflict, with 'the B.B.C. [pumping] religion and patriotism into all its programs', while 'the

[232] Paul K. Saint-Amour, 'Air War Prophecy and Interwar Modernism', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 42.2 (2005), 130–61 (p. 156).
[233] Stephen Spender, *World Within World* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1951), p. 292.
[234] See Annabel Williams, pp. 218-19.

State now sits by the bedside of literature like a policeman watching for a would-be suicide to recover consciousness'.[235]

For all his insistence on the Dordogne valley, however, Connolly does not devote as many pages to south-western France as he does to Paris, for as he twice pronounces, 'tout mon mal vient de Paris': all my ills come from Paris (*UG* 45, 80). 'There', he laments, 'befell the original sin and the original ecstasy; there were the holy places' (*UG* 80). And so holy were these places that Connolly does not hesitate to baptise six of his Parisian hotels 'central-heated Stations of the Cross' (*UG* 62). But piety, irreverent as it may sound at first, quickly cloys into pity, as when Connolly, frustrated with the sartorial uniformity of utility-branded clothing (clothes rationing had begun in 1941, followed in 1942 by the government's Utility Clothing Scheme), longs for a more colourful, Parisian wardrobe. 'For an angora pullover', Connolly grumbles, 'for a red scarf, for a beret and some brown shoes I am bleeding to death; my heart is dry as a kidney' (*UG* 62). It is interwar Paris—with its fashions, boulevards and gardens—that Connolly mournfully labours to sketch out in 'La cle des chants', the third part of *The Unquiet Grave*, and so painstaking was his attention to detail that, on a page solely dedicated to his ferrets' jaunts around Paris, Connolly goes so far as to list six jazz cabarets, eight restaurants or bistros, 'now closed and forgotten', and twenty-five urban landmarks—including streets, gardens, arcades, city gates, warehouses, 'exposed tendons of the Nord railway' and brothels with 'prostitutes calling to each other from their beds' (*UG* 82).

The resultant blueprint of the city is, by necessity, fragmentary and partial, though it can be pieced together from the sparse vignettes Connolly juxtaposes without any apparent design. These are often no more than quick tableaux drawn, of course, with the aid of a list:

[235] Connolly, 'Comment', December 1944, p. 367.

> Paris afternoons; the quiet of hotel bedroom and of empty lounge; the bed covered with clothes and magazines, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Semaine à Paris*; programmes of the Pagoda Cinema, The Ursulines, Studio Vingt-huit; faraway cries of 'voici l'*Intran*' answered by the honking of horns… (*UG* 63)

At other times, Paris comes alive through remembered flânerie, which moves his prose closer to that 'urban lyricism' Connolly had long admired in poems like T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1915).[236] In a vignette entitled 'Evening in June', for instance, Connolly records his wanderings from the outskirts of Montparnasse to Quai de Bourbon on the Seine. 'Walking down the Rue Vavin, past the shop with ivory canes in the window', Connolly begins,

> away from the polyglot bedlam of Montparnasse into the Luxembourg gardens where children are playing croquet […], then out at the corner where the Rue Servandoni's leaning mansards join the sombre Rue de Vaugirard. On by the book-booths of the Odéon, […] then through the broad melancholy twilight of the Rue Soufflot to the cold splendour of the Panthéon, past the blistered shutters of the Hôtel des Grands Hommes […] then across the Rue des Ecoles with its groaning trams, and so by the stews and noisy wine-shops of the Place Maubert to meet the Seine at the Quai de la Tournelle. (*UG* 81)

Such-like passages of remembered mobility—unfettered, unmoored, unmilitarised—represent, I suggest, another instance of the kind of sensory awareness Connolly displayed, too, toward the pleasures of the palate. Connolly's jaunting feet, like his taste buds, infect *The Unquiet Grave* with the pleasures of the body; *The Unquiet Grave*, in turn, mimetically acts out these same pleasures on the page. The result, then, is a physiology of style which operates as a circuitous, vicarious antidote to food rationing and enforced stasis alike.

It wasn't until the end of January 1945, just a few weeks, in fact, after the publication of *The Unquiet Grave*, that Connolly was finally able to set foot back in newly-liberated Paris. Until

[236] Cyril Connolly, 'The Break-through in Modern Verse', *London Magazine*, June 1961, pp. 27–40 (p. 39).

then, Palinurus's wartime ills could only be redeemed through such escapist vagaries as the one which follows his Magic Circle, entitled 'daydream':

> A golden classical house, three stories high, with oeil de boeuf attic windows and a view over water. Outside a magnolia growing up the wall, a terrace for winter, a great tree for summer and a lawn for games; […] then a sheltered garden, indulgent to fig and nectarine, and in the corner a belvedere, book-lined like that of Montaigne, wizard of the magic circle. (*UG* 22)

The idyllic (if risible) reverie, like its preceding map, is guarded by none other than Montaigne, presiding spirit not only of the Dordogne region, where the French humanist was born, but of the essay form itself, of which he was, of course, the celebrated *grand-père*. The allusion is all the more apt if one remembers that for Montaigne, too, the essay had initially represented a retreat from—or rather a compensation for—the violence engulfing his country estate east of Bordeaux, where 'the Protestant revolts were longest-lived and strongest'.[237] And just as significant is the fact that Montaigne (like Connolly) began to compose his *Essais* on the day he admittedly entered middle age, that is to say on his 38th birthday, when, as the Latin inscription on the wall of his study reads, he retired 'to the bosom of the learned virgins, where in calm and freedom from all cares he will spend what little remains of his life, now more than half run out'.[238] Predictably enough, then, Connolly crowns this pastoral scene with a bon mot from Montaigne's *Essais*: 'La liberté et l'oisiveté qui sont mes maîtresses qualités' ['Freedom and idleness which are my chief qualities'] (*UG* 22).

Thus, irked by the monosyllabic slogans of the state machine, and stifled by the utilitarian straitjackets of war propaganda—an activity as useful, Connolly jeers, as 'peeling potatoes' (*UG* 1)—Connolly takes refuge in the airiness of a form synonymous with freedom and

[237] John Snyder, *Prospects of Power: Tragedy, Satire, the Essay, and the Theory of Genre* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), p. 160.
[238] Quoted in Richard L. Regosin, 'Montaigne and His Readers', in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. by Denis Hollier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 248–252 (p. 249).

leisure: freedom to think, that is, and leisure to digress. Connolly, we might say, has his drowning Palinurus gasp for a literary form capable of ventilating what had become, by then, a 'stuffy island'.[239] And it is to *this* form that I turn, at last, in the rest of this chapter.

'Proust, Joyce and Virginia Woolf have finished off the novel'

Paris in January 1945, of course, was not the same city of Connolly's pre-war jaunts, its heavy snow and empty streets making it look rather like 'Vienna or Petrograd'.[240] And yet, despite the lack of 'nostalgic memories', this winter trip is said to have made Connolly 'indescribably happy'.[241] As he would later write in his May 1945 'Comment' for *Horizon*, Paris seemed to assure him that '[e]verything you love is still here. The ideas, buildings, books, and pictures, the wine, the people, the trees. And they won't run away'.[242] Palinurus's anxieties were at last assuaged. In the Café Flore he spoke with several waiters from before the war, and met with, among others, Jean Genet and Simone de Beauvoir. Despite the lingering ghastliness of occupied Paris, the French capital seemed far removed from London, 'a grey, sick wilderness on another planet' where German doodlebugs were still wreaking havoc from above.[243] But the main difference Connolly found in literary matters: to return to Paris, he admitted, was to step back into 'a world of ideas. For the English literary world is not a world of ideas but of personalities, a world of clubs and honours and ancestor-worship and engagement-books'.[244]

Connolly, of course, was not alone in this bombastic display of mid-century Francophilia, easily mocked by Arthur Koestler as 'a new outbreak of that recurrent epidemic, the French

[239] Cyril Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon*, June 1940, pp. 389–93 (p. 393).
[240] Cyril Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon*, May 1945, pp. 296–306 (p. 296).
[241] Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon*, May 1945, p. 296.
[242] Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon*, May 1945, p. 305.
[243] Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon*, May 1945, p. 296.
[244] Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon*, May 1945, p. 305.

"flu"'.[245] We need only recall Rebecca West's own tirade (itself modelled after Henry James's) against Britain's 'lazy, bone-lazy' literary intelligentsia, with its snug beliefs, so un-French-like, 'that life is lived simply by living' (*BL* 1085-86). Connolly shares the same grievances in *The Unquiet Grave*, where he complains that 'our writers [...] mistake prejudice for energy and accept a sense of material well-being as a system of thought' (*UG* 70). And where West drowns the Teutonic jingoism of her Viennese visitor by rattling off as many French authors as she can muster, Connolly ponders the question of literary masterpieces by compiling a list—his 'Sacred Twelve' (*UG* 2)—in which more than half of his chosen few are French. Only two members of this personal pantheon are English, namely Pope and Byron; none from the German-speaking world. National affiliations notwithstanding, however, what makes Connolly's catalogue so telling in relation to *The Unquiet Grave*, which it also prefaces, is its generic composition: poetry, journal, fable, aphorism and, of course, essay. But it is the parenthetical aside Connolly tags at the end of his list that makes it even more significant for my discussion. For these, Connolly adds, are 'mostly high peaks of the secondary range' (*UG* 2).

Connolly's geological trope—the *secondary* range of a mountain chain—signals a certain marginality to which he also pays allegiance when he pronounces that 'the compiler of this list should set himself to write after these models' (*UG* 2). One might argue, of course, that there was nothing marginal, let alone secondary, in the enduring influence exerted by a Baudelaire or a Montaigne, but what matters at present is not so much whether Connolly misrepresented (by devaluing them) his selected works, but that he professed their purported marginality in the first place. The move is one which we have already observed in Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*: that of a mongrel piece of writing self-reflexively

[245] Arthur Koestler, 'French Flu', in *The Yogi and the Commissar* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1945), pp. 21–27 (p. 21).

advertising (and moulding) itself via supposed kinship with other, more illustrious works. That Connolly should frame *The Unquiet Grave* by immediately shoring up its credentials as sui generis, then, begins to sound like yet another symptom of that typically late modernist malaise—the anxiety of novelty—by which modernism's mid-century rearguard had come to regard itself *as* a rearguard. Tyrus Miller, the first to make a sustained case for a distinctly 'late' modernism, described it precisely in such terms, pointing to how 'each work tended toward formal singularity, as if the author had hit a dead end and had to begin again'.[246] Hence why for so many of its early reviewers *The Unquiet Grave* resembled, rather deliberately, 'a very special genre almost unknown', whose result was, moreover, 'like nothing under the sun'.[247] And hence, too, why Connolly should have wrought it out of bits and pieces: 'in the empty spaces left by high modernism's dissolution', Tyrus Miller observed, it was late modernism's leftover duty to reassemble 'fragments into disfigured likenesses of modernist masterpieces: the unlovely allegories of a world's end'.[248]

In his wider survey of lateness in European culture, Ben Hutchinson turned to Paul Valéry to show how this task was often construed, at the same time, as an embarrassing one: to be modern, wrote Valéry in 1937, is to be '"embarrassed" by the perspective of lateness imposed on us by our cultural inheritance'.[249] To be a *late* modernist, Hutchinson went on, was thus to be even more embarrassed; it was, indeed, a way of turning embarrassment into the period's most privileged, self-authorizing rhetoric. This makes lateness as much a self-serving (at times exculpatory) rhetoric as a chronological fact, and Connolly was certainly no exception, often giving vent to this sense of embarrassed (and embattled) belatedness as when, shortly after compiling his list of masterpieces, he complains that:

[246] Miller, p. 13.
[247] Edman, p. 12.
[248] Miller, p. 14.
[249] Ben Hutchinson, *Lateness and Modern European Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 1.

> novelists [...] can no longer develop character, situation or plot. Flaubert, Henry James, Proust, Joyce and Virginia Woolf have finished off the novel. Now all will have to be re-invented as from the beginning. (*UG* 16)

As Connolly saw it, there was little that could be done to perfect a genre that had already been perfected, and thus depleted, at the hands of an older literary guard ('I shall never write another line. Who has the nerve to after that', sighed Djuna Barnes after reading *Ulysses*, before going on to write *Nightwood*).[250] Or as Connolly's novelist friend, Henry Green, admitted in turn: 'They're like cats which have licked the plate clean, you've got to dream up another dish if you're to be a writer'.[251] Against Ezra Pound's celebrated injunction to make it new, then, Connolly responds with his own, inevitably hackneyed and self-consciously parodic exhortation: make it new, anew.

But making something new anew demanded, for Connolly, the obvious repudiation of a literary form—the novel—he considered so thoroughly exhausted as to yield no more creative sap. This is why, as Connolly reminds us in *The Unquiet Grave*, '[t]here are no novels' amid the precious totems of his literary shrine: for his, Connolly insists, is a *secondary* canon, made up of *minor* genres, with specimens that are, in turn, 'fruits of reflective and contemplative natures' (*UG* 2), and of which even the poetry is said to be 'of the kind which speculates about life' (*UG* 2). This clearly set Connolly apart from the many novelists routinely featured in the growing canons of late modernism, which tend to neglect Connolly except as a critic and an editor (it was he who published some of these writers' late work in *Horizon*) rather than a belated writer himself.[252] But what makes *The Unquiet Grave*

[250] Quoted in Kevin Birmingham, *The Most Dangerous Book: The Battle for James Joyce's Ulysses* (New York: Penguin, 2014), p. 222.
[251] Henry Green, *Surviving: The Uncollected Writings of Henry Green*, ed. by Matthew Yorke (New York: Viking, 1993), p. 247.
[252] Hutchinson's *Lateness in Modern European Literature* is a case in point here. In Hutchinson's discussion of late modernism, Connolly is granted only a brief mention, and then only for his pithy quip that 'it is closing time in the gardens of the west' (p. 332).

an important (if neglected) record of late modernism, I contend, is not only its tendency toward formal singularity, as Tyrus Miller would have it, or its use of quotation; it is, rather, the way it seems to conceptualize the very idea of a late modernism in real time, looking for alternative routes toward formal accomplishment that do not necessarily pass through the novel's technical wheelhouse.

Connolly's 'Sacred Twelve', in this sense, are significant not only for their speculative bent, but for the brevity, too, of their masterworks, which are all praised for being 'short and compressed, [...] of great formal beauty and economy of phrase' (*UG* 2). Against the sprawling length of a *Recherche* or a *Ulysses*, Connolly hails the pithy concision of Pascal's *Pensées*, which he sees as 'modern not merely in thought, but in expression' (*UG* 16). And if aphorisms truly are an expression of modernity, rather than modernity's obsolete precursor, then they offer themselves up as worthy substitutes for that most modern of forms, the novel—which, Connolly foretells, 'will end by seeming as grotesque to us as the portrait of an alderman to a Tibetan Lama' (*UG* 59). Predictably enough, Connolly's final pronouncement on the matter is itself couched in the shape of an aphorism on aphorisms:

> [t]hose who are consumed with curiosity about other people but who do not love them should write maxims, for no one can become a novelist who does not love his fellow-men. (*UG* 59)

For all his droll scorn, however, the twined discourses of late modernist exhaustion and novelistic depletion belie, rather, what might be better read as self-serving spiel. Connolly, after all, was acutely aware of his own faults as a novelist manqué, especially following the publication of his only novel, *The Rock Pool*, in 1936. Printed in Paris after being roundly rejected at home, the novel portrays a hedonistic colony of expatriate British artists on the French Riviera—a theme which, Connolly later regretted, proved infallibly dated. Thus,

despite congratulatory plaudits from Desmond MacCarthy and Henry Miller, *The Rock Pool* only ended up providing 'distressing evidence that Connolly was not a natural novelist'.[253] Connolly knew this, and in the opening salvos of *The Unquiet Grave* he bemoans an 'obstruction which is blocking the flow from the well', and which the book itself is entrusted with locating (*UG* 3). This is another sense, then, of *The Unquiet Grave* as an act of literary compensation, not only for the lack of culinary delicacies and enforced stasis, but also—and perhaps even more importantly—for the frustrations of creative barrenness. Connolly's remedy, this time, is obviously not a mock-drug, but a literary form that turns the impossibility of writing into the very *material* of writing, allowing him to compose 'out of rather than against inertia'.[254]

Palinurus's will-to-quit, in short, is at once cure and antidote, frustrating literary genius at the same time as it pricks it into being. In this sense, *The Unquiet Grave* does something akin to what Borges had also been doing, the same year, in *Ficciones* (1944), where he half-jestingly suggests that, since writing 'vast books' is 'a laborious and impoverishing extravagance', and since he himself is 'more inept, more indolent', it is much better 'to pretend that these books already exist, and then to offer a résumé, a commentary', that is to say, 'to write notes' on them.[255] But the line of writers fashioning notes to non-existent masterpieces is, indeed, a long one. Another mid-century analogue to Connolly is the Italian critic and translator Roberto Bazlen (it was he who first translated Freud and introduced Musil to the Italian public), whose eloquently titled *Notes Without a Text* (published posthumously in 1970) contains the rough, unfinished draft of a novel on a sea captain shipwrecked at sea, an anti-mythical version of the *Odyssey* not unlike Connolly's Palinurus or Joyce's 'Poldy' Bloom. And then there is, too, David Markson's *This is Not a Novel* (2001), one of the most obvious

[253] Lewis, p. 263.
[254] Dillon, p. 59.
[255] Jorge Luis Borges, *Fictions*, ed. & trans. by Anthony Kerrigan (London: John Calder, 1965), p. 13.

modern-day descendants of *The Unquiet Grave*: a non-novel cobbled up from anecdotes, aphorisms and quotations from other writers and interspersed, in turn, with annotations from the 'Writer' who has carefully assembled them. Roland Barthes, in the preface to his *Critical Essays* (1964), goes so far as to contend that:

> the critic is the man who is going to write and who, like the Proustian narrator, satisfies this expectation with a supplementary work, who creates himself by seeking himself and whose function is to accomplish his project of writing even while eluding it. The critic is a writer, but a writer postponed.[256]

Barthes's definition of the critic rehearses, in turn, Lukács's much earlier image of the essayist as 'a Schopenhauer who writes his *Parerga* while waiting for the arrival of his own (or another's) *The World as Will and Idea*, he is a John the Baptist who goes out to preach in the wilderness about another who is still to come'.[257] The essayist is, in sum, 'the pure type of the precursor', though one whose longing for form is, adds Lukács, 'a fact of the soul with a value and existence of its own', rather than a mere 'waiting for fulfilment'—a verdict which, had he been aware of it, would have doubtless allayed Connolly's wounded vanity.[258]

Like Barthes's critic, then, Connolly complains about his failure to write even as he turns this complaint into the very act of writing. This logic of diversion—both as deferral and recreation—is one that Brian Dillon comes close to instating at the heart of the essay genre as a whole, especially when he wonders whether essays might not just be that: 'an excuse for never being able to commit to a lifelong, career-long, project' (perhaps a roundabout way of referring, euphemistically, to the novel).[259] And it's certainly tempting to speculate whether Connolly didn't simply rework his pre-existing notebooks into a provisional placeholder, a

[256] Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. by Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. xxi.
[257] Lukács, p. 32.
[258] Lukács, p. 32.
[259] Dillon, pp. 34–35.

surrogate for the middle-age masterpiece that never came to be. Evelyn Waugh certainly thought so: the book, he wrote in his review, was but 'the raw material of literature', made up of 'heterogeneous and often contradictory' jottings that have been 'prematurely put in the killing-bottle and pinned on the setting board'.[260] For his part, Waugh had certainly not hesitated to publish his own scattered fragments of a novel that the onset of war had consigned to incompletion, *Work Suspended* (1945), but in his mind at least the complaint stood: his was still a novel in embryo, Connolly's was not.

Waugh was only the latest in a long line of accusers taking issue with the essay's apparent informality—and with the fact, moreover, that so many essays seem to be no more than assemblages of pre-existing material, be it the author's own or someone else's. Even Montaigne conceded that 'some may say that about me, asserting that I have merely gathered here a big bunch of other men's flowers, having furnished nothing of my own but the string to hold them together'.[261] And, sure enough, Ben Jonson accused him of doing precisely that, in one of the earliest signs of such literary distrust:

> [s]uch are all the essayists, even their master, Montaigne. These in all they write, confess still what books they have read last—and therein their own folly—so much, that they bring it to the stake raw and undigested.[262]

The trope of rawness, or incomplete digestion, almost always recurs when it comes to defining (or defiling) the essay, from as early as 1600, when Sir William Cornwallis (by some accounts Montaigne's first British imitator) used it to designate 'a manner of writing well befitting undigested motions', down to Waugh's own review three centuries later.[263] But

[260] Waugh, 'A Pilot all at Sea', p. 225.
[261] Montaigne, p. 1196.
[262] Ben Jonson, 'Explorata, or Discoveries', in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. by David Bevington et al., 7 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), VII, pp. 524–25.
[263] Cornwallis, p. 190.

as with most essays, the deceptively unpolished coarseness of *The Unquiet Grave* was more deliberate than Waugh could have suspected, or at least allowed. Indeed, far from being evidence of slovenly haste, Connolly's patchwork sampling purposefully revives a certain mode of writing as reading, and of reading as gathering, that was typical of early modern humanism. Scott Black captures this aesthetic of assemblage when he states that, at its inception between the sixteenth and seventeenth century,

> "essay" was the name for a tool of reading that enabled a certain competency and skill—a kind of commonplace book where the work of selection and collection that is key to humanist reading is practiced and undertaken.[264]

Early modern essayists, then, turned their assorted material—quotations, aphorisms, anecdotes, personal reflections—into fodder for writing, and writing became, in turn, less a matter of creating *ex novo* than of cataloguing, compiling, assembling. One need only think, as an example, of Erasmus's *Adagia*: an anthology corralling more than four thousand classical sayings, each annotated with a short essay by Erasmus himself.

But the early modern classic that *The Unquiet Grave* most closely resembles, despite never once mentioning it, is Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. One is a sprawling study of melancholy, the other a pithy inquiry on melancholy's modern-day equivalent, 'Angst' (*UG* 22). One approaches its morbid subject through low comedy and irony, the other via self-deprecating wit. One is written under the pseudonymous persona of Democritus Junior, the other by that of Palinurus. One 'write[s] of melancholy by being busy to avoid melancholy', the other turns a failure to write into the very act of writing.[265] One has 'laboriously collected this cento out of diverse writers', just as 'a good housewife out of

[264] Scott Black, *Of Essays and Reading in Early Modern Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 21.
[265] Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. by Holbrook Jackson (New York: NYRB, 2001), p. 20.

divers fleeces weaves one piece of cloth'; the other spins his yarn by resolving to quote 'as many passages as he could from the French'.[266] And if Connolly's book was accused of being raw, Burton turned rawness into method, claiming that 'which nature does with the aliment of our bodies incorporate, digest, assimilate, I do *concoquere quod hausi*, dispose of what I take'.[267] The result, as Burton concedes, is a '*Macaronicon*', a macaronic compendium that scuttles from one language to another, and that leaps from quotation to quotation.[268]

Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, in a word, brings to its paroxysmal apogee the eccentric art of making literature out of quotations—of turning mere anthologies into literary artefacts in their own right. *The Unquiet Grave* was precisely one such anthology, compiling various samples from Connolly's wartime reading before larding them, in turn, with his own annotations and reflections. And while it didn't swell over the years with thousands of additional pages—as we will see shortly, war demanded brevity—it still displayed that typically early modern gluttony that we find in such gargantuan works as Erasmus's *Adagia*, Montaigne's *Essais*, or Burton's *Anatomy*. So much so, in fact, that Connolly himself was described as 'an editor's and typesetter's nightmare', obstinately revising and reshuffling his drafts until the very end.[269] In his subsequent introduction to the text, Connolly gives us a hint of his editing mania when he states that:

> *The Unquiet Grave* by now consisted of thirty long galley-proofs scissored into little pieces like a string of clown's black sausages, covered with insertions and deletions and spread out on the floor to be arranged and rearranged into a mosaic. The coils of print seemed to move with a life of their own.[270]

[266] Burton, p. 24; Connolly, 'Introduction', p. xii.
[267] Burton, p. 25.
[268] Burton, p. 25.
[269] Lewis, p. 383.
[270] Connolly, 'Introduction', p. xiii.

And for all his claims that 'every paragraph became fitted into an inevitable position [...] from which it could not be moved', *The Unquiet Grave* ends up recalling, rather, the rough draft of a book-to-come, always open to revision.[271] Thus, while Connolly may have found that in his notebooks 'an art-form slumbered', ready to be brought into aesthetic expression, one might add that, in *The Unquiet Grave*, this art-form kept on slumbering. For just as Connolly writes out of the impossibility of writing, *The Unquiet Grave* makes its search of form into a form in itself—what Gary Saul Morson, one of the foremost theorists of the quotation as genre, calls, in yet another culinary metaphor, 'a meal of residues: a banquet of crumbs'.[272]

There is, in fact, more than one way in which Connolly's pensées emulate Pascal's *Pensées*: not only, that is, as self-standing morsels of wit, but also, to cite Morson, as part of 'a notebook for an unwritten book we may try to guess at'.[273] And it's from Pascal himself that Morson borrows the label by which, in his study of short genres, he designates this slippery mode of writing: the 'thought', which unlike other, more straightforwardly short genres, only permits definition via such oxymorons as 'digressive brevity'.[274] For despite clearly belonging to the family of short genres, thoughts nonetheless end up resembling a longer, unfinished one. Thoughts tarry on the threshold between brevity and expansiveness; just like essays, they typify 'a short genre in a free-running style'.[275] For this very reason, Morson adds, it is hard 'to say just where the thought as a genre ends and the essay begins. Many resemble the germ, or else the residue, of an essay'.[276] Predictably enough, then, thoughts tend to sow themselves into literary forms, like the diary or commonplace book, that are

[271] Connolly, 'Introduction', p. xii.
[272] Gary Saul Morson, *The Words of Others: From Quotations to Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 239.
[273] Gary Saul Morson, *The Long and Short of It: From Aphorism to Novel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 197.
[274] Morson, *The Long and Short of It*, p. 196.
[275] Morson, *The Long and Short of It*, p. 195.
[276] Morson, *The Long and Short of It*, p. 195.

tentative and subjective, not yet ready for public inspection. And even if their private rawness is but a useful fiction contrived by their author, thoughts still elicit an almost 'voyeuristic' attention, allowing us a glimpse of the author's mind in its purportedly real-time wanderings—which had been, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the very purpose of Rebecca West's use of stylized dialogues in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*.[277] This explains, perhaps, why thoughts promise 'much the same pleasure as rough drafts of a great novel, but in considerably fewer words'.[278] And that, *pace* Waugh, is also the pleasure Connolly savours—and promises to himself—in the pages of *The Unquiet Grave*. For, taxonomical minutiae aside, *The Unquiet Grave* comes surprisingly close to a mode of writing—be it the thought or the essay—that is additive yet costive, wavering by turns between verbal copiousness and syntactical tightness. That Connolly should have so obsessively relied on the list for his fantasy of not-war, then, begins to sound even more deliberate, for what better device than the list can make abundance out of concision, profusion out of paucity?

This, though, was as much a case of making virtue out of necessity as it was of aesthetic freedom; it was circumstances as much as personal will, in other words, that made Connolly a master of copious austerity. And copious austerity was just the kind of competency one was expected to acquire as the editor of a literary magazine that began life in the stringent years of paper rationing, as Connolly well knew (due to paper rationing, after May 1940 it became illegal to start a new magazine).[279] Indeed, it was thanks to his personal contacts inside the Ministry of Information that Connolly had obtained *Horizon*'s recognition as war work, thereby securing its limited allocation of paper, which meant, in turn, that the first edition of *The Unquiet Grave* could be published under the magazine's imprint, albeit on a limited run

[277] Morson, *The Long and Short of It*, p. 196.
[278] Morson, *The Long and Short of It*, p. 196.
[279] On wartime austerity and rationing more widely, see Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption 1939-1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

of a thousand copies printed on flimsy, handmade paper.[280] And even then, Connolly found enough reason to deplore such a state of affairs, lamenting that:

> [s]ince we can never increase either the number of pages [of *Horizon*] or the circulation beyond a point which we have long since reached, the only way in which we can expand is vertically—by raising the price.[281]

The Unquiet Grave, too, confronts the demands of brevity by expanding vertically—not by raising its price, of course, but by forgoing the horizontal flow of narrative for the vertical assemblage of aphorisms. And if poetry, as Connolly joked, had become 'the only kind of writing so concentrated as to be economically justified', aphorisms must have struck him as the absolute paragon of literary economy.[282] This short form of writing, then, was not merely a literary fad, or even (dare one say it) an exotic substitute for the novel, but a survival technique fit for wartime publishing.

For all their brevity, however, Connolly's aphoristic sayings were contrived as a riposte to that other short genre so typical of wartime, and so steeped, too, in the rhetoric of survival: the oratory address. One need only remember Churchill's inaugural speech as newly-elected Prime Minister before the House of Commons, with this famous display of survival grit: 'I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat'.[283] And this is, in fact, the example given by Morson, who argues that, unlike the thought, the 'summons' (as he calls it) is single-minded and final, admitting neither doubt nor uncertainty. Its effect on the public, on the other hand, is much like that described by Bernard Darwin in his introduction to the 1941 edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*. Recalling how, during a radio broadcast earlier that year, Churchill had recited a few lines from a poem by Arthur Clough ('Say Not

[280] Shelden, pp. 48–49.
[281] Cyril Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon*, December 1941, pp. 375–77 (p. 375).
[282] Cyril Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon*, June 1940, pp. 389-393 (p. 392).
[283] Quoted in Morson, *The Words of Others*, p. 143.

the Struggle Naught Availeth'), Darwin imagines Churchill's voice sending ripples of excitement across an audience flattered, and overjoyed, by its own familiarity with the poem. 'We were if possible more sure than ever that Mr Churchill was the man for our money', writes Bernard Darwin, for

> [h]e had given his ultimate proofs by flattering our vanity. [...] This innocent vanity often helps us over the hard places in life; it gives us a warm little glow against the coldness of the world and keeps us snug and happy. It certainly does its full share in the matter of quotations.[284]

Connolly would have certainly agreed, though for quite different reasons altogether. The quotations that nourish him during the trials of wartime are neither Churchill's oratory soundbites nor, for that matter, such utilitarian slogans as 'Waste the Food and Help the Hun'. Instead, Connolly finds consolation in the maxims of La Rochefoucauld, Pascal, Sainte-Beuve, Chamfort, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Cocteau; the wise sayings of Chuang Tzu; the witticisms of de Quincey. Several passages in *The Unquiet Grave* thus consist of nothing more than an *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* in miniature, sectioned off under such thematic headings as 'Wisdom of Pascal 1623-1662' or 'Wisdom of de Quincey'. The untranslated (and uncited) excerpts are usually followed by the name of their author, though at other times they remain unattributed, as in the case of a line from Dante (*UG* 45). Most, if not all, are saturated by unmistakable bleakness and ironic discontent. So much so, in fact, that Connolly even pastes slivers of melancholic angst from Freud, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger, thereby anticipating the existentialist fad that was to sweep over the Anglophone world in the immediate postwar years.

[284] Darwin, p. v.

And on top of quoting the aphorisms of others, Connolly tries his own hand at aphoristic concision, chiselling such bon mots as:

> Imprisoned in every fat man a thin one is wildly signalling to be let out. (*UG* 44)

or

> Life is a maze in which we take the wrong turning before we have learnt to walk. (*UG* 17)

or

> There is no fury like a woman searching for a new lover. (*UG* 13)

The list could go on, of course, and many of these proved so enduringly appealing as to find their way into subsequent editions of the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*. Others, by contrast, quickly lapsed into kitsch. What all of these would-be (and actual) quotations betray, though, is an undeniable taste for compilation—an encyclopaedic penchant for collection. And while it certainly revived an early modern sensibility, exemplified by the commonplace book so central to humanist learning, this turn towards literary assemblage ostensibly had its modern-day sources, too. For as Susan Sontag reminds us, '[t]he taste for quotations (and for the juxtaposition of incongruous quotations) is a Surrealist taste'.[285]

That early modern humanism and twentieth-century surrealism could claim some degree of affinity was well evidenced by the fact that, in 1947, Salvador Dalí was commissioned to illustrate a new edition of Montaigne's *Essais*. Réginald Dalle later saw in this project a clear

[285] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977), p. 75.

sign that Dalí and Montaigne were, in some way, kindred spirits.[286] Connolly himself, despite having no affiliation with surrealism, made the same point forty years earlier, in *The Unquiet Grave*. 'Romantic surrealism and classical humanism, however antagonistic, are akin', Connolly argues, '[…] and the artist of today must contrive from them a synthesis' (*UG* 72). As to the exact nature of this supposed kinship, Connolly remains rather oblique, claiming that, for all their differences, both movements are 'too homesick and too anti-industrial for the times' (*UG* 73). If they can be said to belong to the same family at all, then, it's only because Connolly pits them against the levelling uniformity of 'political mass-movements' (*UG* 73), with their aberrant equivalent in the arts: socialist realism. But it would be more accurate to suggest, perhaps, that to the extent that any kinship can be registered between, say, Dalí and Montaigne, it clusters around what Susan Sontag aptly calls a taste for quotation, or for the fragmentary assemblage of the same.

That the Second World War should have set the stage for such an efflorescence of citational frenzy is, after all, hardly surprising, since, to quote Sontag once again, 'in a world that is well on its way to becoming one vast quarry, the collector becomes someone engaged in a pious work of salvage'.[287] It is not only, however, that the act of collection is a gesture of preservation, as I've noted at the beginning of this chapter; as a token of surrealist temper, this became as much a medium for capturing the present as a way of salvaging the known. And the present which this fragmentary aesthetic sought to capture was one that had long been dreaded by the surrealisms of the 1930s, made up of bombed cityscapes, mauled bodies, and ruined buildings. As Leo Mellor points out, the surrealist fragment—so hauntingly proleptic in the period between the wars—effectively became, by the mid-forties, a powerful

[286] On Dalì's illustrated edition, and on the affinities between essayism and surrealism, see Christy Wampole, 'Dalì's Montaigne: Essay Hybrids and Surrealist Practice', in *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present*, ed. by Kathryn Murphy and Thomas Karshan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 323–47.
[287] Sontag, p. 75.

‘explanatory tool in unprecedented situations, enabling reportage when more conventional tropes appeared debased or inadequate’.[288] This Connolly knew, and the *mise en page* of his book, with its piecemeal collage of scattered quotations, is certainly wrought from the same wartime *zeitgeist* that bestowed renewed relevance on surrealist aesthetics (of which, as we will see in the coming chapter, Connolly was a keen critic). Which makes it rather apt<, then, that Connolly’s final excursus into war, in the closing pages of *The Unquiet Grave*, should have been prompted by an account of the first screening, in Paris, of Salvador Dalì’s and Luis Buñuel’s surrealist film, *Un Chien andalou* (1929). With verbatim transcriptions from the film’s script, this was, of course, one of the book’s final acts of quotation.

‘Why do we like war?’

Towards the end of *The Unquiet Grave*, Connolly inserts the first (and only) list that confronts what he calls, by way of a title, the ‘[r]ealities of our time’:

> History constructed out of global blocs.
> The Decline of Europe.
> Anglo-American rivalry and imperialism.
> Russian Managerial imperialism.
> Chinese or Japanese imperialism.
> English National Suburbanism.
> The Great American Vacuum.
> Massacres and atrocities, poverties, famines. (*UG* 75)

This geopolitical report—an obviously ironic rejoinder to Connolly’s earlier, and much more earnest, ‘peace-aims’ wish list—comes on the heels of a confession of guilt which Connolly entitles ‘[c]owardice in living’ (*UG* 75). Here, too, Connolly compiles a list, this time on the several ways of evading the present:

[288] Mellor, p. 93.

> through comfort, through society, through acquisitiveness, through the book-bed-bath defence system, above all through the past, the flight to the romantic womb of history, into primitive myth-making […] in surrealism, magic, primitive religions, or eighteenth-century wonderlands […] to Mediterranean womb-pockets and dream-islands, into dead controversies and ancient bric-à-brac. (*UG* 74)

So far, of course, this reads like a fairly concise précis of *The Unquiet Grave* itself, and as such it was probably intended by Connolly, who used it to quickly mount an apologetic defence (as essays do) on behalf of his book. Having thus listed the dismal realities of his time, Connolly stages a mock trial in which a straw-man critic—mouthpiece for collectivist society, otherwise dubbed as 'Group Man'—levels at him the same charges that he (and *Horizon*) routinely faced at the hands of more public-spirited critics of the time.[289] One might think, for instance, of Orwell's jeer that 'a novelist who simply disregards the major public events of the moment is generally either a footler or a plain idiot'.[290] And it's someone like his old schoolfriend Orwell that Connolly might have had in mind when he sketched the satirical vignette which follows his geopolitical dispatch. 'Well, which side are you on?', Connolly parrots, 'Come clean, moody Palinurus, no synthesis this time and no Magic Circle either! […] or do you prefer to daydream in the lavatory, *petit coin sombre* of the Bourgeois Formalist, while a new world is being born? (*UG* 75).

Connolly's lengthy apologia is bookended, predictably enough, by two literary quotations, one by T. S. Eliot ('In my beginning is my end', *UG* 76) and another by Flaubert ('A mesure que l'humanité se perfectionne, l'homme se degrade', *UG* 77). Both, of course, work as a riposte to a previous slogan uttered by Connolly's fictional critic—'Total Everybody

[289] See, for example, Evelyn Waugh's later satirical treatment of Connolly and *Horizon* in his *Sword of Honour* trilogy (1952-1961), where Connolly becomes Everard Spruce, editor of *Survival*, and *The Unquiet Grave* is referenced in the little book of pensées written by Corporal-Major Ludovic and enthusiastically sponsored (of course) by Spruce himself.

[290] Orwell, 'Inside the Whale', p. 81. One should note that the thrust of Orwell's argument in this essay runs entirely counter to this initial jibe at private unconcern, for Orwell ends up praising those works from the Great War written precisely by 'people who simply turned their backs and tried not to notice that the war was happening' (p. 111). Tellingly, in his review of *The Unquiet Grave* Orwell implicitly criticizes Connolly for doing much the same, although in the context of another war.

Always'—which indexes the kind of national holism to which Connolly was so averse (*UG* 75). Nestled in-between these two aphoristic slivers is the defiant screed of a middle-aged aesthete who has 'nothing to say to the masses or to the machines, […] to Nations or Parties', and whose role is more akin to that of a cemetery caretaker. For, Connolly insists, 'I am but a link in the chain of individual heretics and failures, […] I tend the graves—*sapientum templa serena*—of […] Montaigne and Lao-Tsu' (*UG* 76). And so, to his critic's injunction, Connolly responds by rejecting 'participation in the communal life of an organized group' in favour of what he calls, instead, 'communion with the Bourgeois formalism of Nature' (*UG* 77). So much, at least, Connolly had already made plain in his many editorials for *Horizon*—one need only recall his proud admission of guilt on such charges as 'ivory-towerism'. And yet, for all his escapist recalcitrance, Connolly ends *The Unquiet Grave* by embarking precisely on the kind of inquiry which he had long laboured to avoid—a reckoning which, it appears, he could forestall but not forgo. Thus, asks Connolly, '[w]hy do we like war?' (*UG* 91).

Unsurprisingly, Connolly's answer sketches a psychopathology of wartime that sounds more like philosophical hodgepodge than serious-minded inquiry: a quote by Aristotle is framed by another from George Santayana's *Life of Reason* (1904); extensive samples from Henry Devine's *Recent Advances in Psychiatry* (1929) are pasted next to the obligatory extract from Freud; a dictum by Spinoza is tossed in with poetic lines from Baudelaire and Apollinaire. Unsurprising, too, is the motif that threads Connolly's patchwork analysis (the same, after all, that patterns the rest of his book), namely happiness. For Connolly begins with a dilemma: if happiness, as thinkers from Aristotle to Santayana have proved time and again, is the supreme good, then why do we feel so beguiled by its opposite? Why, in other words, is the world around him forfeiting 'its chances of being happy and […] regressing to chaos' (*UG* 89)? For an answer Connolly turns to a rather amateurish version psychoanalysis, so far as

we, Connolly pronounces, ‘are in fact within sight of achieving a world neurosis’ (*UG* 92). In Connolly’s reading, war and violence simply re-enact certain patterns of childhood unhappiness already described by Freud, so that ‘what illness performs for the individual, war accomplishes for the masses’ (*UG* 90). Thus, just as certain lovers always seek partners who will spurn them, ‘we blindly enjoy destruction and can think of nothing better’ because, Connolly posits, we have been unhappy children, scarred by some ill-defined trauma of separation (*UG* 90). Connolly declined to toil with the labours of further exposition, concluding with the quip that if ‘we had all enjoyed happy childhoods with happy parents, then prisons, barracks and asylums would be empty’ (*UG* 91). So too, it seems, would battlefields.

Connolly, then, was certainly no psychoanalyst, and his brief dalliance with wartime psychopathology does no more than simply regurgitate the popularized lessons of Freud (‘in our culture Eros and the Death-wish fight it out’, ‘in our civilization there is a Superego which makes us all feel guilty’, *UG* 91). Even the antidote that he prescribes sounds at times like a platitude, for Connolly advocates ‘a return to the idea of happiness as the highest good’, located not in action but ‘in the flowering of the spirit’ (*UG* 92). And it’s only by accepting life, and coming into harmony with the universe, that we can reach a state of ‘bio-psychic equilibrium’ (*UG* 92). ‘This’, concludes Connolly, ‘is the farewell autumn precept with which Palinurus takes leave of his fast-fading nightmare’ (*UG* 93). Connolly’s brief lecture on violence thus ends in mid-war, with the onset of another autumn, and an elegiac plea to the river Siagne to ‘receive Palinurus’, who fulfils his mythical journey by coming to rest on the coast by La Napoule, west of Cannes, forgotten ‘like an Andalusian dog’ (*UG* 93).

If Connolly’s thoughts on psychoanalysis and war verge on the ersatz—Evelyn Waugh impatiently dismisses them as ‘painful psychological jargon’—the literary ruse he uses to

broach this subject is, by contrast, much more ingenious.[291] For Connolly frames his excursus into war by means of an anecdote from his time in Paris: the première, in 1929, of Salvador Dalì's and Luis Buñuel's surrealist film *Un Chien andalou*. True to form, Connolly sets the stage for this vignette with a scenic list, as if it were indeed the beginning of a screenplay:

> Studio Vingt-Huit—high up a winding street of Montmartre, in the full blasphemy of a freezing Sunday; taxis arriving, friends greeting each other, an excitable afternoon audience of uncowed women and intelligent men. In the hall stands a surrealist book-stall, behind it a bar where a gramophone plays 'Ombres Blanches' and disturbing sardanas, while beyond is a small modern theatre. The lights are lowered and the film begins: 'Prologue'. (*UG* 88)

The rest of this spectatorial account is given over to several quotations from the film's scenario, originally published in the twelfth issue of *La révolution surréaliste*. At other points, Connolly interrupts the flow of his quotations to paraphrase instead, in what effectively amounts to a cinematic ekphrasis: the verbal description, that is, of a moving (rather than a still) picture. Thus, after transcribing the script directions for the famous scene of the woman's eye sliced open by a razor, Connolly records the audience's gasp, followed by his commentary on the appearance on screen of Pierre Batcheff. Finally, as the film 'hurries to its end', Connolly reports the sudden bedlam, the 'tremendous feeling of excitement and liberation' triggered in the theatre room:

> The picture was received with shouts and boos, and when a pale young man tried to make a speech, hats and sticks were flung at the screen. In one corner a woman was chanting 'Salopes, salopes, salopes!' and soon the audience began to join in. With the impression of having witnessed some infinitely ancient horror, Saturn swallowing his sons, we made our way out into the cold of February 1929, that unique and dazzling cold. (*UG* 89)

[291] *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh*, p. 608.

Predictably, Connolly-the-psychoanalyst takes this violent outburst of revulsion as a sure sign that the 'Id had spoken', and that, 'through the obsolete medium of the silent film', the audience had been confronted with 'the fires of despair and frenzy which were smouldering beneath the complacent post-war world' (*UG* 88). The film was, in the last analysis, about a 'contemptuous private world of jealousy and lust' (*UG* 88), just as *The Unquiet Grave* was, for its part, a prolonged fantasy on pleasure, on 'the concept of life as an arrogant private dream shared by two' (*UG* 84). Dalì and Buñuel would have likely approved of Connolly's appraisal, especially considering Dalì's own definition of the film as a testament to 'the overwhelming importance of desire'[292]. And yet, a closer look at Connolly's cinematic account uncovers a number of inconsistencies that make it dubious, if not specious.

To begin, the film didn't premiere at Studio 28, but at Studio des Ursulines, located on the other side of the Seine, in the Latin Quarter; the date of its première, moreover, was the 6th of June 1929, and not, as Connolly recalls, February of that same year, which was when Dalì and Buñuel first composed the film's script. The film *did* run at Studio 28 for about eight months, but only after the cinema's manager, Jean Mauclaire, had secured its rights. And finally, none of the riotous scenes recorded by Connolly actually disrupted the film's première. On the contrary: hiding behind the screen, with stones in his pockets ready to be flung at the audience 'in case of disaster', Buñuel was surprised (and disappointed) by the audience's enthusiastic reception.[293] Such was his dismay, in fact, that in his preface to the film's screenplay Buñuel went on to attack the 'imbecilic crowd that has found *beautiful* or *poetic* that which, at heart, is nothing but a desperate, impassioned call for murder'.[294]

[292] Dalì, quoted in Francisco Aranda, *Luis Buñuel: A Critical Biography*, trans. by David Robinson (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976), p. 64.
[293] Luis Buñuel, *My Last Sigh*, trans. by Abigail Israel (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), p. 106.
[294] Luis Buñuel, 'Preface: *Un Chien Andalou*', in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures*, ed. by Scott MacKenzie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), p. 61.

Thus, to come back to Connolly: did he even attend the film's première, or did he view one of the later screenings held in Studio 28? Could he be confusing the chaotic scenes that greeted Buñuel's following film, *L'Age d'Or*, with the polite reception of *Un Chien andalou*? The whole matter remains somewhat moot, for while Connolly was indeed in Paris throughout the month of February 1929, he would miss the June première of the film by five days, only staying in the city for a week before sailing back to England.[295] What's certain, however, is that Connolly had February 1929 clearly in mind when he wrote *The Unquiet Grave*, not least because he concluded his cinematic anecdote by footnoting this precise month with a quotation from one Eugenio Montes, taken from Dalì's autobiography: 'a date in the history of the Cinema, a date marked in blood' (*UG* 80, n1). What Connolly unwittingly (or deliberately?) overlooked, though, is that in his review of the film, Eugenio Montes had made his fateful pronouncement not in reference to the 'unique and dazzling cold' of February 1929, as Connolly was to write, but to the film's actual première a few months later, in early June.[296]

The Unquiet Grave ends, then, on a mistake—a misreading, a misdating; in a word, a misquotation. The mishap, be it oversight or gambit, was surely a felicitous one, for how apt could it be that Connolly's apparatus of quotations (and one might recall here Bernard Darwin's gloss on anthologies as essentially peaceful works) should misfire right before the book's final turn to war? Put differently: just as Palinurus misdates the première of *Un Chien andalou*—a surrealist film on lust and heartbreak foretelling, by Connolly's account, the catastrophe ahead—so too, I suspect, does Connolly misdate his own fantasy of peacetime pleasure. I began this chapter by showing how Connolly conceived *The Unquiet Grave* as a snapshot of interwar bliss, but it would be more accurate to say now that the book's form—so

[295] *Cyril Connolly: Journal and Memoir*, ed. by David Pryce-Jones (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1984), pp. 209, 221.
[296] See Eugenio Montes, 'Un Chien Andalou', *La Gaceta Literaria*, 15 June 1929, p. 1.

unapologetically exuberant and ironically secondary—made it, however, into a record of wartime. Connolly himself eventually had to concede as much when, years later, he confessed that though he had 'tried to extricate himself from the war and to escape from his time and place into the bright empyrean of European thought, he could not long remain above the clouds'.[297] His earnest (if clumsy) attempt at wartime psychopathology, right at the end of his book, might have certainly been just one such way of finally confronting the disaster unfolding all around him.

Before I turn to Alberto Savinio, who saw accidental misprints and chance misquotations as one of the surest signs of a literary muse at work, I want to conclude by going back to Evelyn Waugh, who had read *The Unquiet Grave* while stationed in Dubrovnik, on the Yugoslav coast, in January 1945. Years later, Waugh's annotated copy of the book ended up under a glass case at an exhibition of manuscripts and first editions organized, in May 1971, by the University of Texas at Austin ('One Hundred Key Books'). After noticing that Waugh had scribbled several comments on the book's margins, Connolly, who had been invited to inaugurate the event, couldn't refrain from wanting to take a closer look. The discovery was hardly flattering. The book's author was, wrote Waugh, a 'drivelling woman novelist', a 'hack highbrow' who 'read Freud while getting a third in Greats', all of it prefaced, moreover, by a question jotted across the title page: 'Why should I be interested in this book?'.[298] Stung by the pain of posthumous reproval, Connolly must have nonetheless pondered the same question when he had insisted, with typical modesty, that *The Unquiet Grave* be included in the exhibition. 'Some', he assured Austin's organizers, 'find the U.G. a mere common-place book, others see in it, with its three movements and epilogue, a "chasse spirituelle" [a spiritual hunt], a beautifully constructed and harmonious whole'.[299] Half a

[297] Connolly, 'Introduction', p. xi.
[298] Lewis, p. 555.
[299] Lewis, p. 556.

century later, it seems, Connolly still clung to his earlier belief that the book's merits primarily lay in its late modernist reworking of myth. But *The Unquiet Grave* came closer, I believe, to what Waugh himself later claimed on behalf of *Brideshead Revisited*, namely that it was 'a souvenir of the Second War rather than of the twenties or of the thirties, with which it ostensibly dealt'.[300] I would like to imagine that Connolly, too, would have been content with the idea of *The Unquiet Grave* as a souvenir. For this was certainly no masterpiece as he envisioned it—after all, he didn't officially include it in the exhibition's catalogue of one hundred key masterpieces. And yet, open under its glass case, one found a poignant statement on what it means to write in a minor key against the brass and percussion of total war. A cheap memento, if you will, or a chip from the rubble.

[300] Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*, p. 7.

CHAPTER THREE

A Dilettante at War: Alberto Savinio's Encyclopaedic Forms

> *ENCYCLOPEDIA.* Laugh at it pityingly, as being a baroque enterprise, and even thunder against it.
> —Gustave Flaubert, *Le dictionnaire des idées reçues* (1913)

In 1946, with travel to the Continent possible once again, Bernard Wall set out to Italy to find out who had been writing what. The dispatch that eventually reached *Horizon*'s offices in London spoke of a difficulty that must have felt all too familiar to the magazine's editor, Cyril Connolly:

> The mania for serious English writing, not mere propaganda, was almost grotesque. The few books one could get had queues of borrowers. One was questioned to exhaustion about Mr. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, about Joyce, about Virginia Woolf, about who was writing what.[301]

But just as familiar, at least to faithfully Francophile Connolly, must have felt the 'official Anglo-Saxon indifference to ideas' with which, Bernard Wall laments, British representatives in Rome shrugged off demands for Anglophone modernism's latest.[302] It had scarcely been two years, in fact, since Connolly himself had sailed across the Channel to probe the state of French letters, only to be reminded of just how 'utterly remote' London still felt from a 'world of ideas' like Paris.[303] One can easily imagine, then, the kind of reception stirred in *Horizon*'s offices by the news that a handful of Frenchmen in Rome did more to circulate books than 'the vast bureaucracies of Americans and Englishmen'.[304] After all, as we have seen in the previous chapter, it was with a similar sense of zealous, lone daring that Connolly

[301] Bernard Wall, 'Some Contemporary Italian Writers', *Horizon*, November 1946, pp. 315–25 (p. 316).
[302] Wall, p. 316.
[303] Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon*, May 1945, p. 305.
[304] Wall, p. 316.

had spent the war years fashioning *Horizon*'s cosmopolitan mission in an increasingly isolated Britain. And it was by means of such sorties into the Continent as Connolly's visit to Paris, or Bernard Wall's trip to postwar Italy, that *Horizon*'s audiences often found out who, indeed, had been writing what abroad.

Bernard Wall's essay, 'Some Contemporary Italian Writers', was published in November 1946 in an issue partly dedicated to recent developments in Italian letters, thereby continuing a trend inaugurated with *Horizon*'s French number of May 1945.[305] Like Connolly's earlier editorial from liberated Paris, Wall's survey served to accustom readers at home with the literary landscape of a fledgling democracy that had undergone, in the span of a few years, the shocks of totalitarian rule and regime collapse, Nazi occupation and civil war. 'Things stored up for twenty years', writes Wall, 'could now be said'.[306] The picture that Wall paints, then, is one of a war-torn country at once culturally sophisticated and materially impoverished. For, writes Wall, the problems plaguing Italy 'are in many ways the traditional problems: how to find enough to eat, and how to survive foreign invasions'.[307] Which was, of course, familiar enough news to a country that had spent the preceding years warding off Hitler's threats of invasion, and which now found itself plunged into postwar austerity. But despite all that, continues Wall, the Italian literary public was everything that the British one, sapped as it had been by total war and 'organized mass Philistinism', was reputedly not: more intellectual, more sophisticated, more polished.[308] And one writer in particular Bernard Wall

[305] The Italian issue was followed, two months later, by an essay on Germany's literary situation. See Heinrich Fischer, 'German Writers of Today', *Horizon*, January 1947, pp. 3–14. The October 1947 issue was dedicated, on the other hand, to literature and the visual arts from the United States. There was also a special Swiss number (February 1946) and an Irish one (January 1942).
[306] Wall, p. 315.
[307] Wall, p. 325.
[308] Wall, p. 325. Some years earlier, Connolly had also written that, though 'we are accustomed to the idea that there is no art worth the name in Germany and Italy', Italy still 'possesses a high standard of taste'. See Cyril Connolly, 'Comment', *Horizon*, April 1940, pp. 229–37 (p. 229).

singles out as embodying all the subtlety that Connolly had spent the war years craving, and in the absence of which he had written *The Unquiet Grave*.

It has become by now something of an obligatory cliché to introduce him by way of family ties, and that is what Bernard Wall does in his own essay. For Alberto Savinio (née Andrea de Chirico) was the younger—and lesser known—brother of Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico, whose artworks ('masterpieces appropriate to our time', Connolly called them in *The Unquiet Grave*, *UG* 70) Connolly admired to the point of entitling his last collection of essays, *The Evening Colonnade* (1973), after one de Chirico painting seen just before the war, in the late thirties. What's more, Connolly even had one of de Chirico's essays on art translated and then published in the pages of *Horizon*.[309] 'Chirico's early work', Connolly wrote in an essay on Surrealism in 1952,

> presents a closed world of the imagination, already perfect and passing away, a dream of urban apprehension, a haunted inner city of squares and statues, of freight trains and grief-stricken colonnades in the last second before the explosion.[310]

That de Chirico's unnervingly empty piazzas should have captured Connolly's attention in the years just before the war is, after all, not so accidental, given what we have come to know as the interwar period's sense of anticipatory dread. Nor, for that matter, is the fact that Connolly should have remembered de Chirico's suspended cityscapes in the early fifties, on the dawn of another, perhaps even more paranoid age of mass, proleptic dread. But Connolly's homage to de Chirico was, above all, one of the last self-absolving bids made by a writer who had spent much of his career defending his reputed lapse from literary promise. Indeed, as Connolly wonders in the preface to *The Evening Colonnade*, published in 1973, only one year

[309] Giorgio de Chirico, 'Sensitiveness', trans. by Beryl Eeman, *Horizon*, July 1944, pp. 65–68.
[310] Cyril Connolly, 'Farewell to Surrealism', in *The Selected Essays of Cyril Connolly*, ed. by Peter Quennell (New York: Persea Books, 1984), pp. 192–205 (p. 199).

before his death, is not his own work, like that of de Chirico's, 'compact of columns, in this case all that's left standing from some five hundred of them?'.[311] Put differently, is not his own oeuvre a mere patchwork of fragments stubbornly refusing to coalesce into anything like a masterpiece, that most obsessive of Connolly's dreams? If so, de Chirico's imploding assemblages certainly offered the last in a series of motifs toward a very personal mythology of failure, just as Virgil's Palinurus had done three decades earlier in *The Unquiet Grave*.

And yet, for all his professed esteem, I suspect that Connolly might have found an even greater affinity with de Chirico's brother, Alberto Savinio, and not solely for the fact that the latter typified the kind of 'pure intellectual' that, by Bernard Wall's account, Connolly so much revered.[312] For Savinio, too, was a lover—and an adept—of short form; an essaying devotee to the witty turn of phrase; and a fellow gourmand, we might add, with a palate for the additive pleasures of authorial compilation. Connolly's personal library did number two books by Savinio that were, like *The Unquiet Grave*, disenchanted reworkings of classical myth, and which Connolly possibly picked at one point or another during his many postwar book hauls in Paris.[313] But it was during the Second World War that, unbeknownst to one another, they each weathered the catastrophe—Connolly in blitzed London, Savinio in occupied Rome—by compiling what would be their most bizarre, exuberant work: a personal anthology. If Connolly, however, never tired of shoehorning *The Unquiet Grave* into something other than 'merely an anthology', Savinio, for his part, acknowledged the formal impulse behind his assemblage by going so far as baptising it after that most ambitious of all catalogues: *Nuova enciclopedia* (1977).[314] Left unfinished during Savinio's lifetime, and

[311] Cyril Connolly, *The Evening Colonnade* (New York: Harcourt, 1973), p. xvii.
[312] Wall, p. 321. For an exhaustive overview of the de Chirico brothers, see Keala Jane Jewell, *The Art of Enigma: The De Chirico Brothers and the Politics of Modernism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).
[313] The two titles, now held at the University of Tulsa's McFarlin Library with the rest of Connolly's personal books, are: *Introduction à une vie de Mercure* (1945) and *Le capitaine Ulysse* (1946), both published in Paris by Savinio's French publisher and longtime friend, Henri Parisot, for Éditions de la revue Fontaine.
[314] Cyril Connolly, 'Introduction', p. xi.

published posthumously only twenty-five years after its author's death, *Nuova enciclopedia* collates more than two-hundred, alphabetically ordered yet whimsically disparate entries, ranging from 'beard' and 'England' to 'Proust' and 'mosquito coil'. As we will see, the choice of this title—and its implied form—did much to restore Savinio's own legacy as an unruly polymath, one who could expatiate on his ideas of Europe, or totalitarianism, while at the same time digressing on such trifles as handshakes, or silence in married life.

I began the previous chapter by showing how, in *The Unquiet Grave*, Connolly's avowed mission to keep a culture alive by citational *fiat* belied, on the contrary, a more personal urge to compensate for lost pleasures: out of wartime into peacetime. And how, in turn, the minor modes of writing mustered to this end (commonplace book, quotation, aphorism) acted as an essayistic surrogate, too, for the novelistic pièce de résistance Connolly never wrote. The present chapter extends this line of inquiry by focusing on another wartime moment when literary form and geopolitical crisis came forcefully, if uncomfortably together—this time, under the banner of what Savinio dubbed dilettantism. For 'dilettantism', Savinio wrote in 1942, 'is my truest and deepest character'.[315] But what did Savinio mean when, in the midst of war, he called himself a dilettante, and what implications did dilettantism have for his writing?

The present chapter begins with a brief profile of Savinio as a wide-ranging and eclectic writer, for no one more than Savinio, as Bernard Wall ventured in the pages of *Horizon*, so aptly exemplified at the time 'the interweaving of Mediterranean constants and the changing forms of modern European expression'.[316] My discussion then continues by dwelling on yet another case of war-induced archive fever—not unlike the one that opened the previous

[315] Alberto Savinio, *Nuova enciclopedia* (Milano: Adelphi, 1977), p. 223. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as *NE*, followed by the page number. To date, despite a number of editions in French, German, Spanish, and Russian, there is no English translation of *Nuova enciclopedia*. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Italian are mine.
[316] Wall, p. 321.

chapter, with the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*—but exemplified now by the collective feat of a nine-volume literary encyclopaedia to which Savinio himself collaborated during the war. More specifically, this section shows how, despite his contribution to so cyclopic an enterprise, in his own compendium Savinio turned the compiler's cataloguing zeal on its head—into a mockery, that is, of encyclopaedism *tout court*. For in spite of its name, *Nuova enciclopedia* refuses the pious work of salvage so dear, and so vital, to its more official genre-mate, which hoped to shore up literary culture against the obliterating pressures of total war. Thus, against the encyclopaedia's commitment to safeguarding the known, Savinio responds with the kind of *noncommitment* (or, as Savinio has it, dilettantism) routinely associated with a certain strand in the history of the literary essay, whereby, to quote John Snyder apropos of Montaigne, the essayist 'chooses not to choose, wills not to will'.[317] The third section of this chapter unfolds this central insight in order to show how, far from only being an empty gesture of parodic irreverence, Savinio's appropriation of the essay form belied, by contrast, a more hazardous balancing act: that of a compromised critic who had written in support of Mussolini's regime and its military campaigns, and who was now in need of a literary form capable of resolving (or rather absolving) the personal as well as collective guilt of post-fascist Italy. As in Connolly's case, though for different reasons altogether, then, essayistic practice became in the hands of Savinio a means of compensation, enabling him to offset past commitments to the regime by elevating the mode's staple refusal to commit—its anti-systematic, *dilettantish* penchant—into a poetics (and a politics) in its own right. The fourth and final section of this chapter brings together these various threads—the dilettantish and the essayistic, war and Europe—in order to show how, in his entries on Europe and totalitarianism, Savinio turned this newly-found essayistic spirit into a quintessentially *European* phenomenon, investing it with an undeniably transnational urgency.

[317] Snyder, p. 150.

‘M. Savinio, qui est poète, peintre et dramaturge’

In the late 1970s, just as Connolly’s bon mots were making their way into the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Savinio was suddenly being rediscovered as a national, if unduly forgotten pioneer of Italian modernist culture. Or, more prestigiously still, as an ‘encyclopaedist à la Diderot, plunged abruptly into the twentieth century’.[318] As a 1991 review of Savinio’s translated short stories in English cautioned: just as when ‘reading Pound, a few reference books and a dictionary may be useful’ when reading Savino.[319] For Savinio was, as one hypertrophic variant or other of the artist’s resumé will attest, by turns prose writer and avant-garde painter, pianist and composer, playwright and stage designer, literary editor and film critic. Such was Savinio’s early fame as an eclectic artist that Guillaume Apollinaire, soon after welcoming young Savinio into the avant-garde coteries of pre-1914 Paris, even likened him to a manifold genius of the Tuscan Renaissance.[320] André Breton, in 1939, went further still: Savinio and his brother were, Breton pronounced, the founders of the ‘whole, as-yet-unformed modern myth’, having first given impulse to what later came to be known as Surrealism.[321] Breton, to be sure, mainly remembered Savinio as the *enfant terrible* who had shocked pre-war Paris with his riotous piano performances—after each piece, Jean Cocteau reported, the keyboard had to be cleaned of chips, splinters, and even blood. But by 1939, Savinio had long ceased to shatter piano pedals in shirtsleeves, or to compose music

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[318] Enzo Siciliano, ‘Brindisi per Alberto Savinio’, in Paola Italia, ed., *Le carte di Alberto Savinio* (Firenze: Edizioni Polistampa, 1999), no pagination.
[319] ‘Review of *Lives of the Gods*’, *Publishers Weekly*, 1991 <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/authorpage/alberto-savinio.html> [accessed 2 September 2023].
[320] ‘M. Savinio, qui est poète, peintre et dramaturge, ressemble en cela aux genies multiformes de la Renaissance toscane’. See Guillaume Apollinaire, ‘Musique nouvelle’, *Paris-Journal*, 24 May 1914, now in Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres en prose complètes*, ed. by Pierre Caizergues and Michel Décaudin, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), II, p. 726.
[321] André Breton, ed., *Anthology of Black Humor*, trans. by Mark Polizzotti (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997), p. 287. In his introduction to *Lives of the Gods*, one of the first English translations of Savinio’s short stories, the French-born American critic Edouard Roditi, then working as a director for Éditions du Saggitaire, the Parisian publishing house affiliated with the Surrealists, claims to have been the one who first suggested Savinio’s work to Breton, in 1935. See Edouard Roditi, ‘Introduction’, in Alberto Savinio, *Lives of the Gods* (Baltimore: Paj Editions, 1989).

altogether: ‘I feel so intense an antipathy for “specialization”, whatever it may be’, Savinio confessed, ‘that in my lifetime I’ve already changed profession three times, and promise to keep doing so’.[322] True to form, as we will see, Savinio then spent his war years in the hands of a literary mode long suspected, in turn, of unseriousness or dilettantism, and one for which, as Brian Dillon wrote, ‘a certain lightness is essential’, even though (or especially because) ‘lightness has had a bad reputation’.[323]

That he should have made his debut on foreign soil, and at such an early age, certainly made Savinio something of a *rara avis* on the Italian cultural scene: a writer, that is, who successfully made a name for himself beyond the Alps, mainly in France (Savinio was, incidentally, the only Italian honoured with an entry in Breton’s *Anthologie de l’humour noir*, first published in 1940).[324] But Savinio had always been, at least by force of circumstance, a cosmopolite: born in Athens, where he spent most of his childhood, Savinio cut his critical teeth on Nietzsche while studying counterpoint in Munich, just before waltzing into Apollinaire’s Paris in the years preceding the Great War. Thus, when *Nuova enciclopedia* was finally published in 1977, Savinio was primarily hailed as an erudite, uprooted urbanite with a taste, like Joyce, for multilingual wordplay; an ironically disenchanted European who had dreamed—and foretold—of a united Europe *avant la lettre*; and a fiercely independent (read antifascist) mind who once had the honour of being labelled *sfasato*, meaning out of sorts, by

[322] Alberto Savinio, *Sorte dell’Europa* (Milano: Adelphi, 1977). To name only a few of his contributions: in 1918 Savinio theorized *pittura metafisica*, the style of painting that would endear de Chirico’s early work to the Surrealists (and, as we have seen, to Connolly). In 1924, Savinio helped cofound Luigi Pirandello’s Teatro d’Arte, for which he wrote a play, *Capitano Ulisse,* staging a bourgeois, ironically demythologised version of the *Odyssey*. In 1927, moreover, Savinio’s first Parisian exhibition boasted a catalogue introduction by Jean Cocteau.
[323] Dillon, p. 22.
[324] Apart from the obvious case of Nobel laureate Luigi Pirandello, originally hailing from Sicily, the other Italian modernist who achieved recognition abroad was also, incidentally, a figure at the geographical (as well as cultural) margins: the Triestine Italo Svevo, whose novel *La coscienza di Zeno* (1923) Joyce helped popularize in Paris in the 1920s. Incidentally, Edouard Roditi, who in 1989 wrote the aforementioned introduction to the English translation of Savinio’s short stories, was also the same critic who, half a century earlier, in 1944, had introduced Svevo to wartime Britain on the pages of Connolly’s *Horizon*. See Edouard Roditi, ‘Novelist-Philosophers I - Italo Svevo’, *Horizon*, November 1944, pp. 342–58.

none other than Mussolini.[325] Savinio, for his part, dubbed Mussolini a 'colossal phallus' (*NE* 376), and once proposed 'the creation of a league whose members would pledge to remain unaware of Mussolini and never speak his name' (*NE* 220). If more people kept the pledge, he added, 'the rise of men like Mussolini and Hitler would be like a balloon trying to rise in an airless space' (*NE* 220).

Excerpts of this kind constitute by now a readymade repertoire in the service of critics keen to shore up Savinio's innate aversion to fascism.[326] Harder to come by, and thus less frequently cited, are such instances of Savinio's (subsequently abdicated) fascist sympathies as the following one, from 1934: 'it's urgent to free Italian art from the democratic spirit still polluting it'.[327] Partly because, by mid-century, Savinio had adroitly refashioned himself into the liberal European—quaintly aloof from politics—so much beloved by critics ever since. In 1977, one of the most vocal advocates during Savinio's revival, Leonardo Sciascia, justified the exclusion of Savinio's pro-regime articles from an edited volume he had personally curated by insisting, rather clumsily, that Savinio's brilliance was 'the furthest thing one could imagine from fascism'[328]. And if, at some point or another during the 1930s, Savinio had been tempted into parroting Mussolini's chauvinist delusions of imperial renewal, Sciascia adds, 'it didn't take him long to recant and repent'[329]. Savinio was certainly not the only writer of his generation to have courted fascism during the so-called 'years of consent', when a patronage network designed to contain dissent (via literary prizes, public commissions, academic institutions) ensured, as Luca Somigli notes, 'the apparently non-

[325] Savinio, *Sorte dell'Europa*, p. 76.
[326] Richard Peaver, for example, uses the latter excerpt in one of the few introductions to Savinio's work in English. See Richard Pevear, 'A Note on the Author and His Book', in Alberto Savinio, *Signor Dido*, trans. by Richard Pevear (Berkley: Counterpoint, 2014).
[327] Alberto Savinio, 'Ricerca', *La Stampa*, 24 February 1934.
[328] Leonardo Sciascia, 'Nota', in Alberto Savinio, *Torre di guardia*, ed. by Leonardo Sciascia (Palermo: Sellerio, 1977), p. xxvii.
[329] Sciascia, p. xxvii.

coercive integration of intellectuals into the Fascist system'.[330] Such lukewarm, often self-serving support made Savinio and his ilk, by Sciascia's account, 'fascist anti-fascists'.[331] And if, Sciascia says, Savinio himself never took up the mantle of militant anti-fascism, he was at least a 'non-fascist' by nature.[332]

In any event, that Savinio should have been rediscovered in the celebrated guise of a droll dilettante—dabbling in all yet worshipping none—was certainly not so accidental, given the wider sociocultural context of his revival. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, in fact, the Italian polity—lacerated as it had been by the political violence and social unrest of the preceding decade, the so-called 'years of lead'—was in the midst of a general withdrawal from politics that clearly favoured the playful detachment of someone like Savinio. The publication of *Nuova enciclopedia* further promoted the image of a free-spirited, unorthodox intellectual who had made Montaigne's lesson his own: 'we must love this and that, but marry nothing but ourselves'.[333] Or, in Savinio's own words: 'there will be no perfect freedom […] as long as life has not reached the condition of perfect meaninglessness and supreme insouciance' (*NE* 232). And so, amidst the widespread retreat (or *riflusso*, as this period was dubbed in Italian) from piazza to hearth, one critic even hazarded the claim that the crises of the first half-century so seamlessly bookended Savinio's career that one ought, almost paradoxically, *not* to read him in light of those very crises—to, in a word, historicize him. Savinio's world, Lelio La Porta insists, is 'always indifferent to history'.[334]

André Breton was somewhat of a different mind when he concluded his *Anthologie* entry on Savinio by reference to the latter's piano performances as a young man dazzling the Left

[330] Luca Somigli, 'Italy', in *The Cambridge Companion to European Modernism*, ed. by Pericles Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 75–93 (p. 89).
[331] Sciascia, p. xxvii.
[332] Sciascia, p. xxvii.
[333] Montaigne, p. 271.
[334] Lelio La Porta, 'Fascismo postfascismo e disimpegno in Alberto Savinio', *Il Ponte*, 4–5 (1987), 130–38 (p. 130).

Bank. Savinio's first signed piece—an avant-garde operetta entitled *Le chants de la mi-mort*, or *Songs of the Half-Dead*—was staged in Paris in May 1914, before being subsequently published in the final issue of Apollinaire's review, *Les Soirées de Paris*. With its blend of poetry, drama, set designs and piano scores all devised by Savinio, and with such experimental features as the noise of artillery fire and flashing beams, the operetta was a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk, thereby anticipating Savinio's enduring taste for the encyclopaedic. As to its performance, Breton notes, Savinio played with such frenzy that he howled and thrashed about, throwing punches 'in the grip of passion, of despair, of unabashed joy' until his fingers bled.[335] Then, with a sleight of hand that clinches, too satisfyingly perhaps, modernism's prophetic purchase on historical crisis, Breton ends: 'Three months later, the war broke out'.[336]

Recent scholarship has done much, and rightly so, to restore Savinio's oeuvre to its proper historical context, thereby continuing a critical trend inaugurated by Paola Italia in her landmark study of Savinio's creative output between 1915 and 1925.[337] More recently, in *Il sognatore sveglio* (2021), Lucilla Lijoi recovered a seminal decade of Savinio's career, from his return to Italy in 1933 to the fall of Mussolini's regime in 1943, that had long languished in neglect, despite (or precisely because of) Savinio's thorny connivance, during those years, with the cultural apparatus of the regime, as evidenced from his journalistic collaboration with a number of fascist newspapers at the time.[338] And yet, despite these recent contributions, little attention has been paid so far to the fact that most of the works that contributed to Savinio's posthumous revival were written—and enjoyed notoriety—during

[335] Breton, p. 289.
[336] Breton, p. 289.
[337] Paola Italia, *Il pellegrino appassionato. Savinio scrittore: 1915-1925* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2004).
[338] Lucilla Lijoi, *Il sognatore sveglio. Alberto Savinio 1933-1943* (Milano: Mimesis Edizioni, 2021). Another noteworthy contribution is Davide Bellini, *Dalla tragedia all'enciclopedia: le poetiche e la biblioteca di Savinio* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2013). Focusing on the question of genre, Bellini traces the discontinuous evolution of Savinio's literary practice, from the visionary fiction of his early career to the encyclopaedic essayism of his late years.

the most critical years of World War Two.[339] Alberto Arbasino, in his biographical homage to Savinio, is one of the few to recall the extent to which Savinio's literary fortunes had seemed bound, indeed, to the dire circumstances of armed conflict and civil war:

> In a past now all but remote—dramatic and terrible years, around '43, '44, '45, amid displacements and blackouts [...]—Alberto Savinio's major works were being published practically all together [...] in those pocket-sized editions [...] to be read by the flicker of a lamp under the blankets, on thick, grey wartime paper.[340]

Most of these works were, moreover, short and fragmentary, shunning the novel form altogether. Indeed, apart from surrealist short stories of the kind collected in *Casa «la Vita»* (1943) and *Tutta la vita* (1945), Savinio wholeheartedly gave himself to essay writing. In 1941, for example, he began compiling a personal anthology corralling various pieces already in print under such rubrics as 'Nuova enciclopedia' (in the periodical *Domus*) and 'Dizionario' (in the newspaper *La Stampa*). In 1942, Savinio published a collection of biographical essays, *Narrate, uomini, la vostra storia* (translated as *Operatic Lives* in 1988), on such varied figures as Jules Verne, Isidora Duncan, and Paracelsus. A year later, in 1944, Savinio wrote a book-length essay on flânerie in Milan, namely *Ascolto il tuo cuore, città*, which might be rendered as *Listening to your heart, city*. In 1945, Savinio's political reflections on Europe came out under the title of *Sorte dell'Europa*, meaning *Destiny of Europe*. The months Savinio spent in hiding (sometime in late 1943 Savinio allegedly appeared on an anti-fascist blacklist) were, as his son Ruggero recalls, 'the most prolific and, paradoxically, the most joyous period of his creative life'.[341] So much so that in 1944, on top of his own essays and short stories, Savinio curated a new edition of Lucian's *Dialogues and*

[339] Of the five works by Savinio that Bernard Wall recommends to *Horizon*'s readers, four were published between 1941 and 1944.
[340] Alberto Arbasino, *Ritratti italiani* (Milano: Adelphi, 2014), p. 54.
[341] Ruggero Savinio, *Ombra portata* (Milano: Anabasi, 1992), pp. 41–42.

Essays, as well as writing an introduction to Thomas More's *Utopia.* Lastly, and even more importantly, Savinio was one of the five hundred contributors to what became his editor's most gargantuan publishing venture: a nine-volume literary encyclopaedia of all the world's literatures. And it's precisely from this sprawling enterprise, painstakingly compiled during the war, that the rest of this chapter will now take its cue.

Noah's Ark

In August 1943, less than a month after Mussolini's arrest and the collapse of his regime, British bombers carried out several air-raid campaigns to force Italy's capitulation. The city of Milan suffered some of the heaviest damage—at least half of its centre was left in rubble. Following the air-raids, Savinio rushed back to the city with his editor, Valentino Bompiani, who subsequently wrote about the episode in his memoir:

> We walked in the middle of the street among fires and torn houses. With every step, Savinio kept shaking his head as if to say no. We reached the offices of our publishing house, laid bare in the open. Bombs had raged, one might say, especially against printing presses, destroying much of the lead: thousands of 'entries' already composed and typeset, melted by the heat. Molten lead flowed here and there in grey trickles, or had curdled already like the cast of a stormy sea.[342]

The scene—two men of letters surveying what's left of molten typeset—is redolent of the pathos captured, this side of the Channel, by the widely reproduced (and tellingly staged) photograph of readers browsing the blitzed shelves of Holland House, Kensington (Figure 4), which used to be, incidentally, the home of Joseph Addison, founder of *The Spectator*, and one of the foremost English essayists of the eighteenth century (and author, too, of the

[342] Valentino Bompiani, *Via privata* (Milano: Mondadori, 1973), p. 132.

epigraph I affixed to Part One of my thesis, with its ominous vision of millions of 'utterly annihilated' volumes).[343]



Figure 4. Harrison (Fox Photos), The ruins of Holland House. Photograph. 23 October 1940. Hulton Archive.

But unlike that propagandistic snapshot, Bompiani's retrospective account was less about national resolve than, albeit only implicitly, national shame; and less about burnt than aborted print. For the molten 'entries' to which Bompiani refers constituted the alphabetically-ordered sections of a literary encyclopaedia that had not yet reached completion: the nine-volume *Dizionario letterario delle Opere e dei Personaggi di tutti i tempi e di tutte le letterature* (1946-1950).

René Wellek, reviewing Bompiani's encyclopaedia in 1951, applauded it as 'by far the fullest and best literary encyclopaedia ever produced in any language'.[344] The *Dizionario* certainly

[343] For a history and a reading of the photograph, see Joseph Elkanah Rosenberg, *Wastepaper Modernism: Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Ruins of Print* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 120–23.
[344] René Wellek, 'Review, "Dizionario Letterario Bompiani"', *Comparative Literature*, 3.4 (1951), 364–66 (p. 364).

didn't lack ambition, its scope purportedly encompassing the written works and fictive characters 'of all periods and of all literatures'. In 1946, when the first volume finally appeared in print, Bompiani assessed that, with its five hundred contributors, the encyclopaedia served 'as a business card and perhaps even a valid identity card of Italian culture'.[345] In 1950, upon publication of its ninth (and final) volume, the humanist mission of the *Dizionario*—a self-conscious heir to such Enlightenment projects as Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*—was advertised on its dust jacket as a titanic feat accomplished in the midst (and importantly, in spite) of war: 'amid the disarray and lacerations of our recent history, [the *Dizionario*] testifies to the vigilant presence of Italian spirit and culture'.[346] As we have seen at the beginning of the previous chapter, however, the fraught web of relations coupling the publishing industry with renewed attempts at encyclopaedism—and encyclopaedism with anticipated violence—certainly wasn't limited to Bompiani only. Recall, for instance, how Alice Mary Hadfield wrote about compiling the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* against the chilling forebodings of another conflict: '[m]iddle-aged people', she glossed, 'remembered 1914 and saw another war approaching'.[347] Bompiani, for his part, went further still: the *Dizionario*, he boasted, didn't simply come into being unwittingly, out of the unease of the thirties; rather, it deliberately set itself up as a literary cache in the event of knowledge-obliterating catastrophe. Indeed, by the time the war ended, Bompiani's editorial circle had even taken to apostrophizing the *Dizionario* by recourse to biblical antecedent: that is, as 'Noah's Ark'.[348]

The account of the *Dizionario*'s origins as an editorial project should certainly sound familiar by now, following as it does the same template (travel-cum-epiphany) we've encountered at

[345] *Scrivere fino in fondo. Lettere 1941-1952*, ed. by Francesca Cianfrocca (Milano: Bompiani, 2019), p. 233.
[346] *Dizionario letterario Bompiani delle opere e dei personaggi, di tutti i tempi e di tutte le letterature*, ed. by Valentino Bompiani et al., 9 vols (Milano: Bompiani, 1950), IX.
[347] Hadfield, p. 126.
[348] Bompiani, p. 127.

length in Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. For while Bompiani's idea of a literary encyclopaedia had long been in the works, it was only in July 1938, when Bompiani travelled to Leipzig and Berlin for the International Publishers Conference, that it cascaded into something far more elephantine. Needless to say, once he arrived in Nazi Germany Bompiani was infallibly struck by the sinister dread of impending violence—and so, for that matter, were many other representatives of the publishing industry worldwide. A Swedish editor, Bompiani recalls, even used his time on the podium to half-jestingly hazard a plea for salvation; the audience, frozen in silence, eventually broke into applause, their hands clapping behind their seats; Goebbels, who presided over the final proceedings, made the hint of an applause before limping his way out of the Kroll Opera House, then assembly hall of the Reichstag. Episodes of this kind not only gave Bompiani the inkling of 'an incumbent threat', but alerted him, too, to an obscure urge 'to salvage valuable assets' while there was still time.[349] 'War', Bompiani couldn't help registering, 'is in the air'.[350] And thus, the *Dizionario letterario* was born: 'not two or three volumes of "masterpieces"', as originally planned, 'but the total inventory'; its avowed mission nothing short than '*to salvage* […] everything that mankind has thought and written over the millennia, from the origins until today'.[351]

For all its bombastic rhetoric, though, Bompiani's epithet was not entirely amiss, if one considers the threats to completion often incurred by the *Dizionario* during the war. Following the bombings of Milan, and after several trips in mule-drawn carts, 'every four pages locked in a wooden box', the recovered lead was painstakingly hidden in the basement of a castle by Lake Como.[352] One day, Bompiani tells us, the Wehrmacht even mistook the

[349] Bompiani, p. 126.
[350] Bompiani, p. 124.
[351] Bompiani, p. 126.
[352] Bompiani, p. 133.

piled boxes for a deposit of bullets, and would have certainly requisitioned the typesets had it not been for a German officer's sudden change of heart. Thus, retrospective self-conceit notwithstanding, the publishing history behind the *Dizionario letterario* attests to one of the period's most spectacular collisions between war and the encyclopaedia. Indeed, what other publishing venture of the mid-century so vocally, and so self-consciously verbalized, by dubbing itself a biblical ark, the claims of traumatic earliness inscribed by Paul Saint-Amour at the heart of his encyclopaedic modernisms? In so doing, the *Dizionario* presented itself as an heir to Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, for Diderot and d'Alembert, too, had envisaged their *Encyclopédie* as a knowledge-ark for some future catastrophe. 'The most glorious moment for a work of this sort', Diderot predicted, 'would be that which might come immediately in the wake of some catastrophe so great […] as to plunge a portion of our hemisphere in darkness once again'.[353] What gratitude would then be lavished, Diderot continues, on those who 'had discerned the approach of disaster and had taken measures to ward off its worst ravages by collecting in a safe place the knowledge of all past ages!'.[354]

By the time the first volume of Bompiani's *Dizionario letterario* was published in 1946, Savinio, who contributed with a total of eight entries, had been compiling his own encyclopaedic compendium—one, though, that was much less bumptious in its pretensions to exhaustiveness, let alone redemption.[355] For Savinio was, by his own admission, no aficionado of the encyclopaedia. 'I don't love encyclopaedias', Savinio once wrote, 'I don't love that habit of theirs to scale the known back to a little of everything'.[356] And it's a fit testament, perhaps, to Savinio's distaste that I begin my discussion of *Nuova enciclopedia*

[353] Denis Diderot, 'The Encyclopedia', in *Rameau's Nephew and Other Works*, trans. by Jacques Barzun and Ralph H. Bowen (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), pp. 277–307 (p. 290).
[354] Diderot, p. 290.
[355] The entries are: Briant, Calipso, Circe, Cyrus Smith, Croniamantal, Fabrizio del Dongo, Minuzzolo, Paganel. Other entries by Savinio were either excluded from the final version of the *Dizionario* or commissioned to other scholars.
[356] Alberto Savinio, *Ascolto il tuo cuore, città* (Milano: Bompiani, 1944), p. 49. Hereafter cited as *Ascolto*.

from somewhere else, with an anecdote from Savinio's book on Milan, *Ascolto il tuo cuore, città*. Indeed, as he's standing inside the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, marvelling at Giotto's frescoes, Savinio glosses his statement above with a digression from childhood. Savinio, we find out, had once asked his teacher of Latin ('one of the last exemplars of the erudite of ancient cast') which encyclopaedia he used.[357] All aflush, Savinio's instructor then broke into scornful laughter, as if

> I had accused him of keeping, among the grave tomes of his library, a complete collection of the "Voleur", the pornographic magazine at the time of Napoleon III, which, one stormy evening, while lemurs and lamias squeaked ominously amid the sunken rumble of the Rummel, I found in the library of the senator of the department of Constantine, inside a fake volume that was instead a box, and on the spine of which one read in gold: *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*.[358]

Curiously, in the original article from 1940 that Savinio reworked for *Ascolto*, the fake spine spotted on the shelves of the senator's library glimmered under a different title: Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*.[359] In the subsequent galley-proof typescripts for the book, however, Cicero's name was crossed out and his work replaced with that of Voltaire. Savinio, I suspect, surely sensed that Voltaire—Enlightenment icon turned pornographic hack—lent himself better than Cicero for a farcical vignette at the encyclopaedia's expense. But Savinio's glib dig at Voltaire was also, albeit implicitly, an ironic admission of his own recent turn to encyclopaedism. In a letter to Bompiani written in 1943, around the same time as he was editing *Ascolto*'s galley proofs, Savinio refers to the manuscript of another work in progress—*Nuova enciclopedia*, then under the provisional title of *Enciclopedia*—by recourse, once again, to Voltaire:

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[357] Savinio, *Ascolto*, p. 49.
[358] Savinio, *Ascolto*, pp. 49–50.
[359] I am grateful to Ruggero Savinio for granting me permission to consult Savinio's archival material, which is held at the Fondo Alberto Savinio in the Archivio contemporaneo Alessandro Bonsanti (Gabinetto G. P. Vieusseux, Florence). The galley proofs in question can be found under the following shelf mark: A.S.II.17.5.

> it'll be a volume of more than 400 pages, or even 500. I would leave the book in the format of the Encyclopaedia, which is to say of entries arranged in alphabetical order: a paraphrase of Voltaire's *Diction. Phil*.[360]

That Savinio should have chosen Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique* rather than Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, to which Voltaire himself contributed, says a great deal about his own compendium. For unlike the *Encyclopédie*, an assemblage so vast that Diderot couldn't conceive it as anything less than a collective enterprise, Voltaire's portable dictionary presented itself as the output of a single, albeit anonymous mind. As such, it could discard the *Encyclopédie*'s standardized, impersonal tone for a plethora of formats, from polemical pamphlet to catechetical dialogue, and a mix of registers, from irony to faux naiveté. Ben Ray Redman notes how, contrary to popular histories of the Enlightenment, Voltaire never gave himself wholeheartedly to Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, a behemoth of 'mere compilation' with 'too official a flavor for his taste'.[361] The *Encyclopédie*, it seems, was simply too large, too pricy, too scholarly: in a word, too inaccessible for Voltaire. Hence Voltaire's idea of a portable dictionary—a parallel initiative to Diderot's rather than a convergence of efforts.

The affinities with Savinio's own bifurcated persona as an encyclopaedist—at once official contributor to Bompiani's *Dizionario letterario* and playful compiler of his own assemblage—are obvious enough. But while the spirit of Voltaire's *Dictionnaire* was still in keeping with that of Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, Savinio's encyclopaedia betokened not only an initiative parallel to Bompiani's, but a subversive one at that. Which is to say that, far from replicating Bompiani's pious work of salvage, Savinio's compendium prefers instead to heed the exhortation once inscribed by Flaubert at the heart of his own (likewise unfinished)

[360] *Scrivere fino in fondo*, p. 235.
[361] Ben Ray Redman, 'Editor's Introduction', in *The Portable Voltaire*, ed. by Ben Ray Redman (London: Penguin, 1977), pp. 1–46 (p. 41).

lifetime project, the alphabetized list of stupidities collected in his dictionary of commonplace ideas, *Le dictionnaire des idées reçues* (1913):

> *ENCYCLOPEDIA.* Laugh at it pityingly, as being a baroque enterprise, and even thunder against it.[362]

And nowhere does Savinio revel in his laughter more than when he ends his satirical vignette on the encyclopaedia with one final lapse into bathos, turning encyclopaedic gravitas into dilettantish smattering. For encyclopaedias, Savinio says, always have 'something mundane' about them:

> [p]ractical as they are, Americans created the living encyclopaedia, and late in the morning, while the mistress has her wrinkles smoothed, or her breasts lifted, or her toenails varnished with turquoise polish, the agent of the living encyclopaedia equips her with some flash notions on dialectical materialism, the mixolydian mode, the generative mysteries of metals, which the mistress will then flaunt that very evening in the parlours of the Fifth Avenue.[363]

How far we are now from Bompiani's grandiloquent rhetoric of salvage! And how far, too, from the exalted posture of cultural guardianship adopted by Connolly-Palinurus in *The Unquiet Grave*. For unlike Connolly, whose lists of quotations were made to exorcise (or so Connolly hoped) the dreaded fate of Rose Macaulay's blitzed library, Savinio turns this exercise in exorcism on its head—into a mockery, that is, of the encyclopaedic *tout court*.

For all his flippancy, however, Savinio's own metadiscursive entry on the encyclopaedia in *Nuova enciclopedia* looks nothing like the mocking, telegraphic injunction we find in Flaubert. Quite the opposite: Savinio's definition recoils, rather surprisingly, back to the

[362] Gustave Flaubert, *Dictionary of Received Ideas*, ed. & trans. by Gregory Norminton (London: Alma Classics, 2016), p. 32.
[363] Savinio, *Ascolto*, p. 50.

rhetoric of crisis espoused by Bompiani et al., albeit with opposite conclusions. If war became, for Bompiani, the very occasion for a repurposed Noah's Ark, Savinio sanctions by contrast the impossibility (and futility) of any encyclopaedic act as such. Reworked, as was Savinio's practice, from an article published in late 1944 in *Il Tempo*, the first independent newspaper following Rome's liberation, the entry is worth quoting in full, given its pivotal role within *Nuova enciclopedia*:

> ENCYCLOPAEDIA. Encyclopaedia means 'all-knowing', that is 'circular' knowledge, 'complete' knowledge. Encyclopaedia means knowledge made up of all notions and notions that are homogenous—'spiritually' homogenous. It's in this sense that the Encyclopaedia is a weapon, a polemical weapon. One can well understand the encyclopaedism of Renaissance men, the encyclopaedism of the French encyclopaedists: one fails to understand any reason for an encyclopaedia compiled today, unless as a guide to practical notions, thus betraying its nature and missing its purpose. Today there's no possibility of an *encyclopaedia*. Today there's no possibility of *knowing all*. Today there's no possibility of *circular* knowledge, *complete* knowledge. Today there's no *homogeneity* of notions. Today there's no *spiritual affinity* among notions. Today there's no *common tendency* among fields of knowledge. Today there's a profound imbalance among fields of knowledge. This is the reason for that 'civilisational crisis' denounced first by Spengler and then by Huizinga. And how can there be balance, how can there be civilisation—which means homogeneity in the *polis*—if some men ponder the curvature of space and the sex of metals, and others simultaneously ponder the Ptolemaic architecture of the universe? And because, on the other hand, there's no hope that such far-flung ideas may ever come together and unite, one should resign oneself to a perpetual and ever more serious civilisational crisis. Let us give up then on a return to the homogeneity of ideas, namely to a bygone type of civilisation, and let us work toward the coexistence, in the least violent way, of the most disparate ideas, including the most desperate ideas. (*NE* 132-133)

Gone now is the bathos with which Savinio lampooned encyclopaedias as mundane, risible trifles. Here the encyclopaedia is mournfully eulogized as a relic from halcyon days, before the crises of the twentieth century liquidated even the last vestige of humanist faith in the common good (cue Savinio's infallible reference to that ubiquitous voice of interwar gloom, Spengler's *Decline of the West*). By the time Savinio came to revise his 1944 article for *Nuova enciclopedia*, moreover, he seemed to have grown even more disillusioned. For if, in the article from 1944, encyclopaedism made no sense 'under the previous regime', in its

subsequent revision Savinio drops this historical referent altogether.[364] Encyclopaedism, he wrote in his later entry, has lost its purpose to begin with, be it under democracy or fascism.

Savinio, needless to say, wasn't the first ever to sound the encyclopaedia's death knell, nor was he the last. In *The Man without Qualities*, to cite just one example from the period, Robert Musil has general Stumm von Bordwehr throw his hands up in dismay when he finds that Vienna's ideas resist all attempts at unity. 'D'you know what it's like?', the General erupts,

> Just like travelling second-class in Galicia and picking up crabs! […] When you've been spending a lot of time among ideas, you get an itching all over your body, and you can't get any peace even if you scratch till you bleed!'.[365]

General Stumm's frustration, though, is also the frustration of Flaubert's Bouvard and Pécuchet, who set out to master the known only to fail spectacularly. Italo Calvino, a century after Flaubert, pointed to the paradox of modern-day encyclopaedism, insofar as 'today we can no longer think in terms of a totality that is not potential, conjectural, and manifold'.[366] And Roland Barthes was even more lapidary when he declared that 'the encyclopaedic act is no longer possible (cf. the failure of today's encyclopedias)'.[367]

For all their resigned solemnity, however, claims about the obsolescence—or even impossibility—of the encyclopaedia have typically resulted in some of the most original experiments with the form and its epistemic pretensions. Think, again, of Musil's sprawling (and once again, unfinished) essayistic novel; or, to go further back, of Flaubert's catalogues

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[364] Savinio, *Sorte dell'Europa*, p. 56.
[365] Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, trans. by Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins, 3 vols (London: Secker & Warburg, 1953), II, p. 86.
[366] Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. by Esther Calvino (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 116.
[367] Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 135.

of the commonplace, designed as an appendix to what Calvino crowned 'the most encyclopedic novel ever written', that is *Bouvard and Pécuchet* (1881).[368] And if Barthes thought that the encyclopaedic act was doomed to failure, he still felt compelled to add that 'as a fiction, the encyclopedic gesture still has its value, its pleasure: its scandal'.[369] Savinio must have thought the same when, in the midst of revising the galley proofs for his book on Milan, he felt obliged to paste a sliver of paper to the bottom of his wry piece on the encyclopaedia, footnoting its opening aperçu ('I don't love encyclopaedias') with the following proviso:

> I am so little fond of encyclopaedias, and they so little satisfy me, that I am working toward compiling an encyclopaedia for myself and for my own personal use, much as Schopenhauer, who for his part had sufficient reasons to dislike histories of philosophy, wrote a history of philosophy for himself and for his own personal use.[370]

This footnote subsequently made its way into the pages of *Nuova enciclopedia*—and as a foreword, no less, to the entire work. Savinio, we might say, tries his hand at the encyclopaedic even as he certifies its impossibility, much as Connolly was spurred into writing out of his very failure to write. But as we'll see in the following section, Savinio's compendium could claim encyclopaedic status only in name, abdicating, as it did, the public function so crucial to its eighteenth-century forebears. As a result, *Nuova enciclopedia* looks less like a work by Voltaire than the fake, hollow tomes passing *for* Voltaire on the shelves of Savinio's childhood. For just as the gilded spines of Voltaire's opus were used as a screen for the *Voleur*, a magazine that enshrined plagiarism and the second-rate in its very name ('thief'), so too does encyclopaedic form become, in Savinio's hands, a brittle casing for something far more digressive, loose, dilettantish; in a word, essayistic—if, like William

[368] Calvino, p. 113.
[369] Barthes, *How to Live Together*, p. 135.
[370] Savinio, *Ascolto*, p. 49.

Gass, we are to see the essayist as 'an amateur, a Virginia Woolf who has merely done a little reading up' (even when, as in Savinio's case, amateurishness belies its own status as an artifice).[371]

To the extent, then, that Savinio's assemblage professes its status as a private anthology, *Nuova enciclopedia* comes much closer to a work like Montaigne's *Essais* (recall Montaigne's own disclaimer: 'here you have not my teaching but my study: the lesson is not for others; it is for me').[372] Or, for that matter, to the dialogues and sketches of Leopardi, whose love for the *dilettevole* (delectable) over and against the useful went so far as to spawn, in 1827, an 'Encyclopaedia of useless notions; or Supplement to all other Encyclopaedias'. Unsurprisingly, Leopardi's catalogue was never finished, let alone begun. But just like its fellow genre mates—each phantom of a work-to-come never quite brought to completion—Leopardi's project evinces a taste for the commonplace and the cliché that Savinio would inflate, by making it his own, in *Nuova enciclopedia*. Writing on Stravinsky in 1941, for instance, Savinio launched into a high-spirited defence of paraphrase and imitation as salutary antidotes to the desiccated myths of novelty in/as creation. 'In Stravinsky', Savinio glosses, 'all is preexisting, known, predicted', which need not be mistaken, however, for a 'minor' form of art.[373] In the foreword to *Ascolto il tuo cuore, città*, having dubbed this literary account of mid-century flânerie 'a discursive book', a term redolent of Osbert Sitwell's own 'discursions' on Italian travel and art, Savinio then warns us again that 'a "discursive" book is not a minor work, but a major one: the greatest one'.[374] For once the puerile ambition of creating a masterpiece is done away with, one doesn't write books, Savinio says, except as a 'long and quiet conversation':

[371] Gass, 'Emerson and the Essay', p. 25.
[372] Montaigne, p. 424.
[373] Alberto Savinio, *Scatola sonora* (Torino: Einaudi, 1977), p. 184.
[374] Savinio, *Ascolto*, p. 5.

> One simply recalls. One walks by, calm and indifferent, amid the memories left behind by the tragedy. And there's only voice for a calm discourse. Then, further down, further up, there won't be place even for a discourse; but for silence only.[375]

Once again, we're reminded of Bompiani's sketch of Savinio in the wake of the air-raids on Milan, walking in silence amid the melting typesets of Bompiani's encyclopaedia-to-be, remnants, quite literally, of a cultural memory scattered behind by the tragedy of war. Savinio's plea for peace and silence can easily be understood, then, as a reaction against the deafening din of total war (elsewhere Savinio imputed his hatred of war to war's noisy primacy as 'the queen of all clamour').[376] But Savinio's defence of paraphrase—of (re)telling rather than showing, and of the discursive against the mimetic—also recalls Connolly's discontent, in *The Unquiet Grave*, with the grand ambitions of the novel, if not with the very imperatives of fictional creation as such. Speaking of Gabriele d'Annunzio—a paradigm, for Savinio, of the writer-creator—Savinio once again affirms the necessity to 'react against the creator's posture' and 'to plunge into paraphrase'.[377] Which means, in turn, that the literary form most suited to this untimely taste for the already-said was, for Savinio as much as for Connolly, not the novel, but the essay. Bathos over pathos, compilation over creation, surface over depth: as we've seen in the previous chapter, these are all signature features of a middle-aged compiler writing in mid-war. And so, doffing the robes of his avant-gardist beginnings, Savinio slips now, at the age of fifty, into the posture of a tardy passer-by, thrust beyond all 'inventions, revelations, illuminations': late to catastrophe, late to creation.[378]

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[375] Savinio, *Ascolto*, p. 5.
[376] Alberto Savinio, *Opere: scritti dispersi tra guerra e dopoguerra (1943-1952)*, ed. by Leonardo Sciascia and Franco De Maria (Milano: Bompiani, 1989), p. 935. Hereafter cited as *Opere*.
[377] Savinio, *Scatola sonora*, pp. 184–85.
[378] Savinio, *Ascolto*, p. 5.

‘these little jottings I go about publishing’

Incidentally, the occasion that led to Savinio’s inauguration, in 1941, of a rubric dubbed *Nuova enciclopedia* (and then, a year later, one entitled *Dizionario*) was the same that led Montaigne to begin his *Essais*, and by so doing to father a new genre, almost four centuries earlier: retreat, that is, from public life.[379] But reclusion, in Savinio’s case, was more a matter of circumstance than of self-willed leave-taking. Partly because, in 1939, Mussolini had barred Savinio from all national newspapers and periodicals, owing to a particularly irreverent article in which Savinio had imputed Leopardi’s death—and thus the death of a nationally revered poet—to an unfortunate case of sorbet indigestion (or, to quote Savinio’s bawdy diagnosis, to the ‘shits’). In reality, Savinio still managed to bypass regime censorship by way of such pseudonyms as *L’Archivista*, namely ‘the Archivist’, with which he returned to signing his pieces barely five months after the sorbet incident. Savinio’s first articles as a *persona non grata*, however, were not the amusing, library-window digressions of a retiring Montaigne, nor, for that matter, the anti-fascist philippics of a jaundiced dissident. Instead, Savinio’s return to journalism, which for long constituted his main source of income, occurred in the pages of such periodicals as *Il Mediterraneo*, a chauvinist weekly chronicling, among other things, Italy’s imperial expansion in the Mediterranean. It was, indeed, in the rubric of *Il Mediterraneo*, signing himself as *L’Archivista*, that Savinio reported on the events of the first year of war, from the tense months of the Phoney War to the fall of France and Italy’s entry into the conflict, in June 1940. As Lucilla Lijoi has noted, this was ‘the only case, across Savinio’s entire production, in which he dedicated himself with such attentiveness to topical events of such relevance’.[380]

[379] John Snyder even traces the essay’s birth back to Cicero’s *Cato Maior de Senectute*, written in 44 BC: ‘[t]his is the historical situation of the essay’s generation: retreat’. Snyder, p. 156.
[380] Lijoi, p. 143.

No other country more than Italy, Savinio wrote a week after Poland's invasion, could more rightfully lay claim to a conflict which was, by Savinio's account, a long-awaited moment of cultural renewal against a corrupt and declining Europe. In Savinio's own words:

> [t]he conflict that has just broken out is the result of a clash between two civilisations: the one which, up until yesterday, influenced the civilised world, and which is commonly known as "Western" […] and the new civilisation aiming to replace the preceding one, as younger, healthier, richer in life, more fertile with future. This civilisation is the Italian civilisation.[381]

As evident from passages of this kind, Savinio, like many other Italian intellectuals at the time, didn't shy away from amplifying regime propaganda, whether out of conviction or opportunism. But as war progressed, Savinio became more and more disillusioned with Mussolini's promises of a culturally revamped Italy, betrayed for Savinio by the regime's alliance with Hitler's Germany, a country Savinio numbered, ironically enough, among those of the declining West. The last piece Savinio dedicated to the conflict was thus published only a month after Italy's entry into the war. Beginning from late 1940, Savinio ceased archiving the geopolitical crisis unfolding around him and turned instead to archiving, or rather compiling, his own private world, tessellating it into an encyclopaedic mosaic made up of eccentric, ironically detached essays, variously published on such rubrics as the aforementioned *Nuova enciclopedia* and *Dizionario*. And so, to revise our Montaignian analogy above: it was not just regime censorship, but a reckoning with the increasingly felt senselessness of war, as well as with fascism's suddenly untenable positions, that pushed Savinio toward a peaceable literary form capable, in Woolf's words, of 'lap[ping] us about and draw[ing] its curtain across the world'.[382] A form of compensation, if you will, not unlike the one orchestrated, this side of the Channel, by Connolly in *The Unquiet Grave*, though for

[381] Alberto Savinio, 'Archivio [Lotta di popoli]', *Il Mediterraneo*, 9 September 1939, pp. 10–13 (p. 10).
[382] Woolf, 'The Modern Essay', p. 13.

reasons that had more to do with political embarrassment than with hedonistic disappointment.

In 'Segnalazioni' (meaning 'Readers' Takes'), an entry from *Nuova enciclopedia* originally published as a newspaper piece in the last days of 1942, Savinio indulges in a moment of metadiscursive commentary on the new body of writing which he had been augmenting for almost two years:

> In these little jottings that I go about publishing under the general rubric *Dizionario*, the topics being covered are varied, ranging from moral issues to society matters, from artistic facts to literary ones, from erudite notations to anecdotes, from serious things to jokes. (*NE* 330)

The principle governing his selection of subject matter is, in other words, sheer variety: after all, to quote Woolf once again, the essay can be 'about God and Spinoza, or about turtles and Cheapside'.[383] Or, as Montaigne said: 'All topics are equally productive to me. I could write about a fly!'.[384] This taste for the miscellaneous—and, what's more, for the burlesque contrasts derived from the juxtaposition of unrelated objects and discourses—can be grasped simply by a cursory glance at Savinio's index, where, thanks in part to the explicit arbitrariness of a structuring yet non-hierarchical device like the alphabet, 'Baudelaire' is found next to 'beard', 'Romanticism' next to 'salt', 'Saint Ambrose' next to 'amoeba'. This humorous mixture of low and high, mundane and profane can be registered, too, within the space of a single entry, so that a piece on the prophet Muhammad derails, for instance, into a gloss on print culture, peppered in turn with quotations from Ovid and Chateaubriand, while an entry on carousels begins instead with a 'short course on philology' (*NE* 199). And if Diderot's *Encyclopédie* made use of *renvois* or cross-references from one article to another so

[383] Woolf, 'The Modern Essay', p. 13.
[384] Montaigne, p. 990.

as to obviate the need for repetition, Savinio often gives in to the pleasure of redundancy by clustering multiple entries (usually two, sometimes even three) under the same headword. So it is, then, that in the first of two entries on 'Orpheus', Savinio violates the encyclopaedia's definitional statute by refusing to give any account at all related to this mythical figure, preferring instead to sketch a humorous piece of domestic life, in which Savinio denounces the begrudgingly high turnover of housekeepers in his household despite, he says, the piano performances he insists on staging for the latter's amusement. The only mention accorded to Orpheus comes toward the end of this brief anecdote, and then only under the oblique, ironic guise of a negation:

> Nivasio Dolcemare [one of Savinio's pseudonyms] used to believe in Orpheus's myth, much as he believed for that matter in all myths; but now he no longer puts faith in it. And only will he restore faith in Orpheus's myth, when a housekeeper can be found who will say to Dolcemare: 'I dislike your house, I'm willing to throw the salary you give me in your face, but I'm going to stay nonetheless, because I am fond of your music.' (*NE* 283-284)

In a parodic turn redolent again of such literary avatars as Bloom-Odysseus or Connolly-Palinurus, Savinio elevates or rather demotes himself to a modern-day, bourgeois version of the ancient bard: a failed, thoroughly bathetic Orpheus, no longer able to enchant his listeners by way of either music or verse. And if, moreover, we were to extend Savinio's desecrating thrust beyond the mythical bounds of the classical world, his bemoaned loss of faith 'in all myths' could surely be read, too, as an encrypted reference to his loss of faith in *one* myth in particular: that of a national redeemer. Savinio's mocking distrust of self-declared prophets (and d'Annunzio, the emblem of the poet-creator, was certainly one) becomes even more pronounced in the second entry on Orpheus, which doubles down on the parodic wit of the first. For no sooner has Savinio ventured a definition ('Orpheus is the one who brings light and truth to mankind'), than he immediately gives it away as second-hand dross: *Why I gifted*

men with light and truth was the title, Savinio clarifies, of a preposterously conceited book by an eccentric from Milan. This mophead prophet, Savinio pronounces, 'was Orpheus yet no one knew it. Neither did he' (*NE* 284).

Elsewhere, double entries end up proliferating the subject at hand centrifugally, by isolating and therefore privileging one particular side or aspect of the matter at hand: Savinio's experience with women, for example, bifurcates into the twofold entries 'woman (barber)' and 'woman (superior)', while his considerations on language spawn a triptych made up of 'tongue', 'tongue (native)', and 'tongue (and people)'. Thus, by deliberately vitiating the unifying coherence (and consequent authority) claimed by any encyclopaedic apparatus, Savinio stages instead the erring hesitancy of a compiler who takes up his subject matter from multiple angles, and on multiple occasions, so that any straightforward referentiality gives way to a free flow of metonymic associations, by turns unpredictable and bizarre. 'To stay on topic', Savinio says,

> continues to be regarded as some great merit. The work—be it a thousand-page novel or a culture feature of a column and a half—must be *of a piece*. […] I, for my part, don't know what I'm doing. […] These same 'pieces' that I publish on the newspaper are not *of a piece*.[385]

Where Diderot and his wartime heir, Bompiani, truss together the main branches of the known so as to stow them away into a single cache—the *Encyclopédie* and the *Dizionario letterario*, respectively—Savinio follows by contrast the arabesque traced by his tree's sprouting tendrils.

Formally, too, owing to the sheer variety of his subject matter, Savinio draws from a repertoire of formats that range from the autobiographical vignette to that other narrative

[385] Savinio, *Opere*, pp. 1000–01.

fragment, the anecdote; from etymological gloss to quotation, polemical pamphlet to moral treatise (curiously, unlike Connolly, Savinio was no devotee of the aphoristic). On one occasion, Savinio addresses the subject of silence between spouses in the form of a letter to his wife. Elsewhere, a concept as generic as that of the family—and so integral, too, to the regime's politics of racial purity—is liquidated with a simple, annotated quotation:

> FAMILIES. From Francesco De Sanctis's memories of youth: 'In the morning, mom used to shower me with affection. She would thrust the baby away from her chest and move her breasts closer to me, chuckling, as if to say: 'Do you remember?'. One wonders what his father used to show him. (*NE* 153)

And for all his wry detachment Savinio even tries his hand at political forecasting. Thus, under the entry for 'England', Savinio hazards the prediction that postwar England will be a proletarian country, if not in reality then, at least, in spirit. Having said nothing else about England, Savinio then concludes with a further prognosis whose unforeseen irony certainly won't be lost on readers today: 'that is why this great country will come out of its "splendid isolation" and will, for our sake as well as its own, become part of Europe' (*NE* 224). Elsewhere, Savinio anticipates that, owing to the war machine's technological (which is to say self-annihilating) advances, 'new wars in Europe are unlikely to occur again' (*NE* 235). But just as he does with the encyclopaedia's purported coherence, so Savinio also disables, by way of parody, the encyclopaedic will to prescience: whereas Diderot dictates that 'you must know the state of mind of your nation, foresee the direction of its future development, hasten to anticipate its progress so that the march of events will not leave your book behind', Savinio professes instead 'a latent incompatibility between History and poetic fancy' (*NE* 351).[386] And he cites, as evidence, the failed prophecies in Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908), where 1913 is erroneously earmarked as a date of worldwide conflict averted by

[386] Diderot, p. 288.

labour solidarity (*NE* 351). Or, to go further back into the *longue durée* of history, Savinio reports, under the entry for 'Prophecies', an apocryphal anecdote concerning a message held in the Great Pyramid of Giza, allegedly foretelling the dates of future events such as the birth of Christ, the Great War, and the Wall Street Crash. Among these, Savinio notes, one also finds the prediction, already half-mistaken, of 'a period of great upheavals from 1936 to 1953', which leaves Savinio hoping, in the midst of war, 'that just as the prophetic stone botched the start date of these "great upheavals", so it will equally miss their end date' (*NE* 297).

Spoof forecasting aside, in its first years of compilation—which is to say from 1941 right until Mussolini's fall on July 25th, 1943—Savinio usually shuns any topical reference to either the regime or its imperialist campaigns on the Axis side. But despite (or even perhaps due to) being sidelined, the disasters of fascist nationalism are now hyper-compensated for by a retreat into irony and play, ambiguity and possibility, accident and fantasy—into all, in a word, that is most anathema to fascism and its unthinking myopias. If, then, a few weeks after Poland's invasion, Savinio-*L'Archivista* had welcomed the eruption of hostilities as a long-awaited flash of clarity against 'the chiaroscuro and the mists of the sentimental West', by 1942 'clarity destroys: clarity "finishes" life' (*NE* 223).[387] And if, two months into the conflict, Savinio-*L'Archivista* had called for a 'rebirth of Roman civilisation' in a pro-war article entitled *Solidarietà*, this very title reappears, a few years later, as an eponymous entry for *Nuova enciclopedia* that mocks (enforced) solidarity as 'deeply humiliating', and war as irrelevant humdrum (*NE* 350).[388] Begrudging how, during Rome's occupation, his household had become 'invaded' by all sorts of people to whom, in peacetime, he would have otherwise been a stranger, Savinio argues polemically that:

[387] Alberto Savinio, 'Archivio [Di là dagli avvenimenti]', *Il Mediterraneo*, 23 September 1939, pp. 12–13.
[388] Alberto Savinio, 'Archivio [Solidarietà]', *Il Mediterraneo*, 28 October 1939, pp. 13–14.

> solidarity, intimacy, common good determined by exceptional circumstances are superficial, because the very facts determining this solidarity, intimacy, and common good are in themselves superficial. But how can one convince *others* that this dreadful war, cause of millions of dead and immense ruin, is after all a 'superficial' fact? (*NE* 350)

The shock of juxtaposition, here taken to its extreme in the conflation of wholesale slaughter with irrelevance, might certainly ring as a gratuitous provocation, a controversy for controversy's sake. But apart from emphasizing antiphrastically the opposite of what it actually states—the senselessness of Germany's (and Italy's) war captured by the sheer scale of its destruction—Savinio's contentious entry could also be read as a belated attempt to dissolve personal accountability into essayistic play; a plea, in short, not to be taken seriously: a panegyric *to* unseriousness.

Thus, in an article on George Bernard Shaw published in early 1943, and later included as an entry in *Nuova enciclopedia*, Savinio, after declaring that 'truth is not one but many' (*NE* 332), lampoons the Irish playwright precisely for being too serious—too bent, that is, on proselytizing his own ideas. For despite the wide renown of his satirical plays, Savinio writes, Shaw is neither a humourist nor an ironist, but a would-be man of wit, a second-rate poseur hiding his pedantic sullenness behind a veneer of light-hearted irreverence. In a drawing by Savinio accompanying this article (Figure 5), Shaw is thus made to resemble a cantankerous type from the world of fairy tales: an aged, garrulous dwarf who 'talked to himself and talked all the time', his feet invariably caught in a long, cascading beard, wearing the peevish air of a toddler without his teat (*NE* 333).

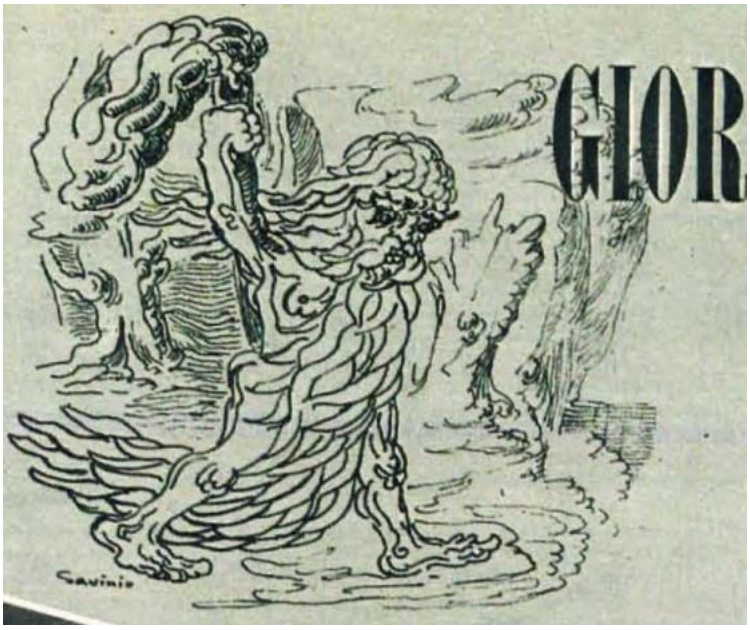


Figure 5. Alberto Savinio, drawing, in *Film*, n. 8, 20 February 1943, p. 5.

Savinio's satirical mockery of the Irish playwright serves him, in the end, to mount an attack against the prejudice of seriousness, or what he calls the 'unbearable tendency of "serious" people to dramatize the most trivial themes': another unspoken reference, perhaps, to the histrionic solemnity, the highfalutin gravitas of a Mussolini.[389] For however difficult seriousness may prove to maintain, Savinio observes,

> much more difficult is that *nonseriousness* which traverses seriousness and exceeds it, and which very few men, Lucian of Samosata, Voltaire have managed to acquire. Compared with the profundity of these 'frivolous superiors', the profundity of the 'profound' man boils down to a residue of coffee dregs. (*NE* 335)

The *nonserious* artist par excellence is, it soon turns out, the so-called dilettante, or rather, to use Savinio's own aggrandizing epithet, the 'Grande Dilettante': the juggler of ideas unable to seriously commit to any one idea; the playful artist dabbling in all forms of expression yet mastering none; the quick wit subverting all established dogmas, especially those of the

[389] Alberto Savinio, *Childhood of Nivasio Dolcemare*, trans. by Richard Pevear (New York: Eridanos Press, 1987), p. 73.

totalitarian state. In his 1944 introduction to Lucian's *Dialogues and Essays*, Savinio fleshes out his concept of dilettantism by further clarifying that 'Lucian sits in the company of Montaigne, Stendhal, Nietzsche', those who, in other words, 'have freed themselves from wretched contingency', and whose purpose is to save others, too, from 'cruel necessity' by battling 'superstition and illusion' whenever they chance upon them.[390] For all the evils vexing the world come, Savinio insists, from the simple yet perilous fact that 'for the most part people can only conceive one idea, and are unable to ever think of more than just one'.[391] Savinio's dilettante could be seen, then, as a master of suspicion: wittily superior by virtue of a certain light-heartedness that is also, at the same time, a lightness of thought, no longer weighed down by any credo.[392]

Savinio, to be sure, does not shy away from numbering himself among the unserious, unburdened circle of these Great Dilettantes. In an article on the surrealist writer Leonor Fini published in 1945, Savinio footnotes the term 'dilettantism' with the following gloss, in which, forgoing the usual modesty of a Montaigne, he irreverently caps a list of dilettantish luminaries with his own name:

> By 'dilettantism' and 'dilettante' I mean the highest degree of a mental civilisation. Which is to say of a general, learned outlook beyond any specialization as such. A few names will help determine this type of supreme intellectual: Lucian of Samosata, Montaigne, Voltaire, Stendhal, Nietzsche, myself.[393]

Once again, we come up against one of the essay's most obsessive—and most obsessively recurring—self-authorizing conceits: the forebears' list, or better yet: the enlistment, by way

[390] Savinio, *Opere*, pp. 56–57.
[391] Savinio, *Sorte dell'Europa*, p. 45.
[392] For a general overview of the concept and category of dilettantism, especially from its development in eighteenth-century Germany to its popularisation in fin-de-siècle France, see Richard Hibbitt, *Dilettantism and its Values: From Weimar Classicism to the fin de siécle* (London: Legenda, 2006).
[393] Savinio, p. 87. The original article was written in French.

of a list, of *authoritative* forebears. As John Snyder has aptly noted, the essay form 'is permitted to build whatever genealogy of learning it may find necessary to shore itself up': Montaigne did so with Plutarch and Seneca, Rousseau with Montaigne, Nietzsche with Kant.[394] Rebecca West did so with Montaigne and Diderot; Cyril Connolly with his so-called 'Sacred Twelve'. This chronic anxiety for an official *imprimatur*—sought now from this, now from that literary pantheon—one finds unsurprisingly in Savinio, too. Just as one finds, moreover, that his preferred canon of authority not only remains thoroughly French, as could be expected from someone who for years had lived among Paris's avant-gardes, and was therefore exceptionally well-versed in French letters; but one made up, above all, of forms of writing often seen as minor or secondary. The works by Lucian of Samosata that Savinio edited in mid-war were known, after all, as *Dialogues and Essays*, and *Essais* was the generic label used, again, by Montaigne. The Voltaire Savinio admittedly paraphrased when inaugurating *Nuova enciclopedia* was the playfully encyclopaedic Voltaire of the *Dictionnaire philosophique*. And while Stendhal was, to be sure, a renowned novelist, it was rather from his travel essays (*Rome, Naples et Florence* [1817] as well as *Mémoires d'un touriste* [1838]) that Savinio quarried the numerous quotations strewn throughout his compendium. The disclaimer Connolly affixed to his choice canon of secondary masters could equally be applied, then, to Savinio's own circle of dilettantes: '[t]here are no novels' in this list (*UG* 2).

But while the forebears' list has been shown, time and again, to be almost *de rigueur* as a self-authorizing device among many mid-century practitioners of the literary essay, in Savinio it does something more than simply lending authority to its compiler: it elevates the essay as a literary form to the ontological dignity (and prestige) of a category of existence, that of dilettantism. Lucian and Voltaire, Montaigne and Stendhal may certainly adopt

[394] Snyder, p. 158.

different formats of writing, but they all live—and write—essayistically, that is to say as 'men who are everything a man of spirit can be: poets, philosophers, artists, and at the same time something still more'.[395] Put simply, the dilettante is defined, like the essayist, by a sense of possibility, of openness and incompleteness; by a regime of noncommitment, that is, in which 'division by *speciality* no longer makes sense'.[396] Savinio, to be sure, wasn't the only one to have turned the erring ways of a form of writing into a way of life, nor was he the first: Musil did so a decade or two earlier, when, in *The Man without Qualities*, he dubbed the novel's hero—a variant, as it were, of a dilettante à la Savinio— a *Möglichkeitsmensch*, namely a possibilitarian, and his way of life, *Essayismus*, or essayism. If, as Musil's Ulrich believes, 'the present is nothing but a hypothesis that one has not yet finished with', and if everything could just as easily be some other way, then this explains why, throughout the novel, Ulrich feels compelled to opt out of 'a character, a profession, a definite mode of existence', instead hesitating 'to become anything', much as Savinio does when he claims to have 'changed profession three times, and promise[s] to keep doing so'.[397] In what Thomas Harrison has called Musil's 'existentializing of the form', [398] the essay becomes, for Musil's hero, a paradigm for (in)action:

> It was approximately in the way that an essay, in the sequence of its paragraphs, takes a thing from many sides without comprehending it wholly—for a thing wholly comprehended instantly loses its bulk and melts down into a concept—that he believed he could best survey and handle the world and his own life.[399]

Dilettantism, then, as essayism, and essayism as dilettantism, insofar as Savinio, like Musil, puts the given order of things in abeyance, including the apparent determinations of history.

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[395] Savinio, *Opere*, p. 55.
[396] Savinio, *Opere*, p. 55.
[397] Musil, I, p. 297; Savinio, *Sorte dell'Europa*, p. 65.
[398] Thomas J. Harrison, 'The Essayistic Novel and Mode of Life: Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*', *Republics of Letters*, 4.1 (2014), 1–14 (p. 1).
[399] Musil, I, p. 297.

Musil's two-thousand-page novel tarries on the year 1913 almost as if to pack it, in the words of Paul Saint-Amour, 'with possible futures that could not yet be ruled out', thereby suspending the imminent disaster of the Great War (indeed, the novel might have been left unfinished precisely because its author refused to end it with the outbreak of the conflict).[400] Musil's sense of possibility—or as he calls it, his *Essayismus*—becomes the very generative device that drives (or rather, stifles) the novel's plot. But whereas Musil deferred a war past, Savinio bracketed a conflict that was, at the time of his writing, still very much present, raising questions of accountability that Savinio dissolved by identifying a certain degree of salutary indifference as the dilettante's most prized virtue. The dilettante's detachment even becomes the wry aloofness proper to the Greek gods, who 'live their existence devoid of tragedy', indeed 'revelling at the sight of troubles they themselves created'.[401] 'Enveloped by a mysterious invulnerability', Savinio writes elsewhere, 'these human sargassums [the dilettantes] pass through the midst of […] endless dramas and tragedies, carried by a gulf stream of their own, without mixing in the least with the bitter waters they float through'.[402] The description—of the dilettante as floating seaweed—strikingly recalls that employed much later by Pierre Bourdieu to mock Roland Barthes, accusing him of being precisely one such intellectual lightweight or dilettante: 'the peak of the class of essayists', sniffs Bourdieu,

> who, having nothing to oppose to the forces of the field, are condemned, in order to exist, or subsist, to float with the tides of the external or internal forces which wrack the milieu, notably through journalism […] a spirit floating on every breeze, quivering at every touch, able to absorb every impression and to retransmit it in turn, but needing to be set in motion by a neighbouring spirit, always eager to borrow a watchword.[403]

[400] Saint-Amour, *Tense Future*, p. 256.
[401] Savinio, *Scatola sonora*, p. 191.
[402] Savinio, *Opere*, p. 88.
[403] Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. by Peter Collier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. xxii.

That the essay is most often stirred into being by the 'watchwords' of others is a point of contention (or a point of honour) which my discussion has so far dwelled on extensively, but Savinio goes even further in his panegyric to dilettantish noncommitment by anticipating, in an entry from *Nuova enciclopedia* on 'Freedom', originally published as an article shortly after Rome's liberation in June 1944, that there will be no perfect freedom until life has attained 'perfect meaninglessness and supreme insouciance' (*NE* 232). When that day arrives, Savinio ventures,

> the *Iliad*, the *Commedia*, the Sistine frescoes, the lessons of the moralists, the systems of the philosophers, the works of the statesmen, and everything grave, 'serious', 'meaningful', venerable, necessary in the world will be looked upon with archaeological curiosity, as records of an epoch of barbarities and slavery. (*NE* 232)

Having made his Zarathustra-like prediction, Savinio then adds that 'one can foresee a new Bible inspired by this concept: our "true" Bible' (*NE* 156). And this new Bible comes close, in Savinio's mind, to his own *Nuova enciclopedia*: no longer, of course, a biblical ark compensating for future catastrophe, as Diderot's *Encyclopédie* or Bompiani's *Dizionario letterario*, but a book nonetheless—indeed, *the* Book—compensating for present disaster by way of a 'complete distraction from boredom, spite, envy, loss, disappointment, sadness, hatred, ire, pain, death' (*NE* 331). And compensating, we might add, for political guilt, too. For if Savinio elevates meaningless insouciance to the dignity of a philosophical 'ism' right in the midst of war, before numbering himself among dilettantism's representatives, he does so as a writer who had been all too willing, at times, to support a regime now on the wane. Indeed, Savinio seems to ask, what bearing could something as trivial as pro-regime journalism have, if even the *Iliad* or the Sistine frescoes are bound to be studied one day as records of barbarity? 'A Great Dilettante', Savinio contends, 'is not touched by responsibility', even when, as in Nietzsche's case, he is cast under the suspicion of having

inspired 'certain ideologies, certain behaviours'.[404] On the contrary, a dilettante alone 'can say one thing and at the same time its opposite', without running into contradictions, as Savinio does, of course, in the kaleidoscopic entries of his personal encyclopaedia.[405] Which also implies that, according to Savinio, 'the Great Dilettante cannot be faulted if some take his words literally, almost as if they were the words of a common man vexed by necessities, hemmed in by responsibilities'.[406] What begins as a parenthetical gloss on Nietzsche and dilettantism begins to sound, in the end, like a thinly-disguised apologia on Savinio's own behalf. Small wonder, then, that as Savinio recoils from fascism's delusions of imperial grandeur, he also retreats, through *Nuova enciclopedia*, toward a literary practice that is, like him, unserious and, therefore, uncommitted: better yet, no longer committed. This Savinio not only dubbed dilettantism, but made it, as the war neared its end, a quintessentially *European* phenomenon, as we will see in the following, and final, section of this chapter.

'dilettantism is the greatest condition of the European spirit'

In October 1943 Savinio, who had been suspected of harbouring anti-regime sympathies since at least the sorbet incident, was forced into hiding on account of an anti-fascist blacklist in which his name appeared—or so he was warned at the time—in third place.[407] News of Italy's secret Armistice with the Allies, first broadcast on September 8th, precipitated the country into civil war: for Savinio, the cautious retreat of a would-be Montaigne turned, almost overnight, into the clandestine hiding of a political dissident. And yet, it was during his months of hiding (Rome was only liberated in June 1944) that Savinio collated—and revised—most of the entries for *Nuova enciclopedia*, and even seemed ready, by early 1944,

[404] Savinio, *Opere*, p. 56.
[405] Savinio, *Opere*, p. 56.
[406] Savinio, *Opere*, p. 56.
[407] Savinio, *Opere*, p. 371.

to see it published.[408] But the disarray of war, combined with Savinio's relentless revisions, certainly frustrated all such publishing bids. In a letter to his editor Bompiani written in the spring of 1944, while still in hiding, Savinio documents the unfolding crisis in the following terms:

> [t]he moment we are undergoing is extremely important and delicate: we ought to examine our moral principles with care and to sharpen our prophetic sense. Everything we do […] ought to have a meaning both deep and exemplary […]. Let your every action conform always to a moral standard. Remember that we are in a time of reform: remember that *we* have to carry out this Reform.[409]

Savinio's injunction to militancy, at least in the cultural sphere, led to a slim volume of essays entitled *Sorte dell'Europa*, which assembled some of the political (this time liberally-oriented) articles he wrote during his hiding, and which ended with the following call to arms: 'partisans of Europe, unite!'.[410] As this repurposed riff on *The Communist Manifesto*'s famous rallying cry makes clear, *Sorte dell'Europa* staged, above all, a passionate paean to a united Europe—and for Savinio in 1944, as Roberto Dainotto has rightly noted, '[e]scaping to Europe means running towards the end of all wars'.[411] But escaping to Europe meant, too, escaping 'from the shame of being Italians after fascism', as Savinio himself came close to conceding when, years later, he confessed to writing *Sorte dell'Europa* as a means of compensating for some ill-defined (and conveniently understated) guilt:

> I felt directly responsible for the catastrophe, as someone who had witnessed, helplessly and silently, the accumulating factors that were preparing the catastrophe from afar, and

[408] See Savinio's letter to his editor Bompiani, dated 25th February 1944, in *Scrivere fino in fondo*, p. 54.
[409] *Scrivere fino in fondo*, p. 67.
[410] Savinio, *Sorte dell'Europa*, p. 87.
[411] Roberto M. Dainotto, 'The European-ness of Italy: Categories and Norms', *Annali d'Italianistica*, 24 (2006), 19–39 (p. 31).

> so I had promised myself never to stay away from the causes that move the life of our people and determine its fate, namely from politics.[412]

Savinio, needless to say, had never really been the hamstrung, unsuspecting bystander he would have us believe, as even a cursory glance at his previous collaboration with such jingoistic periodicals as the aforementioned *Il Mediterraneo* or, for that matter, *Antieuropa*, would amply demonstrate. Take, for instance, the article Savinio wrote, shortly after Poland's invasion, under the telling title 'S. U. d'Europa' (an abbreviation for the United States of Europe), in which a modern-day Pax Romana, and a renewed Europe in the image of fascist (and imperial) Italy, were prescribed by Savinio as a favourable outcome of the conflict which he was chronicling.[413] By 1944, however, Savinio inverts the terms of his prognosis by instead advancing 'a theory that wanted Italy to disappear completely into a European totality'.[414] The corrective Savinio prescribes now against the ongoing catastrophe is, in short, a wholesale repudiation of Italian chauvinism in favour of a 'transition from modern-day Europe, divided into nations, into Europe as "one nation"', which is to say into a united, democratic Europe.[415] This call for a united Europe, though, did not necessarily spell out a fully-fledged political programme, as in the case of Altiero Spinelli's and Ernesto Rossi's *Ventotene Manifesto*, today one of the founding texts of the European Union, published in 1944 but written, in 1941, during Spinelli's and Rossi's imprisonment as anti-fascist dissidents on the island of Ventotene.[416] Unlike Spinelli's and Rossi's federalist manifesto, in fact, in *Sorte dell'Europa* Savinio declines to elucidate what a united Europe should or ought to look like, instead limiting himself to the somewhat uncertain, if hopeful claim that 'only an idea will be able to unite [Europeans]. Only an idea will be able to *make* Europe'—that idea

[412] Savinio, *Opere*, p. 536.
[413] Alberto Savinio, 'Archivio [S. U. d'Europa]', *Il Mediterraneo*, 16 September 1939, pp. 4–5.
[414] Dainotto, p. 28.
[415] Savinio, *Sorte dell'Europa*, p. 34.
[416] For a discussion of Savinio and his ideas on Europe, see Andrea Gazzoni, 'Dilettante e militante: l'Europa di Savinio (1943-1948)', *Nemla Italian Studies*, 36 (2014), 69–99.

being, for Savinio, the idea of a social community, with an overt nod to socialism, lauded as 'the latest expression of Europeanism' (*NE* 151).[417]

Unsurprisingly, given what we have come to know as his literary practice, Savinio reworked—and amplified—many of the pieces contained in *Sorte dell'Europa* as entries for *Nuova enciclopedia*. And this was the case, too, for the eponymous entry Savinio dedicated to the subject of Europe, incidentally one of the book's lengthiest. Across thirteen pages replete with philosophical musings that deliberately eschew any attempt at geopolitical concision, Savinio anoints Europe, and the European spirit, as both enemy and cure to all encroaching totalitarianisms. For Europe, Savinio begins, 'is God's grave' (*NE* 139), if by God we are to intend, as Savinio does, all 'supreme and centralizing authority' (*NE* 141). And if Europe is God's grave, then 'any totalitarianism in Europe is destined to perish' (*NE* 150), since Europe dissolves and multiplies all that is one and the same; 'the European spirit', Savinio chimes, 'abhors lumps' (*NE* 143). Which also means, for Savinio, that 'the two most recent deicides committed by Europe go by the names of Hitler and Mussolini' (*NE* 143). That both of these Axis powers were in themselves *European* empires, however, was of course something of a vexing inconvenience for Savinio—and one to which he remedied by declaring Nazism an Asian (which is to say non-European) phenomenon, 'a tumour at the heart of Europe' (*NE* 140). This Orientalist sleight of hand not only enabled Savinio to shore up his sanitized version of Europe as an entity wholly alien to totalitarian violence, but also to downplay the crimes perpetrated by the Italians in comparison to those committed by the Germans, condemned here as the least European of all European peoples: '*ces asiatiques de l'Europe*' (*NE* 140), that is, Europe's Asiatics. Unlike the belligerent Germans, 'unhappy and dangerous' (*NE* 182) like the ancient subjects of a theocratic regime in the East, the Italians are simply faulted for being the unwitting victims of a dictator who for two decades forced

[417] Savinio, *Sorte dell'Europa*, p. 36.

them ‘to feign an ardent inclination towards militarism’, when in fact ‘hostile, like no other people, to militarism itself’.[418]

Savinio’s (avowedly Eurocentric) dichotomy between (peaceful) Europeans and (warmongering) non-Europeans serves him, in the end, to stage a somewhat simplified history of the two world wars:

> Short history of the First World War. The ‘European’, represented by England, France, Italy and the other allies, fights and destroys the non-European represented by the Central Powers and their allies, the Bulgarians and the Turks.
> Short history of the Second World War: the ‘European’, represented by France, England and the United States, fights and destroys the non-European represented by Nazism and Fascism. And this time—important fact—the European comes from the outside; this time it is from America that the European comes to fight and destroy the non-European risen in Europe. (*NE* 144)

The two world wars, in other words, can be chalked up to a cultural clash between a democratic, liberal Europe (Savinio conveniently leaves out the contributions of the Soviet Union) and its aggressive (read Asiatic) Other, a conflict which Savinio frequently couches, moreover, in pathological terms: just as Europe was once decimated by the spread of the Black Death, Savinio says, so it lately found itself imperilled by two metastatic ‘tumours’ (the ‘two Asiatic formations’ of Nazism and Fascism) that for years gnawed at its tissues (*NE* 145). What is most notable from the passage above, however, is not so much that Savinio should demote *de facto* Europeans to non-Europeans—after all, British propaganda had been referring to Germans as Huns since at least the Great War—but that he should promote *other* non-Europeans, the Americans, to the coveted status of Europeans. Savinio’s Europe is, by implication, less a geographical entity than a mobile concept, a nomad spirit looking to the West so as to ‘keep up with the sun’, according to a westering trajectory that travels from one

[418] Savinio, *Sorte dell’Europa*, p. 67.

continent to another (*NE* 145). More specifically, the European *Geist* first burgeons, by Savinio's account, in pre-Socratic Greece and Ancient Rome, continues its life in modern-day France and England ('the most European of Europeans', Savinio concedes, 'are the English' [*NE* 150]), before finally crossing the Atlantic into the United States, where it finds its latest refuge. 'Europe', Savinio concludes, 'stops on America's Pacific coast' (*NE* 146).

Savinio's vision of Europe wavers, in the end, between a newly-found Atlanticism and a repurposed Orientalism chillingly redolent of the divisions between East and West once touted by none other than Hitler and Mussolini—at one point, Savinio even assures us that, overrun though Europe may be one day by the Slavs, the European spirit will not die. As a statement on European unity—and one which could claim, too, some degree of prescience, especially insofar as it anticipated the power struggle that would later define the Cold War—Savinio's reflections on Europe are certainly a relevant episode in the cultural history of European federalism. What interests us here, however, is the way in which Savinio's Europe dovetails, and overlaps, with his textual practice as a literary essayist: that is to say, with his professed dilettantism. For dilettantism, Savinio writes, 'is the greatest condition of the European spirit' (*NE* 148): like the dilettante, Europe survives precisely by carving out subjunctive spaces within constative ones, according to a 'democracy of ideas' in which 'no idea is worthy of being put at the centre' (*NE* 147). Unlike the non-European, goaded into war and violence by subjection to one idea ('God, credos, myths, fables'), the European is wise enough to concede that 'life does not tend towards any goal, it craves no conquest, it hopes for no reward, it aspires to no victory' (*NE* 148); wise enough, too, 'to recognize dilettantism as a solution to the problem of life, […] to recognize that life is not a problem' (*NE* 148). Were a European mind to be infected by a thirst for vexing questions, as in Aldous Huxley's case (Savinio likely has in mind Huxley's study of Eastern mysticism, *The Perennial Philosophy*, published in 1945), it is beyond Europe that, Savinio adds, such

dilemmas are then sought. ‘Do we need to specify from what source this wretched man hopes to extinguish his thirst?’, Savinio asks, before replying, with yet more Orientalist spite: ‘India’ (*NE* 148).

The true European, by contrast, is a dilettante: someone who lives, like Musil’s hero, as if life itself were an essay. In the final image crowning Savino’s entry on Europe, and which Savinio also renders, though with some variations, in painting (Figure 6), Savinio captures

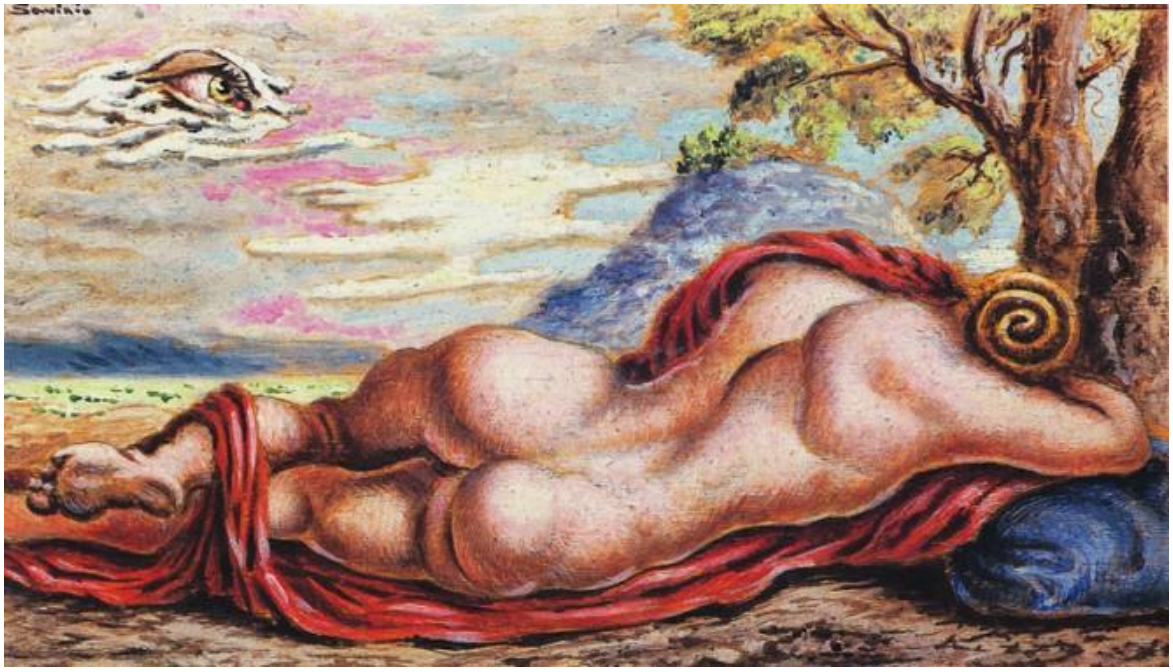


Figure 6. Alberto Savinio, ‘Il riposo di Hermaphrodito’ [Hermaphrodito's Rest], 1944-45. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

this sense of possibility by personifying Europe as an androgynous figure—one already at the centre of his avant-garde debut novel, *Hermaphrodito* (1918)—peacefully asleep in a quiet, domestic setting:

> An enormous, erect phallus, flanked by a moustache as if by two black sabres, rules over the breast-shaped fields of the non-Europeans. In the midst of Europe, on an agreeably slim sofa, surrounded by comfortable and silent appliances, under an indirect and suffuse light, sleeps Ermafrodito. (*NE* 150)

Disarmed (in the literal sense of the word) and disarming, far away from the phalli-sabres of the belligerent and rural East, Europe is represented as a peaceful figure, at once male and female, resting urbanely on a sofa, its head spiralling centrifugally into an expansive field of possibilities, or into 'a play of ideas' (*NE* 313). As such, Europe is elevated by Savinio into a historical-geographical equivalent to *Nuova enciclopedia*, which is, in turn, as Andrea Gazzoni points out, 'the textual form of a democratic Europe'. [419] For just as each entry in *Nuova enciclopedia* eschews unitary definitions in favour of digressive offshoots, and just as each entry can be multiplied into yet more entries under the same title, so Europe itself becomes decentred and diffracted, mobile and amorphous. Or, to put it differently: the European spirit is, for Savinio, an *essayistic* spirit.

Thus, at the very juncture of Savinio's reckoning with the disastrous legacies of fascism, he not only chooses the essay, but Europe, too. For while the hope for a united Europe came to compensate, in Savinio, for Italy's collective shame after fascism, the literary essay, with its staple veneer of genteel detachment, afforded a sheltered space where one's politics could be confronted, or otherwise elided: out of (more or less pronounced) connivance, into the liberal noncommitment that Savinio had made synonymous with dilettantism. And this might also explain why Savinio's subsequent canonization, and revival, in the late seventies, after a decade of civil strife and political terrorism, became premised on the popular image of an eccentric author either quaintly aloof from politics or unjustly persecuted by the regime. Massimo Cacciari, for instance, claimed at the time that if Savinio could be read as a European thinker at all, it was thanks to the 'anti-totalitarian vein' in his writing, which puts him in the same company as some of the 'major practitioners of contemporary essayism [in

[419] Gazzoni, p. 90.

Europe], from Musil to Canetti'.[420] Plainly, then, Savinio's reflections on Europe and totalitarianism, written from the midst of confinement in wartime Rome, did much to restore his posthumous fortunes as a cosmopolitan, self-declaredly *European* writer. What's more, by so overtly constellating the European with the essayistic, Savinio also opened up a perspective that proved even more compellingly urgent to the postwar generation of essayists, from Claudio Magris to W.G. Sebald, to which I will turn in Part Two of my thesis.

But for all the critical acclaim subsequently lavished on Savinio as a free-spirited champion of essayistic levity and European democracy, this chapter has sought to read Savinio's idiosyncratic use of the essayistic (as dilettantism), together with its transnational equivalent (Europe), *back* to the lacerating circumstances under which they were first forged, out of the rubble of World War Two, in the exuberant work that is *Nuova enciclopedia*. Almost a mock response to the serious-minded encyclopaedism typical of, say, Bompiani's *Dizionario letterario*, *Nuova enciclopedia* proliferated, over the years, into an essayistic mosaic that was conceived, as consensus soured into dissensus, behind the curtains of withdrawal (to paraphrase Woolf) and subsequently corralled while in hiding. One might wonder, in the end, why Savinio never published *Nuova enciclopedia*, or, for that matter, why he left it unfinished, even though he kept revising it—and augmenting it with yet more entries—until at least 1951, a year before his death. Paola Italia speculates, for one, that Savinio 'might have felt stifled by his indecision over which entries to publish'.[421] I would like to think, however, that the dilettante's—and by extent, the compiler's—work, as Savinio was fond of repeating, precluded its own end. It seems apposite, then, to conclude with one of the entries that Savinio entrusted not to his own encyclopaedia, but to the knowledge-ark purportedly

[420] Massimo Cacciari, 'Savinio europeo', in *Mistero dello sguardo. Per un profilo di Alberto Savinio* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1992), pp. 15–19 (p. 17).
[421] Paola Italia, 'Nuove voci di *Nuova enciclopedia*', in *Maestra ironia. Saggi per Luca Curti*, ed. by Francesca Nassi and Antonio Zollino (Lugano: Agora, 2018), pp. 137–53 (p. 146).

represented by Bompiani's *Dizionario letterario*. In a brief profile on Fabrizio del Dongo, the protagonist of Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839)—to whom we will briefly return in Chapter Five, with W.G. Sebald—Savinio offers this additional gloss on endings and dilettantism, here repurposed under the different name of 'Stendhalism', which presents itself as a final coda to the common thread that has insistently weaved itself in and out of the middle diptych of my thesis, from Connolly to Savinio: the pleasures of compilation.

> Fabrizio is the essence of Stendhal: Stendhalism made flesh. That constant desiring without concluding. Who doesn't wish to prolong pleasure, […] to free it from a conclusion? But unfortunately, pleasure […] extinguishes itself. Fabrizio, that is to say Stendhalism, is a perpetual "preparation". […] Fabrizio, that is to say Stendhalism, is alive with desire so long as he desires without concluding. Why does Fabrizio betray Stendhalism in the end, betrays himself? Fabrizio, in the end, "concludes" with Clelia Conti and dies. For to conclude is to die.[422]

[422] Alberto Savinio, 'Fabrizio del Dongo', in *Dizionario letterario Bompiani*, VIII, p. 324.

PART II

I will have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining. We do not remember. We rewrite memory much as history is rewritten. How can one remember thirst?

Chris Marker, *Sans soleil* (1983)

CHAPTER FOUR

Claudio Magris, *Danube* and the Literary Form of Mitteleuropa

> Shall we be destined to the days of eternity, on holy-days, as well as working-days, to be shewing the *relicks of learning*, as monks do the relicks of their saints—without working one—one single miracle with them?
> —Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759)

> Out of the cracks in the system forged according to the Soviet model something is reborn: not only a nostalgia for Mitteleuropa, but even the form appropriate to it.
> —Claudio Magris, *Danube* (1986)

When Patrick Creagh's English translation of Claudio Magris's now-classic *Danube* first appeared in the summer of 1989, a puzzled reviewer wondered what kind of book this was. For whether this was at all a travel book, as its subtitle seemed to suggest, he was 'not so sure', calling it rather 'history, spiritual autobiography, philosophy, and criticism'.[423] What Patrick Taylor-Martin felt sure of, however, was that the book's author was all too prone to quotation (in the first thirty pages, Taylor-Martin reckons, there are no less than twenty-seven references, literary or otherwise), so that the Danube became, in the end, 'a river of words, thick with the bodies of dead writers'.[424] Another reviewer agreed: 'too much in it is made of paper only', glossed a yet-unknown W.G. Sebald, upbraiding his fellow academic-raconteur for something he would soon begin doing himself, and to much greater critical acclaim no less: namely, surrounding 'even that which is before his eyes with all kinds of secondary references'.[425] As such, *Danube* ends up (readers are warned elsewhere) 'rather pretentious for the Anglo-Saxon palate', its journey 'largely cerebral', its author a specimen, what's more, of 'that species which sends the English to their smelling salts, the intellectual'.[426] And

[423] Taylor-Martin, p. 26.
[424] Taylor-Martin, p. 26.
[425] W.G. Sebald, 'Review of Claudio Magris, *Donau: Biographie eines Flusses*', *Austrian Studies*, I (1990), 183–84.
[426] The first two quotations are from Roger Clarke, 'Mummies and patriarchs', *Sunday Times*, 30 July 1989, p. 9. The third is taken from Nicholas Shakespeare, 'Navigator in history's tumult', *Daily Telegraph*, 2 June 1990, p. 11.

how all the more unfortunate, echoed a reviewer from across the pond, that Magris should have 'chosen to approach his subject in a stream-of-consciousness manner', with 'labyrinthine sentences' and 'abstruse bits of history' suggesting one topic after another, the text meandering 'as wilfully as the river that is its protagonist'.[427]

Such was Magris's essayistic penchant for the second-hand that when, in 1999, the Spanish writer Javier Marías began awarding dukedoms in his fictional kingdom of Redonda, Magris chose for himself the title of 'Duke of Segunda Mano', meaning duke of the second-hand (Sebald, for his part, would be honoured as Duke of Vertigo). Which makes it all the more surprising, then, that in spite of all this (or perhaps because of it) *Danube* should have so quickly become an international success as the mid-career work of a writer who was credited with reviving, by dint of this one book alone, the concept (and the myth) of Mitteleuropa—that multicultural, multilingual 'middle-Europe' once part of the Habsburg empire, though long since displaced (or as Milan Kundera would have said, 'kidnapped') by Soviet rule and the barbed divisions of the Iron Curtain.

I concluded the previous chapter with the image of a slumbering, androgynous figure, peacefully at rest 'in the midst of Europe', away from the drawn 'sabres' of a totalitarian, warmongering East (*NE* 150). This, Alberto Savinio proclaimed in 1944, was the image of a Europe soon to be free, conveyed to us in the literary mode most appropriate to it: that of a tolerant, untroubled essayism. But what happens, one might ask, when the reviled, sabre-rattling East of Savinio's fantasy extends its totalitarian grip to 'the midst of Europe', and thus to its recumbent representative? In moving forward from the mid-century moment of Savinio's proclamation on to the last decade of the Cold War, this chapter can be read as interrogating the posthumous life of Savinio's allegory—or how, and why, the form of the

[427] 'Review of *Danube* by Claudio Magris', *Kirkus Reviews*, 15 August 1989 <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/a/claudio-magris-2/danube/> [accessed 11 August 2023].

essay should have not only endured but burgeoned indeed as *the* expressive medium most proper to 'the midst of Europe', just when the very idea of such a centre was put under pressure, if not altogether erased by the politics of the Iron Curtain. Put in terms less metaphorical, it will be my contention here that the Cold War division of Mitteleuropa, as it will be called henceforth, became the occasion for a renewed engagement with essayistic prose, and that Magris's experimentation with the essay form in *Danube* ought to be read, in turn, as one of the defining moments in the 1980s rediscovery of the idea (and legacy) of Mitteleuropa. The present chapter is thus as much about the revival of a transnational, multilingual space thought to be long gone, as it is about the literary form which quickly came to be associated with it.

Accordingly, my discussion begins with the thorny question of *Danube*'s genre, before proceeding to sketch out a twentieth-century overview of Mitteleuropa as a political, cultural, and intellectual project. Far from being a novel-in-disguise, or the preparatory draft of a novelist-to-be, *Danube* is, I argue, a work altogether in step with the time of its writing, which saw the literary reappropriation of Central European space as both a symptom of anti-Soviet resentment and a longing for European unity. Only recently, however, has the question of genre begun to animate critical discussions concerning the Cold War moment of Mitteleuropa's revival. Yvonne Zivkovic, for instance, made the case that '[t]he form that lends itself most formidably to experimental writing and which has in fact played a crucial role for the dissemination of the new wave of Mitteleuropa writing is the essay'.[428] But before further disentangling the implications of this claim, the second section of this chapter will begin by asking what exactly Mitteleuropa is, and how it came to provide the central concern and overarching background in Magris's *Danube*. Mitteleuropa, as will become clear, is not

[428] Yvonne Zivkovic, *The Literary Politics of Mitteleuropa: Reconfiguring Spatial Memory in Austrian and Yugoslav Literature after 1945* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2021), p. 17.

so much a geographical toponym delimiting a fixed territory as, rather, a cultural legacy variously upheld by its most vocal advocates as a synonym for transnational tolerance and liberal humanism—the principal virtues most often ascribed to the bygone Habsburg empire which once kept these territories together. And if, as many of its advocates held, Mitteleuropa was to be celebrated as a defence of the fragment against the whole, or rather of the individual against the totalitarian state, what better textual equivalent for it, then, than a form so radical, to quote Adorno, 'in accentuating the fragmentary, the partial rather than the total' as, indeed, the essay?[429] This, at least, is the view that has most often been advanced in recent discussions on the subject. In the third and final section of this chapter, through a close reading of one of *Danube*'s central sections, I venture, however, a somewhat different argument capable of accounting for the fortunate alliance, embodied in (and by) *Danube*, between Mitteleuropean space and essayistic form. The essay, I argue, became 'the key mode of writing which permeates Central Europeanness' not, or at least not only, because its fragmentary form easily lent itself to a fragmented space (that of occupied, forgotten Mitteleuropa); rather, it did so because, as the genre of quotation and (re)citation, and thus as a medium that frequently styles itself as a textual latecomer, the essay gave voice to a sense of posteriority and belatedness which also became one of the most pervasive, if understudied aspects of Mitteleuropa's revival.[430] Simply put, the time of Mitteleuropa is the time of—and thus for—the essay.

[429] Adorno, p. 157.
[430] Jessie Labov, *Transatlantic Central Europe: Contesting Geography and Redefining Culture beyond the Nation* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2019), p. 3.

‘a drowned novel’: the genre of *Danube*

That Magris was born in Trieste, the very city where, as Churchill famously declared, the Iron Curtain once ended, certainly makes him as much an exponent as an expert of that kaleidoscopic Mitteleuropa he helped to popularize at the mere age of twenty-four, with a dissertation (now a landmark of the field) on what he then dubbed the ‘Habsburg myth’. A one-time bustling emporium of the Austrian Crown, a port city located on the Adriatic sea, in Italy’s far north-east, and therefore a borderland, too, on the very doorstep of the Balkan peninsula, Trieste was also for a time one of the lesser-known, though by no means less central, capitals of modernism. It is here, among other places, that the modernist novel was arguably inaugurated, with Joyce beginning work on *Ulysses* (a novel whose hero, you will recall, is the son of a Habsburg Jew) while teaching English to the local bourgeoisie. And it was in Trieste, moreover, that Italo Svevo, Joyce’s friend and one-time pupil (for some the model, too, behind Bloom) published *Zeno’s Conscience* (1923), that Rainer Maria Rilke wrote his *Duino Elegies* (1923), and that Edoardo Weiss introduced psychoanalysis to the Italian public. These, of course, are only some of the most celebrated instances of the kind of rarefied atmosphere—urbanite, cosmopolitan, literary—in which Magris grew up, during the turbulent years of the Second World War and the no less turbulent years of its aftermath (his father, Magris is keen to remind us, learned English from none other than Stanislaus Joyce). But for much of its history Trieste was also a battlefield of contested nationalities and warring ideologies: once regarded a loyalist outpost of the Habsburg dynasty, in the early twentieth century the city was claimed by Slovenes and Italians alike (his wife, Magris also reminds us, was one of 300,000 Italian refugees driven out of Istria and Dalmatia after these became part of Tito’s Yugoslavia).[431] It is not so surprising, then, that Trieste should have proved so

[431] It was from Trieste’s main square—to cite only a few of the most infamous episodes from the city’s past—that Mussolini announced the racial laws adopted by his regime in 1938; and it was on Trieste’s outskirts that, a

congenial a place for a work as keenly aware of history's ironies and catastrophes as *Danube*, a tour de force whose very appeal was thus in no small part due to its author's credentials as 'a polymath and polyglot, almost uniquely fitted by origins, taste and attainments to do what he has done'.[432]

And what Magris has done is to chronicle the course of the Danube, with its constellation of peoples and customs, one anecdote or quotation after another, from its disputed source in the Black Forest—an old gutter in a drenched meadow, or so Magris finds—to its maze-like delta on the Black Sea. If the idea was in itself a rather straightforward one, its four-hundred-page execution—nine geographically-grouped chapters, 170 prose vignettes of varying length—was lauded as a masterwork from the very beginning. Or rather, it was not simply a masterpiece, but a masterpiece of many things: of travel (it is, Ian Thomson ventured, 'an odyssey'); of encyclopaedic learning (the book, Sebald conceded, was an 'undertaking of daunting proportions [and] dazzling erudition'); even, though for no particular virtue of the author himself, a masterpiece of timing, its English translation virtually appearing on the very eve of the fall of the Berlin Wall, thereby guiding us, one reviewer noted, 'into a forbidden Europe that is suddenly free'.[433] In France, meanwhile, Magris's deft combination of ironic self-inquiry, learned quotation, and rambling curiosity owed him the title of a 'Montaigne èlectrisé', a galvanized Montaigne—an epithet that is not entirely amiss when considering how quickly, as did Montaigne's *Essais*, *Danube* quite literally became sui generis, spawning its own genre as well as its own imitators, from Péter Esterházy's parodic version in *The Glance of Countess Hahn-Hahn (Down the Danube)* (1991), to David Barison's and Daniel

few years later, the Nazis operated Italy's only concentration camp equipped with a crematorium, namely the Risiera di San Sabba.

[432] Colin Welch, 'Prodigiously learned guide', *Spectator*, 5 August 1989, pp. 28–29 (p. 28).

[433] Ian Thomson, 'Last waltz along the blue Danube', *Independent*, 1 July 1989, p. 32; Sebald, 'Review', p. 183; Shakespeare, 'Navigator in history's tumult'.

Ross's filmic excursion upriver in *The Ister* (2004).[434] And though the tradition could be said to stretch at least as far back as Rousseau, *Danube* certainly set the precedent for the easily recognizable (and easily parodied) blend of travel, memoir, and essayism that was soon to launch Sebald into worldwide literary fame. Put simply, *Danube*'s critical fortune was such that if Magris is routinely bruited as a possible winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, it is, Robert Kaplan points out, 'because of this one book, which is not even a novel'.[435]

That *Danube* 'is not even a novel', however, becomes a much more contested point according to where, and by whom, it is read. In Britain, for example, the book was marketed as a travelogue, and as such it was even equipped with an index of names and with a double-spread map of the river, complete with relevant toponyms of the places visited by Magris. The book's declared affiliation with the travel genre was further underscored by the addition of a subtitle, so that the English edition became *Danube: A Sentimental Journey from the Source to the Black Sea*—a clear nod, of course, to Laurence Sterne's classic *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768). Robert Kaplan, in his review of the book, went so far as to crown (and by so doing domesticate) *Danube* as the 'supreme example' of a genre, that of intellectual travel, which numbered among its ranks such canonical texts as Patrick Leigh Fermor's *A Time of Gifts* (1977, though written in the early 1930s) or, more pointedly, Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941).[436] In Italy, however, where attempts to canonize travel writing have long been thwarted by the genre's perceived lack of literariness, the travel label is usually downplayed in favour of such hyphenated coinages as 'novel-essay', which emphasize, instead, Magris's credentials as a scholar. In one of the book's first reviews in Italy, Gian Luigi Beccaria captures the gist of *Danube*'s wider reception at home

[434] Evelyne Pieller, 'Aux sources du Danube', *Le Magazine Littéraire*, February 1989, pp. 77–78 (p. 77).
[435] Robert D. Kaplan, 'A Globe-Trotting Celebration of Erudition', *Wall Street Journal*, 20 February 2015 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-globe-trotting-celebration-of-erudition-1424472521> [accessed 11 August 2023].
[436] Kaplan, 'A Globe-Trotting Celebration'.

by noting how the 'erudite Baedeker eventually turns into a stirring novel-essay': *Danube*, we are told, is less a book of travel than 'an essay on the plural, the metamorphic'.[437] As for Magris himself, when asked to define his magnum opus a few years later, he responded by upholding instead its generic ambiguity: it was, he insisted, at once 'a sentimental journey à la Sterne', 'a Decameron of the Danube', and 'a drowned novel, a kind of Bildungsroman'.[438]

Of all these definitions, which hint now at the irony of the sentimental traveller, now at the imaginative skill of the raconteur, the last is perhaps the most suggestive, and the one I will turn my attention to. On its surface, Magris's allusion to the Bildungsroman signals that his was, at least to a certain extent, an autobiographical narrative of sorts. The narrator, Magris concedes, 'describes this world and ends up detecting in it his own reflection', just as 'that painter in Borges's parable, who paints landscapes, mountains, seas and rivers only to realize at the end that he's drawn his own portrait'.[439] Which is, as it happens, a case in point that could easily be extended to much of travel writing as a whole. Rebecca West, for one, recalls how D.H. Lawrence, having arrived in Florence once, dashed from the railway station to his hotel room in order to hammer out articles about the place 'with nothing more to go on than a glimpse of it', for to write about place was, in his view, to write 'about the state of his own soul at that moment'.[440] And it was precisely as a snapshot of her own soul that Rebecca West's travelogue on Yugoslavia was later received by one of her friends, for whom *Black Lamb* was 'not so much a book about Yugoslavia as a book about Rebecca West'—a claim that has since endlessly been reprised to voice commendation as much as condemnation.[441] Even a work as accurately and painstakingly researched as *Danube*, for its part, didn't fail to

[437] Gian Luigi Beccaria, 'Anse', *L'indice dei libri del mese*, February 1987, p. 13. Translation mine.
[438] Claudio Magris, 'Danubio e post-Danubio', *Rivista di studi ungheresi*, 7 (1992), 21–32 (pp. 28, 25). Translation mine.
[439] Magris, 'Danubio e post-Danubio', p. 27.
[440] Rebecca West, 'Elegy', in *Rebecca West: A Celebration* (London: Penguin, 1978), pp. 383–395 (p. 388).
[441] *Selected Letters of Rebecca West*, p. 175.

stir the discontent of a number of readers who saw in it something the book was plainly never meant to be: namely, an accurate and exhaustive account of the countries and peoples living on the banks of the Danube. For *Danube*, as Magris says apropos of the book's title, is not *The Danube*: not a book solely about 'the river, its geography and its history', nor for that matter 'an exhaustive study on Mitteleuropa'.[442] It is, rather, the tale of a journey made by a character who, by Magris's account, ventures beyond the lecture hall into the multifaceted world of his studies, his readings and, by implication, his identity. Significantly, then, the source of the river Breg near Furtwangen, where *Danube*-the-book begins and Danube-the-river (at least by some accounts) springs into being, also marks the very place where, Magris tells us, 'twenty-three years ago […] the course of my life was decided', ostensibly referring to the publication, in 1963, of the monograph that inaugurated his academic career. So much, then, for *Danube* as an autobiographical Bildungsroman—but what is one to make of Magris's definition of the book as a novel, and 'a drowned novel' at that?[443]

The relationship between rivers and novels—and the rinsing of novels in rivers—is perhaps as old as the history of the Italian-language novel itself. It was Alessandro Manzoni, widely acknowledged as the pioneer of the form's belated development in Italy, who first popularized this motif with his famous rewritings of *The Betrothed* (1827), a novel whose earlier drafts had to be painstakingly Tuscanized so as to conform to the literary standard set by the fourteenth-century triumvirate of Italian letters (Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio). Hence, Manzoni's now-proverbial claim that he travelled down to Florence from his native Milan in order to 'rinse his washing in the Arno' (*risciacquare i panni in Arno*, the Arno being of course the river traversing Florence). The river chronicled by Magris, however, is not the linguistically pure Arno, but the polyglot Danube, whose 2,850-km course through no less

[442] Magris, 'Danubio e post-Danubio', p. 23.
[443] Claudio Magris, *Danube*, trans. by Patrick Creagh (London: Collins Harvill, 1989), p. 17. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as *D*, followed by the page number(s).

than ten countries easily makes it the world's most international river basin. To rinse one's washing in the 'muddy yellow' and 'murky' (*D* 175) waters of the Danube, then, was for Magris to reclaim the kind of linguistic plurality once banished from the hallowed precincts of Italian literary prose. Which certainly explains, in turn, the profusion in his book of words and idioms from other languages, chiefly from the German and French, but also from the Latin and the Triestine dialect—*Danube* ends, for example, with the quotation of a verse in vernacular by the Triestine poet Biagio Marin. Thus, while *Danube* may have been written in Italian by an Italian author, its breadth and ambition make it not so much, or rather not only, Italian as European—a characterization which, together with Magris's own advertised self-image as a writer of proudly European faith, certainly had much to do, too, with the book's fortunes abroad.

That said, the reference to *Danube* as a drowned, submerged novel had also, albeit implicitly, a clear political import: *slavi risciacquati* (or, as the Triestine say, *s'ciavi resentài*, meaning rinsed Slavs) was the name commonly given, during the two decades of fascist rule, to people who were forced, as was Magris's wife, to Italianize their Slavic surname as part of the regime's policy of ethnolinguistic purity, especially in frontier areas such as Trieste and its composite hinterland. To rinse one's surname meant, in this sense, to cleanse oneself of the stain of Slavic barbarism, and by so doing to pledge allegiance to the allegedly superior Italian race—a chilling anticipation, as it were, of the campaigns of mass violence later unleashed by Italy's wartime occupation of Yugoslavia. To rinse one's novel in the Danube was then, by contrast, to reverse the linguistic violence inflicted on minorities like the *slavi risciacquati*, and by so doing to remind one's readers of the kind of aberration latent in Manzoni's proverbial rinsing in the Arno, especially when put in the service of ideas of racial purity. Magris's own variation on the motif of the drowned novel is thus driven by an unmistakably ethical imperative: that of reinscribing into awareness the many forgotten lives

that can be found 'tangled on the banks of the river'.[444] And if, as Magris concedes, *Danube* often ends up sounding like a catalogue of catastrophes, it is because the book 'is also an attempt at redemption on behalf of the many anonymous victims' of history—a move that clearly rehashes (albeit with a more overtly political intention) the kind of redemptive ambitions typically ascribed to modernist aesthetics.[445]

For all the implications, political as well as literary, that novels dipped in rivers may suggest, however, *Danube* is not, at least in any recognizable sense of the word, a novel—though attempts to secure its status as one have variously been made by recourse to, say, the genre of the novel-essay. Richard Flanagan, for example, has recently made the case, in his introduction to the English edition of the text, that *Danube* 'cleaves to the world of the novel' by way of 'its openness to the strangeness of experience' and 'the delight in paradox': criteria so loose they might well extend to all imaginative literature as such.[446] Bruno Schacherl sees in *Danube* 'the novel of a novel that will never be written', just as Proust's *Recherche* was, for its part, a novel about a novel that came into being at the moment of writing.[447] Ernestina Pellegrini, on the other hand, situates *Danube* at a moment of transition, in Magris's career, between academic prose and a markedly more narrative freedom, one that enables Magris to slip away from the 'essayistic cage' in which the novelist-in-disguise had long been forced to dwell—a formulation that also evokes Rebecca Solnit's definition of the essay as 'a kind of literary birdcage capable of containing only small chirping subjects, as distinct from the lion's den of the novel'.[448] Gian Luigi Beccaria, in his review of 1987, likewise appoints

[444] Magris, 'Danubio e post-Danubio', p. 28.
[445] Magris, 'Danubio e post-Danubio', p. 27.
[446] Richard Flanagan, 'Introduction', in Claudio Magris, *Danube*, trans. by Patrick Creagh (London: Penguin, 2016), pp. vii–xvi (p. xiii).
[447] Bruno Schacherl, 'Di là e di qua dal fiume', *Rinascita*, 13 December 1986, pp. 19–20 (p. 19). Translation mine.
[448] Ernestina Pellegrini, *Epica sull'acqua. L'opera letteraria di Claudio Magris* (Bergamo: Moretti e Vitali, 1997), p. 49. Translation mine; Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Penguin, 2000), p. 124.

Danube as the turning point on a teleological line running from the critical essay to the genre of all genres, the novel. For only by abandoning the former, Beccaria insists,

> could Magris bring to fruition that way he had of writing essays, ever so attentive and rich, yet composed with the melancholy of one who felt obliged to skewer and desiccate a butterfly that ought to be fixed instead in the fleeting moment of its flutter.[449]

Only this, of course, is precisely what Virginia Woolf accomplished in what became, ironically enough, one of her most celebrated essays—though her insect of choice was a moth rather than a butterfly.[450] All the same, what all these appraisals clearly share is yet another sense of *Danube* as an underwater novel: to be more precise, a form that is not yet a full-fledged novel, but one whose outlines *as* a novel are slowly coming into view, hovering just beneath the ripples on the surface before finally emerging in the shape of Magris's later novels. The move, I suspect, speaks as much of an urge to aggrandize Magris's magnum opus by bestowing on it the honorific title of a novel—for how much more fitting, we are to think, if Magris were to win the Nobel for a narrative masterpiece, rather than a work that 'is not even a novel'—as of an anxiety to neatly contain Magris's career arc within the facile paradigm of a critic-turned-novelist, as in the more familiar case of Umberto Eco.

But what if, I want to suggest, *Danube* were less one critic's circumspect yet inevitable turn to the novel's promised land, than a mode of writing altogether in step with its time? What if, to put it differently, *Danube* was not so much looking forward to a novel-to-come, but

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[449] Beccaria, 'Anse'.

[450] I am referring, of course, to 'The Death of the Moth' (1942), an essay with a decisive influence, as we will see in the next chapter, on Sebald's own writing. Interestingly, the same observation made by Beccaria on *Danube*—on how, that is, the essay merely functions as a preparatory draft for a novel to come—was once made by Mark Schorer apropos of 'The Death of the Moth', which, Schorer wrote, merely consisted of 'finger exercises, drills—even when full-dress—for the novelist's sensibility'. See Mark Schorer, 'Virginia Woolf', *Yale Review*, XXXII, December 1942, p. 377.

backward at a form that had apparently survived 'midcentury proclamations of its demise'?[451] And what if, in the last analysis, the return of this form was of a piece, too, with the return of an idea—that of Mitteleuropa—rekindled by the Iron Curtain? In what follows, before unspooling these various conjectures, I will sketch a brief cultural and intellectual history of Mitteleuropa, from its origin as a colonial, pan-Germanist shorthand to its revival as a transnational banner of resistance.

'the colours of my life': the idea of Mitteleuropa

When, at a joint meeting in early 2023, the governments of Vienna and Budapest upheld their decision not to send military assistance to war-torn Ukraine—a move then glaringly out of step with the rest of the European Union—the *Kyiv Independent* wrote an article whose headline ('Austria, Hungary agree not to supply weapons to Ukraine') prompted more than just a nudge and a wink.[452] For whether or not inadvertent, the obvious allusion, by way of a silent comma, to the formerly hyphenated entity of Austria-Hungary at once came to serve as a reminder of shared culpability in the past, and of missed opportunity in the present: after all, wasn't Austria-Hungary's expansionist drive one of the causes that precipitated the Great War? And should not Russia's invasion of Ukraine a century later represent an urgent clarion call to be now on the right side of history? Be that as it may, the two countries' refusal to deliver military aid to Ukraine was proof enough for some that the temporizing strategy that once made the old empire famous—its so-called *fortwursteln*, meaning an ability to (quite literally) muddle through—was alive and well in its present-day heirs. For as Magris defines it in *Danube*, *fortwursteln* names a peculiarly Habsburg mode of governance premised on the

[451] Atkins, p. 11.
[452] 'Austria, Hungary agree not to supply weapons to Ukraine', *Kyiv Independent*, 31 January 2023 <https://kyivindependent.com/defense-ministers-austria-hungary-agree-not-to-supply-weapons-to-ukraine/> [accessed 11 August 2023].

deferral of matters often deemed pressing yet unsolvable (such as the national demands once advanced by the empire's ethnic minorities) as a way of preserving the status quo. Or, to quote Magris himself: 'the reluctance to act, the defensive posture of those who do not aim to win but to survive, who dislike wars because, like Franz Joseph, they know that wars are always lost' (*D* 135).

The proverbial lethargy of the Habsburg state machine, famously satirized by Robert Musil in the ineffective deliberations of the *Parallelaktion*, the committee tasked with organizing Franz Joseph's platinum jubilee in *The Man without Qualities*, solidified over time into one of the most enduring traits of the former empire's cultural (and as we have seen, political) legacy. As the anecdote above shows, the temporizing stasis that once gave Franz Joseph 'the strength to accept interminable, insoluble conflicts' (*D* 135) was clearly felt to loom large over the joint meeting at which Austria and Hungary declined to join in the effort to militarily equip Ukraine: here, some readers jeered, was Habsburg Mitteleuropa writ large. And yet, for all its unexpected relevance today, it is also rather ironic that the one certainty about Mitteleuropa—loosely conceived as the sprawling space once contained within the borders of the Habsburg empire, with the flowing Danube at its heart—remains the very uncertainty of its definition (a trait shared with the literary form that most consistently disseminated it as an idea, as we will see soon). Magris, in this respect, has his own anecdote to tell: 'When Bruno Frank called Marieluise Fleisser, a friend of Brecht's and herself a vigorous writer, "the most beautiful breasts of Mitteleuropa", nobody quite knew to what geographical extent this record held'.[453] And that might be because over much of its history, adds Magris, the idea of Mitteleuropa has proven as malleable indeed as a 'chewing gum', denoting not so much 'a geographical space more or less identifiable' on the map with the territories of modern-day

[453] Claudio Magris, 'Prefazione', in Igor Fiatti, *Le sponde del crepuscolo* (Milano: Aragno, 2021), pp. i–iii (p. i). Translation mine.

Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Austria, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, and parts of western Ukraine, but 'a cultural space that is much more difficult to define': a common bedrock capable of holding together a plurality of people and languages in spite of their obvious differences.[454] Czesław Miłosz, one of the key contributors to the term's revival in the 1980s, similarly conceptualized Mitteleuropa as an affective structure, that is, 'ways of feeling and thinking' that map onto a mental topography not always, or not fully coinciding with the physical borders of its individual nation-states.[455] So much so, in fact, that Miłosz's Mitteleuropa came to straddle political realities as varied as those of Soviet communism on the one hand, and the self-managing market socialism of non-aligned Yugoslavia on the other: whether we are 'in my native Wilno, or the differently baroque Prague or medieval-Renaissance Dubrovnik', writes Miłosz, it is 'while walking the streets of its cities' that we are assured of Mitteleuropa's survival well after the end of the polyglot empire that once held it together.[456] And this, too, is how Yugoslav-Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić portrayed Mitteleuropa when she conceded that 'the monarchy stamped a watermark on the souls of its subjects, an internal landscape' mirrored, in turn, by the architectural physiognomy of its cities, from the apricot-hued façades and 'window-boxes of pelargonia' of their railway stations, to the city parks and bureaucratic buildings lining their avenues.[457] Magris, for his part, goes as far as appointing the 'ochre and orange-yellow of the Danubian buildings', so often glimpsed in the course of his travels downriver, as the 'colours of my own life' (*D* 136), further trussing together real and imagined space.

[454] Magris, 'Prefazione', p. i.
[455] Czesław Miłosz, 'Central European Attitudes', *Cross Currents: A Yearbook of Central European Culture*, 5 (1986), 101–8 (p. 101).
[456] Miłosz, p. 101.
[457] Dubravka Ugrešić, 'The Spirit of the Kakanian Province', in *After Yugoslavia: The Cultural Spaces of a Vanished Land*, ed. by Radmila Gorup (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp. 289–306 (p. 289).

And yet, in spite of the imaginative sway that the concept has ostensibly wielded for more than a century, especially among its most vocal littérateurs, it is important to note that what once became, during the last decade of the Cold War, a rather high-flown banner for transnational solidarity (or, as Ugrešić has it, 'a half-hearted call for a new republic of writers') was, upon its inception at the start of the First World War, a synonym for pan-German expansionism.[458] Mitteleuropa, in this context, first appeared as the title of a 1915 pamphlet by Friedrich Naumann, a Reichstag member who used it to advocate for the economic and political union of the German and Habsburg empires, necessary (he thought) for bringing peace to Central Europe. Hitler's colonialist project of a racially pure *Lebensraum* in the east, pursued via the enslavement and extermination of its Jewish, Slavic, and Romani population, further exacerbated the term's geopolitically loaded legacy, with the result that a number of German-speaking historians still prefer to use *Zentraleuropa*, a somewhat less compromised term closer to the English 'Central Europe'. In spite of this, Mitteleuropa remained, as Yvonne Zivkovic rightly claims, 'the dominant shorthand expression for the cultural (if not economic or political) dimension of this space', especially after the Second World War, when the defeat of the Third Reich and the subsequent division of Germany effectively made it possible to detach a pluralist, geopoetical idea of Mitteleuropa from its expansionist, geopolitical predecessor.[459] To speak of Mitteleuropa instead of Central Europe was therefore—for many of its advocates at least—to designate a cultural legacy, a collective memory, a shared trauma, an affective formation, in brief, a topography of the mind that, as Miłosz pointed out, could easily transcend (and often did) the shifting borders of its corresponding nation-states.

[458] Ugrešić, p. 303.
[459] Zivkovic, p. 8. On the relationship between geopolitics and 'geopoetics' in Mitteleuropa, see Zivkovic, pp. 31–80.

It is hard, in this respect, to overstate the key role that Magris played in the postwar revival of Mitteleuropa as a literary myth, especially with his 1963 study *Il mito absburgico nella letteratura austriaca moderna* [The Habsburg myth in modern Austrian literature], which gave a sustained account of how, in the wake of the Habsburg empire's collapse, a renewed focus on Mitteleuropa quickly expanded into a compensatory utopia for collective loss, especially among interwar Austrian writers such as Franz Werfel and Stefan Zweig, Joseph Roth and Hermann Bahr, Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Robert Musil. This 'world of yesterday', so lovingly eulogized by Stefan Zweig in his 1943 memoir of the same name, Magris saw as a retrospective (and thus skewed) product of nostalgia: a myth he dubbed, rather consequentially, the Habsburg myth. Against the backdrop of Hitler's rise and the impending violence of another war, the former empire was thus cast under the benign light of an imperial mystique. Gone was now the memory of the many ills that had long beset the monarchy, from its widespread antisemitism to the national rivalries within its borders; instead, it could now be said that even though they 'admittedly hit each other over the head and spat at each other', the subjects of the Dual Monarchy, wrote Musil, 'rather liked each other'.[460] To many orphans of the defunct empire now caught in the seismic upheavals of a new geopolitical order, then, Mitteleuropa indexed, to quote Zivkovic again, 'both a past heterogeneous world lost in the turmoil of history, but also the relics of that world, its destroyed, fragmented state'.[461] By turns ironic and affectionate, wry and melancholy, the Austrian writers who survived the former empire in the years *entre deux guerres* reflected on what such a transnational entity could have been, and what a united Europe could yet look like.

[460] Musil, II, p. 279.
[461] Zivkovic, p. 34.

Small wonder, then, that when years later Central Europe found itself physically riven by the barbed divisions of the Iron Curtain, the banner of Mitteleuropa was once again hoisted as a rallying cry for multicultural anti-totalitarianism, regional solidarity, and the promotion of civil society and liberal humanism. Beginning in 1982, several intellectual dissidents hailing from a number of countries then under Soviet rule—most notably, the Czech Milan Kundera, the Hungarian György Konrád, and the Pole Czesław Miłosz—appropriated the literary discourse on Mitteleuropa hatched by their interwar predecessors from Austria in order to reclaim their collective identity not only as free citizens of an unduly forgotten Central Europe, whatever this may have meant at the time, but as rightful Europeans *tout court*. 'Geographically in the center, culturally in the West and politically in the East', after 1945 Central Europe had been 'kidnapped' by its Soviet overlords, who, not unlike the Nazis before them, stripped their subjects of national sovereignty, and in doing so relegated their countries to the lamentable status of satellite backwaters—or so decried Milan Kundera in a key essay tellingly entitled 'The Tragedy of Central Europe' (1983).[462] The lively debate that followed—animated by conferences and exhibitions, and disseminated via journals such as *Cross Currents: A Yearbook of Central European Culture*—was hence geared toward 'restoring the forgotten territory east of the Iron Curtain in Western consciousness', especially through a re-acquaintance with the cultural production of the former empire's more peripheral centres, from Budapest and Prague to Warsaw and Lviv.[463] For 'this was the moment (just after the First World War)', Kundera claimed, 'when the pleiad of great Central European novelists saw, felt, grasped the terminal paradoxes of the Modern Era'.[464] It was high time,

[462] Milan Kundera, 'The Tragedy of Central Europe', trans. by Edmund White, *New York Review of Books*, 26 April 1984, pp. 33–38 (p. 33).
[463] Zivkovic, p. 3. For an overview of the key roundtables, symposia, and exhibitions that animated this debate, see n47 in Zivkovic's introduction; for an editorial history of *Cross Currents*, the journal which hosted many of the dissidents' essays on Mitteleuropa, see Labov.
[464] Kundera, *The Curtain*, p. 50. Kundera is here referring to Franz Kafka, Robert Musil, Hermann Broch, and Witold Gombrowicz.

then, that their modernist experiments be remembered and reclaimed for what they were: counter-images of a shared, multinational space that was once 'a great cultural center, perhaps the greatest', but which now found itself 'swallowed up by the Russian empire'.[465] And it's squarely within this objective that Magris situates himself, too, as the 'family's chronicler', in the words of Guido Snel, 'whose travelogue *Danubio* provided the community [of dissident writers] with a pedigree'.[466]

Published on the thirtieth anniversary of the armed Soviet invasion of Hungary, *Danube* was, by Magris's own account, not only a clear-eyed excursion into 'that "other" Europe', but a high-spirited attempt to 'cancel this adjective, "other"', through the rediscovery of its shared cultural legacy.[467] For as Magris goes on to say,

> I've always been convinced that Europe means not only Western Europe […] but also the so-called 'other' Europe, namely Central and Eastern Europe, which at the time was forgotten and oppressed, feared and rejected. Soviet rule was certainly the chief cause of this division, this rejection or at least this remoteness, but Western prejudice was also to blame for disavowing and even ignoring this essential part of our civilization. I remember for instance how in my youth I used to think that Prague was east of Vienna, simply because it lay beyond that curtain, and how bewildered I was to discover that it's actually further west.[468]

Danube is thus presented as a corrective to the kind of 'inner-European Orientalism' that had once befuddled its own author as a young man; a literary effort, that is, of conjoining what the Yalta Conference once separated, fostering a renewed dialogue between Western and Eastern Europe on the eve of their reunification.[469] As such, *Danube* often reads like a period piece—somewhere between nostalgic eulogy and Cold War memento—though one, we must

[465] Kundera, 'The Tragedy of Central Europe', p. 34; Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 11.
[466] Guido Snel, 'Fictionalized Autobiography and the Idea of Central Europe' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2003), p. 16.
[467] Magris, 'Danubio e post-Danubio', p. 22.
[468] Magris, 'Danubio e post-Danubio', p. 22.
[469] Salvatore Pappalardo, 'Dockings on *Danubio*: Magris, Mitteleuropa, and the Hinternational Future of Europe', *European Legacy*, 27.7–8 (2022), 689–707 (p. 690).

add, that has recently been recontextualized (and thus given new currency) by Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. For while the end of the Cold War may have long superseded the political and intellectual import once carried by Mitteleuropa, Russia's military aggression has shown how Mitteleuropa's flagship liberal humanism (and anti-Russian sentiment) has not entirely receded from view so much as *proceeded* further eastwards, settling along Ukraine's eastern borders, and thereby redrawing the mental map of today's Europe.

For all such politically-inflected overtones, however, it is important to note that most advocates of a literary Mitteleuropa have tended to oppose any actual expansion of the term into the arena of political strategy, not least due to its earlier ideological instrumentalization at the hands of the pan-Germans, preferring to conceive it instead as 'a community of the arts rather than one of national entities with vested interests'.[470] If anything, as Magris says apropos of György Konrád's essay *Antipolitics* (1984), which he reads while in Hungary, 'Mitteleuropa becomes the cipher for a refusal of politics, or rather for the intrusion of the state and of reasons of state into every sphere of existence' (*D* 268). Mitteleuropa signifies, by implication, 'the defence of the particular against any totalitarian programme' (*D* 268), and it's precisely this anti-totalitarian, liberal humanist vein that, according to Magris, makes the cultural legacy of the old empire so beguiling, and so necessary.

To the question of what, in the final analysis, Mitteleuropa may be, Magris thus replies that in spite of the term's long-standing ambivalence, Mitteleuropa stands for a 'culture that is attentive to difference, to whatever represents a discrepancy or a deviation from totalizing conceptions; an attention to the marginal, the fragment, to that which the course of history leaves behind, unresolved'.[471] And that culture, adds Magris, is a pre-eminently Austrian, that is to say Habsburg one, for 'against Hegel's identification of reality with rationality Austrian

[470] Zivkovic, p. 44.
[471] Magris, 'Prefazione', p. iii.

culture proposes a deviation, things that might always take a different turn, history conjugated in the subjunctive, an ironic absence' (*D* 113). One of the leitmotifs punctuating *Danube* is indeed the idea, so cherished amid the regrets and might-have-beens instigated by the empire's collapse, that 'if things go the way they do, they could perfectly well go otherwise', and that history could therefore be written 'in terms of lost opportunities' (*D* 195).[472] The cafés of interwar Vienna were, in this context, the 'no man's land' where many 'deserters from Stalinist Communism' first learned what it means to survive 'outside the confines of history, living in memories of the past and in the dream of the future' (*D* 198), just as the dissidents of the 1980s, for that matter, were caught between the myth of a bygone multinational past and the hope for a united Europe yet to come. Mitteleuropa, in this sense, is a place where the untaken yet possible trajectories of history are no less important than how events actually unfolded.

But quite apart from being one of the most recognizable facets of Mitteleuropa, Magris contends that the possibilities of 'life in the subjunctive' also constitute 'the major province of twentieth-century literature', if not its greatest discovery, thereby rehearsing a point already made, in 1986, by another advocate for Central Europe, namely Milan Kundera.[473] Having denounced how, at least since the eighteenth-century experiments of Diderot's *Jacques the Fatalist* and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, the novel had been consigned to 'a cemetery of missed opportunities', Kundera reasons that it subsequently fell to the 'pleiad of Central European novelists' of the early twentieth century to reclaim the novel's unexplored formal possibilities—above all, its taste for ludic inquiry and formal play.[474] And they did so, Kundera holds, by dint of a new literary practice, that of 'the *specifically novelistic essay*',

[472] Elsewhere in *Danube*, a wooden statue of the Viennese writer Peter Altenberg suggests to Magris that 'we should not take what is happening too seriously, that things go as they do partly and chiefly by chance, and that they could perfectly well go quite differently' (*D* 168).
[473] Magris and Di Paolo, p. 58.
[474] Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 15.

which unlike the *roman à thèse* 'does not claim to bear an apodictic message but remains hypothetical, playful, or ironic'.[475] As a result, while the literary modernisms west of the Iron Curtain (and by west Kundera chiefly has in mind France, where he emigrated in 1975) had purportedly turned their back on the novel, electing poetry as the 'untouchable goddess' of modernity, the 'antimodern modernism' of Central Europe, as Kundera dubs those writings from the region that displayed a 'mistrust of History and of the glorification of the future', had revitalized the novel as 'the privileged sphere of analysis, lucidity, irony'.[476]

Kundera's rigidly schematic argument is obviously predicated on a correspondingly limited account of modernism, one that pits the early avant-gardes (Kundera cites Apollinaire and the Futurists, but also the Surrealists) against the unaffiliated, at times unknown novelist living further east, and therefore the city of Paris against Vienna, or Prague, or Budapest. All the same, by qualifying his chosen novels as essayistic—or rather, by speaking of something akin to the novelistic essay, as Magris's *Danube* has so often been defined—Kundera raises a significant question of genre, though one that has seldom troubled discussions on Mitteleuropa as such.[477] And yet, as the 'key mode of writing which permeates Central Europeanness', the essay situated itself from very early on at the juncture between modernism and (anti-)totalitarianism, and it's to this precise intersection that I want to draw our attention in the following section of this chapter.[478] For as Magris discovers in *Danube*, 'out of the cracks in the system forged according to the Soviet model something is reborn: not only a nostalgia for Mitteleuropa, but even the form appropriate to it' (*D* 249).

[475] Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 80. Kundera's view is clearly indebted to a specifically German-language conception of the essay form that stretches as far back as the early Lukács, for whom the essay already spoke, in 1910, of 'a final, irreducible category of possibilities of experience'. See Lukács, p. 33.
[476] Kundera, *The Curtain*, pp. 50, 55; Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 125; Kundera, *The Curtain*, p. 49.
[477] Relevant exceptions to this trend can be found in the two aforementioned studies by Jessie Labov (2019) and Yvonne Zivkovic (2021).
[478] Labov, p. 3.

‘the loveliest city on the Danube’

Halfway through his journey, Magris’s arrival in Budapest, crowned ‘the loveliest city on the Danube’ (*D* 261), occasions a section of writing that deftly condenses all the major strands—thematic as well as formal—of *Danube* as a whole: above all, a concern with flânerie and irony; with modernism and the essay; with Europe and the Cold War. Packed within the space of a few pages, in other words, is a scaled-down macrocosm—a *Danube* in miniature—such that a close reading of its key passages will say a good deal, too, about the chief impulses, modes, and techniques governing the text at large. Incidentally, it’s precisely with the idea of one such modular structure that the section on Budapest begins. Magris, indeed, opens this section by linking up several of the capitals along the Danube within a spatial network of reciprocal cross-references and emulations, according to a modular pattern. Marvelling at the ‘metropolitan magnificence’ of Budapest, for example, Magris posits that the city’s eclectic exuberance is only a thinly-disguised game of double mimesis: that is, ‘if modern Vienna imitates Baron Haussmann’s Paris, with its great *boulevards*, Budapest in turn imitates this imported town-planning of Vienna: it is the imitation of an imitation’ (*D* 261). Put simply, if Paris was (as Benjamin famously claimed) the capital of the nineteenth century and thus the modern city par excellence, Vienna becomes, on Magris’s showing, an imitation of Paris; Budapest an imitation of Vienna; and Bucharest a yet paler imitation of Budapest. Indeed, the farther south-east one goes along the Danube, says Magris, the ‘heavier and more ornate’ its Franco-Balkan style, the ‘more massive’ its classicism, the ‘more marked and weighty’ (*D* 265) its eclecticism, according to a modular logic of replication that instals Paris as the model—by turns urban blueprint and Platonic ideal—for many of its sister-capitals east of the Iron Curtain (plus Vienna).

But as Hermann Broch did in his 1948 essay *Hofmannsthal und seine Zeit*, which draws its critique of fin-de-siècle Vienna (as embodied by Hofmannsthal's oeuvre) out of a polemic against Vienna's architectural kitsch, Magris's urban considerations on Budapest are simply the prelude to a wider excursus into literary form and the avant-garde. For as Magris goes on to say, the histrionic bombast of fin-de-siècle Budapest, taken to its extreme by 'the spectacular and monumental celebrations of the Hungarian millennium of 1896' (*D* 261), set the stage for a burgeoning avant-garde bent, by contrast, on 'the search for the real life, and the investigation of the truth, or the falsehood, of form' (*D* 262). A dazzling instance of this 'extraordinary culture' (*D* 261), though one (Magris is keen to remind us) that had long since been dispersed by the cold winds of Stalinism, is the *Sonntagskreis* or 'Sunday Circle' of 1915-18, an intellectual coterie which numbered, among its regulars, such figures as film theorist Béla Balázs, sociologist Karl Mannheim, art historian Arnold Hauser, and György Lukács. Spurred by the 'fetching kitsch' (*D* 263) of modern Budapest into an inquiry on the relation 'between the soul and form', as Magris writes with a nod to Lukács's 1910 collection of essays *Soul and Form*, the members of the *Sonntagskreis* interrogated 'whether behind the multiplicity of the inessential there was an essence of life' (*D* 261): whether behind Budapest's 'empty, theatrical façades' (*D* 263) there was, that is, any unitary substance capable of giving order to a crumbling empire plunged into chaos and war. And it was against the kind of empty, Potemkin urban planning exemplified by the fin-de-siècle castle of Vajdahunyad, not far from where (Magris tells us) the young Lukács lived, that this newly-formed avant-garde embraced a search for new expressive means and a renewed sense of experimentation Magris calls, rather consequentially, 'essayism'.

If literary histories of Anglophone modernism have long sidelined the essay as a genre somewhat alien to the ruptures of modernism proper—to its epiphanies and images and involuntary memories—the modernist experimentation that both accompanied and followed

the Dual Monarchy's collapse was, as Magris shows, an endeavour decidedly more open to the discursive ebb and flow of essayistic inquiry.[479] The same kind of discursiveness (in fiction) that was anathema to the likes of Pound or Woolf thus became, in the hands of the early Lukács and his *Sonntagskreis* companions, a powerful tool of critique against the modern. Robert Musil, for his part, went so far as to turn a taste for essaying into the very scaffolding of his unfinished novel, thickening the fleeting flash of modernist vision with the wordy leisure more commonly associated with the essayist's craft. And it was, after all, an essay—Hugo von Hofmannsthal's 'The Letter of Lord Chandos' (1902), 'one of the founding texts', glosses Andreas Huyssen, 'of literary high modernism'—that instigated the *Sprachkrise*, or language crisis, usually credited with the beginning of Vienna modernism.[480] An epistolary essay documenting a writer's sudden failure to speak and to write, 'The Letter of Lord Chandos' self-consciously drew attention to its form by way of being addressed to none other than Francis Bacon, author of the first published book of English essays in 1597 (the Chandos Letter is fictively dated 1603), and thus one of the key initiators of the genre itself. But another such essay humbly disguised as a letter was, of course, Lukács's 1910 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay: A Letter to Leo Popper', acclaimed by Magris as Lukács's true masterpiece, one which 'speak[s] more clearly to us than the polished orthodoxy of *Studies in European Realism*, or other woodenly didactic books, which betray signs of the compromises he made with Stalinism' (*D* 273).

Having thus singled out essayism as the avant-garde's riposte to Budapest's architectural kitsch, and to the wider crisis embodied by it, Magris then fleshes out a definition of the essayist which clearly betrays his indebtedness to Lukács, or rather to Lukács's own attempt

[479] If anything, essays written by canonical modernist writers have usually been read as ancillary statements on their literary practice *as* novelists or poets, rather than as artforms in their own right. For an exception, see Randi Saloman, *Virginia Woolf's Essayism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).
[480] Andreas Huyssen, 'The Disturbance of Vision in Vienna Modernism', *Modernism/modernity*, 5.3 (1998), 33–47 (p. 36).

at defining the essay in the aforementioned letter that inaugurates *Soul and Form*. For 'the essayist's craft', says Magris,

> displays the agonizing, ironical vicissitudes of the intellect which is aware how far immediacy lacks authenticity, and how far life diverges from its meaning; and yet the intellect aims, however obliquely, at that ultimately unattainable transcendence of meaning—whose flickering presence is to be seen in the very awareness of its absence. (*D* 262)

Let us note, before delving further into Magris's formulation, that Patrick Creagh's translation of the original Italian replaces Magris's reference to what is in fact an activity, *saggismo* (that is to say, 'essayism'), with the agent of this activity, namely 'the essayist'. Though likely motivated by a strategy aimed at simplifying the source text for an English-speaking audience already prejudiced against the Germanist's seemingly heavy-loaded jargon (and jargon in an essay, wrote William Gass, 'is like a worm in fruit'), Creagh's choice obscures the fact that Magris's *saggismo* is an implicit allusion, too, to the kind of existentialized aesthetic inherent in Musil's *Essayismus*, which, as we have seen in Chapter Three, detaches a more properly essayistic mode of existence (and expression) from any single codified genre as such.[481] And this is the sense that transpires, too, from Lukács's own essay on the essay, which weds lived life (or as he calls it, rather arcanely, the soul) and written form in such a way that, says Lukács, '[t]he life of Socrates is the typical life for the essay form, as typical as hardly any other life is for any literary form'.[482]

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[481] Gass, 'Emerson and the Essay', p. 25. For a more detailed account concerning Patrick Creagh's translation of *Danube*, see Loredana Polezzi, 'Different Journeys along the River: Claudio Magris's *Danubio* and Its Translation', *Modern Language Review*, 93.3 (1998), 678–94. Polezzi helpfully demonstrates how 'simplification and normalization, frequent in most Italian-English translations, appear to concentrate, in the specific case of *Danubio*, in areas of "poetic" and erudite use of language; this may amount to an attempt to play down the perceived pretentiousness of the source text' (p. 691).

[482] Lukács, p. 29. We should note that Lukács's essay, with its frequently mystical overtones, is still an expression of a pre-Marxist, neo-Kantian stage in his formation, which consequently leads him to view literary forms as atemporal or transcendental structures, not unlike Plato's Ideas. Only in his later *Theory of the Novel* (1916) will Lukács abandon subjective idealism in favour of a more historically and sociologically grounded view of aesthetics, in keeping with the dominant intellectual trends of his Sunday Circle.

But the key element Magris's definition borrows from Lukács's essay is, above all, the irony Lukács embeds at the heart of the form—intended, by Magris as much as Lukács, in the Romantic sense of 'an absolute striving accompanied by a recognition of its merely relative means'.[483] As Lukács contends, in fact, '[w]e can always find the same irony in every text by every great essayist', for though they are 'always speaking about the ultimate problems of life', essayists do so in a tone which implies that they are 'only discussing pictures and books, only the inessential and pretty ornaments of real life'.[484] And this results in a certain tension between the essayist's seemingly lowly claims (though just why books and pictures should make trivial matter, Lukács never says) and the grander questions they are said to pursue, albeit indirectly, through them. But despite all that, Lukács is keen to add, the essayist 'ironically adapts himself to this smallness—the eternal smallness of the most profound work of the intellect in the face of life—and even emphasizes it with ironic modesty', proudly displaying the badge of a second-class citizenship, as did Montaigne when he 'gave his writings the wonderfully elegant and apt title of "Essays"'.[485] And so Magris, too, when early on in *Danube* he ends a peroration on the 'inadequacy of writing' and the 'humility' it teaches with the following plea: 'Let the man of letters who, as such, is aware of being a fool, in virtue of this self-awareness which knows it cannot fulfil itself, therefore be allowed to cultivate his passion for the written word' (*D* 89). Only such modesty is, of course, part and parcel of Magris's (and the essayist's) well-oiled spiel, 'an arrogant courtesy', as Lukács pithily put it, made to lighten the gravitas of the erudite professor with a salutary dose of ironic sprezzatura.[486]

[483] Thomas J. Harrison, *Essayism: Conrad, Musil and Pirandello* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 3.
[484] Lukács, p. 25.
[485] Lukács, p. 25.
[486] Lukács, p. 25.

At this point it may be useful to recall the kind of unserious yet enlightened dilettantism theorized in mid-war by Alberto Savinio, as well as the kind of playfully digressive (and politically circumspect) prose it generated; or more recently still, the broader distinction, made by Marjorie Garber, between what she calls the amateur professional and the professional amateur. While the former is often an untrained enthusiast or lay devotee ('the amateur sleuth, whether of crime or of scholarship') asking to be taken seriously by members of the relevant profession, the latter, writes Garber, is a professional 'who glories', by contrast,

> in amateur status. Often the professional amateur is *not* a professor, at least not one with a conventional academic training. If he or she *is* one, the odds are that some pains will be taken to disavow that fact. The dabbler, the dilettante, the virtuoso, the "man (or even "woman") of letters," the book reviewer, the belletrist, the polymath. And that current favorite, the "public intellectual."[487]

And so, where the amateur professional brandishes the fruit of his or her intellectual labour, often making recourse to 'voluminous footnotes', the professional amateur disguises it instead under varying degrees of studied nonchalance, keeping the apparatus of the scholar generally hidden.[488] Professional amateurs, Garber maintains, were Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot, the latter being someone who comes 'from a professional training but works as a free lance and for the pleasure of problem solving'; or the real-life (and tellingly all male) Alfred Kazin, Edmund Wilson, and Kenneth Burke, literary critics who, despite holding visiting professorships at one time or another, 'seem to have been free-standing, not tied to an institution'.[489] The professional amateur, in other words, is someone who is sufficiently disinterested and/or has time—and money—enough to do (or claim to be doing)

[487] Marjorie B. Garber, *Academic Instincts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 19–20.
[488] Garber, p. 31.
[489] Garber, pp. 11, 21.

what they do simply out of love, rather than any professional duty or institutional obligation as such. Hence, then, why a genre as 'unhurried', and as unrigorous as the essay should have so insistently been put in the service of self-professed (albeit, at times, professing) amateurs.[490]

It is, then, under the guise of a professional amateur—a self-deprecating yet well-meaning 'man of letters', as he says above, or a 'mere follower' marked by 'a well-cultivated literary taste and a measure of cautious modesty' (*D* 299)—that Magris confronts us in *Danube*. And it's by poking fun at the systematic ambitions of two fellow academics, intent on organizing an exhibition on travel and the history of hotels, that *Danube*, in turn, begins. The exhibition prospectus that Magris receives just before starting for his journey—a catalogue of hospitality venues and hotel life so methodically arranged as to unwittingly parrot the totalizing pretensions of Hegel's *Science of Logic* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*—is indeed the unassuming pretext that cascades the whole book into, as one reviewer called it, '400 pages of anecdote'.[491] But unlike this scholarly proposal, which 'aims to reduce the unpredictability of travel, the intricacy and divergence of paths, the fortuity of delays […] to the inexorable order of a treatise' (*D* 15), *Danube* is (or so it is implied) an amateur's scrapbook, one born of chance more than of method, or one rather that makes a method out of chance. The principle governing *Danube* is, in other words, the squiggle once scrawled by Sterne to illustrate the workings of *Tristram Shandy*: to 'write what comes, catching at images and sentences as best he may' (*D* 89), and 'to look for places to pause, and detours, and delays' (*D* 38). Thus, on reaching the region of the Banat, which lies on the border between Hungary, Serbia, and Romania, Magris abandons the course of the river altogether and strays as far as Timişoara, a hundred kilometres or so from the Danube. Often, such detours and diversions are merely the

[490] Gass, p. 25.
[491] Eugen Weber, 'For One Thing, It's Not Blue', *New York Times*, 1 October 1989, section 7, p. 14.

result of capricious whims on the part of Magris's occasional travelling companions: the Hungarian town of Szeged, for instance, makes it into the itinerary only because Magris's friend, one Amedeo, 'once met a certain Klára, who came from Szeged and wore striped stockings' (*D* 282), while an impromptu trip to the heart of Transylvania, in Sighişoara, is only made possible by the wish of a certain Grandma Anka (Magris's unofficial, octogenarian guide in the Banat) to visit the tomb of a former lover who died by suicide.

But just as it modulates his comings and goings along the Danube, so the amateur's love for chance frequently provides, too, the choice of subject matter. Indeed, as Magris himself concedes at the beginning of *Danube*,

> [t]he German scholar who travels fitfully along the whole course of the river carries with him his baggage of fads and quotations; if the poet entrusts himself to his *bateau ivre*, his understudy tries to follow the advice of Jean Paul, who suggested that on the way one should gather and record not only visual images but old prefaces and playbills, railway-station gossip, epics and battles, funerary and metaphysical inscriptions, newspaper clippings, and notices pinned up in taverns and parish halls. (*D* 18)

The Germanist travelling along the Danube is thus less an ecstatic youth à la Rimbaud than a middle-aged descendant of those 'mild-mannered wandering pedagogues' (*D* 87) populating Jean Paul's fiction. Strategically placed at the start of Magris's journey, this statement of intent operates, what's more, as a rehearsal of many of the essayist's most familiar *topoi*: above all, the fitfulness of the proceedings, textual as much as physical; the taste for quotation and the already-said; the form's self-consciously secondary status vis-à-vis more established genres; its thematic miscellany and preoccupation, at last, with the mundane. It is, in fact, Magris's keen eye for the trivial matter of daily life that makes him a modern-day curioso, though one who, unlike his Renaissance predecessors, collects trivialities rather than rarities, discarded flotsam rather than *objets d'art*. Thus, having dwelt on the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife while on a visit to the royal couple's burial place in

Artstetten, Magris concludes this historical excursus by observing how '[o]pposite the archducal crypt, the Artstetten parish notice-board announces that next week there will be a "day of reflection for mothers-in-law"' (*D* 154). In Linz meanwhile, having sketched a profile of Raimondo Montecuccoli, the Austrian field marshal famous for his battles against the Turks, Magris glosses that '[n]ext-door to the building where Montecuccoli died, the plaque of the "Lidea" private investigations agency promises discreet and efficient inquiries on the marriage front. Other geometries, calculations, operational angles; other wars' (*D* 141). Or, having visited a waxworks museum in Vienna, Magris caps his high-sounding reflections on the 'perfect, precarious topography of our bodies' by drawing attention to a nearby placard announcing 'that on June 1st, as part of a cycle concerned with "conservative sexuality", a certain Dr Knax will give a lecture entitled "Wanking: Mass Murder?"' (*D* 192).

Such bizarre non sequiturs and lapses into bathos are, indeed, Magris's privileged way of short-circuiting the more solemn or weighty pronouncements that can be found elsewhere in *Danube*—of undermining, that is, the authoritative poise of the academic typically given to making arguments. Take, for instance, this chilling, redolently Cold War prediction of a third global conflict, intimated to Magris by Franz Ferdinand's bloodstained uniform in Vienna's Army Historical Museum:

> The wound inflicted that June 28th 1914 is still open, for the whole of Europe. It may be that it will have to be healed disastrously by a third and final catastrophe, because two world wars have not found a stable substitute for the equilibrium which was shaken at Sarajevo. (*D* 181)

And the gastronomic list which follows it, rather inconsequentially:

> Francis [*sic*] Ferdinand's menu, that June 28th, comprised Consommé en tasse, Oeufs à la gelée, Fruits au beurre, Boeuf bouillé aux légumes, Poulets à la Villeroy, Riz Compote, Bombe à la Reine, Fromage, Fruits et Dessert. (*D* 181)

And further still, the closing reflection which restores this brief passage to the sombre pathos of its opening quotation ('Blood does not always pale and fade so soon, says a beautiful passage of Lu-Hsün'):

> I admit that injustice discriminates even between bloodstains: those of the Archduke are preserved under glass, while those of the eighty-five demonstrators killed by the police near the Palace of Justice on July 15th 1927 have been washed away by the rain and rubbed out by passing feet. But even those bloodstains exist, are with us for ever. (*D* 181)

Insofar as they attest to Magris's tendency to juxtapose the grand and the mundane, the philosophical and the anecdotal, such swerves in mood and register give shape to yet another trait of the essay as conceived by the early Lukács: namely, the way in which the 'small realities of life' are made to constantly interrupt the essayist's search for the ultimate, shoehorning it into an ironical conclusion that bears 'little connection with that which it interrupts'.[492] For 'the essential is always interrupted by such things in such a way', says Lukács with reference to Plato's *Lysis*, where Socrates's meditation on friendship is cut short by the abrupt arrival of the guardians who carry off Socrates's two young interlocutors.[493] And this is what occurs, too, in the passage on Budapest (and on Lukács) with which we have begun, and to which we now return.

Having described how the city's fin-de-siècle balconies and façades spurred the inquisitive essayism of the young Lukács and his friends, Magris concludes his stroll around Budapest with a vignette centred on one of his most enduring concerns throughout *Danube*: namely, the state of late-twentieth-century Europe. Sitting in a pastry shop on Vörösmarty Square, Magris remarks how 'the evening wind passes through the open-air cafés like the breath of an

[492] Lukács, p. 30.
[493] Lukács, p. 30.

old Europe which may already be at the brink of the world and no longer produces history but only consumes it' (*D* 264). That Cold War Europe had been dwarfed to the secondary role of a handmaiden in the service of other superpowers was, to be sure, a view routinely aired by many of Magris's colleagues in the Mitteleuropa circle: think, for instance, of Kundera's laconic sketch of Central Europe as a twilight zone or, as he called it, a 'laboratory of twilight' besieged by 'cultural marginality' and 'political nonexistence'.[494] But I suspect that in his nod to a nascent obsession with or even a quasi-commodification of the past ('The European spirit', says Magris immediately afterwards, 'feeds on books, […] gnaws at the volumes of history in the libraries' [*D* 265]), Magris somewhat foresaw, too, the kind of witness-oriented, archive-based fiction that was to take over large swathes of the European literary scene after the end of the Cold War, most notably in Sebald and his twenty-first-century successors (such as Daša Drndić or Maria Stepanova). For this was a Europe given over, like the essayists it spawned, to quotation and recapitulation, to endings rather than beginnings. Dwelling on this idea of 'a Europe "after the show"' (*D* 265)—of a Europe, that is, *after* history, both in the sense of being on the margins of global affairs, and of being fixated on its own past—Magris dramatizes Europe's supposed demise by transfiguring it into that quintessentially Central European meeting place: the coffee house. For Europe, says Magris,

> also means this café, at which we no longer find the Managing Directors of the *Weltgeist*, but at the most the functionaries of one of the lesser branches, who do not make decisions but carry them out, and the occasional beautiful woman who gets herself talked about. (*D* 264)

No longer the Café Central of early twentieth-century Vienna, where for years before the Great War one could find the likes of Trotsky sipping coffee and hatching revolutions (*D*

[494] Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 125.

167), Magris's Europe is no more than a drab back-shop; or more precisely, that cellar in which, shortly after the Second World War, an aged Lukács was to be found declaiming his Marxist ideas ('a drab recital of Soviet propaganda' [*D* 187], jeers Magris) to a risible audience of thirty.

But just before dampening this verdict with the additional caveat that Europe may not, after all, be 'irreparably destined to play this role of operatic confidante' (*D* 265), Magris interrupts the course of his reflections with a paragraph suddenly detailing a photograph of school-leavers he chances on in a nearby shop-window. 'Boys at the first-cigarette stage, girls in sailor-suits with ties', writes Magris,

> they all look out towards their future, which is rushing upon them at a speed that perhaps they have realized only at that very moment, at the classroom door, as if they were being bombarded by particles accelerated in a syncrotron [*sic*]. (*D* 264)

What might otherwise make for a mundane scene is here exposed to (even exploded by) the blast of its closing simile, which makes the photograph's unsuspecting school-leavers into the suspended victims of an atomic bomb, blinded by the light of a synchrotron as if it were, in fact, the flash of a nuclear conflagration.[495] If this seems at all too far-fetched, it is Magris himself who, only a few lines later, once again decries Europe's fate as a 'negligible province' at the mercy of 'the press-button rooms of other empires' (*D* 265). But for all its intimations of nuclear catastrophe, the expression Magris reads into the school-leavers' faces is one of proud defiance. A girl named Szendy Marianna, observes Magris, exhibits 'an imperious nose that at least promises to give tough work to the great grindstone which awaits her' (*D* 264). Singling out one Kis Zoltán—'the inevitable fat boy of the class', though one

[495] Curiously, the verb 'bombarded' is a lexical choice made by Patrick Creagh in his English translation of the text, while the original Italian reads, somewhat less ominously, '…come se piombassero loro addosso le particelle accelerate artificialmente in un sincrotrone', that is, 'as if particles accelerated in a synchrotron were *precipitating* on them' (my italics). See Claudio Magris, *Danubio* (Milano: Garzanti, 1986), p. 311.

'who knows how to laugh' when handed a Fail—Magris then divines that this school-leaver will also be able 'to laugh in the face of the other messengers of tragedy who are waiting for him in the narrow pass' (*D* 264). And it's by way of this seemingly accidental aside that Magris weds together all the disparate threads of the foregoing passage: Budapest and its architectural kitsch, Lukács and the essay, nuclear dread and the Cold War, Europe and its (non)future. For though they interrupt the course of Magris's thoughts, the faces of the gritty pupils in the photographer's shop-window—at once extinct and enduring—anticipate the open-ended state Magris soon ascribes to his Europe in limbo, one that is both about to end and has already, in fact, ended.

Having thus rekindled the course of his thoughts after this photographic intermezzo, Magris turns Budapest into something of a viewing platform from which to observe the 'feared or decreed decline' of Europe, whose 'sun is still high above the horizon and gives good warmth, but at the same time […] is veiled by clouds and curtains, which imperiously remind us of its declining phase' (*D* 265). The leitmotif of Europe as a setting sun was one, of course, to which Alberto Savinio had already lent some credence in the midst of the Second World War, with his view of an ever-westering spirit rescuing liberal democracy away from the totalitarian wastelands of the East. In the 1980s, however, this classical leitmotif acquired a different edge: no longer a refulgent sun shining down its beams on an enlightened west, Europe—or to be more precise, that loosely defined part of Europe known as Mitteleuropa—became associated instead with notions of dimness, if not outright darkness. Indeed, it was precisely as a zone of twilight—one caught in-between the collapse of old utopias and the longing for new ones—that the very idea of Mitteleuropa gained new currency in the years preceding the seismic events of 1989, which ultimately superseded it. Kundera, as we have seen, baptised this space 'a laboratory of twilight', one that showed, with its postwar lapse

into marginality, 'the possible fate of all of Europe'.[496] Igor Fiatti's *Le sponde del crepuscolo* [*Twilight shores*], on the other hand, is the title of what is, to my knowledge, the most exhaustive study on Mitteleuropa to date. And it is as an 'interval between sunset and dark' that Magris, too, draws the outlines of Mitteleuropa in *Danube*, so that, while Budapest shows Europe in its 'declining phase', in Vienna 'one gets the impression that people live, and have always lived, in the past', dwelling 'in one prolonged epilogue, […] in a protracted, postponed farewell' (*D* 193).

This rhetoric of decline gained momentum, according to Andreas Huyssen, on the back of 'widespread contemporary obsessions with issues of cultural memory', of which Mitteleuropa quickly became one of the most emblematic—and problematic—topographies.[497] If the leitmotif of twilight then captured the fate of Mitteleuropa as a whole, it was because, as Huyssen argues in *Twilight Memories* (1995), his study on memory and amnesia at the end of the last century, twilight is 'memory's privileged time', an in-between state 'in which the last light of the day may still play its ultimate marvels'.[498] But in the case of cities like Vienna, which, adds Huyssen, 'caught the American imagination in the new gilded age of the 1980s', there was also the added fascination of what Hermann Broch once branded 'the gay apocalypse': the all-pervasive apocalyptic *zeitgeist*, that is, of an old empire on the wane, blindly sleepwalking—to borrow the term employed by Broch in the title of his novelistic trilogy—into military defeat and geopolitical demise.[499] A climate of endings, in brief, and an atmosphere of lateness that soon made the idea of Mitteleuropa as much about time as it had been about space. Indeed, as Magris remarks early on in *Danube*, 'for some years now 1918 has come closer to us, for the end of the Hapsburg empire, formerly

[496] Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 125.
[497] Huyssen, 'The Disturbance of Vision in Vienna Modernism', p. 33.
[498] Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 3.
[499] Huyssen, 'The Disturbance of Vision in Vienna Modernism', p. 33.

obliterated in the past, has returned into the present as the object of passionate disputes' (*D* 39). What is noteworthy about Magris's observation is that the object of such disputes should concern not—or rather not only—the geographical idea of a shared, albeit lost space, as we have seen thus far, but the purported return of a year (1918) and a process (the Dual Monarchy's collapse) seemingly consigned to a bygone era. Put another way, in the 1980s Mitteleuropa came to signify not only an exalted banner of multinational coexistence, but a period of perceived decline, even a secret warning, as Huyssen calls it, 'about the end of liberal culture'.[500]

That the much-feared end of liberal culture prefigured by (or read into) Mitteleuropa should have soon turned, by the start of a new decade, into liberalism's very triumph, especially in the countries east of the Iron Curtain, seems to read like the very product of 'that irony which', says Magris, 'created the greatness of Central European culture' (*D* 58). For it was not liberal culture so much as history itself that was decreed to have ended after the collapse of the Soviet bloc—or so goes the enormously influential, if endlessly mocked, argument ventured by Francis Fukuyama in 1992.[501] But even though it may have seemed to anticipate it, the twilight decline divined by Magris in Cold War Budapest bore little resemblance to the kind of post-historical afterglow in which many of the West's liberals were to bask during the 'long nineties', the period that is usually made to stretch from the fall of the Berlin Wall to 9/11 and the war on terror. If anything, following the events of 1989 Magris felt compelled to dampen the unduly jubilant mood captured by Fukuyama's thesis with the warning, also pronounced in 1992, that 'there is no "victory", for the West, in the events of 1989', for in all of Europe 'the conquest of freedom is intertwined with violent hatreds and violent

[500] Huyssen, 'The Disturbance of Vision in Vienna Modernism', p. 33.
[501] I am referring, of course, to Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992).

nationalisms'.[502] No longer riven by ideological walls, in other words, Mitteleuropa still risked becoming 'a grotesque and sadly truthful mirror of the world, a laboratory of absurdity', of which the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s offered a tragic and extreme example.[503] The walls of ideology may have fallen—history, Magris insisted, had not.[504]

Only it's precisely with one such fantasy of a *posthistoire*, even post-apocalyptic world that the foregoing passage on Budapest closes, for though Magris may have later pronounced otherwise, *Danube* evidently partakes of the cultural logic of his wider milieu. Following his thoughts on Europe with a recursive variation on the section's inaugural motif, namely Budapest's urban eclecticism, Magris now speculates that the kind of 'historical posturing' and 'non-style' exhibited by the city's buildings occasionally appear 'as some bizarre face of the future', a future that is both 'post-historical and without style' (*D* 265), and one that is swarming, too, 'with the survivors of some catastrophe' (*D* 266). In the fanciful arabesque that ensues, Magris imagines this metropolis of the future as:

> peopled by chaotic, composite masses, in national and ethnic qualities indistinguishable, Malay-Redskin Levantines who live in shacks and skyscrapers, twelfth-generation computers and rusty bicycles fished up from the past, rubble from the Fourth World War and superhuman robots. The architectural townscape of this metropolitan future is archaic-futuristic, with skyscrapers kilometres in height and temples in the *kolossal* style like Milan Station or Grand Central. (*D* 265-66)

The passage inflates, to the point of caricaturizing them, the hints of nuclear catastrophe already sowed in the earlier snapshot of blinded school-leavers awaiting their future: no longer an object of dread looming overhead, the 'third and final catastrophe' (*D* 181) previously divined by Magris does not even appear, in fact, to be so final after all—and

[502] Magris, 'Danubio e post-Danubio', p. 31.
[503] Magris, 'Danubio e post-Danubio', p. 31.
[504] Tellingly, the title of one of Magris's subsequent collection of essays is *La storia non è finita*, namely 'history has not ended', in which he reflects on Italy's political landscape in the early 2000s. See Claudio Magris, *La storia non è finita* (Milano: Garzanti, 2006).

neither, for that matter, does the fourth global conflict which is meant to follow it, failing as it does to bring about the kind of mass-scale extinction typically associated with all-out nuclear warfare. In this, Magris ironically overturns the apocalyptic fantasy set at the end of that other cornerstone of Triestine (and more broadly European) modernism, namely Italo Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno* [*Zeno's Conscience*] (1923). '[T]he most extreme', according to Paul Saint-Amour, 'among many interwar modernist city novels' that began conceptualizing the metropolis 'in and as a state of total war',[505] the closing paragraph of Svevo's novel comes remarkably close to foretelling the invention of an atomic bomb *avant la lettre*:

> Perhaps, through an unheard-of catastrophe produced by devices, we will return to health. When poison gases no longer suffice, an ordinary man, in the secrecy of a room in this world, will invent an incomparable explosive, compared to which the explosives currently in use will be considered harmless toys. And another man, also ordinary, but a bit sicker than others, will steal this explosive and will climb up at the center of the earth, to set it on the spot where it can have the maximum effect. There will be an enormous explosion that no one will hear, and the earth, once again a nebula, will wander through the heavens, freed of parasites and sickness.[506]

Whereas Svevo's analysand winds up his journal by indulging in the vision of a post-apocalyptic future freed of all human life, bringing to apotheosis F. T. Marinetti's (and the Futurists') glorification of war as 'the world's only hygiene', Magris sketches a dystopian future that is not only populated, but teeming indeed with survivors.[507] And these survivors are made in turn so transnational as to become, in fact, *post*-national, thereby mirroring, with their unlikely, if not deliberately preposterous ethnic make-ups, the equally eclectic physiognomy of their city's architectural townscapes. But far from materializing the

[505] Saint-Amour, 'Air War Prophecy and Interwar Modernism', p. 156.
[506] Italo Svevo, *Zeno's Conscience*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Everyman Publishers, 2001), pp. 436–37.
[507] Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, 'The Founding Manifesto of Futurism', in *Marinetti: Selected Writings*, ed. by R. W. Flint, trans. by R. W. Flint and Arthur A. Coppotelli (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972), p. 42.

hinternational sense of belonging once espoused by Johannes Urzidil, who, as Magris observes, called for a Europe *hinter*, that is to say beyond (rather than simply *inter*, or between) nations (*D* 29), this post-historical, post-national future does no more than collapse plurality into anonymity. As such, the celebrated subject of Mitteleuropa (and Urzidil, the German-Czech Jew who time and again declares '*Ich bin hinternational*', is as Mitteleuropean as they go) is twisted into a globalized, farcically exoticized hybrid, a Levantine with features borrowed far and wide, from North America to Southeast Asia. If the aim was to better convey this post-apocalyptic Babel of the future, its effect inches perniciously close, though, to the kind of doomsaying rhetoric later perpetuated in the West by rightwing nativism: for the sun of Europe seems to set where that of the Levant threateningly begins to rise (Levant comes, after all, from the Italian *levante*, used to refer to the rising of the sun, and thus to the lands in the eastern Mediterranean). Of course, it is nothing nearly as suggestive as *that* which inspires Magris's post-apocalyptic vision; rather, it is '[t]he eclecticism of Budapest, its mixture of styles' that, in Magris's view, evokes 'a possible future swarming with the survivors of some catastrophe' (*D* 266). Put simply: the end of style—its collapse or fulfilment, that is, into mere stylization—is what spells, too, the putative end of history.

It is a matter of some interest to note, before dwelling on history's end, that for all such (at times) overwrought speculations, Magris's line of thinking bears some resemblance to what Fredric Jameson had to say, for his own part, apropos of historicism and pastiche in 1984, around the same time as *Danube*'s writing. I am referring, of course, to the claims advanced in 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', the essay which originally lay the groundwork for, and later gave the name to, Jameson's influential book of 1991. Very briefly, it will be enough to recall how Jameson's argument in this piece was of a twofold nature: first, that one of the key aesthetic modes of the late capitalist West was the pastiche,

or stereotypical reappropriation, of all the styles of the past; second, that rather than manifesting any real grasp of historical content, such an imitation of dead styles was itself symptomatic of a more generalized 'weakening of historicity', by which Jameson meant an impaired sense of one's collective (and private) past, resembling at times a full-blown case of historical amnesia.[508] The past thus came to be substituted by its own image; 'the history of aesthetic styles', argued Jameson, 'displaces "real" history'.[509] Though Jameson began his scrutiny from the contemporary perspective of American mass culture rather than that of fin-de-siècle Central Europe, and though the Cold War amnesias of which he speaks are not those denounced by Kundera et al., his considerations still land him on quite similar terrain as Magris, for in the writings of one as much as of the other, we are ultimately confronted with the prospect of 'a society bereft of all historicity, one whose own putative past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles'.[510] Thus, just as the nostalgia films of late twentieth-century Hollywood (Jameson's chief example) arbitrarily conveyed '"1930s-ness" or "1950s-ness"' by way of, say, recognizable fashion attributes or art deco credit scripts, the 'plaster Potemkinism' (*D* 263) of turn-of-the-century Budapest operated as a stage-set design creating a 'heraldic past' (*D* 262) for the city's new middle classes.[511] What is perhaps even more significant, however, is that Jameson's point of departure for his account of postmodern pastiche was, as in Magris's case, architectural history, from which Jameson derived his conception of historicizing pastiche as 'the complacent eclecticism of postmodern architecture, which randomly and without principle but with gusto cannibalizes all the architectural styles of the past and combines them in overstimulating ensemble'. [512] This,

[508] Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, 1984, 53–92 (p. 58).
[509] Jameson, 'Postmodernism', p. 67.
[510] Jameson, 'Postmodernism', p. 66.
[511] Jameson, 'Postmodernism', p. 67.
[512] Jameson, 'Postmodernism', p. 66. Jameson goes as far as claiming that not only his idea of pastiche, but that of postmodernism as a whole initially emerged out of his engagement with architectural debates—just as a decade or two later, that of a literary late modernism will come into being from its originary use as an architectural category.

stipulates Jameson, is the cultural logic of late capitalism, 'with its perpetual present and its multiple historical amnesias'.[513]

But while the Marxist critic then went on to denounce how this state of affairs 'effectively abolishes any practical sense of the future and of the collective project, thereby abandoning the thinking of future change to fantasies of sheer catastrophe and inexplicable cataclysm', Magris concludes his own inquiry into Budapest's eclectic townscape by conjuring precisely one such catastrophe, and one such future.[514] The end of style—its collapse, that is, into pastiche (for the American Jameson) or kitsch (for the Germanist Magris, quoting the Austrian Broch)—thus coincides not only with an end of historicity, however much stock one may put in the idea of a collective sense of the past, but with an end of history *tout court*. Significantly, this end is not, as we have seen, the one later proclaimed by Fukuyama in 1992—nor could it have been, insofar as Magris was still writing from the midst of the Cold War, when the events of 1989 still seemed to him quite remote, if not altogether unlikely.[515] Rather, it is with a much earlier epilogue that Magris is preoccupied here, for as he goes on to say in the closing lines that follow this post-apocalyptic arabesque, '[e]very heir of the Hapsburg era is a true man of the future, because he learnt, earlier than most others, to live without a future, in the absence of any historical continuity; and that is, not to live but to survive' (*D* 266). And further still: '[i]t may be that to us today old Austria often seems a congenial country because it was the country of men who doubted that their world could have a future' (*D* 38). The catastrophic epilogue of Svevo's novel seems to be a case in point here, but one also thinks (as Magris must have thought) of Karl Kraus's pronouncement on fin-de-siècle Vienna as an 'experimental station for the end of the world', or of Broch's essay on the

[513] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 170.
[514] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 46.
[515] Magris confesses, in 1992, that he had been 'baffled by the rapidity of those changes, which no one could have foretold, at least to such an extent, not even the protagonists of those same changes'. Magris, 'Danubio e post-Danubio', p. 29.

'disintegration of values' said to have precipitated the Great War.[516] Taking stock of this period in 1948, from the postwar perspective of an exile living in the United States, Broch would later maintain that by the early twentieth century, 'it was no longer the brittleness of Austria that was at stake, but the brittleness of the world, in which lurked the coming ruin, the coming human sorrow'.[517] The end of old Vienna, in other words, amounted for Broch to the end 'of the entire epoch', and as such to the prophetic image, too, 'of world apocalypse'.[518] Or, to put it differently: it is in 1918 Vienna—and not, as will later be claimed, in 1989 Berlin—that the first *posthistoire* subject was born, out of the rubble of a bygone empire into an untimely afterward, the senescent or obsolescent age of a continent ostensibly past its zenith. To exist and endure under the threat (or even in the wake) of catastrophe is thus for Magris a lesson bequeathed to the nuclear age by the orphans, as he calls them, of that 'many-nationed crucible' (*D* 194) that was Habsburg Mitteleuropa.

Accordingly, *Danube* reads in the end less like the biography of a river ('the great river about which Magris writes', Sebald was to gloss, 'is the stream of civilisation and hardly ever the Danube itself') and more like a gallery of orphaned survivors eking out their untimely, unseasonable existence on the riverbanks.[519] Joseph Schumpeter, for instance, is remembered less for his influential work in economic theory than for his unknown and unfinished novel, 'a furtive, fragmentary self-portrait' featuring 'a typical Hapsburgian character' (*D* 194) that Magris appoints not only as an interwar specimen of the 'tiny, newborn Austrian Republic' (*D* 30)—a clerkish, faltering, Kafkaesque figure of ambiguous nationality, 'alien to every country, to every social class'—but as a fitting representative, too, for the entire century:

[516] Quoted in Edward Timms, Karl Kraus: Apocalyptic Satirist: Culture and Catastrophe in Habsburg Vienna (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 10.
[517] Hermann Broch, *Hugo von Hofmannsthal and His Time*, trans. by Michael P. Steinberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 180–81.
[518] Broch, p. 180.
[519] Sebald, p. 183.

> heir and orphan of that many-nationed crucible the disappearance of which had left behind it a profound feeling of not belonging to any precise world, but also the conviction that that elusive identity—composed of mixtures, suppressions and elisions—was not simply the destiny of the children of the Danube but a general historical condition, the being of each and every individual. (*D* 194)

In *To Have Been*, a short theatrical piece written for the 2001 edition of Mittelfest, a festival dedicated to Central European art and culture, Magris would go so far as to elevate this 'typical Hapsburgian character' to a general mode of being: the lightness, as he calls it, of 'having been' (a clear play on the title of Kundera's famous novel of 1984, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*). Staged as an anonymous monologue commenting on the death of one Jerry, a guitarist who (we are told) took his own life after an injury made him unable to play, *To Have Been* sardonically pits the musician's desire to keep playing, and therefore 'to be', against that, typically Mitteleuropean, of 'having been':

> Ah, ladies and gentlemen, in that instant I understood how lucky it is to be born, like me, or to have an uncle or a grandfather or whatever, born in Bratislava or Leopoldi [*sic*], or Kalocsa or any other dump in this shabby Mitteleuropa, which is a hell, a real cesspool. It's enough to smell that musty odor, that stink, which is the same in Vienna and Czernowitz; but at least it doesn't force you to *be*. Quite the contrary. If only Jerry had realized, when his hand gave out, his great good fortune in having been! […] Sure, any grocer of Nitra or Varazdin could teach the whole of Fifth Avenue […] the happiness of having been. Oh, the modesty, the lightness of having been […] as opposed to the presumption, the weight, the squalor, the dismay of being![520]

As I ventured earlier, and as this piece further suggests, Magris's Mitteleuropa is here to be found not only in the familiar, worn-out guise of a transnational map that encompasses places as far and wide as Vienna and Czernowitz, Lviv and Varaždin; rather, it comes closer to a temporal category, indeed *the* chronological measure most fitting for a world, as Magris put it, that 'no longer produces history but only consumes it' (*D* 264). Mitteleuropa is thus made

[520] Claudio Magris, 'To Have Been', trans. by Gerald Parks, *Salmagundi* (2003), 26–29 (p. 27). 'Leopoldi' is likely an incorrect translation of the Italian toponym for the Ukrainian city of Lviv, namely 'Leopoli'.

to resemble the epilogue of a novel, for 'every epilogue is happy, because it is an epilogue' and 'nothing more can happen'.[521] If this now begins to sound like Fukuyama's own thesis on the end of history, it is because Magris wrote this piece well after the Cold War had ended, though not before the 2004 EU enlargement officially brought back into the West's fold most of the countries that had lain east of the Iron Curtain (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, and the Baltic states). Gone, then, are the elegiac peals of *Danube*, though not its mythicization of Mitteleuropa as a forgotten land basking in the afterglow (Magris would say the twilight) of its former glory. For this, proclaims the self-mocking voice in *To Have Been*, is 'the heritage that Central Europe has left us': an overdetermined sense of the past bearing down on its belated epigones as that which has 'already been' and is therefore 'safe, protected from all accidents', out of and after history.[522] This same sense of post-historical lethargy returns, almost two decades later, in Magris's most recent collection of short stories, where the snug drowsiness of the Central European coffee house (in his case, Trieste's historical Caffé San Marco) is set against the chaos of history: 'better to stay at the Café than within History'.[523] Or, as a twenty-three-year-old Sebald once glossed upon landing in England from his own, admittedly stultifying corner of Mitteleuropa: 'the future lies in the past'.[524]

If the essay thus became 'the key mode of writing which permeates Central Europeanness', from the *k.u.k.* Budapest of the young Lukács through to the interwar Vienna of Broch and Musil down to the Cold War outposts of Kundera's Prague and Magris's Trieste, it is certainly because at one time or another, and against one regime or another, its form consistently lent itself as a political, that is to say *anti-totalitarian* mode of writing.[525] This

[521] Magris, 'To Have Been', p. 29.
[522] Magris, 'To Have Been', p. 28.
[523] Claudio Magris, *Tempo curvo a Krems* (Milano: Garzanti, 2019), p. 85. Translation mine.
[524] Sebald, quoted in Angier, p. 217.
[525] Labov, p. 3.

much, at least, we have already ascertained in Chapter Three, via Alberto Savinio's wartime elevation of the essay as *the* expressive mode most suitable to a new, liberal-democratic Europe after the tragedy of war and fascism. Similarly, Magris's *Danube* can be said to mobilize the essay as the form most appropriate for capturing a legacy, that of Mitteleuropa, premised on 'an attention toward the marginal, the fragment'.[526] For just as the culture of Mitteleuropa 'defends the tangible detail, the unique particular' against 'ideological totalitarianism' (*D* 80), so too does the essay emphasize the part over the whole, in a revolt against the systemic and taxonomic. It is not accidental, in this regard, that *Danube* should be strewn with so much of the flotsam and jetsam of daily life, from parish notices and lunch menus to newspaper clippings and old prefaces. But even more importantly, this chapter has attempted to go beyond such a conception of the essay as transnationalized writing so as to venture another, decidedly less familiar argument capable of accounting for the convergence in *Danube* between essayism and Mitteleuropa. In other words, if the essay became *Danube*'s privileged medium, it did so by virtue of a consciousness of its own posteriority which strikingly recalls that exhibited, in turn, by Magris's Mitteleuropa, or rather by those orphaned 'children of the Danube' (*D* 194) and 'heirs of the Habsburg era' (*D* 266) which populate Magris's journey. I am referring, more specifically, to the essay's preference for quotation rather than creation, and thus to its abdication of novelty in favour of that, as Lukács put it, which 'has already been there at some time in the past'.[527] The essayistic voice, in other words, always speaks late, or after the fact, as Elizabeth Hardwick came to concede in 1986, the same year that *Danube* was published, when she wrote:

> We would not want to think of the essay as the country of old men, but it is doubtful that the slithery form, wearisomely vague and as chancy as trying to catch a fish in the open hand, can be taught. Already existing knowledge is so often required. Having had mothers and fathers and the usual miserable battering of the sense of self by life may

[526] Magris, 'Prefazione', p. iii.
[527] Lukács, p. 26.

> arouse the emotional pulsations of a story or a poem; but feeling is not sufficient for the essay. Comparisons roam about it, familiarity with those who have plowed the field before, shrewdness concerning the little corner or big corner that may remain for the intrusion of one's own thoughts.[528]

The spectacular collision between essayistic prose, late modernism, and middle age in Cyril Connolly's *The Unquiet Grave* represents only one of the most extreme examples of the view Hardwick is advancing here: that of the essay as cumulative, belated, at times overripe, ever autumnal. And it is in this sense, too, that Magris's and (as we will see in the coming chapter) Sebald's experiments with the form may be best understood: as the creative work of middle-aged academics, that is, with more than enough familiarity with those, to borrow Hardwick's words, who ploughed the field before. But it is not something like late style, or rather (middle-)*aged* style, that I mean to suggest when I speak of the essay's (and thus of Mitteleuropa's) sense of posteriority; nor am I simply alluding to the contested survival of a late modernism always astir beyond its disputed end at mid-century—dying yet never quite dead—though such a survival, with its Musils and its Brochs, its Kafkas and its Hofmannsthals, was obviously credited with Mitteleuropa's revival as a (geo)cultural legacy in the 1980s. Rather—and this is an insight that will come to the fore in the final chapter of this thesis—as a written medium that routinely and self-consciously fashions itself as a literary latecomer (or as Hardwick says, a 'country of old men'), the essay was conveniently positioned to capture the *posthistoire* mood of a century on the wane, caught in-between lingering Cold War anxieties of nuclear dread and jubilant declarations of Fukuyamian peace. It became, in other words, a form fitting for a second fin de siècle.

I want to conclude this excursus into *Danube* with one final point on the subject of lateness and chronological posteriority. In the years since *Danube*'s first publication, Magris has

[528] Elizabeth Hardwick, 'Its Only Defense: Intelligence and Sparkle', *New York Times*, 14 September 1986, section 7, p. 1.

endlessly been asked how differently *Danube* would have looked, and what other form it would (or could) have taken, had it been written after, or even during, the events of 1989. Magris's answer is unequivocal: though the book is already woven through with 'hidden forebodings' of the change to come, a *Danube* written in 1989 would have certainly been more reportage than essayism.[529] Spurred less by the leisurely digression of a flâneur and more by the telegraphic urgency of the moment, this belated version of *Danube* would have been unable, by Magris's reckoning,

> to indulge in those centuries-old meanders of Mitteleuropean history and civilization, which alone can help us understand what happened in 1989, especially what happened afterwards and is still happening; namely, that emergence of ancient tensions, unforgotten resentments and unhealed wounds that are now fuelling fierce and visceral hatreds in Southeastern Europe, of which the horrible and foolish tragedy in Yugoslavia is but an extreme example.[530]

And further still:

> To grasp what is happening in Danubian Europe, it's necessary to plunge into and roam about its past, as is the case in *Danube*, thanks to the relatively vagrant freedom of its journey.[531]

Simply put, a post-Cold War *Danube* would have likely forfeited, or so Magris maintained, its self-conscious allegiance to the format of the essay—to its ironies and its ramblings, its strung quotations and unexpected collages. For it is the essay's proverbial leisure ('the essay is unhurried', quipped Gass, 'it thumbs through things') that allows it to extend its gaze past the present's surface into a more 'labyrinthine temporality' that encompasses, for Magris, 'the burning present' as much as 'the vanished or vanishing past'.[532] But Magris, I must add,

[529] Magris, 'Danubio e post-Danubio', p. 30.
[530] Magris, 'Danubio e post-Danubio', p. 30.
[531] Magris, 'Danubio e post-Danubio', p. 30.
[532] Gass, 'Emerson and the Essay', p. 25; Magris, 'Danubio e post-Danubio', p. 30.

certainly wasn't the first to ever stipulate such an overtly transitive link between essayistic prose and the *longue durée* of history. Recall, for instance, how already in 1941, in the epilogue to *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*—that other travelogue-cum-essayism casting an oblique light on this region of Europe—Rebecca West had justified her gargantuan endeavour by claiming that, in order to 'follow the dark waters of that event [World War Two] back to its source', she had been 'obliged to write a long and complicated history' capable of showing 'the past side by side with the present it created' (*BL* 1088). And this, West insisted, was the task of an essayist—not that of a journalist, nor that of a reporter. For Magris as much as West, then, the time of (and for) the essay is that, hushed and suspended, which either precedes or follows the moment of crisis—'the interval', in Magris's words, 'between sunset and dark' (*D* 193). In moving on to Sebald and the last decade of the last century, the coming chapter will prove how, on the contrary, this conception of essayistic form in moments of crisis might not be nearly as unequivocal as that. For after all, as the refrain that punctuates *Danube* goes: 'if things go the way they do, they could perfectly well go otherwise' (*D* 195).

CHAPTER FIVE

'Not of this time': W.G. Sebald, Literary Tact, and the Wars in Yugoslavia

> On the outskirts of every agony sits some observant fellow who points.
> —Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (1931)
>
> In this cave within a cave
> No glance back to the future survives.
> —W.G. Sebald, 'Bleston' (1967)

Of W.G. Sebald, and of the four prose works that launched him to literary fame at the end of the last century, it is often said that he was, as a writer, a 'supremely tactful' one.[533] Mark O'Connell, writing on the tenth anniversary of Sebald's death, pitched the following, 'quintessentially Sebaldian' passage on the Holocaust as one such example of writerly tact (not least because, as another reviewer concurred, the Holocaust is 'the ultimate test of a writer's tact'):[534]

> Quite apart from their indubitable utility value, silkworms afforded an almost ideal object lesson for the classroom. 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 dispatched 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

[533] This exact phrasing recurs, curiously enough, in two early reviews of *The Emigrants*. Jonathan Coe's review for the *LRB*, simply entitled 'Tact', praises the book as 'a supremely tactful' one, while in the *New York Review of Books*, André Aciman points to the ways in which, '[s]upremely tactful, Sebald never brings up the Holocaust. The reader, meanwhile, thinks of nothing else'. See Jonathan Coe, 'Tact', *London Review of Books*, 20 March 1997, 24–25; André Aciman, 'Out of Novemberland', *New York Review of Books*, 3 December 1998.
[534] Mark O'Connell, 'Why You Should Read W. G. Sebald', *New Yorker*, 14 December 2011 <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/why-you-should-read-w-g-sebald> [accessed 11 August 2020]; Coe, p. 25.

> 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.[535]

The passage, which comes toward the end of Sebald's oneiric travelogue around the coast of Suffolk, *The Rings of Saturn*, effectively captures the gist of Sebald's entire poetics: namely, that if to write about concentration camps 'is practically impossible', then 'the only way in which one can approach these things… is obliquely, tangentially, by reference rather than by direct confrontation'.[536] Or so Sebald himself claimed in a radio interview on the 6th of December 2001, eight days before his untimely death in a car accident. What one reads on the page, in other words, is often only the flickering shadow of its actual referent, so that the Holocaust—Sebald's *master* referent—is often sublimated into an 'invisible subject', a 'formal black hole', 'a vast and blank presence' that can only be seen from the periphery of one's vision.[537] The effect, O'Connell pronounced, was much 'like that of a dream in which a lecturer is speaking drily about sericulture but also, somehow, about Auschwitz'.[538]

Sebald, to be sure, claimed indebtedness to an earlier master of tact, that is to say Virginia Woolf, whose posthumously published 'The Death of the Moth' (1942) Sebald lauded as a 'wonderful example' of oblique poetics.[539] For while this short and rather unassuming essay may ostensibly be about someone watching 'the queer spectacle' of a moth dying, just as the above excerpt may outwardly be about someone watching silkworms dying, it was written, Sebald observed, at some point 'between the battlefields of the Somme and the concentration camps erected by my compatriots'.[540] And though there is 'no reference made to the

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[535] W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 293–94. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the main text as *RS*, followed by the page number(s).
[536] Silverblatt, pp. 79–80.
[537] Silverblatt, p. 80; James R. Martin, 'On Misunderstanding W. G. Sebald', *Cambridge Literary Review*, 4.7 (2013), 123–38 (p. 123); O'Connell.
[538] O'Connell.
[539] Silverblatt, p. 80.
[540] Virginia Woolf, *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays* (New York: HBJ/Harvest, 1970), p. 3; Silverblatt, p. 80.

battlefields of the Somme in this passage', Sebald concedes, 'one knows, as a reader of Virginia Woolf, that she was greatly perturbed by the First World War, by its aftermath, by the damage it did to people's souls, the souls of those who got away, and naturally of those who perished'.[541] Of course, it is hard to establish whether Woolf really did have the Great War in mind when she wrote 'The Death of the Moth'. The only passage that might have given some rope to Sebald's imagination can be found toward the end of Woolf's essay, when her unnamed observer suddenly gives in to a fleeting foreboding of large-scale catastrophe, such that 'the extraordinary efforts' made by the moth against its own death become the cipher, too, of a struggle 'against an oncoming doom which could, had it chosen, have submerged an entire city, not merely a city, but masses of human beings'.[542]

The idea that Woolf might have been endowing something as unobtrusive as a dying moth with the sheer horror of total extinction was certainly a tempting one for Sebald, especially insomuch as it granted him the official *imprimatur* of a modernist forebear. Indeed, Sebald went on to flesh out the historical weight he ascribed to Woolf's essay in his last novel, *Austerlitz* (2001), where the eponymous protagonist—an architectural historian who discovers, later in life, to have been a Kindertransport child—recalls a number of moths straying indoors from the garden behind his house in London. When he finds them in the morning, says Austerlitz, he knows that the little creatures, having lost their way, 'will stay where they are, never moving, until the last breath is out of their bodies'.[543] The stiff remains of these moths, blown into dusty corners by some cold draught, prompt Austerlitz to wonder 'what kind of fear and pain they feel while they are lost', just as Woolf's narrator is moved, in turn, into 'a queer feeling of pity' by the dying moth.[544] Only toward the end of the novel,

[541] Silverblatt, pp. 80–81.
[542] Woolf, p. 11.
[543] W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 132.
[544] W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 132; Woolf, p. 9.

however, does Sebald expand Woolf's intimate musings on mortality into an elegiac lament on history, war, and displacement. For it is during his last encounter with Sebald's narrator, in 1997, that Austerlitz reveals that the moths straying into his house do not come from his garden, as he had previously assumed, but from a nearby Ashkenazi Jewish cemetery. Austerlitz recalls these nocturnal insects only in a passing aside, and yet, accidental though it may be, Austerlitz's reference allows Sebald to signal the invisible subject for which the moth operates as a tactful stand-in: that is, Austerlitz himself, the uprooted Jew once rescued, in his childhood, from Nazi-occupied Prague. And so, just as Woolf ostensibly captures the lost souls of the Great War via her parable of a dying moth, so too does Sebald address the displaced victims of the Holocaust by way of Austerlitz's own straying moths.

Though critical dissent on the matter is not too hard to come by ('I guessed that such a punchline was coming', wrote another reviewer on the silkworm passage, 'and can only regard it as rather cheap'), it was precisely this tactfully tangential tarrying with atrocity that had, by the century's end, made Sebald so popular in Britain and the United States.[545] Sebald's avowed focus on the Holocaust, and on World War Two more broadly, has indeed spawned what Sebald himself once referred to, in a quibble with Kafka scholars, 'a hypertrophic body of secondary literature': scores of studies devoted, that is, to some variant or other of the critical triptych 'history—memory—trauma'.[546] This prolific industry counted, by 2009, over twenty-five monographs and edited volumes, and more than five-hundred articles; since then, an unauthorized biography and countless other studies, films, and books, of which the compendious *W.G. Sebald in Context* (2023) is the most recent addition, have

[545] Matthew Reisz, 'Sensibility Without a Subject', *Prospect Magazine*, 20 August 1998 <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/sensibilitywithoutasubject> [accessed 11 August 2020].
[546] From W.G. Sebald's syllabus for his course on Franz Kafka, May 1977, now at the University of East Anglia. *W.G. Sebald. History—Memory—Trauma* is, not incidentally, the title of the edited volume that was published, in 2006, after the first international symposium on Sebald. See *W.G. Sebald. History—Memory—Trauma*, ed. by Scott D. Denham and Mark R. McCulloh (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2006).

contributed to a posthumous lionization that can only be dubbed as the 'Sebald Phenomenon', or the 'Sebald Case'. And yet, if Sebald's melancholic obsession with the rubble of the past has long garnered critical attention, little has been written on his approach to the more contemporary crises of late modernity. For 'although Sebald is acutely conscious of the lethal aspects of postmodernity', Richard Sheppard maintains, 'he is less explicitly direct about them', even less so, one might add, than he is about such harrowing events as Auschwitz or the firebombing of German cities.[547]

Partly, of course, this was an accident of biography: a German émigré born, in 1944, in the idyllic village of Wertach im Allgäu, near the Bavarian Alps, Sebald quickly came to feel the overbearing guilt of the postwar sons and daughters who were left with the impossible burden of reckoning with their fathers' crimes. And so, as Sebald tells us in his poem *After Nature*, though he grew up 'without any / idea of destruction', it was not long before he became dimly apprehensive of 'a silent catastrophe that occurs / almost unperceived'.[548] That one catastrophe has, as a result, cast an undeniably long shadow over Sebald's life and work—to the point that Sebald himself once confessed that '[t]here is something terribly alluring to me about the past. I'm hardly interested in the future'.[549] Indeed, Sebald's narrators soon came to represent, in the mind of many a reader, a real-life incarnation of Walter Benjamin's famous rendering of Paul Klee's 'Angelus Novus': the 'angel of history' who has his 'face turned towards the past', gazing at a 'single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon

[547] Richard Sheppard, 'Three New Books on W. G. Sebald and Some Afterthoughts', *Journal of European Studies*, 50.1 (2020), 106–18 (p. 111).
[548] W.G. Sebald, *After Nature*, trans. by Michael Hamburger (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 88.
[549] Eleanor Wachtel, 'Ghost Hunter', in *Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. by Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), pp. 37–62 (p. 57).

wreckage' while the storm of progress 'irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned'.[550]

Insofar as it pries open Sebald's densely imagined indexes of modern calamity—especially those that make up *The Rings of Saturn*—so as to paint a different, somewhat more contested picture of the relationship, in his writing, between literary form and mass violence, the present chapter intends to brush against the grain of a number of approaches that have since hardened, I believe, into worn-out commonplaces. Only recently, in fact, have scholars of Sebald begun to reconceptualize his literary corpus as something other than just post-Holocaust writing—a label which, in any case, Sebald himself made a point of rejecting.[551] Jonathan Long, for one, argued that we 'need to see Sebald not only as a chronicler of post-Holocaust trauma but as an historian of the *longue durée* of modernity if we are fully to understand why his work matters'.[552] Though I certainly subscribe to the merits of Long's bird-eye take, especially with regards to Sebald's oft-overlooked engagement with colonialism and the slave trade, in what follows I want to cast my investigative net nearer to Sebald's own present as he was writing *The Rings of Saturn*, when atrocities like genocide and ethnic cleansing once again swept certain parts of the European continent, interrupting what Sebald once referred to, rather sardonically, as postwar Europe's 'real achievement': its fifty years, that is, of seemingly undisturbed peace.[553]

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[550] Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. by Edmung Jephcott, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), IV, 389–400 (pp. 67–68).
[551] On the idea of a literary canon exclusively about the Holocaust, Sebald commented that 'it's a dreadful idea that you can have a sub-genre and make a specialty out of it; it's grotesque'. See Maya Jaggi, 'Recovered Memories', *Guardian*, 22 September 2001, <www.theguardian.com/books/2001/sep/22/artsandhumanities.highereducation> [accessed 27 September 2023].
[552] J. J. Long, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 174.
[553] W.G. Sebald, *'Auf Ungeheuer Dünnem Eis': Gespräche 1971 Bis 2001*, ed. by Torsten Hoffmann (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2011), p. 247. Hereafter cited as *Gespräche.* Unless specified otherwise, all subsequent translations from Sebald's German interviews are mine.

As the first line of *The Rings of Saturn* makes plain, Sebald's traveller undertakes his series of solitary walks around Suffolk in late August 1992, 'when the dog days were drawing to an end', only to begin gathering his notes a year later, in 1993, while interned in a Norwich hospital 'in a state of almost total immobility' (*RS* 3). The travelogue ends with the matter-of-fact statement that 'today, as I bring these notes to a conclusion, is the 13th of April 1995' (*RS* 294), the same year in which the book was first published in Germany, before the appearance of a translated edition in English in 1998. Incidentally, then, the genetic and publishing history of *The Rings of Saturn*, as well as the diegetic arc of its narrative, overlaps with the outbreak of the first armed conflict on European soil since World War Two, namely the Yugoslav Wars (1991-1999). Indeed, prodded, in a 1995 interview with Sven Boedecker, to indicate what particular event, if any, had compelled him to write *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald pointed to the wars in Yugoslavia, which, he recalls,

> [were] just beginning back then. You immediately ask yourself: will it always go on like this? This is all complete madness, it's been going on for three years now […] we are getting more and more crazy.[554]

Despite a somewhat lengthy detour into the harrowing effects of the two world wars in the former Yugoslavia, however, *The Rings of Saturn* makes no reference to the contemporary state of affairs in the region. This blank is no doubt surprising, not least because Sebald, as we will see shortly, must have been alert to the frequent analogies, spun by Western media in the early stages of the conflict, between the death camps of the Third Reich—the recurring endpoint of his prose—and the concentration camps erected throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina at the time. As this mercurial (rather than simply saturnine) witness proves, then, a noticeable slippage separates the post-Holocaust chronicler, hailed for the arresting

[554] Sebald, *Gespräche*, p. 114.

tact of his 'virtuoso acts of empathy', from the more ambivalent, equivocal reporter of contemporaneity.[555]

If this chapter begins to display a certain recursiveness, then, it is because my discussion inevitably returns, as in the early parts of this thesis, to the question of the former Yugoslavia—no longer, of course, the Nazi-occupied Kingdom eulogized in Rebecca West's magnum opus, but the disintegrating federation of the 1990s. This is, in part, a corrective to what is, in my view, an unaccountable dearth of critical engagement with the admittedly minor, though by no means less significant role played by the war in Bosnia within Sebald's opus—the only notable exception being Boris Previšić, who singles out *The Rings of Saturn* as 'an initial literary acknowledgment of the post-Yugoslav conflict in German-speaking literature'.[556] It is my contention, by contrast, that a humanitarian and geopolitical crisis in Southeastern Europe instigates, once again, a literary response on the far side of the continent, in Britain, that is worth examining not only for what it has to say regarding this one crisis—although, in fact, that will amount to little, if anything—but for the key questions of prose style and formal innovation it raises. More specifically, my discussion will centre on three distinct moments within Sebald's narrative, each dealing with one particular period of Yugoslav history: the first and the second, in the fourth part of the book, dwell on the region's embroilment in the First and the Second World Wars; the third, meanwhile, goes back even further to the late nineteenth century, to the time of Vienna's takeover, in 1878, of Ottoman Bosnia. Taken together, these passages evidently present themselves as further instances of literary tact, insomuch as they allow their author to write about an ongoing war without so

[555] David Kaufmann, 'Angels Visit the Scene of Disgrace: Melancholy and Trauma from Sebald to Benjamin and Back', *Cultural Critique*, 70.1 (2008), 94–119 (p. 101).
[556] '[E]ine erste literarische Verbürgung der postjugoslawischen Kriege in der deutschsprachigen Literatur'. See Boris Previšić, *Literatur topographiert: der Balkan und die postjugoslawischen Kriege im Fadenkreuz des Erzählens* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2014), p. 212. Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Previšić's original German are mine.

much as naming it even once. And yet, far from obtaining the double-tracking effect figured above, Sebald's representation of the conflict—with his use, as we shall see, of heavily tailored, at times discredited print sources—ends up writing the wars of the 1990s out of the present, and thus out of history. Given the ways in which this eruption of large-scale violence was, at all events, all but sidelined in the end-of-history climate of the 1990s, especially in the West, it will be my suggestion throughout this chapter that Sebald's essayistic sublimation of the former Yugoslavia, far from making him (as with the silkworm) an isolated case of literary greatness at the end of the century, makes him rather a writer wholly of his time. Or, to put it differently: the verbal cortège traced by Sebald's labyrinthine prose may well have been 'not of this time'; the head of the procession, though, certainly was.

'simply fallen into disrepair'

In 1965, one year before Sebald moved to England, and thus one year, too, before 'the paths of Michael's life and mine […] intersected' (*RS* 187), as he marvels in *The Rings of Saturn*, Michael Hamburger, Sebald's friend and translator, wrote 'An Essay on the Essay', in which he declared the essay 'an outmoded genre', indeed even a 'dead genre', since at least the time of Virginia Woolf.[557] The culprit, reasoned Hamburger, was none other the twentieth century, for while the essay can only exist as 'a walk, an excursion', the totalitarian systems of the past century have 'turned walking without a purpose into a crime'.[558] And who could take walks 'without a bad conscience', Hamburger asks, in an age constantly aware 'of a crisis' ever unfolding? That would be 'shameless, egotistic and insolent': familiar charges already mounted, as we have seen at length in the preceding chapters, against the likes of Cyril

[557] Hamburger, p. 92.
[558] Hamburger, pp. 91–92.

Connolly, with his wartime idylls, or Alberto Savinio, with his playful wit.[559] This would seem to hold even more true after 1945, that is to say, after the extermination camps with which the leisurely, unhurried essay has not—cannot—come to terms. For anyone 'who can never get these out of his mind', avers Hamburger, 'cannot tolerate the aimlessness and evasiveness of essay-writing'.[560] And yet, how happily ill-timed would Hamburger's pronouncement prove by the century's end: by the time, that is, his younger friend's 'essayistic semi-fictions', as he called them, began to revive the essay—and the essay on a walk, no less—into precisely one such way of holding the extermination camp in one's mind.[561] And how rivetingly dismayed, too, would Sebald himself have been, to discover yet another coincidence binding him, as he believed, to Michael Hamburger's life. '[S]omewhere or other', Hamburger wrote in the closing of his essay, 'the spirit of essay-writing is walking on; and no one knows where it will turn up'.[562] One answer to that question is, this chapter argues, *The Rings of Saturn*: the account of a walk made in the midst of a crisis, and with a bad conscience.

That Sebald then chose to illustrate his poetics by reference to one of Woolf's lesser known essays, rather than any of her more celebrated novels—say, *To the Lighthouse*, with its muted echoes of war on the home front, or *Mrs Dalloway*, with its representation of war's psychic wounds—suggests that, though the essay form might have long been outmoded, it was not altogether dead. Sebald's trademark tact, in other words, had as much to do with the circumspect way in which he thematized his subject as with the literary form he fashioned to this end: with literary form, that is, 'as another instance of tact'.[563] For unclassifiable though

[559] Hamburger, p. 92.
[560] Hamburger, p. 93.
[561] Michael Hamburger's letter to W.G. Sebald, 29 September 1995, now at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach. Quoted in Angier, p. 347.
[562] Hamburger, p. 93.
[563] Coe, p. 25.

they might be, hovering somewhere along the unsettled—and unsettling—border between fiction and (auto)biography, history and travel, literary criticism and nature writing, Sebald's four prose works nearly always call to mind one variation or another of the word 'essay'. Susan Sontag, under whose aegis Sebald first began to garner attention in the United States, said in her jacket blurb for *The Emigrants* (the first of his books to be translated into English) that it was 'like nothing I've ever read… *A roman d'essai*?'.[564] Sebald, for his part, veered toward a more generic category—'my medium', he announced, 'is prose, not the novel'—even as he claimed a certain veneer of untimeliness to it:[565]

> It's not of this time … But if you dip into any form of eighteenth- or nineteenth-century discursive prose—the English essayists, for instance—these forms exist in previous ages of literature and they have simply fallen into disrepair.[566]

Already in 1965, Michael Hamburger had praised the art of the essay as an eminently Anglo-Saxon one, perfected by three centuries yet wholly contained, too, 'in the first sentence of the first great collection of English essays—Francis Bacon's of 1597: "What is Truth; said jesting Pilate; And would not stay for an Answer.".[567] The effect of so antiquarian an obsession with bygone, at times florid modes of writing was to cement Sebald's reputation as the literary equivalent of a cathedral restorer—'a lonely survivor of Late Modernism', or 'a European at the end of European civilization', as he has indeed been described—concerned not with the upkeeping of centuries-old masonry, though he was just as obsessed with run-down manors and ruined buildings, but with the neglected survival of 'unseasonable forms' (the phrasing, as we have seen in the introduction, is Fredric Jameson's) on the cusp of the new

[564] See Sontag's jacket-blurb review of W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* (1996).
[565] Sebald, *Gespräche*, p. 85.
[566] Silverblatt, p. 78.
[567] Hamburger, p. 92.

millennium.[568] One might think, in keeping with Hamburger's argument, of Thomas de Quincey's peregrinating, hallucinatory prose; or of Charles Lamb, with his fictive narrator who (much like Sebald's) both is and isn't the real Lamb; or of a less ribald, though no less digressive Laurence Sterne. Or, to go back even further, of Sir Thomas Browne, whose 'labyrinthine sentences', Sebald marvelled in *The Rings of Saturn*, 'resemble processions or a funeral cortège in their sheer ceremonial lavishness' (*RS* 19). As Simon Cooke suggests, extending the list of formal borrowings to even older genres such as the medieval *memorabilia* or the pilgrim's tale, 'what is perhaps most counter-cultural about Sebald's writing is precisely his openness to cultural forms of the past, his digression from an ideology of novelty'.[569] Sebald's long-standing preoccupation with prose relics purportedly 'not of this time' certainly accounts, at least, for the ghostly, 'weirdly posthumous' ring of his own prose—or for why, as Geoff Dyer remarked, part of Sebald's originality as a contemporary writer seemed to derive, paradoxically, 'from the way his prose felt as if it had been exhumed from the past, as if the spirit of ruined Europe were speaking through him'.[570]

What both gestures toward a generic definition and attempts, on the other hand, to secure a safe genealogy show, then, is a sense of Sebald's prose as one intimately tied to essayistic craft. It is not solely the case, however, that the history of essay writing had often rubbed shoulders, especially in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, with that of tact as a social practice.[571] There is also the fact, more importantly, that the modes of attention cultivated by the essay form have proven remarkably amenable to the forms of oblique thematization so dear to Sebald, and so highly esteemed by his critics. To wit: while it is in

[568] Ryan Ruby, paraphrasing Sontag, calls Sebald 'a lonely survivor of Late Modernism in the trash culture of Late Capitalism' in his review of Angier's biography; in her jacket blurb for *The Emigrants*, Sontag dubs him, for her part, 'a European at the end of European civilization'. See Ryan Ruby, 'Privatized Grand Narratives', *New Left Review*, 131 (Sept/Oct 2021), 131–44 (p. 139).
[569] Simon Cooke, *Travellers' Tales of Wonder: Chatwin, Naipaul, Sebald* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 140.
[570] Geoff Dyer et al., 'A Symposium on W. G. Sebald', *Threepenny Review*, 89 (2002), 18–21 (p. 18).
[571] See Russell, *Tact*.

the nature of the essay to always be *on* or *about* something (*On Being Blue*, *Of Idleness*, even *An Essay on the Essay*), it more often happens that the essay's titular topic sits at odds with its actual, undeclared subject. Indeed, the mismatch between intention and attention—between declared will and its execution—has become a critical mainstay in the genre's long history. In 'Of Vanity', for instance, Montaigne admits that '[t]he names of my chapters do not always encompass their subject-matter', preferring to abandon himself to 'flights of fancy' that appear 'fortuitous and casual', rather than adhering to the rigidity of a prescribed theme.[572] Lukács, too, came to acknowledge this essential non-identity when, in 1910, he pointed to the essayist 'always speaking about the ultimate problems of life, but in a tone which implies that he is only discussing pictures and books'.[573] And Claudio Magris, to take a more recent (and pertinent) example, concurred in defining the essay as 'almost a metaphor in itself, for it often speaks of one thing only so as to speak of another'.[574]

Simply put, the essay points at something, but in so doing, it shows us not only that object, but a nest of other, more peripheral ones, too, however diaphanous or flitting these might at first appear. Again, Michael Hamburger perhaps put it best when, in his 1965 essay on the essay, he reasoned that 'if the title [of an essay] says "on" that can only mean that this essay passes over a certain field—but with no intention of surveying it'.[575] Or, as Kathryn Murphy has more recently observed: the 'aboutness and prepositionality' so central to the essay's self-conception 'are techniques of the attention, which occupy the mind only so that something else more difficult to articulate becomes visible'.[576] Sebald's use of the silkworm as a way of thinking about the Holocaust (or rather, as O'Connell argues, of 'making us think about how

[572] Montaigne, p. 1125.
[573] Lukács, p. 25.
[574] Quoted in Christy Nicole Wampole, 'Late Twentieth-Century French and Italian Essayistic Fiction' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Stanford University, 2011), p. 185.
[575] Hamburger, p. 91.
[576] Kathryn Murphy, 'On On: The Essay as Prepositionality', *ASAP/J*, 2022 <https://asapjournal.com/the-contemporary-essay-on-on-the-essay-as-prepositionality-kathryn-murphy/> [accessed 25 October 2023].

we can't understand the Holocaust') is only the most extreme, if obvious case in point here.[577] The processes involved in sericulture become, by this logic, an oblique—if, for some readers, objectionable—proxy for the murderous machine of the Third Reich. For as Brian Blanchfield recently glossed in a collection of essays tellingly entitled *Proxies*, proxy is 'the word for a subject you choose to study to produce data that can *approximate* the data you'd get from the actual, desired subject, if it were not prohibitively hard to apprehend'.[578] And what subject, as Sebald so often insisted, could be more prohibitively hard to apprehend—and thus more amenable to proxies—than the fate of European Jewry in the middle of the twentieth century? Though, as we have seen, rarely addressed as such, that fate nevertheless looms large throughout most of *The Rings of Saturn*—to such an extent that it overruns Sebald's narrative at the very moment of its inception.

It is curious that, like Rebecca West's book on Yugoslavia half a century before it, *The Rings of Saturn* began life as a short guide 'about remote Suffolk for German tourists', to be published in ten instalments on the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.[579] Soon, however, the innocuous Baedeker turned into a long meditation which took three years to complete, and whose gestation proved for its author as physically debilitating as *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* had been for Rebecca West: on sick leave (in late 1993) following a discectomy, Sebald reportedly wrote the book while 'lying on his stomach on a bed, his papers on the carpet below and his forehead on a chair'.[580] And just as *Black Lamb* began, moreover, with its narrator reminiscing about the time when, convalescing in a nursery home after a surgery, she first heard on the radio of the assassination of King Alexander of Yugoslavia in 1935, so *The Rings of Saturn* beings, too, in the middle of another (albeit unstated) Yugoslav crisis,

[577] O'Connell.
[578] Brian Blanchfield, *Proxies: A Memoir in Twenty-Four Attempts* (New York: Picador, 2017), p. viii.
[579] Angier, p. 342.
[580] Angier, p. 345.

with a convalescing narrator bound to a hospital bed. True to the blurb on the back cover of its German edition, which advertises it as '*Ein Reisebericht besonderer Art*' (a travel report of a special kind), *The Rings of Saturn* begins by holding out the promise of a journey on which, it very soon becomes clear, the narrative itself reneges. 'In August 1992, when the dog days were drawing to an end', the narrator intones, 'I set off to walk the county of Suffolk, in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work' (*RS* 3). Soon, however, the narrative lurches forward to 'a year to the day after I began my tour', when the narrator, having been hospitalised as a result of some ill-defined ailment, 'began in my thoughts to write these pages' (*RS* 3-4). And it is only after another proleptic leap, this time to 'more than a year after my discharge from hospital' (*RS* 5), that Sebald's ailing traveller finally begins to assemble his notes into written form, or so we are told.

Playing fast and loose with the established conventions of the travel genre, to which it nonetheless professes some kind of allegiance, the first chapter in *The Rings of Saturn* then proceeds to altogether part company with its declared theme—a walking tour of Suffolk—so as to tarry, instead, on a variety of unrelated subjects. A rueful elegy on the premature death of two academic colleagues, likewise caused by unknown ailments, is followed by a bizarre search for the skull of the seventeenth-century Norwich doctor and writer Thomas Browne; an ekphrastic reappraisal of Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*, complete with a double-spread, black-and-white reproduction of the painting, gives way to an excursus on levitation before circling back, at last, to Thomas Browne's cabinet of curiosities. Indeed, it is not until the second section of the book that the promised journey begins in earnest: '[i]t was on a grey, overcast day in August 1992', the narrator once again tells us, 'that I travelled down to the coast in one of the old diesel trains' (*RS* 29).

Such digressions are not, however, as arbitrary as they might at first seem, in that from the very beginning they are made to operate according to an intricate, lattice-like order of coincidences and correspondences—not unlike the geometrical pattern Browne 'identifies […] everywhere' in nature, the so-called 'quincunx' (*RS* 6). David Anderson, for instance, points out how 'Browne's presence in *The Rings of Saturn* is evidence of how the text is inflected by the East Anglian landscape even before the place, as such, has been discussed'.[581] And it is, moreover, by way of a paraphrase of a passage from Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* that, almost three hundred pages later, the narrator brings the account of his journey to a satisfyingly symmetrical end—all the more so if one remembers, as the narrator keenly reminds us after his lesson on sericulture, that Browne 'was the son of a silk merchant' (*RS* 296). *The Rings of Saturn* thus wavers, like Magris's *Danube* before it, between the purposefulness of narrative plot and the vagrancy of essayistic drift—between, that is, the forward thrust of the journey and the sideways decoys, red herrings, false starts, and cul-de-sacs strewn over its pages, literal as well as metaphorical. In this, Sebald obviously heeds the lesson bequeathed to him by one of the eighteenth-century masters of digressive art, Laurence Sterne, who in *Tristram Shandy* boasts about his 'digressive skill' in weaving 'the main work and the adventitious parts of it with such intersections', and with such careful calibrations of progressive motion and digressive pull, 'one wheel within another', that 'the whole machine, in general, has been kept a-going'.[582]

There is, however, another element of the text that deliberately confounds the purported randomness of Sebald's digressions, and which brings him closer, too, to the kind of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century prose whose subsequent demise at the hands of realist fiction Milan Kundera famously decried. I am referring, more specifically, to the fact that the

[581] David Anderson, *Landscape and Subjectivity in the Work of Patrick Keiller, W.G. Sebald, and Iain Sinclair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 146.
[582] Sterne, pp. 57–59.

ten numbered sections that make up *The Rings of Saturn* are listed in the contents page of the book with a cursory summary of their subject matter ('I. In hospital—Obituary—Odyssey of Thomas Browne's skull—Anatomy lecture—Levitation', and so on), so that the startling frisson commonly triggered by all such associative leaps is pre-emptively nullified by a paratext neatly accounting for them before the text proper has even begun. In this, Sebald ostensibly follows an ancient and early modern practice of indexing treatises, reference books, anthologies, and encyclopaedias, which subsequently percolated into the prepositional titling of essays (from the Latin *De* to the English On, or Of, or About) and, in some cases, into a 'way of organising novels in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries'.[583] Take, for example, Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, with its lengthy summaries of chapters such as 'Concerning pearls, how they grow and where'; or later compendious, if eccentric assemblages such as Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, with its exuberantly baroque division into sections, members, and subsections, some of which could just as well be transplanted on to the contents pages of *The Rings of Saturn* ('SUBSECT XV—Love of Learning, or overmuch study. With a Digression on the misery of Scholars, and why the Muses are Melancholy').[584] At the same time, as James Williams observes, echoing Kundera's point on the forgotten playfulness of early forms of fiction, 'eighteenth-century novels toyed self-consciously with the chapter head', employing it by turns as a curt summary of action, as in the case of Cervantes (and later Sebald), or else turning it into a mere pretext for metatextual irony, as Henry Fielding does when, in *Tom Jones* (1749), he taunts the reader with such chapter headings as 'Containing little or nothing' or 'Containing five pages of paper'.[585]

[583] James Williams, 'Chapters', in *The Cambridge Companion to Prose*, ed. by Daniel Tyler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 78–95 (p. 79).
[584] Pliny the Elder, quoted in Williams, 'Chapters', p. 79; Burton, p. 300.
[585] Williams, 'Chapters', p. 79.

Aside, then, from halting the forward thrust of the novel ('I have an aversion to the standard novel', Sebald once remarked, 'there's something trite about it. You can feel the wheels turning'), the contents page prefacing *The Rings of Saturn* structurally acts out the 'long account of calamities' (*RS* 95) Sebald's narrator will come to identify, by the end of his journey, with the course of history as such.[586] Indeed, the almost total paralysis, and subsequent hospitalisation, that befalls the narrator one year after his journey is but a belated effect of 'the paralysing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place' (*RS* 3). Among these calamities, both manmade and natural, one can count: the genocidal exploitation of the Belgian Congo; the Allied firebombing of German cities during World War Two; the forced mass emigration of Suffolk farmers; the British-backed suppression of the Taiping Rebellion in nineteenth-century China; the great storm of 1987; the Irish Civil War; the decay of Dunwich; the threat of nuclear warfare; the Amritsar massacre in India; and, of course, the Holocaust. But in the midst of this litany of disasters, there are some which, as I already anticipated, prove of much greater concern to us here: namely, those that Sebald signals, in the fourth chapter, under the sub-headings 'Pictures from the Great War' and 'The concentration camp at Jasenovac on the Sava', and it is to these specific sections that my discussion will turn in the rest of this chapter.

From Southwold to Sarajevo

An 'advancing chill in the air', which disperses his reveries of centuries-old naval battles as he sits by the seafront in Southwold, leads Sebald's traveller to seek refuge in the Sailor's Reading Room, a charitable establishment 'which nowadays, sailors being a dying breed,

[586] James Atlas, 'W.G. Sebald: A Profile', *Paris Review*, Summer 1999, p. 282.

serves principally as a kind of maritime museum' (*RS* 92). Echoes of past wars, however, hauntingly chase the narrator even inside the drowsy atmosphere of the Sailor's Reading Room, where '[a]part from the muffled sound of the sea and the clicking of [billiard] balls there is nothing to be heard' (*RS* 93). Inside this temporary haven, in fact, Sebald's narrator unexpectedly comes across a photographic history of the First World War, a compendious anthology published (ominously enough) in 1933 'to mark the past tragedy, and perhaps as a warning of another approaching' (*RS* 94). Having leafed through disparate 'scenes of destruction, mutilation, desecration, starvation, conflagration, and freezing cold' (*RS* 94), from the Austro-Italian front through to Galicia and Flanders, the narrator chances on a number of images documenting 'the chaos in the Balkans', an area of the world which, Sebald glosses with some irony, 'was further removed from England then than Lahore or Omdurman' (*RS* 95). Sebald then reproduces a black-and-white photograph of the tattered collection, with a double-page spread showing 'the notorious snapshot from Sarajevo' (*RS* 95). 'The picture', the narrator continues,

> has the caption Princip Lights the Fuse! It is the 28th of June 1914, a bright, sunny day, ten forty-five in the morning. One sees a few Bosnians, some Austrian military personnel, and the assassin being apprehended. The facing page shows the tunic of Archduke Franz Ferdinand's uniform, holed by bullets and soaked with blood. (*RS* 95-96)

This, the narrator adds, can now be seen under a 'black-framed reliquary' (*RS* 96) in Vienna's army museum—a fact Sebald likely drew from his reading of Magris's *Danube* a few years earlier. For Magris, as we saw in Chapter Four, Franz Ferdinand's bloodstained tunic became the ominous portent of 'a third and final catastrophe, because two world wars have not found a stable substitute for the equilibrium which was shaken at Sarajevo' (*D* 181). By the time Sebald sets out to write *The Rings of Saturn*, of course, Magris's words inevitably ring with a certain prescience, though the catastrophe he imagined at the time later turned out to be,

instead, one of regional (rather than global) breakdown. In spite of this, Sebald's account ends with a passing statement whose dry, matter-of-fact tone belies a much wider—and chilling—resonance. For '[i]n 1993', the narrator concludes, almost parenthetically, 'the Serbs celebrated the seventy-fifth anniversary of his [Gavrilo Princip's] death' (*RS* 96). And though the glaring relevance of such a commemoration in the context of yet another ongoing war in the region would have been obvious enough, at least in the mind of a reader at the time, the narrator refrains from further plucking at the loose thread on which he has suddenly laid his finger, and which would risk exposing this web of violence as one not entirely consigned to the past.

On the following day, in an attempt, perhaps, to insulate himself from this sudden brush with atrocities past and present, the narrator ironically reports feeling 'a sense of eternal peace' (*RS* 96) as he sits in the bar of his Southwold hotel. This *outre-tombe* repose even takes on a cosmological scale when the narrator, lulled by the mechanical ticking of a grandfather clock, indulges in a description of the clock's 'rising and setting sun and moon', the cogwheels gripping, the pendulum swinging 'from side to side', so that 'the big hand, bit by bit, in tiny jerks, went its round' (*RS* 96). Thus cocooned within this pre-ordained cosmos *en miniature*, the narrator shows no recollection of the gruesome photographs glimpsed on the previous night, nor of the abrupt pull that had threatened to drag his attention away from the drowsy Reading Room in Southwold to besieged and beleaguered Sarajevo, in Bosnia. This cosmic bliss is, however, all but short-lived, for as he flicks through the pages of a copy of the *Independent on Sunday*, Sebald's unwitting narrator comes across an article 'that was related to the Balkan pictures I had seen in the Reading Room' (*RS* 96), though with a focus this time on World War Two.

From 1941 to 1945, the article reports, Bosnia was the theatre of numerous cleansing operations against Serbs, Jews, Roma, and Bosnians carried out by the Ustaša regime of the

Independent State of Croatia, the Nazi puppet state established after Hitler's invasion of Yugoslavia. A photograph in the article, absent from the text, is said to show Ustaša militiamen sawing off the head of a Serb while striking heroic poses. Another snapshot, the only one reproduced in the text, exhibits a line of corpses hanging from 'a kind of rudimentary cross-bar gallows' (*RS* 97), which was taken at the concentration camp of Jasenovac, where '[s]even hundred thousand men, women and children were killed there alone in ways that made even the hair of the Reich's experts stand on end' (*RS* 97). Sebald concludes his excursus into wartime Yugoslavia by dwelling on the children who survived the Axis-led Kozara Offensive in northwestern Bosnia. Those who were not murdered on the spot, Sebald's narrator recalls, were later sent to Zagreb via cattle wagon, on journeys during which '[m]any of those who were still alive were so hungry that they had eaten the cardboard identity tags they wore about their necks' (*RS* 98). The narrator finally ponders how, even though they were later brought up in Catholic households before becoming fully integrated citizens of Tito's socialist Yugoslavia, 'no one knows what shadowy memories haunt them to this day' (*RS* 98).

Given the uncanny insistence with which the Balkans keep unsettling the narrator's sojourn at the other end of Europe, one might expect a further (final) update—from the 1940s to the 1990s—to close this twentieth-century chronicle, however partial, of the region. Indeed, by the time Sebald's narrator embarked on his walking tour across Suffolk in 1992, Yugoslavia had all but collapsed, Croatia had been at war with Serbia for more than a year, and Sarajevo had been under siege for almost five months. On the 17th of August 1992, just around the same time as the narrator's East Anglian walk, *Time* magazine featured on its cover a photograph of Fikret Alić, a Bosnian prisoner at the Serb-controlled concentration camp of Trnopolje. The emaciated man, a naked torso of protruding ribs, is standing behind barbed wire alongside other internees. On the left side of the cover, a red caption alarmingly asks:

'Must it go on?'. The question is the same one posed, in 1995, by Sebald himself, its sense of urgency and despair now dampened, however, by three intervening years of warfare and violence: 'Does it always go on like this?'.[587] Apart from imprinting itself on the eyes of many Western viewers as a symbol of the violence that had engulfed Bosnia in 1992, the photograph pointedly tapped, too, into what looked like unmistakable iconography: '[t]he shock of recognition', reads the attendant article, 'is acute. Skeletal figures behind barbed wire'.[588] The image was originally taken from a video report produced by ITN's Penny Marshall and Ian Williams, and first broadcast on ITV and Channel 4 on the 6th of August 1992. British newspapers subsequently circulated the picture under front-page headlines such as 'BELSEN 92' (*Daily Mirror*) and 'THE PROOF' (*Daily Mail*), and a public controversy quickly ensued when *LM Magazine* (originally *Living Marxism*) published an article by the German journalist Thomas Deichmann provocatively entitled 'The Picture that Fooled the World', accusing ITN's footage of being entirely fabricated. A few months later, in December 1992, former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher ended an article lambasting Western inaction over Bosnia with the following plea: 'There is still time to save the intended victims of this second Holocaust'—a powerful reminder, indeed, of just how global the Holocaust had become, by then, as a 'universal trope for historical trauma'.[589]

It might not be too far-fetched, then, to imagine one such copy of *Time* magazine, with its shockingly graphic cover, displayed in the newspaper section of the Sailor's Reading Room or else lying somewhere in a corner of the Crown Hotel bar, where Sebald's narrator already chances on the *Independent*. And how all the more unlikely, too, that a melancholy rambler so obsessed with photographic histories of atrocity and displacement should not, after all,

[587] 'Geht das denn immer so weiter?'. In Sebald, *Gespräche*, p. 114.
[588] J.F.O. McAllister, 'Atrocity and Outrage', *Time*, 17 August 1992, p. 21.
[589] Margaret Thatcher, 'Belgrade Votes, Bosnia Burns, and the West Just Fiddles', *The European*, 17 December 1992; Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 13.

immediately seize on so harrowing a trace of destruction, and one, moreover, that was being overtly, if sensationally framed as analogous to the one past tragedy to which Sebald's narrators always return. We know, for a fact, that Sebald himself not only followed news reports from war-ravaged Bosnia, but had an active role, too, in arranging humanitarian aid for one family who had been unable to flee besieged Sarajevo. On the 24th of January 1993, the *Sunday Times* reported that:

> [a] university professor, Mario Susko, 52, living with his wife and daughter in one room in Sarajevo without water or electricity, has been offered a job at the University of East Anglia after academics there read of his plight in The Sunday Times last month.[590]

In fact, this brief notice referred, without explicitly naming him, to one 'Max' Sebald, then Professor of European Literature at the University of East Anglia, who had met Suško some years earlier, during Suško's eight-week tenure as a bursary holder at the British Centre for Literary Translation, founded by Sebald himself in 1989. And so, having read of Suško's plight in an article published by Janine Di Giovanni towards the end of 1992, Sebald 'successfully arranged internal funding for Suško to return to UEA with his family on a year-long visiting fellowship with free accommodation', as well as launching 'a public appeal for additional funds which led to *The Sunday Times* paying for Suško's transport to the UK'.[591]

One might wonder, then, just why, as Sebald was mobilising aid for one of the victims of the Bosnian war, this same war should make no explicit appearance in the calamity-strewn travelogue Sebald was also beginning to conceive around the same time; or why, to put it another way, Mario Suško should have failed to become yet another member of Sebald's (usually all-male, always European) cast of *Ausgewanderten*, that is, those Henry Selwyns

[590] 'Offer of Hope', *Sunday Times*, 24 January 1993, p. 18.
[591] Duncan Large, 'The British Centre for Literary Translation', in *W.G. Sebald in Context*, ed. by Uwe Schütte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 50–57 (pp. 54–55). The article in question is Janine Di Giovanni, 'Christmas in Sarajevo', *Sunday Times*, 27 December 1992, p. 9.

and Ambros Adelwarths and Jacques Austerlitzes and Michael Hamburgers populating, with their sorrowful stories of war and exile, the pages of his prose. For as Sebald himself saw it, his was the impossible yet unremitting duty 'to write about the history of persecution, of vilification of minorities, the attempt, well-nigh achieved, to eradicate a whole people'.[592] But instead of bringing his chronicle back from the 1940s to 1992, Sebald concludes the fourth chapter of his travelogue by dwelling on the complicity of his own countrymen in the Ustaša massacres of the Second World War. One such accomplice, whom Sebald mentions without explicitly naming him, was Kurt Waldheim, the Wehrmacht intelligence officer who signed off the deportation orders on behalf of the Croatian Ustaša. Waldheim later became Secretary General of the United Nations, and 'it was in this last capacity', Sebald observes,

> that he spoke onto tape, for the benefit of any extra-terrestrials that may happen to share our universe, words of greeting that are now, together with other memorabilia of mankind, approaching the outer limits of our solar system abroad the space probe Voyager II. (*RS* 99)

Having briefly indulged in a moment of cosmic peace sanctioned by the ticking of a grandfather clock, Sebald's text finally drifts off into outer space, propelled by the tragic irony of a spokesman for mankind being charged with complicity in some of the most heinous crimes in history.

For someone so beguiled, then, by the 'long account of calamities' (*RS* 295) that stretch far back into the past, Sebald's apparent neglect of a calamity that was still ongoing at the time of writing no doubt makes for a puzzling absence. And yet, before chalking up the entire matter to questions of tact—or better yet, of tactful omission—it might be worth asking whether Sebald's literary silence could be symptomatic, in fact, of a much wider lack of concern on

[592] Silverblatt, p. 80.

the part of the British public and their policymakers at the time. For though Sebald might have been personally invested in the fate of Mario Suško, a Bosnian Croat translator from Sarajevo, the *Independent* article he cites in *The Rings of Saturn* wilfully parrots, in fact, the very sort of anti-Croat propaganda spun by Slobodan Milošević's regime to justify its war of aggression—and repackaged, in turn, by the *Independent* reporter, Robert Fisk, as an argument against international intervention. Indeed, though Sebald carefully excises all such references Fisk makes to the concomitant war in the 1990s, the article in question purports to 'put today's events in Bosnia in historical perspective', and it does so by ascribing the now-familiar analogy of the Jewish tragedy not, as the *Time* (and Thatcher) did, to Bosnians, but rather to Serbs, painting them as the beleaguered 'survivors of that earlier Holocaust' now caught in the throes of '[a] second civil war'.[593] Fisk then bemoans how 'today [it is] unfashionable to recall how Serbs were the principal victims of Croats', for '[t]o do so upsets our current moral indignation over the barbarism in Bosnia-Herzegovina'.[594] As to those 'politicians (and journalists) who have been calling […] for Stealth bombers to overfly Belgrade', adds Fisk, they might do well to remember that 'a foreign invasion or intervention can kindle a blood bath'.[595]

This line of thinking was only the most egregious consequence of what the American diplomat Richard Holbrooke, who in 1995 brokered the peace deal that ended the wars in Yugoslavia, dubbed the 'Rebecca West effect': the ill-fated view, that is, that the history of the region was 'either too complicated (or trivial) for outsiders to master', thus 'making it impossible (or pointless) for anyone outside the region to try to prevent the conflict'.[596] And though Holbrooke would later caution against approaching the conflict of the 1990s through

[593] Robert Fisk, '"Cleansing" Bosnia at a Camp Called Jasenovac', *Independent*, 15 August 1992, p. 23.
[594] Fisk.
[595] Fisk.
[596] Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War* (New York: Random House, 1999), p. 22.

the distorting lens of prior wars in the region, cherry-picking past injustices in support of one's favourite ethnic side, that is precisely what Fisk does in his *Independent* article when he insists, with regards to ITN's Trnopolje footage, that 'the original concentration camps set up here by the Nazis and their Croatian allies were on a much more terrible scale than the camps now being uncovered in Bosnia'.[597] As evidence, Fisk claims that '700,000 men, women and children were slaughtered in Jasenovac alone, almost all of them civilians', an overblown estimate that Sebald then reproduces, rather blindly, in *The Rings of Saturn*.[598] In fact, today's historiographic consensus puts the number of total victims somewhere closer to 70,000, less than one seventh of the vastly exaggerated figure used by Serb nationalists for propaganda purposes, and cited in turn by Fisk (and then Sebald). As Marko Attila Hoare, one of the foremost historians of modern-day Bosnia, observes in this regard, '[i]t is of course true that the Serb people suffered grievously at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators in Yugoslavia (Ustashas, Chetniks and others), but this suffering [..] certainly was not on a par with the fate that befell the Jews in Europe under the Nazis', unlike what Fisk suggests when opining, rather preposterously, that the savagery in Jasenovac 'might surpass even Auschwitz'.[599]

What is even more noteworthy for our own purposes, however, is that Hoare specifically singles out Fisk's article as an early instance, in Britain, of the wider ideological camp he dubs 'left revisionism': that is to say, those journalists, academics, and intellectuals who downplay (or even deny) the genocidal campaign orchestrated by Serbs in Bosnia and Kosovo, and who shift the blame for this violence, as well as for the break-up of Yugoslavia, on the 'imperialist' (meaning anti-Serbian and anti-Yugoslav) West. The following passage by

[597] Fisk.
[598] Fisk.
[599] Marko Attila Hoare, 'Genocide in the Former Yugoslavia: A Critique of Left Revisionism's Denial', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 5.4 (2003), 543–63 (p. 556).

Hoare captures, rather succinctly, both the logic often mobilised by left revisionists, and the consequently fraught state of British reporting on the matter:

> [i]f Ed Vulliamy reports on a contemporary Serbian concentration camp, then this is 'demonizing the Serbs' and proof that the Western media is biased against 'the Serbs,' but if Robert Fisk writes about a Croatian concentration camp that existed half a century earlier during World War II, as he did in *The Independent* at the height of the Bosnian war, then this is proof that 'the Croats' are really the bad guys and consequently that the rest of the media is biased against 'the Serbs' for not pointing this out.[600]

Thus, though Sebald could have just as well cited the news dispatches of a less controversial war reporter such as, say, the BBC's Martin Bell (brother, incidentally, to Sebald's later translator Anthea Bell, and author of *In Harm's Way*, a 1995 memoir of wartime Bosnia), the extensive use Sebald makes of Fisk's article—and of the inaccuracies contained therein—places him in a somewhat compromised position more akin, in fact, to the one parallelly espoused by Peter Handke, one of the few contemporary novelists from Austria whom Sebald most admired. It was in early 1996, less than a year after the Srebrenica genocide—the largest atrocity in Europe since the Holocaust—that Handke travelled to Bosnia and Serbia, and among other things had himself glibly photographed at the very entrance of Srebrenica. The subsequent travelogue, published in Germany one year after *The Rings of Saturn*, and translated in English as *A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia*, was both an ode to the Serbian people and a scornful attack on Western journalists, accused—so the familiar line goes—of anti-Yugoslav bias. Needless to say, we are a far cry from Sebald's chance encounter with an uncited article on Jasenovac from which, moreover, all dubious references to the 1990s wars have been carefully excised. But one suspects, all the same, that the recital

[600] Hoare, p. 553.

of Fisk's article in *The Rings of Saturn* certainly exposes Sebald's narrative to the risk of being grist, as it were, to the revisionist's mill.

It is more likely, though, that the sudden intrusion of Fisk's article into Sebald's text signals less an outright embrace of genocidal violence, à la Peter Handke, than a much more widespread stance against direct Western intervention in the conflict. For though an article as glaringly tendentious as Fisk's was by no means an effective barometer of public opinion regarding the war in Bosnia, Fisk's warnings against military intervention still spoke to the vast majority of the British polity at the time. Indeed, a poll published on the frontpage of the same issue of the *Independent on Sunday* cited by Sebald in *The Rings of Saturn* showed that only 13% of the British public agreed with Thatcher's call to arm Bosnia, 37% with Paddy Ashdown's call to bomb Serbian artillery positions, while 53% were against sending any UK troops at all.[601] The poll also found that two out of three people polled could not name the capital of Bosnia, while fewer still could identify Serbia as the country under UN economic sanctions. The vast majority of electors were, in sum, too 'confused about detail' (and, it seemed, geography) to take sides.[602] Thus, if Sebald's narrator overlooks the contemporary violence engulfing the region, even as he morbidly delves into the atrocities of its more recent past, it might be because the Balkans still prove, in 1992 as much as in 1914, 'further removed from England' (*RS* 95) than such former provinces of the British Empire as Lahore, in India, or Omdurman, in Sudan. For this, to repurpose Neville Chamberlain's infamous dismissal, was a faraway country of which people knew (almost) nothing—and for which, it is implied, they could do nothing.

[601] Peter Kellner and Donald Macintyre, 'Don't risk UK troops in Bosnia, says poll', *Independent on Sunday*, 16 August 1992, p. 1.
[602] Kellner and Macintyre.

That Sebald should set the obscure topography of the Balkans against the avowedly more familiar reaches of the British Empire—and that he should do so, moreover, while physically sitting in a seafarers' establishment on the coast of England—is not, however, as accidental as may at first seem. In both instances, the use of local print sources places him within an eminently British perspective, for just as the *Daily Express* collection of World War I photographs turns Sarajevo into a *terra incognita* more unfamiliar (and thus, paradoxically, more distant) than some of the Empire's overseas colonies, so too does Robert Fisk's article in the *Independent* tap into a rhetorical repertoire of peculiarly (though by no means exclusively) Anglo-Saxon flavour, given that, as Fisk suggests, 'to understand the wartime history of Bosnia is to take a journey into darkness', and to reckon thereby with crimes of a 'bestial' nature.[603] I say of a 'peculiarly Anglo-Saxon flavour' advisedly, for though such portrayals of the Balkans as a violent no man's land were certainly common across much of Western Europe, at least since the late nineteenth century, British writing in particular, as Vesna Goldsworthy notes, 'exerted considerable influence on the perceptions of the area not only in Britain but throughout the world'. [604] One need only cite such enduring examples of popular fiction as Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894), set in the imaginary country of Ruritania, which became 'one of the most widely used symbols of the archetypal Balkan land', or Bram Stoker's *The Lady of the Shroud* (1909), with its fictitious Land of the Blue Mountains.[605] And then there is, too, Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, whose influence was such, as we have seen, as to stir Western policy-making in the wars of the 1990s. In other words, Sebald's twentieth-century chronicle of the region's various conflicts—as well as the way it glosses over its intervening decades of peace—quarries a discursive repertoire that has since come to be known, largely thanks to Maria Todorova's

[603] Fisk.
[604] Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination* (London: Hurst, 2013), p. 11.
[605] Goldsworthy, p. 52.

study of 1997, as 'Balkanism': the idea, that is, that the Balkans are not so much Europe's Other, as with Edward Said's wholly other *Orient*, but a much hazier, thicket-strewn borderland on the outskirts of Europe proper, neither here nor there.[606]

But there is yet another, decidedly less overt mention of Bosnia in *The Rings of Saturn*, and it is by way of this subsequent reference that Sebald not only gestures toward the nineteenth-century origins of England's enduring Balkanist imaginary, but comes closest, too, to actually naming the Yugoslav conflict of the 1990s.

From Sarajevo to Southwold

During his second evening in Southwold, in the fifth section of the book, Sebald's traveller falls asleep while watching a BBC documentary on Roger Casement, the Irish diplomat and humanitarian activist who denounced the colonial abuse in the Congo Free State. A reference to Casement's friendship with Joseph Conrad sets off, in turn, a biographical detour into Conrad's own life, focusing especially on the months Conrad spent as a seaman in Lowestoft, a town already visited by the narrator on his way to Southwold. Having observed how Conrad (whom he calls by his Polish name Korzeniowski) first learned English by reading the *Lowestoft Standard* and the *Lowestoft Journal*, Sebald then proceeds to list some of the 'motley assortment of news [that] was brought to the public's attention' during the first week of Conrad's arrival in England (*RS* 114), in the middle of June 1878. The eleven news pieces Sebald corrals are mostly tragic, from the collapse of a mine in Wigan, with a death toll of two hundred, to a domestic incident in Whitby, involving a housemaid who is burnt alive after accidentally catching fire. Some, in fact, are almost *comically* tragic: a certain Mrs Dixon of Silsden, we are told, dies of a stroke for being 'too overjoyed' at the sight of her

[606] See Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

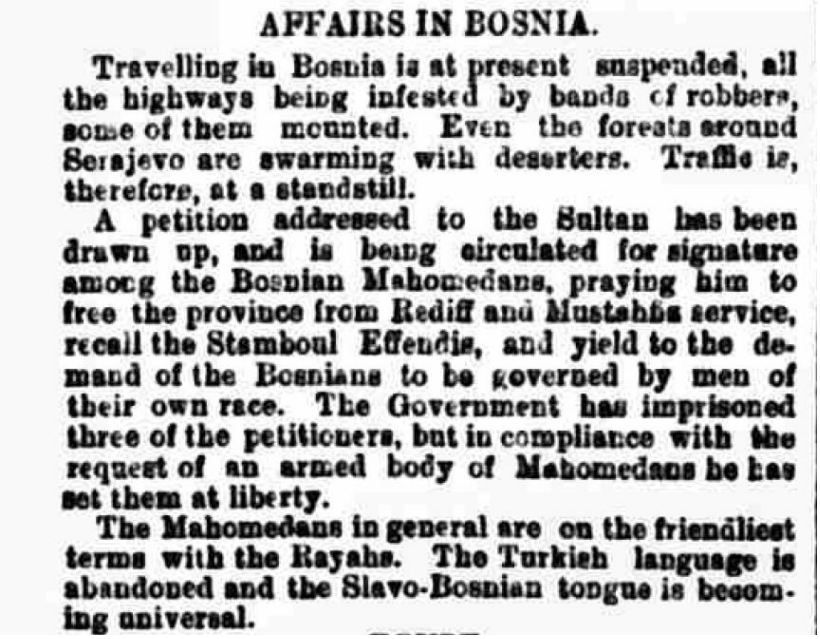
long-lost son, who turns up at her door 'after ten years' absence in America' (*RS* 114). Some bring news of foreign, far-off crises: unrest in South Africa, for instance, or an uprising in Rumelia. And some even anticipate thematic motifs soon to appear in Sebald's future prose works, so that the construction of a series of fortifications around Hong Kong, where 'two thousand coolies' are said to be 'slaving' (*RS* 114), seems to portend Jacques Austerlitz's own obsession with fortified cities in *Austerlitz* (a book that, incidentally, only took the shape of a more conventional novel owing to the fact that, after the essayistic meanderings of *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald felt like he 'couldn't go on in the same way for ever', lest he became 'a bore').[607]

This, to be sure, looks like a shorter, much more condensed version of the book itself: a *Rings of Saturn* in miniature, so to speak, with its 'long account of calamities' (*RS* 95) scaled down to a simple news summary. Indeed, not only are seemingly unrelated events, both local and global, collated here into one single space, but the number of sections in the book is replicated, too, in the number of reports given. Or rather, since there are ten chapters and *eleven* news pieces, I would argue that this journalistic collage supplies, by dint of its eleventh bulletin, the missing referent that the narrator has so far refrained from making explicit in each of his encounters with the Balkans. For the eleventh, and thus last, spot in this sundry assemblage is reserved to Bosnia, where, we are told,

> all highways are infested with bands of robbers, some of them mounted. Even the forests around Sarajevo are swarming with marauders, deserters and francs-tireurs of all kinds. Travelling, therefore, is at a standstill. (*RS* 114)

[607] Angier, pp. 355–56.

Though Sebald says nothing more about the violence reportedly encircling the Bosnian capital, the original piece (published not in the *Lowestoft Standard*, as the narrator would have us believe, but in the *Lowestoft Journal*) refers to the chaotic aftermath of the 1875 Herzegovinian Uprising against the Ottoman Empire, under whose rule Sarajevo (and the rest of Bosnia and Herzegovina) then stood, and to which Sebald directly seems to allude in the second news piece from his list ('in Rumelia there was a Mohammedan uprising', Rumelia being the old toponym for the Ottoman Balkans, *RS* 114). In particular, the uncited segment of this relatively short bulletin—a few paragraphs tucked in the foreign-affairs column of the paper (Figure 7)—tells of a 'petition addressed to the Sultan' of the Sublime Porte, bidding him 'yield to the demand of the Bosnians to be governed by men of their own race'.[608] As Robert Donia remarks in his history of Sarajevo, the address was not only intended as a protest against 'the punishment of deserters and their families' by Istanbul's central government, which kept permanent garrisons in Bosnia, but also as a pointed warning that 'Bosnians would defend their homeland with their lives in the event of war'.[609] And sure



AFFAIRS IN BOSNIA.

Travelling in Bosnia is at present suspended, all the highways being infested by bands of robbers, some of them mounted. Even the forests around Serajevo are swarming with deserters. Traffic is, therefore, at a standstill.

A petition addressed to the Sultan has been drawn up, and is being circulated for signature among the Bosnian Mahomedans, praying him to free the province from Redif and Mustahfiz service, recall the Stamboul Effendis, and yield to the demand of the Bosnians to be governed by men of their own race. The Government has imprisoned three of the petitioners, but in compliance with the request of an armed body of Mahomedans he has set them at liberty.

The Mahomedans in general are on the friendliest terms with the Rayahs. The Turkish language is abandoned and the Slavo-Bosnian tongue is becoming universal.

Figure 7. 'Affairs in Bosnia', from the *Lowestoft Journal*, 15 June 1878.

[608] 'Affairs in Bosnia', *Lowestoft Journal*, 15 June 1878, p. 2.
[609] Robert J. Donia, *Sarajevo: A Biography* (London: Hurst, 2009), p. 43.

enough, though a representative assembly made up of members from Sarajevo's local elite was quickly formed after this petition, less than a month later Bosnia was plunged into further chaos by the invasion of foreign troops—this time, of Austro-Hungarian stripe—following the decision, sanctioned by the Congress of Berlin in July 1878, to give Vienna full control over Bosnia. In August 1878, Sarajevo fell at last to the occupying forces.

Significantly, the bulletin from Sarajevo is the only one in Sebald's list to appear in the present tense—the other sampled extracts being, in fact, in the past simple.[610] Though hardly noticeable in itself, the abrupt change in verbal tense gives the impression that, having so far offered second-hand summaries of past events, the narrator were now reporting on things happening in his own present, rather than on matters of long ago. The choice, I suspect, was surely a deliberate one, especially if one remembers how closely Sebald oversaw Michael Hulse's translation of the German text. Indeed, not only is the report from Sarajevo given place of honour at the end of the foregoing list, but a glance at the same passage in the original German reveals an even more obvious attempt to spotlight the Bosnian capital over and above its accompanying pieces:

> … die junge Königin von Spanien wird Tag für Tag schwächer; die Arbeiten an den Befestigungswerken von Honkong, bei denen über zweitausend Kulis beschäftigt sind, *rapidly approach completion and in Bosnia all highways are infested with bands of robbers, some of them mounted. Even the forests around Sarajevo are swarming with marauders, deserters and franctireurs of all kinds. Travelling is, therefore, at a standstill.*[611]

Sebald's italicised, mid-sentence shift into untranslated English can be explained by the simple fact that he is quoting the first lines of the bulletin from Sarajevo verbatim, exactly as

[610] Among the sundry items of news, Sebald writes for instance that the Duke of Cambridge 'was to inspect the Indian troops', while the *Lowestoft Journal* reports instead that the Duke '*will* inspect the Indian troops' (italics mine).
[611] W.G. Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn: eine englische Wallfahrt* (Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn, 1995), p. 145.

they appear, that is, on the column of the *Lowestoft Journal*. Whether one reads the English translation or the German original, then, the effect of these alterations is much the same, in that they cast into relief Sarajevo's crisis over and above all the other events sampled from the period. By manipulating the tense of his verbs (in English) or by more obviously switching the language of his text (in German), Sebald thus turns a century-old news bulletin into a report that could have just as easily, and just as convincingly, been published on the day of his visit to Southwold, in 1992, albeit of course with a few lexical alterations (modern-day 'snipers', for instance, in lieu of their antiquated predecessors, the 'franc-tireurs'). For though the historical actors are plainly not the same, the modern-day Sarajevo of 1992 was yet again engaged in a similar struggle to assert its national sovereignty against an aggressor; besieged, what's more, by snipers shooting down at its people from the wooded hills above the city; and cut off, as a result, from the rest of the world, as Sebald's own efforts to rescue Mario Suško's family out of the besieged city had made all too tangibly clear. In 1992 as much as in 1878, travelling really *was* 'at a standstill'.

That Sebald made a point of sampling the crisis of 1878 at a time when Sarajevo was again under siege, blurring past and present by way of dexterous shifts in idiom or tense, could surely be no mere coincidence. On the contrary: if Sebald mentions this nineteenth-century bulletin at all, it is precisely as a circumspect—one might even say tactful—way of pointing to the wars in Yugoslavia without going so far, of course, as to explicitly name them. The template is, by now, a familiar one, in that a local, specifically English source of print media—from the *Daily Express* album (1933) through to the *Independent* article (1992) and, finally, the *Lowestoft Journal* (1878)—is used to bring tidings of war in the present via news of violence from the past. And this is also why Sebald sampled only the very beginning of the *Lowestoft* report while proceeding to omit the remainder of it, with its subsequent references to the Ottoman Empire, to 'the Turkish language' or the 'Stamboul Effendis', which would

have certainly foreclosed, by reason of being too historically specific, any possibility of discerning the wars of the 1990s behind—or beyond—the news from the 1870s.[612] The same, albeit reversed logic can be registered, conversely, in Sebald's carefully tailored paraphrase of the *Independent* article, which is not only misdated in the text (the article was published on a Saturday, and not, as Sebald would have us think, in the following *Independent on Sunday*), but also shorn of any explicit reference made by Fisk to the present conflict so as to preserve it as an absent—though by no means invisible—referent. In one case, the culled context would have made the ongoing war not pertinent enough; in the other, it would have made it *too* pertinent. Far from being chance, ready-made findings strewn by the wayside, as the narrator would have us believe when he claims, for instance, to have simply been 'leafing through' the newspaper (*RS* 96), or never to have previously 'seen' (*RS* 94) the photographs in the Sailor's Reading Room, each of these allusions betrays, upon closer inspection, the hand of an artful editor, rigorously calibrating the extent to which his (and our) attention should tarry on the present. For as Sebald himself confessed, 'moving from one subject, from one theme, from one concern to another always requires some kind of sleight of hand', such that the reader may be persuaded 'that this is something on your mind, but that you do not necessarily roll it out […] on every other page'.[613]

With this in mind, we might now posit that the hall of mirrors thus created, with its images of continuing violence ricocheting from one focal point to the next, operates as a series of thematic proxies: instances, that is, of an essayistic subjectivity speaking about one thing, only so as to draw attention to some other thing, one perhaps more difficult to conceive or articulate. Thus, just as the dead silkworms at the end of the book become a subtle way of recalling the Nazi death camps, so too does the paper trail evidencing past episodes of

[612] 'Affairs in Bosnia', p. 2.
[613] Silverblatt, pp. 79–80.

bloodshed in Bosnia become, in turn, a way of acknowledging present violence tactfully, without (to borrow Sebald's own phrase) 'tipping into melodrama'.[614] For this, Sebald maintained, was something that the novel form was most congenitally prone to—'the wrongful trespass', as he put it in *The Emigrants*, into someone else's suffering—and the reason, therefore, why he preferred to speak of his works as prose texts rather than novels.[615] Unlike the trawling for aesthetic effects Sebald detected (as early as his doctoral dissertation) in all 'cheap forms of fictionalization', the modes of indirection—of writerly tact—cultivated by the essay become, by contrast, a more fitting medium for 'approaching these things […] obliquely, tangentially, by reference rather than by direct confrontation'.[616] And so, following Sebald's own logic: it is not that Bosnia's plight is altogether absent from the text, callously omitted by an indifferent narrator; it is, rather, that for Sebald this plight is best conveyed tangentially, by nesting it into the folds of an ever-receding past.

There is, however, a crucial point of difference to be noted here, and one, moreover, that arguably exposes Sebald's celebrated tact as a more tendentious kind of aesthetic practice. For while the oblique ways of the essay may be one and the same, the effects they bestow on their chosen calamities are pointedly not. If the silkworm can become so powerful a metaphor (or proxy) for the fate of European Jewry under the Nazis, it is largely on account of the shock effect—the frisson, even the friction—of this unexpected collision between two unrelated, incommensurable subjects. As in Sebald's reading of Woolf's 'The Death of the Moth', so the silkworm in *The Rings of Saturn* is elevated, in the words of Bianca Theisen, to 'a prominent emblem for the enslaved, victimized, persecuted, marginalized, and perishing', and thus for 'all those forced to live in the shadows'.[617] The same does not apply, however, to

[614] Sebald, *Gespräche*, p. 203.
[615] W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Harvill Press, 1996), p. 29.
[616] Sebald, *Gespräche*, p. 85; Silverblatt, p. 80.
[617] Bianca Theisen, 'A Natural History of Destruction: W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*', *MLN*, 121.3 (2006), 563–81 (p. 572).

the century-old extract from the *Lowestoft Journal*, which may hardly evince any nod of recognition, let alone empathic identification. Sebald's detour into Yugoslav history certainly ends on an allusive note, whereby the geopolitical convulsions of the 1990s are registered only by reference to a much earlier, nineteenth-century conflict. And yet, remote though they may be from one another, these occurrences can still be shelved under the general rubric of military history. What Sebald manufactures here, in other words, is not so much (in the words of Michael Silverblatt) 'a metaphor that has no statement of its ground, only of its vehicle', as in the oft-quoted case of the silkworm, but rather a metonymy; that is, an associative chain of events running along discrete points in time, temporally contiguous rather than arbitrarily analogous.[618]

Sebald's prose is routinely celebrated as a paragon of multidirectional writing, whereby remote and seemingly unrelated times and places are brought together in the space of a single narrative. Todd Samuel Presner, for instance, observes how, by linking the shoreline of Suffolk with the colonialist depredation in West Africa or the firebombed cities of Germany, Sebald makes this corner of England 'contiguous with geographies that are ostensibly noncontiguous and synchronic with histories that are ostensibly nonsynchronic'.[619] Rebecca Walkowitz, too, reads Sebald's works as a series of contact narratives between discrete yet enmeshed histories of violence, assembling 'cultural and ethical points of view that seem inconsistent or incommensurate'.[620] Monika Kaup concurs that 'the most striking feature of *The Rings of Saturn* is its dramatic jumps back and forth between local and global geographic scales'.[621] And Thomas Davies goes so far as to posit that the very practice of telescoping the

[618] Silverblatt, p. 80.
[619] Todd Samuel Presner, 'Hegel's Philosophy of World History via Sebald's Imaginary of Ruins: A Contrapuntal Critique of the "New Space" of Modernity', in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. by J. Hell and A. Schönle (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 193–211 (p. 204).
[620] Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 2.
[621] Monika Kaup, 'The Neobaroque in W. G. Sebald's "The Rings of Saturn": The Recovery of Open Totality Countering Poststructuralism', *Contemporary Literature*, 54.4 (2013), 683–719 (p. 691).

local and the global makes Sebald a belated representative of late modernism—if by late modernism we mean, as does Davies, an art of scale nesting large-scale geopolitical tragedies in the objects and spaces of everyday life.[622] It is my suggestion here, however, that in the case of the Bosnian war, Sebald's diachronic metonymy effectively turns two *de facto* contemporaneous events—the narrator's thirty-mile walk across Suffolk and the war engulfing Bosnia—into two *non*-contemporaneous timeframes instead. The seconds peacefully ticking away from the grandfather clock at the Crown Hotel are not, *pace* Presner et al., the ones keeping the time in besieged Sarajevo.

The exotic, geographical remoteness previously identified by Sebald's narrator with British (particularly English) representations of 'Balkanness' is thus reflected, too, in the chronological dislocation with which the Yugoslav conflict of the 1990s is effectively evacuated from the present—and by extension, from history *tout court*. For having weaved a relatively linear, if episodic narrative of Balkan crises from 1914 to the Second World War, Sebald covers the latest stage of this 'chronicle of disaster' (*RS* 94) not, as one might expect, by extending this thread into his own present, but by leaping backwards even further into the late nineteenth century. As Boris Previšić has argued, the historicizing distance thus manufactured arguably leads to an 'exterritorial' perspective that blots out the nascent, independent republics of the former Yugoslavia from Sebald's map of Europe, leaving in their stead the site of a vacancy.[623] As such, the conflict in the former Yugoslavia is simply written off as being the latest recrudescence in a much longer history of 'deranged belligerence', as Sebald once remarked in what appears to be, as far as I know, the only explicit reference he made, across his entire literary corpus, to the wars of the 1990s.[624] In the concluding part of

[622] Davis, *The Extinct Scene*, p. 226.
[623] Boris Previšić, 'Poetik der Marginalität: Balkan Turn gefällig?', in *Von der nationalen zur internationalen Literatur*, ed. by Helmut Schmitz (Amsterdam: Brill, 2009), pp. 187–203 (p. 196).
[624] The phrase appears in *Campo Santo*, Sebald's posthumously published collection of essays. While on a visit to Corsica, Sebald notices some young men dressed in makeshift paramilitary gear, complete with rifles and

this chapter, we will see how, far from constituting, like his prose, a wholly outmoded, idiosyncratic view, this was one of the most manifest, if unduly overlooked tokens of Sebald's engagement with the cultural milieu of his time—the so-called 'end of history' and memory boom—as well as of his status as a writer unreservedly, and unremittingly, fin de siècle.

'Naught so sweet as melancholy'

Though (or precisely because) it indexes an anomaly within Sebald's catalogue of disasters—gone now is the surprise, and the shock, of silkworms and moths—the case of Sarajevo illuminates the extent to which Sebald himself was far from being the anachronistic anomaly he is so often made out to be; from being, that is, the lonely survivor of a late modernism past its age. The elegant, labyrinthine sentences of his ghostly prose may well have been, as he was keen to stress, 'not of this time', but the essayistic principle they served—call it tact or indirection—was certainly as much a symptom as a formal distillation of the wider circumstances that accompanied Sebald's ascent to literary fame. For 1992 was not only the year in which the siege of Sarajevo began, and the year in which Sebald's narrator set off for his walking tour of Suffolk; it is also, importantly, the year in which Francis Fukuyama published, as we have seen in the previous chapter, his (in)famous thesis on the end of history and the triumph, in turn, of liberal-democratic capitalism. And the year, too, when Charles Maier gave a lecture (then reprinted as an essay) on what he saw then, with notable foresight, as one of the most troubling byproducts of this *posthistoire* mood in the West, namely its 'surfeit of memory'. This growing preoccupation with memory quickly cascaded, to quote

long beards, which remind Sebald of 'those Croatian and Serbian militiamen who destroyed their native land in their deranged belligerence; and, like those Marlboro-style heroes of the Yugoslavian civil war, the Corsican hunters are not to be trifled with if you happen to stray into their territory'. See W.G. Sebald, *Campo Santo*, trans. by Anthea Bell (New York: Modern Library, 2006), p. 41.

Andreas Huyssen, into ‘a cultural obsession of monumental proportions’, indeed a veritable ‘memory boom’.[625]

Maier’s essay, occasioned by the imminent inauguration, a year later, of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, as well as by the parallel debate over the future Jewish memorial to be erected in newly-reunited Berlin, has an obvious bearing, too, on the sort of literary pursuit Sebald was embarking on around the same period, under the conviction that, as he once put it, ‘the moral backbone of literature is about that whole question of memory’.[626] And though Sebald would not ascend to literary stardom until at least the turn of the millennium, his prose stands perhaps as the most instructive—indeed representative—instance of the wider phenomenon diagnosed by Maier in 1992. If memory had become a veritable industry, and we its faithful adepts, it was because the rituals of remembrance had usurped the ways of politics, or more precisely of ‘transformative politics’.[627] In other words, the end of the Cold War spelled not only the end of Soviet communism, and thus the much trumpeted end of history, but also the end, or at least the faltering, of ‘political communities with public collective aspirations’, oriented toward the future as the preeminent site of change and social action.[628] ‘At the end of the twentieth century’, Maier argues, ‘Western societies have come to the end of a massive collective project’, so that, where one used to find utopian ideas about collective institutions, civic enfranchisement and public trust, now one discovers—or so Maier laments—a comfortable, quiescent retreat to the past and an

[625] Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 26.
[626] Maya Jaggi, ‘The Last Word’, *Guardian*, 21 December 2001 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2001/dec/21/artsandhumanities.highereducation> [accessed 26 October 2023].
[627] Charles S. Maier, ‘A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy and Denial’, *History and Memory*, 5.2 (1993), 136–52 (p. 150).
[628] Maier, p. 148.

obsession, indeed, with memory as (at best) 'an exercise pleasurable in its own right', or (at worst) as a political weapon in the service of state-sanctioned violence.[629]

But to suggest that the memory boom of the nineties was instigated by the collapse of the grand, utopian narratives of the Cold War is, for Maier, only to look at one side of the coin. For as a result of this 'great exhaustion of civic culture at the end of the second millennium', argued Maier, modern politics increasingly began to centre itself on memory as an expression of (and a means toward) ethnic recognition.[630] For Maier, this means that the purpose of commemorative sites like the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is not so much to teach the lessons of history, but to insist that 'by virtue of prior suffering collective existence should be recognized and honored by the wider civic culture'.[631] Kinship and ethnicity have replaced more capacious attributes of communitarian living such as citizenship or the law; 'ethnic grievances have become the currency of politics'.[632] Insofar as it co-opted centuries-old resentments over past injustices in the service of genocidal violence in the present, the rise of ethnonationalism in the former Yugoslavia proved a bellwether for the extent to which (distorted) memory would, indeed, become a principle of politics. One thinks, most memorably, of Slobodan Milošević's Gazimestan Speech of 1989, in which the commemoration of a six-hundred-year-old battle—the Battle of Kosovo, so central, too, to Rebecca West's own travelogue on the region—is yoked to present-day strife toward ethnic recognition and, more ominously, 'future battles'. Or, to cite an example closer to Sebald's own milieu, one thinks of Robert Fisk's article on Jasenovac, in which memories of past injustices committed by one ethnic group (the Croats) are brought to mind in order to explain—if not justify—crimes now committed by another ethnic group (the Serbs). Sebald

[629] Maier, pp. 147, 138.
[630] Maier, p. 148.
[631] Maier, p. 145.
[632] Maier, p. 148.

himself recognized, if only obliquely, the emergent dynamics described by Maier when, in *The Rings of Saturn*, he ended his Great War excursus with a telegraphic remark on yet another politically loaded anniversary for the Serbs, writing that '[i]n 1993 the Serbs celebrated the seventy-fifth anniversary of his [Gavrilo Princip's] death' (*RS* 96).

It is important to note, of course, that Sebald's own focus on memory—like the memory boom in general—was part and parcel of a much more localized phenomenon, developing, as it did, on the back of the 1986 *Historikerstreit*, the West German scholarly debate over how to situate the experience of the Third Reich within German historiography. Sebald had his own say on the matter of postwar amnesia, especially vis-à-vis the Allied bombing of German cities, in an essay entitled *On the Natural History of Destruction* (1999), in which he upbraided the widespread silence by which much of the literature from the postwar period had glibly memory-holed the catastrophes endured in Dresden, say, or Cologne. Other critics, meanwhile, trace the apocalyptic retreatism underwriting Sebald's prose further back still, seeing it as 'a late and extreme expression' of the left-wing melancholy that had taken hold of the West German student generation in the failed aftermath of the euphoric rebellions of 1968 (though by the time the protests took place, Sebald was, ironically, on vacation in Yugoslavia, having already moved to England two years prior).[633] Still others locate Sebald's obsession with memory within a different national context altogether, speculating that, if Sebald turned his gaze backwards, it was at the same time in order to turn it *away from* the present in which he lived—the present, that is, of neoliberal Britain, whose effects he registered most acutely in his professional life, beset as it was by the increasing 'stalinization' (or so Sebald called it) of British academia at the hands of the 'hard-line capitalist […] Baroness Thatcher' (*RS* 41).[634] Thus, when Sebald's narrator writes, at the beginning of *The*

[633] Peter Morgan, 'The Sign of Saturn: Melancholy, Homelessness and Apocalypse in W.G. Sebald's Prose Narratives', *German Life and Letters*, 58.1 (2005), 75–92 (p. 89).
[634] Quoted in Sheppard, p. 111.

Rings of Saturn, that nothing troubled his late colleague, Michael Parkinson, 'quite so much as the dire responsibility of performing his duties, under increasingly adverse conditions' (*RS* 6), this becomes yet another elliptical, tactful way of hinting, this time, at the managerial bureaucratization imposed on British academic staff from the early 1980s onwards.

At all events, when Sebald confessed, in a 1998 interview, that '[t]here is something terribly alluring to me about the past', and that, conversely, 'I'm hardly interested in the future', he was arguably doing more than simply doubling down on his scholarly polemic against postwar Germany's 'conspiracy of silence', as he called it, or turning away from the social, political, and economic malaise he saw everywhere in neoliberal Britain.[635] It can be argued, rather, that from its very inception, Sebald's literary project was borne aloft by the mnemonic tide that surged in the aftermath of the Cold War, amidst the clamour—by turns exultant or apocalyptic, jubilant or glum—over history's purported end. It is not accidental, in this regard, that Maier should have begun his essay on the surfeit of memory by cautioning against the one affective mood that has since come to be associated with all things Sebaldian—melancholy—and that, conversely, Sebald's amnesiac narrators, often paralysed to the point of hospitalization by their traumatic pasts, should have become early victims of what Maier calls memory's 'neurasthenic' and 'disabling' effects.[636] As with its two predecessors, *Vertigo* (1990) and *The Emigrants* (1992), with which it is often coupled as a trilogy of some sort, *The Rings of Saturn* was not simply an out-of-time piece of prose that had happened to be written in the nineties; it was, rather, the nineties' most paradigmatic work of literature, capturing the logic of a navel-gazing West unable (or unwilling) to make room, under its newly-found security order and in its lurch toward globalizing capitalism, for such offending realities as those, indeed, of armed conflict and genocidal violence. For what

[635] Wachtel, p. 57.
[636] Maier, p. 141.

could be more redolent, at the time, of a safely bygone past, one might ask, than images of rolling tanks and refugee caravans, deportation trains and barbed wire? And what could one do, when confronted with such images, aside from folding them back into that same past?

Put this way, Sebald's historicizing distance regarding Sarajevo's siege—and his neglect, more broadly, of 'the former Eastern Bloc in narratives of modernity and imperialism', as Kaisa Kaakinen contends—becomes legible, at last, as a 'concrete effect of his melancholic representation of postwar Europe as a post-apocalyptic space beyond history'; as a sign, that is, of *posthistoire* gloom.[637] It's instructive, in this regard, that when he was once challenged to agree that 'we have now been living in peace for fifty years', Sebald did not counter this glib claim by mentioning the wars in the former Yugoslavia, but chose instead, as his main objection, the half-million sheep that were buried, during the food-and-mouth epidemic of 2001, across various mass graves in Cumbria.[638] The price of peacetime, Sebald suggests, 'are these hecatombs, increasingly so in the twentieth and twenty-first century'.[639] One might also cite, on this point, Sebald's curious silence apropos of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster; for someone so vexed (and so beguiled) by the fear of environmental catastrophe, this particular tragedy does not figure in the extensive list of calamities punctuating *The Rings of Saturn*, nor in any of Sebald's other essays or interviews. Perhaps because, as Sebald's sister Gertrude speculates, 'her brother was so convinced at an early age that such catastrophes were inevitable, that he was not particularly surprised when one occurred'.[640] The kind of political quietism implicit in Gertrude Aebischer's judgement of her brother is, indeed, what Maier declared, in his essay of 1992, to be one of the most worrisome offshoots of the fin de siècle's memory boom. In his recent study of the political aesthetics of a still-

[637] Kaisa Kaakinen, *Comparative Literature and the Historical Imaginary: Reading Conrad, Weiss, Sebald* (London: Springer, 2017), p. 228.
[638] Sebald, *Gespräche*, p. 247.
[639] Sebald, *Gespräche*, pp. 247–48.
[640] Quoted in Sheppard, p. 112.

earlier (that is to say nineteenth century) fin de siècle, Alex Murray neatly captured the gist of this attitude by coining the phrase 'decadent conservatism', a shorthand which carries some bearing, too, on Sebald's own poetics a century later, in that it registers not so much an attitude of reactionary reverence (as in the case of Peter Handke, who posed for shots at Srebrenica, or Russian poet Eduard Limonov, who fired at Sarajevans from atop Serb outposts) as of conservative deference.[641] For whereas, after a traumatic event that upends old ways of life, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Yugoslavia, the reactionary yearns for a return to the past, the conservative knows that there can be no such return; where the reactionary's desire is to be 'again what the past once was like', as Frank Ankersmit aptly remarks, the conservative's desire is only, by contrast, 'a desire to know' that past.[642] This certainly goes some way toward explaining not only why Sebald's narrators should so often be compelled by a compulsion to 'know how it was' (*RS* 125), but also why Sebald himself should have dramatized this epistemological quest through modes of writing which he later declared to be, in themselves, unseasonably *decadent* (in the literal, etymological sense of 'fallen into disrepair', as Sebald meant it).

By conservatism, however, I do not necessarily mean to suggest any narrowly right-wing positioning on the political spectrum; for while his prose texts may have been notoriously recalcitrant to the idiom of politics, Sebald himself was, all things considered, a left-wing intellectual.[643] And yet, as Richard Herzinger and Hannes Stein have pointed out, the language of the German intelligentsia in the 1990s became so enmeshed, in certain quarters, with an all-pervasive, apocalyptic irrationalism that the terms 'left' and 'right' themselves

[641] See Alex Murray, *Decadent Conservatism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).
[642] Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 327.
[643] This is how Murray himself uses the term, arguing that 'decadent conservatism is not exclusively the preserve of the political right. It also has affinities with […] the political left's challenge to the corrosive, alienating effects of exploitative capitalism'. See Murray, p. 3.

became no longer viable descriptors of political affiliation.[644] Thus, what places Sebald's characters among Fukuyama's last men, according to Ryan Ruby, is that, 'where they might choose the political, they choose the elegiac instead'.[645] It is also worth remembering, in this context, Magris's own dramatization of this turn-of-the-century, small-c conservatism, with its occasional lapses into political inertia, in *Danube* and, later, *To Have Been*, literary works that put on display the same binary pairs of structuring oppositions that one finds, incidentally, across much of Sebald's own oeuvre: having-been versus being; surviving versus living; the old versus the new; the past versus the future; the hypertrophied memory of Habsburg Mitteleuropa against the amnesiac presentism of a capitalist, Anglocentric West. And presiding over all such iterations, always one finds an affinity for essaying as opposed to the labour of inventing—for prose, as Sebald called it, as opposed to the novel. Put this way, the great anomaly of Sebald's rise to fame—or how, as Geoff Dyer marvelled, his originality 'derived from the way his prose felt as if it had been exhumed from the past'—is less a paradox than a testament to the fact that, as Huyssen wrote in 1995, 'novelty in our culture is ever more associated with memory and the past rather than with future expectation'.[646]

I want to go back, by way of a conclusion, to the epigraph that inaugurates Sebald's entire journey, taken from a letter Joseph Conrad wrote to Marguerite Poradowska between the 23rd and 25th of March 1890:

> Il faut surtout pardonner à ces âmes malheureuses qui ont élu de faire le pèlerinage à pied, qui côtoient le rivage et regardent sans comprendre l'horreur de la lutte, la joie de vaincre ni le profond désespoir des vaincus. (*RS* 1)

[644] Richard Herzinger and Hannes Stein, Endzeit-Propheten oder die Offensive der Antiwestler: Fundamentalismus, Antiamerikanismus und Neue Rechte (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1995), pp. 14–15.
[645] Ruby, p. 144.
[646] Dyer et al., p. 18; Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, p. 6.

> [One must above all pardon these unhappy souls who have chosen to go on a pilgrimage on foot, who walk along the shore and look, without understanding, upon the horror of the struggle and the deep despair of the vanquished.]

One suspects that here, too, Sebald might have been making recourse to the life of Joseph Conrad—or more precisely, to lines jotted by Conrad at the end of the nineteenth century—to comment on issues of pressing urgency in the present. What I mean to suggest, in other words, is that, far from being a jaded and indifferent bystander, Sebald the author/narrator might have ironically been soliciting, by way of this epigraph, the reader's pardon for his own uncomprehending gaze as a pilgrim who attempts to bear witness not only to past catastrophes, but—and perhaps even more importantly—to atrocities happening in the present. As Susan Sontag, who on various occasions made a point of visiting wartime Sarajevo as a show of solidarity, and even went on to stage Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* there in 1993, would go on to argue a few years later, '[b]eing a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience', and yet, despite our over-exposure to images of the dead and smouldering cities, when it comes to the pain of others '[w]e don't get it. We truly can't imagine what it was like. We can't imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes. Can't understand, can't imagine'.[647] It will be enough to recall how, at the end of 'Max Ferber', the last story in *The Emigrants*, the narrator confesses to similar 'scruples' concerning 'the subject of my narrative, which I felt I could not do justice to'.[648] But even in *The Rings of Saturn*, the entire digression that begins in the Sailor's Reading Room, and which soon unspools a piecemeal history of the former Yugoslavia, is framed by one such episode of abortive witness, whereby, as Woolf's narrator says of the dying moth in 'The Death of the Moth', 'one could only watch'.[649]

[647] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. 126.
[648] Sebald, *The Emigrants*, p. 230.
[649] Woolf, 'The Death of the Moth', p. 11.

‘I felt as if I were in a deserted theatre’, the narrator says as he sits alone on the seafront, just before seeking refuge in the Sailor’s Reading Room, ‘and I should not have been surprised if a curtain had suddenly risen before me and on the proscenium I had beheld, say, the 28th of May 1672’ (*RS* 76), the day when seventy-five Dutch battleships attacked an English fleet at anchor in Sole Bay, not far from Southwold. Sebald’s narrator then begins his brief chronicle of the battle from the point of view of the townspeople who must have rushed out of Southwold ‘to watch the rare spectacle from the beach’ (*RS* 76). The resultant tableau reads as Sebald’s own exploit in vicarious retelling, though as Sebald is quick to point out, his fellow bystanders must have been unable to make out much of the battle at all, for ‘the scene would have been shrouded in an acrid, yellowish-black smoke’ (*RS* 76). Even subsequent accounts of the event, says the narrator, fail ‘to convey any true impression of how it must have been to be on board one of these ships’ (*RS* 77). Posterity, it would seem, enjoys little advantage in grasping ‘[t]he agony that was endured and the enormity of the havoc wrought’, which, Sebald’s narrator laments, ‘defeat our powers of comprehension’ (*RS* 78). It is certainly tempting, therefore, to read Sebald’s gesture of vicarious spectatorship at Sole Bay as a pre-emptive nod toward *other*, present-day calamities which he admittedly fails to grasp, and which will soon overwhelm him. That is to say: just as Southwold’s inhabitants neither saw clearly nor understood the disaster unfolding before them, so Sebald’s narrator cannot adequately give witness to the events convulsing the other shore of the continent in 1992.

Later still, in the fifth chapter, the memory of a visit to the Waterloo Panorama in Belgium (a three-dimensional reproduction of the famous battle) becomes the occasion for yet another series of musings on ‘the representation of history’ (*RS* 125), or how ‘we, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was’ (*RS* 125). And as with the Battle of Sole Bay, after lamenting that no clear picture of the scene

emerged from the Panorama itself, Sebald's traveller attempts to conjure the Battle of Waterloo simply via imaginative *fiat*:

> Only when I had shut my eyes, I well recall, did I see a cannonball smash through a row of poplars at an angle, sending the green branches flying in tatters. And then I saw Fabrizio, Stendhal's young hero, wandering about the battlefield, pale but with his eyes aglow and an unsaddled colonel getting to his feet and telling his sergeant: I can feel nothing but the old injury in my right hand. (*RS* 126)

The scene may bear, again, the imprint of Sebald's reading—for his 1990 review in *Austrian Studies*—of Magris's *Danube*. For while the literary intrusion of Fabrizio del Dongo might be simply shelved as yet another tribute to Stendhal, who had already featured as one of the main subjects in Sebald's first prose work, *Vertigo*, the unsaddled colonel that comes after Fabrizio del Dongo intimates that there might be another, less overt intertext at work here. In a passage that appears underlined in Sebald's (German) copy of *Danube*, Magris stipulates, in fact, that 'history comes into existence a little later, when it is already past' (*D* 40), citing, like Sebald, the popular case of Stendhal's hero in *The Charterhouse of Parma*, Fabrizio del Dongo, for whom, it is said, there is no battle of Waterloo while he is still in the midst of it, since 'at that moment, "that moment" had not yet become "that moment"' (*D* 40). In other words, only in hindsight, once 'general connections [have been] determined and written down' (*D* 40), can these events acquire their full historical weight. 'In the pure present, the only dimension, however, in which we live', Magris concludes, 'there is no history […] only the mouth swallowing saliva, the movement of a hand, a glance at the window' (*D* 40). Like Magris's Fabrizio, who is unaware of being in the midst of a momentous battle, so too does Sebald's unsaddled colonel (himself another character from *The Charterhouse of Parma*) reduce the epochal weight of this event to the personal discomfort of an injury to the right hand.

It is my suggestion as we near the end of this chapter that, in underlining Magris's words in *Danube*, Sebald inadvertently found an aesthetic principle that was to preside over his own books a few years later, especially in his faintly etched representation of what had become, by then, yet another gruesome conflict in this corner of Europe. Only, of course, it is not so much that, for Sebald, in the pure present there is no history, even though this might seem to apply rather well to a work which, as I have argued thus far, perfectly exposes the end-of-history *zeitgeist* of the decade in which it was written. It is, rather, that the present in which Sebald lives is continuously read as a sign *of* history, or to recall Maier's diagnosis, as a site so mnemonically loaded to the point of becoming, in Kaisa Kaakinen's words, 'an empty space in which the narrators organize and reorganize fragments of the past'.[650] So it is, then, that one of the most consequential catastrophes to have occurred in Europe since 1945—and the one, moreover, to have admittedly provoked the very writing of *The Rings of Saturn*—is rarefied, at last, into a second-degree digression, or better still, into a post-historical afterword. The anonymous writer of the *Lowestoft Standard* first reports on the fighting around Sarajevo in the bulletin from 1878, which Joseph Conrad is then said (or rather imagined) to have read after his arrival in England, and on whose account Sebald's narrator picks it up, in turn, before relaying it to his readers, albeit under the guise of an abridged story buried at the bottom of a motley list of news reports. The essay's proverbial indirection is, to be sure, ostensibly at work here—ostensibly, I say, because an act of ostension which points at one thing, only does so in order to draw our gaze toward some *other* thing, one much closer to our own time. That said, we are a far cry now from the celebrated tact to which Sebald's essayistic semi-fictions first owed their fame in the English-speaking world. *The Rings of Saturn* should be read, we are told, for the 'wonderfully disorienting' yet 'invigorating' effect of passages like the one quoted at the start of this chapter, which stir the

[650] Kaakinen, p. 223.

dead victims of past tragedies back to life—*not*, one might add, for the equivocal uncertainty by which Sebald's narrators attempt to make sense of contemporary wars even as they write them out of their own present.[651] And yet, it is, I would venture, the very fact that Sebald extends his essayistic tact to the one atrocity convulsing the Europe of his day—refracting it as if through a smokescreen or a hall of mirrors, metonymically dispersing it across the centuries—that makes him a writer wholly of his time, and his essayistic prose, in turn, a literary mode for the age. Sebald, it is true, might have spoken as if from beyond the grave, but the very form of his prose, with its funeral cortèges spreading across the page, reveals the extent to which untimeliness could be, in itself, a form of timeliness; or how timely it could prove, after all, to be untimely.

[651] O'Connell.

EPILOGUE

Essayistic Forms into the Twenty-First Century

> It is curious how, at every crisis, some phrase which does not fit insists upon coming to the rescue—the penalty of living in an old civilization with a notebook.
> —Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*

In the early autumn of 2023, on a visit to his home in Trieste, I asked Claudio Magris what might have happened, since the end of the last century, to the epigones who once roamed the banks of his beloved Danube, swelling their notebooks with 'fads and quotations' (*D* 18) or gnawing, so he wrote, 'at the volumes of history in the libraries' (*D* 265). Are we still living, I asked, in a Europe 'after the show' (*D* 265), ever capitulating to its own past only so as to recapitulate it once more? 'As far as *I* am concerned', answered Magris, 'yes'; but as far as the world at large is concerned, he added, 'I see instead a fever of the present or the future, and a violence always lurching forward'.[652] As it happens, though, Magris is not as alone in this assessment as he might wish (or despair) to think. For better or for worse, the urge to take stock—to inventory—and to stack one's 'fads and quotations' against the dread of future loss, war, and oblivion, which has featured so prominently among the core writers of this study, is alive and well in our own century. And so, for that matter, is the literary mode which has proved, time and again, most congenial to its expression: the long-form, genre-defying essay, which began in the interwar as an untimely, eccentric enterprise—'a form insane from any ordinary artistic or commercial point of view', to borrow Rebecca West's admittedly self-serving description—and which has now solidified into one of the most recognizable (even critically palatable) staples of our literary landscape.[653]

[652] Claudio Magris, personal interview, 17 October 2023.
[653] *Selected Letters of Rebecca West*, p. 169.

I began this thesis with the conjecture that our current turn to essayistic prose may be of a piece with a certain discontent concerning the novel and its perennially exhausted possibilities; that the essay has long been, in sum, a backdoor through which either to renounce or renew the novel. 'The essay, the list, the tangential excursus, the stream of unbroken dialogue, the thicket of unremitting description', so Teju Cole intoned in 2013, 'these are all available to us as novelists. But we rarely use them'.[654] A decade later, Cole's verdict no longer holds much water. For as Alexandra Kingston-Reese has recently remarked, the essay's status 'is now reaching a crescendo, resembling something like a major literary form': gone, then, are the times when this self-proclaimed second-class form could 'feign absenting itself from cultural systems of prestige'.[655] The recent rise of so-called 'creative nonfiction', the proliferation of university courses on the literary essay, and the concomitant revival of criticism as an artform in its own right: these are only some of the most overt signs intimating that ours may be, after all, an essayistic age.[656] As Peter Boxall has aptly noted, 'the distinction between creative and critical writing is becoming more difficult to sustain', and 'critical writing is itself becoming increasingly "literary," increasingly belle-lettristic'.[657] And then there is, too, the rise of independent publishing houses such as Jacques Testard's London-based *Fitzcarraldo Editions*, which since its foundation in 2014 has devoted as much as half of its editorial line to long-form essays, thus making it wholly apt that, four centuries after Montaigne's *Essais* first landed on British shores, it should have been yet another Frenchman who once again galvanized interest in this form.[658] And already, in certain quarters, doubts begin to arise that '[e]scaping the bad novel doesn't mean you will find good

[654] Cole, 'Pitch Forward'.
[655] Alexandra Kingston-Reese, 'Novel Nausea', *ASAP/Journal*, 16 May 2022 <https://asapjournal.com/the-contemporary-essay-novel-nausea-alexandra-kingston-reese/> [accessed 9 November 2023].
[656] Only within the English Faculty at Oxford University, for instance, there are two such courses on offer: *Possibilities of Criticism* and *Of Essays: Origins and Afterlives*.
[657] Peter Boxall, *The Value of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 5.
[658] *Fitzcarraldo* published, among other works, Brian Dillon's reflection on the essayistic, *Essayism* (2017). Apart from teaching creative writing at Queen Mary University of London, Dillon is also a judge for *Fitzcarraldo*'s annual Essay Prize, given to book-length essays praised for their experimentation with the form.

essays', not least because, as the form's flaunted irregularity coarsens into a familiar set of canonized practices governed, in turn, by public taste and editorial demands, essays—even longer essays of the maverick, unassimilable kind I have privileged here—'risk doing themselves formal damage by hovering in the twilight zone between genres, forms, institutions, beholden to the cultural objects they obsess over, and, sometimes, try to sell us'.[659]

But such forebodings are no more, for now, than fleeting qualms, slyly tugging at one's writerly (or readerly) conscience before giving way to the usual approbation. Indeed, it surely stands as a testament to the form's enduring popularity that when, in 2018, Judith Schalansky published a series of essayistic meditations on loss enticingly (and ironically) entitled *Verzeichnis einiger Verluste* [*An Inventory of Losses*, 2020]—a cabinet of missing curiosities including, among other things, the submerged island of Tuanaki and Sappho's fragmentary lyric papyri, an extinct Caspian tiger and a lost F. W. Murnau film—it stirred little of the mesmerizing doubt that nearly always coalesced around the literary works on which we have variously dwelt so far. Gone, now, were the strings of generic tags (a travelogue? a biography? a history?) nearly always summoned by a Sebald or a Magris, or by any of their predecessors—and gone, too, was the impression of an aesthetic singularity so exquisitely *sui generis* as to make one gasp, as Susan Sontag had gasped when picking up *The Emigrants*, 'it is like nothing I've ever read'.[660] For by the time it landed on booksellers' shelves under the now-familiar 'Fiction/Essay' label, Schalansky's *An Inventory of Losses* could simply be savoured, in the words of one reviewer, as 'a fine example of everyone's favourite genre: the

[659] Kingston-Reese, 'Novel Nausea'.
[660] Quoted from Susan Sontag's jacket blurb for the first edition of Sebald's *The Emigrants*.

genre-defying book, inspired by history, filtered through imagination and finished with a jeweller's eye for detail'.[661]

But despite having become common currency in today's literary marketplace, travelling the long road, it seems, from anti-genre to genre, the fortunate permutations of this once-neglected form have sprouted in the absence of any systematic account capable of fully restoring into view the historical specificities around which they first coalesced. Though it is far from being comprehensive, this thesis has sought to sketch out a longer, if necessarily partial history of these minor modes of expression, one that might show, first, how they emerged from a forgotten or undeclared encounter with the threatening, mid-twentieth-century contexts of total war and totalitarian violence; second, how their claim to novelty nearly always drew from an impulse to repurpose and revise older genres of prose, going from the commonplace book and spoof encyclopaedia through to the philosophical dialogue, the aphoristic compendium, and the ramble; and third, how indispensable this taste for revision proves, in the final analysis, to our shifting understanding of late modernism, both in the narrower sense of a modernism nearing its terminus, and in the wider sense of an institutionalized modernism alive in the literary writings of those who went on institutionalizing it. In closing, then, I want to give a brief overview of works that continue to adapt the aesthetic strategies of long-form essayism against the various challenges of our own century, putting up their 'fads and quotations', their byways and sways, sallies and drifts, inventories and lists, against incumbent fears and anxieties.

Clive James's *Cultural Amnesia*, published in 2007 after almost forty years of gestation, reads perhaps as the most fitting testament to our form's tenacious survival, grandiosely

[661] John Self, 'An Inventory of Losses by Judith Schalansky Review – It Can't Last', *Guardian*, 4 December 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/dec/04/an-inventory-of-losses-by-judith-schalansky-review-it-cant-last> [accessed 9 November 2023].

standing, with its nine-hundred pages of wit and erudition, like a baroque cenotaph erected on the threshold of a new century to commemorate the old. Not coincidentally, then, the epigraph that inaugurates my own study I have chipped off from the opening pages of this great, mausoleum-like book: 'welcome to the twentieth century', we read in its introduction, 'out of which your century grew as surely as a column of black smoke grows from an oil fire'.[662] Corralling one hundred and six biographical essays devoted, in turn, to a motley ensemble of twentieth-century figures, both known and unknown, from Coco Chanel and Charles Chaplin to Josef Goebbels and Margaret Thatcher, through Proust and Kafka to Dubravka Ugrešić and Stefan Zweig, *Cultural Amnesia* is itself a product of its object of study:

> I wanted to write about philosophy, history, politics and the arts all at once, and about what had happened to those things during the course of the multiple catastrophes into whose second principal outburst (World War I was the first) I had been born in 1939, and which continued to shake the world as I grew to adulthood.[663]

The literary impulse which brings my study to a close is thus the same one that galvanized it into being, for how familiar, indeed how recursive does the above begin to sound, when placed next to Virginia Woolf's bid, in 1933, to detonate her essay-novel into a 'millions of ideas but no preaching—history, politics, feminism, art, literature—in short a summing up of all I know, feel, laugh at, despise, like, admire hate & so on'.[664] *Cultural Amnesia* thus aspires to tell everything it knows of its age, just as Rebecca West had attempted to do in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. It began as a commonplace book gathering reading 'passages for future consideration', the very means by which, James reminds us, 'Montaigne invented the modern essay', and by which, we might also add, Cyril Connolly compiled his own wartime

[662] Clive James, *Cultural Amnesia: Notes in the Margin of My Time* (London: Picador, 2007), p. xvi.
[663] Clive James, p. xvi.
[664] Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, IV, p. 152.

assemblage of afflictions and aphorisms, *The Unquiet Grave*.[665] It is arranged alphabetically, in the manner of a dictionary, while flaunting the partiality of its form against the 'premature synthesis' effected by totalitarian ideologies: in this, it is a clear descendant of Alberto Savinio's *Nuova enciclopedia*.[666] As an exercise in memory ever mindful of just 'how close culture came to being eradicated altogether' in the past century, it mounts the same kind of resistance against postmodern amnesia as W.G. Sebald or Claudio Magris.[667] Finally, and much to the latter's delight, it takes its cue from 'the essays and remembered wit that came out of the cafés' of fin-de-siècle Vienna, the 'ideal' place, with its triumphs and tragedy, 'to begin studying what happened to twentieth-century culture'.[668]

In more ways than just one, then, *Cultural Amnesia* recapitulates within its covers all the various experiments in essayistic prose we have explored thus far. It is all the more apt, then, that its declared lodestar should have been yet another work of interwar encyclopaedism, namely Egon Friedell's *Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit* (The Cultural History of the Modern Age), written between 1927 and 1931 by a Viennese Jew—half erudite essayist, half cabaret artist—who was credited with being, on account of this 'mesmerizing claim to the totality of knowledge', nothing short than a 'polymath's polymath', and 'a fantastic demonstration of the mind at serious play'.[669] Friedell, Clive James tells us, jumped out of his apartment window on the day the Nazi troopers marched into Vienna, in 1938, calling as he did so 'a warning, in case his falling body hit an innocent passer-by'.[670] It is with the long-lasting echoes caused by that deadly thud, as well as with that fall's troubling aftermath, that *Cultural Amnesia* is avowedly concerned, fashioning its pursuit less in terms of

[665] Clive James, p. xv.
[666] Clive James, p. xvi.
[667] Clive James, p. 3.
[668] Clive James, pp. 3–4.
[669] Clive James, pp. 4–5, xxii.
[670] Clive James, p. xxiii.

encyclopaedic totality (though the universality of Friedell's gusto, we are told, 'remains an enduring ideal') than of strenuous remembrance.[671] For if, as James pointedly remarks, 'the humanism that makes civilization civilized is to be preserved into this new century, it will need advocates. Those advocates will need a memory, and part of that memory will need to be of an age in which they were not yet alive'.[672]

But of advocates for memory, in our own age of literary experiments with the essay's possibilities, there is certainly no shortage. Take, for instance, Daša Drndić's *Sonnenschein* (2007) [*Trieste,* 2012], a documentary novel that unspools discursively what little plot it has to offer, and in which one comes across the most striking, if perhaps most haunting use of a list (that quintessentially essayistic device) in recent decades: forty-four pages alphabetically inscribed with the names of about 9,000 Jews deported from Italy, or killed in Italy by the Nazis and their Italian accomplices, some in the blazing furnaces of Trieste's infamous Risiera di San Sabba, a former rice mill turned concentration camp. Outwardly the tale of one Haya Tedeschi, a Jewish Catholicized woman in search of her long-lost son kidnapped, toward the end of the war, by her one-time Nazi lover, and subsequently handed over to a more racially pure family as part of Hitler's *Lebensborn* programme, the narrative of *Trieste* assembles a loose collage of trial transcripts, biographical sketches, witness testimonies, and black-and-white photographs, each documenting the horrors of Nazi occupation in the northern Adriatic. The novel opens, indeed, with Haya Tedeschi sifting through her memories, 'letters, […] photographs, postcards, newspaper clippings, magazines', arranging them and rearranging them into a picture of her own life, and of the twentieth century more broadly.[673] Elsewhere, Haya Tedeschi cuts out and reproduces, on a separate page, a list of some fifty Nazis dispatched to Trieste and its environs in 1943, but the list, she comes to

[671] Clive James, p. 5.
[672] Clive James, p. xviii.
[673] Daša Drndić, *Trieste*, trans. by Ellen Elias-Bursać (London: MacLehose Press, 2012), p. 2.

realise, is incomplete, for '[w]here are the Italians in the service of the Reich? Where are the civilians, the silent observers, the invisible participants in the war? […] *This list should be endless. This list is endless*'.[674]

It is precisely the search for one such list that puts into motion, too, Claudio Magris's most recent novel, *Non luogo a procedere* (2015) [*Blameless*, 2017], which is part, according to Saskia Ziolkowski, 'of a current move in Italy to discuss how Italians contributed to the tragedies of the Second World War'.[675] Here is, again, a work of prose at once discursive and allusive, cohering around yet another rudimentary plot inspired, this time, by the obsessive manias of the real-life Diego de Henriquez, 'a brilliant, uncompromising Triestine of vast culture and fierce passion', writes Magris, 'who dedicated his entire life (1909-1974) to collecting weapons and military materiel of all types to build an original, overflowing War Museum that might, by displaying those instruments of death, lead to peace'.[676] But while the novel is thus arranged as one curator's imaginary catalogue for this utopian museum-to-end-all-wars, minutely describing dozens of items, from U-Boats and tanks through to army caps and wooden spears, the one list that most often troubles the pages of *Blameless* is, as it happens, a lost one: namely, the names of informants duly copied out by de Henriquez from the walls of the Risiera di San Sabba, on which former prisoners of the camp had once scrawled them prior to their brutal deaths. The scrawls on the walls are long gone, plastered over by unknown hands, and so, too, are de Henriquez's notebooks, burnt in the fire that eventually killed this eccentric collector and destroyed, too, most of his collection. It is with

[674] Drndić, p. 198.
[675] Saskia E. Ziolkowski, 'Thomas Bernhard, Italo Calvino, Elena Ferrante, and Claudio Magris: From Postmodernism to Anti-Semitism', in *Thomas Bernhard's Afterlives*, ed. by Stephen Dowden, Gregor Thuswaldner, and Olaf Berwald (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 183–206 (p. 202).
[676] Claudio Magris, *Blameless*, trans. by Anne Milano Appel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. 339–40.

this all-too-literal attempt at whitewashing the city's inconvenient past, then, that Magris's work is ultimately concerned, as his narrator plainly suggests:

> It's that smoke I'm in search of, those names turned to ashes. I'm not fighting against oblivion, but against oblivion of oblivion, against the culpable unawareness of having forgotten, of having wanted to forget, of not wanting and not being able to know that there is an atrocity that one wanted—had to?—forget. In Trieste, on every street, I see smoke that no one wanted to see.[677]

It is an impossible task—as impossible, indeed, as bringing about perpetual peace by amassing in one single place, as museum relics, all objects of war. For there will always be one more weapon to inventory, one more war to chronicle, and one more victim to remember. 'Oh, if only I could get one, it would indeed be king of the Museum', grumbles at one point our eccentric collector, unaware that the T-34 tank after which he pines—the one saving 'Great Mother Russia when the Nazis attack her in 1941'—would see its more technologically advanced successors deployed, more than half a century after his death, in new battlefields on the outskirts of Europe.[678] If Magris's narrative spreads itself out in the shape of an unfinished (and unfinishable) museum catalogue, then, it is because the delirious project it nurtures is doomed, by default, to lag behind the reality it purports to archive.

Magris's rallying cry 'against oblivion of oblivion' is parallelly echoed in Maria Stepanova's fittingly entitled *Pamyat', Pamyat* (2017) [*In Memory of Memory*, 2021], a family scrapbook (published, not coincidentally, under *Fitzcarraldo*'s imprint in Britain) that pieces together photographs and souvenirs, postcards and letters, from a century of Jewish life in Russia. Here is, again, a work of genre-bending prose ('unclassifiable', in the words of the International Booker Prize judges who shortlisted it in 2021) that opens with a narrator sifting

[677] Magris, *Blameless*, p. 301.
[678] Magris, *Blameless*, pp. 76–77.

through a deceased aunt's belongings, in 2010s Moscow. And here, too, is the familiar refrain about '[t]he memory of what is lost', and about 'keeping tally of those losses while knowing that nothing can be returned'.[679] But as one keeps tally, in turn, of all such attempts at keeping tally, from Schalansky to Drndić to Magris to Stepanova—not to mention the American Teju Cole and Ben Lerner, Slovenia's Dušan Šarotar, Chile's Benjamin Labatut, Spain's Agustín Fernández Mallo, and France's Mathias Énard—one begins to sense in these works an intermittent series of literary aftershocks, much in the same way as *literal* aftershocks can be periodically registered, by way of lesser tremors, in the wake of a macroseism: perceptible in their own right, it is true, but lacking the blunt awe of the main event. And the main event is, in this case, the advent of W.G. Sebald's prose, the literary standard against which many subsequent incursions into the terrain of essayistic semi-fiction (to borrow Michael Hamburger's phrase) are inexorably defined and, either to their chagrin or delight, judged. It is little wonder, then, that at one point or another, virtually each of these works should have been dubbed, by publishers and reviewers alike, whether in Europe or the United States or South America, as positively Sebaldian. For as Hari Kunzru pointed out in his review of Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), we have been witnessing for some time now the steady canonization of 'an emerging genre, the novel after Sebald, its 19th-century furniture of plot and character dissolved into a series of passages, held together by occasional photographs and a subjectivity that hovers close to (but is never quite identical with) the subjectivity of the writer'.[680]

My own sense is that, aside from quite obviously bearing the imprint of a reading of Sebald, many contemporary forays into essayistic prose over the past twenty years bear the imprint, too, of a fin-de-siècle sensibility that continued to hold sway well into the twenty-first

[679] Maria Stepanova, *In Memory of Memory*, trans. by Sasha Dugdale (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2021), p. 271.
[680] Hari Kunzru, 'Impossible Mirrors', *New York Times Book Review*, 7 September 2014, p. 12.

century; a moment, to be more accurate, in which the end of the Cold War (and, if one so believed, of history as such) had meant that the only way forward was, as Sebald had long thought, backward: to sit and sift through the archive, assembling the realia and marginalia of our troubled pasts. Put another way, the end of the Cold War has not only cast a long shadow over subsequent developments of essayistic prose, but it has been, I would wager, the very cultural soil from which many of the above works were able to germinate in the first place. But that moment—and that sensibility—may have ended not too long ago, at least since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 finally put the last nail in *posthistoire*'s coffin. Clive James himself was perceptive enough to conjecture, as early as 2007, that 'the end of history is in the offing, but not in the way that Francis Fukuyama was talking about'; not in the way, that is, of a globalizing liberal-democratic capitalism triumphantly extending its benign influence over previously authoritarian regions of the world, ensuring perpetual peace for all.[681] Russia's invasion of Ukraine precipitated as I was midway through the writing of this thesis; since then, other frozen conflicts have gone unfrozen; regional hotspots have flared up; talk of global war reached a new pitch of (at times hysterical) self-consciousness. Even someone as beguiled by the past as Claudio Magris confessed to me, rather obliquely, that today 'the danger of violence is not so much the remembrance of past violence: of course we are horrified by the Shoah, but it's not *that* Shoah which frightens us now'.[682] Today the essay remembers, but to repurpose Paul Saint-Amour's words, violence remembered is not (at least not yet) violence already unleashed.[683]

As we hurtle from one geopolitical crisis to the next, then, it is hard to predict where things will stand, for our literary form at least, after this thesis: whether it will keep steadfast on its

[681] Clive James, p. 248.
[682] Magris, personal interview.
[683] Saint-Amour claims that 'violence anticipated is violence already unleashed'. See Saint-Amour, *Tense Future*, p. 13.

current mandate to remember and recapitulate, languidly thumbing through photographs and souvenirs from a bygone era, or whether it will go back to the kind of totalizing, encyclopaedic frenzy that we observed in the interwar, shoring up the known against the looming catastrophe; whether it will simply peter out for a time, driven out by better modes of expressing and recording one's time, or whether it will find a renewed sense of purpose through the renunciation of any purpose and the ill-timed insistence (as we observed in the works of Connolly and Savinio) on pleasure and disinterestedness, against any glib assertion that 'a state of war produces any literary form more easily than the essay'.[684] When Connolly claimed, in 1938, that his was the time when wars break out, not coincidentally it was also as a prelude to some of the most spectacular, if unduly neglected experiments with long-form essayism to date.[685] But the time is ever ripe, it would seem, for the essay. Will there be a last essay?

[684] Gerould, 'An Essay on Essays', p. 415.
[685] Connolly, *Enemies of Promise*, p. 15.

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