

*The Work of Art in
Postwar Fiction
1945-2001*

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*A thesis submitted for examination for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
English Literature in Trinity Term, 2014.*

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List of Illustrations

Fig. 1. Jasper Johns, *Book*, 1957. Photo courtesy of The Margulies Collection at the Warehouse, Miami. © Jasper Johns. Licensed by permission of VAGA, New York.

Fig. 2. Drawing by Samuel Beckett in the manuscript of *L'Innommable*, Notebook 2, page 41. © The Estate of Samuel Beckett. Image by permission of the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

Fig. 3. L. Debricon, 'La Sensation,' in *Descartes: choix de textes avec étude du système philosophique et notices biographique et bibliographique; 16 gravures et portrait par L. Debricon; préface de Labescat* (Paris: Louis Michaud, n.d.), p. 200. Image by kind permission of the Principal and Fellows of St. Anne's College, Oxford.

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Abstract

The Work of Art in Postwar Fiction 1945-2001, by Kevin Brazil, New College, University of Oxford. A thesis submitted for examination for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English Literature in Trinity Term, 2014.

The Work of Art in Postwar Fiction 1945-2001 explores the responses of postwar novelists to visual art by focusing on the work of Samuel Beckett, William Gaddis, John Berger and W. G. Sebald. In doing so, it opens up a new approach to understanding the relationship between fiction and art in the postwar period as a whole, for what distinguishes these writers is that they use an engagement with visual art in order to historicize their own work as distinctly “postwar” fiction. This thesis shows that in the writings of these novelists, long running aesthetic issues in the study of the relationship between text and image are reformulated and transformed: medium specificity; ekphrasis; and visual representation as a model for literary realism. Drawing throughout on original archival research, *The Work of Art in Postwar Fiction 1945-2001* traces what T. J. Clark terms the “processes of conversion and relation” between art, its contexts and its commentators, and it is by studying these mediations that the literary consequences of the work of art for these writers are shown.

With a historicizing approach throughout, and an interest in the ways in which postwar novelists mediate their engagement with art through history, this thesis contributes to a new understanding of the literature and art of the postwar era, or what Amy Hungerford has called “the period formerly known as contemporary.” This thesis offers a revisionary account of a relationship previously subsumed under the dominant logic of postmodernism, which according to Fredric Jameson was defined by a “waning of

historicity.” In returning historicity as method and theme to the study of the relationship between literature and art since 1945, *The Work of Art in Postwar Fiction 1945-2001* shows the diverse ways in which postwar writers historicized their writing, and reflected on their techniques, in dialogue with visual art. Concerning itself with the distinct challenges posed by focusing on what Hannah Ardent called the “most recent” past, this thesis also develops new ways of thinking more broadly about the relationships between literature, art and history.

Chapter 1, “Reviewing Postwar Fiction,” situates this thesis within recent debates in literary studies surrounding what Mark McGurl has termed a discipline-wide “hegemony of history.” Chapter 2, on Samuel Beckett, argues that Beckett’s postwar art criticism responds to a specific strand of Marxist humanist aesthetics developed after the war, and it studies Beckett’s manuscripts to show the relationship between this criticism and the composition of *The Unnamable*. Chapter 3 discusses William Gaddis’s 1955 novel *The Recognitions*, arguing that the novel pivots around some of the central cruxes of postwar American aesthetic debate: Clement Greenberg’s theory of abstraction, and Michael Fried’s identification of the problem of “art and objecthood.” Chapter 4 discusses the work of the British art critic and novelist, John Berger. It shows that Berger’s critical account of Cubism shaped the narrative forms of his novels *A Painter of Our Time* and *G.*, and that these narrative innovations were central to his theory of the artistic and revolutionary “moment.” Chapter 5 focuses on the relationship between photography, painting and aesthetics in the work of W. G. Sebald. It argues that aesthetic concepts such as “the readymade” and “objective chance” offer a better account of Sebald’s engagement with art than accounts which draw on trauma theory. The thesis concludes with a short discussion of how the writers studied in this thesis have influenced the contemporary fiction of Jonathan Franzen, Teju Cole, and Tom McCarthy.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Reviewing Postwar Fiction

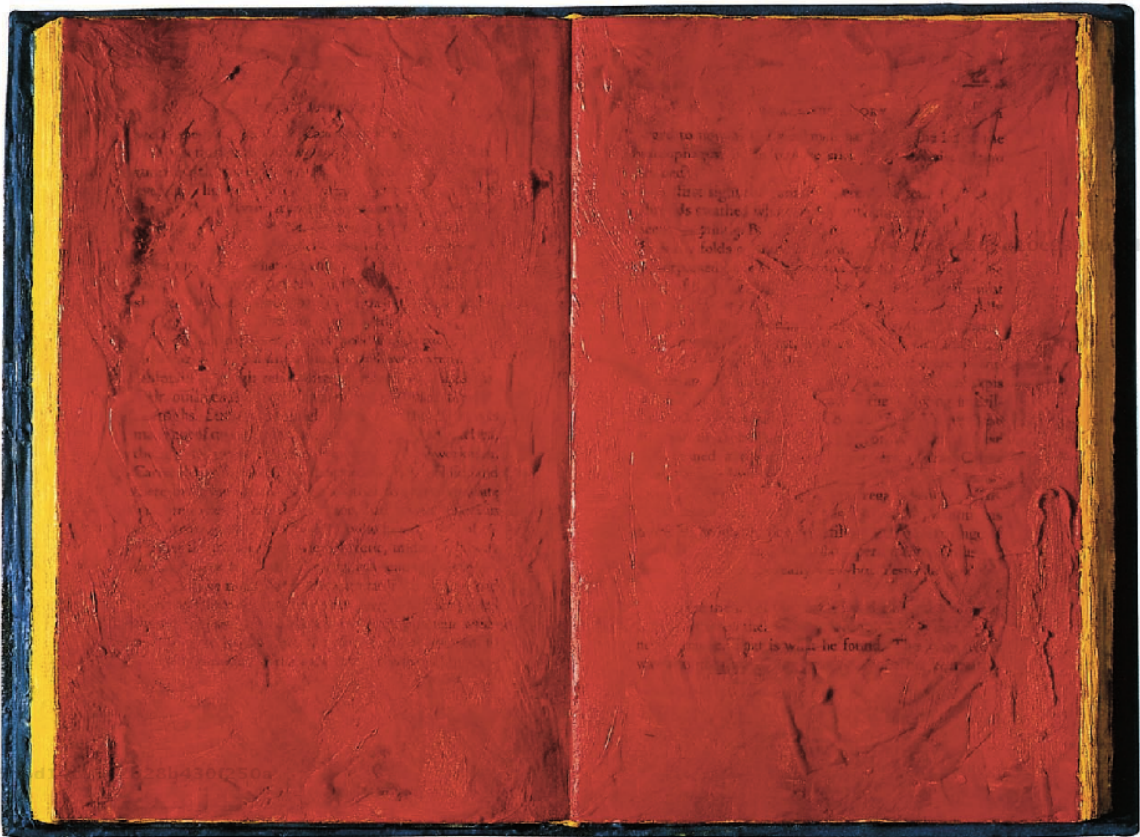


Fig. 1. Jasper Johns, *Book*, 1957. Photo courtesy of The Margulies Collection at the Warehouse, Miami. © Jasper Johns. Licensed by permission of VAGA, New York.

In 1957 Jasper Johns opened a book, covered it with red and yellow encaustic paint, and stuck it to a blue wooden frame (Fig. 1). An object became a work of art, a book became *Book* (1957). The book in question was *Lost Worlds* by Anne Terry White, a popular account of adventures in archaeology. The pages Johns painted describe the moment when Carter and Carnarvon break into Tutankhamen's tomb. On the threshold of their

discovery, the two explorers suddenly feel “strangely suspended in time and space.” Beneath the layers of red paint, we are told that “[n]ot the unbelievable tomb, but the actual world of the twentieth century seemed unreal to these enchanted explorers.”¹ Of course, these words are invisible to the naked eye. Under layers of paint, they are exposed and disguised; like the tomb in the desert, they are hidden in plain sight.

Book takes its place in the long history of explorations of the relationship between text and image, between literature and art. Here, the text is buried under paint, but fragments of words can be glimpsed if you look hard enough. On the top right hand page: “first sight,” “swathed,” “folds”; and at the bottom: “that is what he found.” In *Book*, seeing and saying are in opposition. The materiality of paint prevents simple access to the text, but this resistance is the condition for the kind of interaction between text and image upon which the piece depends. One might say, which it desires, for *Book* makes textual meaning something secret, a tantalizing code available only to initiates. By painting over a book called *Lost Worlds*, Johns’s piece signals its ironic awareness about the long history it is placing itself in. It can’t not be self-conscious about all the past explorations of the relationship it wants to make its theme. It feigns a loss of innocence under the pressure of tradition: the long history of depicting books in painting, and of using books as sculptural objects, as a means to probe the differences between artistic media. *Book* is neither a painting based on a text, nor a text describing a painting. Through taking a painted book and placing it in a frame, Johns presents as the object for consideration the relationship between art and literature itself in the “actual world” of his postwar present.

¹ Anne Terry White, *Lost Worlds: Adventures in Archaeology* (London; Toronto; Wellington; Sydney: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd, 1943), 119; James Coddington and Suzanne Siano, “Infrared Imaging of Twentieth-Century Works of Art,” in *Tradition and Innovation: Advances in Conservation*, ed. Ashok Roy and Perry Smith (London: The International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, 2000), 42–3. My thanks to Katherine Hinds, Curator of the Margulies Collection, Miami, and James Coddington, Chief Curator of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, for this information about Johns’s *Book*.

That relationship is the subject of this thesis. *The Work of Art in Postwar Fiction 1945-2001* traces the responses to visual art of four postwar writers: Samuel Beckett, William Gaddis, John Berger, and W. G. Sebald. It begins around 1945, with Beckett struggling to define the kind of painting, and the kind of writing, that could express his inexpressible vision of a “humanity in ruins.”² It ends in 2001, with Sebald’s melancholy life of Jacques Austerlitz, and the struggle of both author and character to find an aesthetic form to remember the victims of the Holocaust. Along the way it takes in the recognition, in the work of William Gaddis, of the Cold War as a context of interpretation which cannot but compromise the proclaimed autonomy of the meaning of the art object. The same recognition struck Berger when a young critic, prompting him to write mongrel fictions in which multiple perspectives and interpretative indeterminacy, modeled on Cubism, first became a means to reconceive socialist aesthetics during the Cold War, and then to rethink the historiography of a revolutionary modernism. Berger’s subsequent turn to photography was a turn away from art, but in the work of Sebald, the relationship between aesthetics, photography and fiction was the foundation upon which he built his works of restitution for the victims of postwar history.

As this brief sketch indicates, this thesis places these literary responses to visual art deep within their respective historical and political contexts. One of the wider claims of this thesis is that these writers were drawn to visual art precisely because it offered them a means to respond to, and engage with, the historical and political events of the postwar period. By doing so, this thesis proposes an argument about how to frame the response to visual art in postwar fiction in more general terms. As well as mediating

² Samuel Beckett, “The Capital of the Ruins,” in *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose 1929-1989* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 278.

concerns with the legacy of modernism, techniques of narrative, and the impact of photographic mass media, concerns that will recur throughout this study, the work of art traced in this thesis is always a form of historical work. The phrase the “work of art” intentionally condenses a number of assumptions. It expresses an awareness of the legacy of what was once called the “new art history.” As summarized by Johanna Drucker: “[t]he lessons of formalist method, processed through poststructuralist Marxism and deconstruction in many modes, all contribute to appreciation of material visual artifacts as *works*, that is, dynamic nodal points in complex systems of the cultural and symbolic order [italics original].”³ But it qualifies this with Berger’s view of what is lost in such an approach. In an essay entitled “The *work* of art [italics original],” Berger responded to an early, if crude, instance of the new art history, Nicos Hadjinicolaou’s *Art History and Class Consciousness* (1973). For Berger, that study’s Althusserian understanding of visual ideology as interpellation, located in the structure of the visual artifact, emphasized the reified object at the expense of “historical process and time”: the process by which the work was created as a mediation between consciousness and the material world, and the process of the “*act* of looking [italics original]” and interpretation.⁴ Berger’s argument, that of both a creator and a critic, was that the “work” of art is a process in a double sense, and that the interpreting beholder produces meaning at the same time as the work produces them.

Finally, the title of this thesis expresses an argument of my own: that these writers’ responses to visual art should be understood as a form of interpretative work, whose outcome can be traced in the style and narrative form of their fiction. Thus throughout this thesis my focus is as much on the ways in which postwar fiction is made,

³ Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xv.

⁴ John Berger, “The Work of Art,” in *The White Bird: Writings by John Berger*, ed. Lloyd Spencer (London: Chatto & Windus, 1985), 201.

as on the ways in which it can be interpreted. Or rather, this thesis is motivated to return again and again to manuscripts, archives and accounts of reading and composition to interpret the process by which postwar fiction is produced, providing a hermeneutics of poiesis. This tracks the moments in which writers produced their own interpretations of works of art, and used these simultaneously as acts of artistic self-interpretation of their own work and the medium of prose fiction. It therefore offers a different way to conceptualize the self-reflexivity and self-referentiality that has long been seen as one of the characteristic traits of postwar fiction: as a process of productive self-interpretation through a different medium, rather than a metafictional closure where “forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed,” or as a terminal self-consciousness that leaves writer and reader alike “lost in the funhouse.”⁵ This attention to poiesis also extends to the way these writers are related to history. By studying the historicizing ways in which these writers interpret art, and thus their own writing, it foregrounds the ways in which postwar writers historicized themselves, justifying the situating of these writers within the wider literary historical period of the postwar era.

History emerges as a central concern of these writers’ responses to visual art, and therefore of this study, not only because their reflection upon the art of the past, whether Giorgione, Jan van Eyck, or Pisanello, creates, in a somewhat obvious way, a sense of historical difference. Reflection upon the different historical temporalities and periodizations of the visual arts of their present, already theorized and institutionalized as a “modernism,” and already diverging from their own understandings of the periodization of that movement in literature, opens up for these writers a more complex understanding of the periodization and historicity of their own writing. Whether in Beckett’s perfect tense description of “the new thing that has happened” as the “rupture

⁵ William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York: Knopf, 1970), 25; John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968).

of the lines of communication,” and his subsequent exhaustion of this rupture into silence, or by Gaddis’s programmatic satirizing of the styles of Mansfield, Stein and James in a manner that accords with Tyrus Miller’s definition of late modernism, the writers in this thesis saw themselves as coming after, if not fully escaping from, the literary moment of modernism.⁶ At the same time, whether in the face of French *tachisme*, the works of Jackson Pollock, a central figure for both Gaddis and Berger, and above all in the criticism of Clement Greenberg, it was very clear that painterly modernism was reaching a final culminating climax. After decades of denunciation in direct proportion to his earlier influence, what Jean-Michel Rabaté has called Greenberg’s “specific blend of philosophy, cultural critique and aesthetics” has re-emerged as a pivotal source for understanding the relationship of modernism to postwar culture, and his work will receive some discussion in Chapter 2.⁷ As Morag Shiach has observed, because of the strength of Greenberg’s theories, in comparison to literary history, art history has a very different periodization of modernism, one which stretches back to Manet in the 1860s, and forward to Pop Art in the 1960s.⁸ The most developed justifications for these periodizations have been developed in the decades-long dialogue between T. J. Clark and Michael Fried, both positioning themselves as the inheritors of different strands of Greenberg’s criticism. For Clark, painterly modernism is a negative response to the spectacle and contingency of the visual in capitalist modernity, and it is this theory of modernism as a change in the order of visibility that makes Clark’s theory, and thus his expansive periodizing of its limit cases, so compelling.⁹ Fried, in contrast, proposes a

⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (London: John Calder, 1983), 70; Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction and the Arts between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁷ Jean-Michel Rabaté, “Introduction,” in *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 4.

⁸ Morag Shiach, “Periodizing Modernism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, ed. Peter Brooker et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 26–28.

⁹ T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 9–22; T. J. Clark, *Farewell To An Idea: Episodes From A History of Modernism* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1999), 7–13.

theory of visual modernism in which by inventing compelling ways of acknowledging its medium and materiality, a work can produce a “set of positive values, conventions, sources of conviction,” on the basis of which the beholder can secure her value judgments, and by which art can equal the achievements of the past.¹⁰ This differently historicized and developmental understanding of modernism has allowed Fried to extend his periodization beyond the 1960s, most recently into contemporary photography.¹¹ In contrasting ways, these critics show what Shiach describes as the “close connection between periodization, theoretical understanding, and aesthetic preferences” inherent in any strong theory of visual modernism, complicating its reduction to a chronological category comparable to “Elizabethan,” “Victorian,” or “antebellum.”¹²

Modernism, then, occupies an important place in this study. In attending to the difference between visual and verbal modernism, and the difference in their postwar critical constructions, for these writers the notion of a coherent historical period is split open without being completely discarded; related developments in different forms are seen to take place on different timescales; stages of development are seen to be taking place at different rhythms; and it is this lack of fit that makes the question of the historicity of their own writing all the more pressing. The theory of the uneven development of cultural formations (for that, ultimately, is what “modernist art” and “modernist literature” are) has its origins in Marx’s writings on political economy, which speculate on “[t]he uneven development of material production relative to e.g. artistic development. In general, the concept of progress not to be conceived in the usual abstractness. Modern art etc [*italics original*].” Furthermore, “this is the case with the relation between different

¹⁰ Michael Fried, “How Modernism Works: A Response to T. J. Clark,” *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 1 (September 1982): 220; Michael Fried, “An Introduction to My Art Criticism,” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1–76.

¹¹ Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008).

¹² Shiach, “Periodizing Modernism,” 28.

kinds of art within the realm of the arts...The difficulty consists only in the general formulations of these contractions.”¹³ That, it might be observed, has proved to be no small difficulty. Marx’s speculations have been elaborated in later theories of cultural materialism, most notably Raymond Williams’s model of emergent, dominant, and residual formations.¹⁴ But this problematic also has a genealogy within the discipline of art history, intersecting with Marxist theory in the writings of Ernst Bloch. As Frederic J. Schwartz has written, Bloch’s concept of *Ungleichzeitigkeit*, or “non-simultaneity,” is the concept “though which Bloch develops a Marxist theory of the nature of culture under twentieth-century modernity.” But this concept was lifted by Bloch “out of a debate among art historians and theorists of culture about periodicity and the nature of historical time,” specifically the response of Wilhelm Pinder to the historicism of Riegl, Dvorak and Wölfflin.¹⁵ Reflecting on the relationship between style and period, and co-presence of artists of different generations, Pinder concluded that the comparative study of different art works produced at the same time shows that “[t]here is no simple ‘present’ because every historical ‘moment’ (*Augenblick*) is experienced by people with their *own* different senses of historical duration; each moment means something different for everyone – *even a different time* [italics original].” Different cultural artifacts must be analyzed through the concept of *die Ungleichzeitigkeit des Gleichzeitigen*, or “the non-simultaneity of the simultaneous,” a concept which retains a notion of a historical period but allows a more complex sense of its internal differentiation.¹⁶

Along with his better known contemporaries Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin, Pinder was theorizing the experience of time, but his objects of analysis, as

¹³ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Allen Lane, 1973), 109; 110.

¹⁴ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121–28.

¹⁵ Frederic J. Schwartz, “Ernst Bloch and Wilhelm Pinder: Out of Sync,” *Grey Room*, no. 3 (Spring 2001): 55; 57.

¹⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 62.

Erwin Panofsky pointed out, were cultural artifacts: it is from the non-simultaneity of styles that the non-simultaneity of experience is inferred, and not the other way around. “All that is given is the artistic object, and the primary order that we can impose upon this endless multiplicity is actually based on nothing more than meaningful connections and frames of reference.” These frames of reference are theoretically produced units (*Einheiten*) of chronological time and geographical space, which produce “relational systems, within which and between which dynamic connections can be established”; or, in the case of this thesis, in which chronological simultaneity and stylistic non-simultaneity across media can be related.¹⁷ This overlap between the problematics of critical theory and art history, so characteristic of the intellectual ferment of Germany in the 1930s, provides the grounds for understanding how the uneven development of modernism across media does not “reflect,” but in a concrete sense *is* a manifestation of the differentiated temporality of modernity. In this thesis, through the specific case of the uneven legacies of modernism in the postwar period across the visual and verbal arts, I argue that, for these writers, the difference between media showed the “non-simultaneous simultaneity” of their historical present. Due to this centrality of modernism, tracing postwar literary responses to visual art necessarily motivates wider questions concerning the periodicity and historicity of postwar fiction. By showing that an engagement with visual art was a means by which postwar writers produced their own historicity, it follows that this engagement can be used retrospectively to understand postwar fiction in history. In history, and as history: for historicizing postwar literature has emerged as one of the most pressing concerns in recent literary scholarship.

¹⁷ Erwin Panofsky, “Reflections on Historical Time,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 4 (Summer 2004): 697; 698.

Historicizing Postwar Fiction

Will Postwar be nothing but “events,” newly created one moment from the next?
No links? Is it the end of history?¹⁸

Moving chronologically through a series of case studies from the end of the Second World War to the turn of the millennium, this thesis concerns itself with what, in literary studies, Amy Hungerford has influentially termed the “period formerly known as contemporary.” In one sense, Hungerford’s argument is disarmingly simple: with the passing of time, and of the authors of that time, the decades following the Second World War are “history, not memory.”¹⁹ Yet the ease implied in this transition is deceptive, for few topics have provoked as much historiographical debate since 1945 as the question of the relationship between history and memory.²⁰ When read alongside the pervasive literary treatments of this relationship since 1945, discussed in this thesis in relation to W. G. Sebald, Hungerford’s argument for a general periodizing logic of memory of ceding to history is one which cannot be applied so easily to the particular case of the postwar period. The problem of memory ceding to history, or the destruction of memory by history, is already a central concern of the period in question; it is from debates about these issues that a claim such as Hungerford’s emerges.

This alignment of general and particular periodizing logics draws attention to the ways in which the status of the history-memory relationship has long been deployed for periodizing claims since 1945. One of the earliest and strongest versions of this claim

¹⁸ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973), 56.

¹⁹ Amy Hungerford, “On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary,” *American Literary History* 20, no. 1–2 (March 20, 2008): 416.

²⁰ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989): 7–24; Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Saul Friedländer, “History, Memory, and the Historian: Dilemmas and Responsibilities,” *New German Critique*, no. 80 (April 2000): 3–15; Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Enzo Traverso, *Le passé, mode d’emploi: Histoire, mémoire, politique* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2005).

was developed by Hannah Arendt, for whom the constellation of war, the Holocaust, totalitarianism and the invention of nuclear weapons had been followed by a “failure of memory,” a failure of the remembrance that would bring the meaning of these actions to light through completion. Thus follows a break: “no willed continuity in time and hence, humanly speaking, neither past nor future, only sempiternal change of the world and the biological cycle of living creatures in it.” In a recurring thought-image, this change in the relationship between history and memory has cut “the thread of tradition” and “broken the continuity of Occidental history. The break in our tradition is now an accomplished fact.”²¹ Arendt, the consummate thinker of beginnings, herself begins a tradition of periodizing the postwar in terms of the relationship between history and memory.

Defining the postwar break through the history-memory relationship, and the alignment of general and particular periodizing logics, shows that not all periodizing claims can be dismissed as merely arbitrary, as pragmatic acts for the convenience of scholarship. There is always that which both Arendt and Theodor W. Adorno call the “vantage point” of the “most recent;” not the present, but a unique if ever shifting alignment of a present and a past.²² This structure should be considered as one of the “distinct temporalities” that Joshua Kates argues should complicate conventional axial concepts of “[p]eriods and the period.” From a reading of Althusser, Kates proposes a theory of periodization governed by a “differentiation at once temporal and object oriented,” with “different classes of events answering to various structures of time.”²³ This thesis argues that the postwar period is distinguished by its particular status as the “most recent” temporal object, its different classes of events taking place within a

²¹ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Present* (London: Penguin, 1993), 6; 5; 14; 26.

²² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5; Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997), 359.

²³ Joshua Kates, “Against the Period,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 25, no. 2 (2012): 140; 137; 143.

distinct structure of time. But it does so in the awareness that the difficulty of accounting for the “most recent” is part of a larger theoretical question, one which stretches back from Althusser and Marx into Hegel. For Hegel, famously, “the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk”: we ascend to knowledge of history, the apprehension by the ideal of the real, only once a period comes to an end.²⁴ It is telling that in Hegel’s metaphor the most recent moment before the owl takes flight is one of increasing darkness: the casting of the recent past into twilight is what makes the rest of history visible. This thesis focuses on the “most recent” period precisely because of the distinct challenges it offers to the writing of literary history, out of a conviction that addressing these challenges can contribute to these long running theoretical debates.

The sense that the decades since 1945 are no longer contemporary has been intensified by a recent wave of attention to the category of the “contemporary” itself, in work by Giorgio Agamben, Terry Smith, Lauren Berlant, Robert Eaglestone and Peter Osborne.²⁵ Of all these critics, Osborne has provided the richest account of what it means to think the contemporary, one which offers a suggestive model for literary studies. While acknowledging the difficulties in stating when the postwar has ended, or will end, Osborne draws a distinction between the postwar and the contemporary from the opposite perspective to Hungerford. He wants to preserve the “increasingly complex temporal-existential, social and political meanings” of the contemporary against its reduction to “a simple label or periodizing category.” The “distinctive conceptual grammar of con-temporaneity,” he writes, expresses “a coming together of *different but*

²⁴ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), 13.

²⁵ Giorgio Agamben, “What Is the Contemporary?,” in *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 39–54; Terry Smith, “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity,” *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 4 (June 1, 2006): 681–707; Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2011); Robert Eaglestone, “Contemporary Fiction in the Academy: Towards a Manifesto,” *Textual Practice* 27, no. 7 (December 2013): 1089–1102; Peter Osborne, *Anywhere Or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013).

equally 'present' temporalities or 'times,' a temporal unity in disjunction, or a disjunctive unity of present times. This problematically disjunctive conjunction is covered over by straightforward, historicist uses of 'contemporary' as a periodizing term [italics original].²⁶ As Agamben has pointed out, there is nothing particularly "contemporary" about this definition of the contemporary as a disjunctive relationship towards one's present: it goes back to Nietzsche's critique of historicism in "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life."²⁷ Therefore for Osborne it is exactly this, the historicizing gaze, which produces the difference between the time of the contemporary and the time of the historicized past.

It is this distance – or the methodological adoption of such a distance – that for Hungerford is "an advantage when it comes to the business of historicizing." Hungerford and Osborne end up neatly symmetrical: what the philosopher of contemporary art wants to avoid, the historian of postwar literature wants to embrace. Hungerford's business is the "revisionary work" now demanded on what she elects to call the literature of the "post-45" period, an adjective implying "a minimal set of assumptions about the ways the world and culture – especially American culture – changed since the end of World War II."²⁸ If in this study I adopt the more common "postwar" rather than "post-45," it is not because I disagree with the necessity for such revisionary work in literary studies and the assumption of historical change upon which it is based; quite the opposite. But as with Lewis Carroll's Syzygies, suffixes do matter. If "postwar" remains the more common term in critical and historical discourse, then this act of the collective unconscious registers a difference between the United States and the

²⁶ Osborne, *Anywhere Or Not At All*, 17.

²⁷ Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary?," 40–1; Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 57–124.

²⁸ Hungerford, "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary," 416; 412; 418.

rest of the world, where the ending of the war was more than a date. To follow Arendt: if global war, use of atomic weapons, and the Holocaust of the Jews did not mark a zero-hour in history, then what did? This thesis intentionally moves across American, British and European literature and visual art in order to follow the dynamics of its subjects, writers who were often as peripatetic as the art system they followed, and to allow for the interplay between national and transnational positions that defined the postwar literary field.

Such wide ranging and comparative scopes have characterized much of the work that has followed Hungerford's call for revisionary work on postwar literature. Steven Belletto, Julia Jordan, and Alex Houen have found common ground between British and American literature in their concerns with chance and potentiality, grounding aesthetic and thematic concerns as responses to Cold War politics and postwar disciplinary transformations in game theory, economics and existential philosophy.²⁹ Michael LeMahieu has similarly historicized the relationship between postwar literature and philosophy to argue for the impact of logical positivism on novelists such as John Barth, Saul Bellow and Iris Murdoch, forming the kind of unexpected but suddenly convincing constellation that makes such revisionary work so important, cutting across distinctions between national cultures and between so-called experimental and conventional authors.³⁰ In contrast, when Mark McGurl, Stephen Schryer and Michael Trask focus on the institutional role of the university and its discourses of professionalism in defining postwar American literature, they show just how distinctly American this development

²⁹ Steven Belletto, *No Accident, Comrade: Chance and Design in Cold War American Narratives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Julia Jordan, *Chance and the Modern British Novel* (London: Continuum, 2011); Alex Houen, *Powers of Possibility: Experimental American Writing since the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁰ Michael LeMahieu, *Fictions of Fact and Value: The Erasure of Logical Positivism in American Literature 1945-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

was.³¹ As McGurl admits, professionalized “[c]reative writing is, in sum, as American as baseball, apple pie, and homicide.” Less convincing, however, is his claim that the spread of the writing program throughout the world is less an instance of “Americanization” than of the overall process of “reflexive modernity.”³² As Serge Guilbaut has influentially if provocatively argued in relation to visual art, the American institutionalization of forms modernism and modernization elided in their constitution the national political contexts from which they emerged.³³ As shall be discussed in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, the battle to declare, as Beckett put it, that “the Paris school, whatever that means, is finished,” was one which postwar writers had already noticed, and which made their engagement with visual art an entry into a field politicized by national and political commitments in a way which left them sharply aware of the slippage between the trajectory of one national culture and the wider development of modernity.³⁴

Reflecting the impact of what Rebecca Beasley has termed the “gradual dismantling of ‘the straw-man modernism’ that featured in the postmodernist, anti-modernist, and historical avant-garde polemics of the 1970s and 1980s,” and its concomitant expansion into plural constellations of modernisms, David James and Lisa Siraganian have made strong cases for the continuing relevance of modernism to postwar writing.³⁵ Both draw on literary responses to visual art to make such claims, showing how the relationships between literature and art complicate, but therefore necessarily must be

³¹ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2009); Stephen Schryer, *Fantasies of the New Class: Ideologies of Professionalism in Post-World War II American Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Michael Trask, *Camp Sites: Sex, Politics and Academic Style in Postwar Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

³² McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, 364–365.

³³ Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

³⁴ Samuel Beckett, “The New Object,” *Modernism/modernity* 18, no. 4 (2011): 878.

³⁵ Rebecca Beasley, “Pound’s New Criticism,” *Textual Practice* 24, no. 4 (2010): 649; David James, *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Lisa Siraganian, *Modernism’s Other Work: The Art Object’s Political Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); see also the essays in David James, *The Legacies of Modernism: Historicizing Postwar and Contemporary Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

incorporated within, wider attempts at historicizing postwar fiction. But this focus on modernism can come at a price. It risks sidelining the intensely self-reflective and politically and philosophically grounded uses of realism in postwar writing, traced in this study in the writings of Berger and Sebald. It also often replaces one “straw-man” with another, this time a reductive image of postmodernism, as well as caricaturing the still insufficiently studied ways in which postwar writers responded creatively to the theoretical writings of Foucault, Deleuze, Lacan, Benjamin and others.³⁶ Nevertheless, guiding all such work is the welcome realization that postmodernism, while an indelible historical fact, is an inadequate theorization of the entirety of postwar literature.

Such a claim was advanced somewhat earlier by Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls in one of the first attempts to write a history of literature in England spanning the twentieth century as a whole. For them, “the notion of the Postmodern, in apparent violation of its own terms, has not proven to be an efficient periodizing concept that clearly situates us in a context distinct from modernity; rather, it affirms a continuing and troubled relation to a modernity we cannot evade.”³⁷ Similarly, Jason Gladstone and Daniel Worden note the absence of both postmodernism and postmodernity in Werner Sollors and Greil Marcus’s *A New Literary History of America*.³⁸ As they reflect of that book, postmodernism now seems best understood “not only as a synonym for the postwar condition...but also [as] one aesthetic among many.”³⁹ Intentionally or not, this is a direct repudiation of Fredric Jameson’s central claim: “I cannot stress too greatly the radical distinction between a view for which the postmodern is one (optional) style

³⁶ Initial surveys have been attempted by Michael Greaney, *Contemporary Fiction and the Uses of Theory: The Novel from Structuralism to Postmodernism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Judith Ryan, *The Novel After Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

³⁷ Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*, ed. Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4.

³⁸ Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors, eds., *A New Literary History of America* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2009).

³⁹ Jason Gladstone and Daniel Worden, “Introduction: Postmodernism, Then,” *Twentieth-Century Literature* 57, no. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 2011): 292.

among many others available and one which seeks to grasp it as the cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism.”⁴⁰ “Late capitalism” was always the weakest link in Jameson’s thesis, never quite recovering from Bill Warren’s retort – “late for what?”⁴¹ The truth, it now appears, was that foreseen by Walter Benjamin: “The catastrophe is that it just goes on like this.”⁴²

“Where are we now?” David J. Alworth’s recent question restages nothing so grand as that of Marcus and Nicholls as to where we stand today in relation to modernity; rather it is a reflection on the more modest terrain of this recent revisionary work on postwar literature. Alworth questions how efficient a periodizing concept the postwar is, could, or should be. He notes that, for all that such work rejects Jameson’s claim that postmodernism is the cultural logic of late capitalism, it adheres to a different aspect of Jameson’s work: his imperative to “Always historicize!”⁴³ Alworth worries that if such historicism becomes routine, work on the postwar period might fail to respond to calls for modes of “surface” or “enchanted” reading to disrupt the methodological dominance of historicism, calls that as of yet, as even their most illustrious practitioners admit, remain more willed than realized.⁴⁴ Alworth, in short, has caught a postwar strain of what Jennifer Fleissner has diagnosed as “Historicism Blues.”⁴⁵ She points out that historicism and periodization have emerged as key theoretical concerns not just for the postwar period, but for the discipline of literary studies as a whole. She also usefully unpicks some of the different modes of historicism that often get tangled up in such debates. Historicism as an assumption about teleology is not the same as historicism

⁴⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 45–6.

⁴¹ Quoted in Fred Halliday, “The Ends of Cold War,” *New Left Review*, I, no. 180 (April 1990): 18.

⁴² “Dass es ‘so weiter’ geht, ist die Katastrophe” [my translation]. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften V.I.*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982), 592.

⁴³ David J. Alworth, “Hip to Post45,” *Contemporary Literature* 54, no. 3 (Winter 2013): 622; 630.

⁴⁴ See Franco Moretti, “Operationalizing,” *New Left Review*, II, no. 84 (December 2013): 113.

⁴⁵ Jennifer Fleissner, “Historicism Blues,” *American Literary History* 25, no. 4 (December 1, 2013): 699–717.

meaning interpreting through context, which is not the same as the use of the archive, and none of which are necessarily a tool of the politicized symptomatic reading or hermeneutics of suspicion whose paranoia has fatigued so many critics.⁴⁶

Fleissner doesn't have a cure; instead she suggests the couch. For her, the inescapable urge towards historicizing and periodization in literary studies reflects the "constitutive elusiveness of the history that is its aim."⁴⁷ Like Agamben, she is assisted by Nietzsche in what is not so much a critique of historicism, but a call to reflect upon and theorize more fully what is assumed by the critical act of historical explanation. By doing so, she manages to sidestep what Virginia Jackson calls the "hermeneutic circle" in which so many critiques of historicism become trapped, critiques which by showing the "historical formation of historical thinking" depend on the method they are ostensibly attacking.⁴⁸ Such circularity characterized the anxiety about the relationship between literature and historical knowledge generated a generation ago under the twin pressures of deconstruction and the New Historicism.⁴⁹ Perhaps as a result, unlike Fleissner's proposal to embrace theorizations of historicism in order to move beyond it, the debates of the early 1990s were characterized by a resigned cynicism, exemplified above all by David Perkins's pessimistic *Is Literary History Possible?* (The answer was no.) Following Dominick LaCapra, Fleissner proposes a reintroduction of theoretical reflection in order to understand our relationship to the object of historical explanation: in this case Freud's theory of *Nachträglichkeit*. Such an approach "indexes the psychoanalytic scenario more broadly in order to understand why we are drawn back to the past in ways that affirm our

⁴⁶ See Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 1.

⁴⁷ Fleissner, "Historicism Blues," 700.

⁴⁸ Virginia Jackson, "Introduction: On Periodization and Its Discontents," in *On Periodization* (Cambridge, MA: English Institute, 2010), 4.

⁴⁹ David Perkins, ed., *Theoretical Issues in Literary History* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1991); David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Marshall Brown, ed., *The Uses of Literary History* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 1995).

constitutive inability to simply account for ourselves.”⁵⁰ A similar proposal has recently been made by Peter Bürger, who in a revision to his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, advocates “the use of deferred action as a general category of reflection.”⁵¹ And Lauren Berlant has argued that “the temporal whiplash of the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* is far more complex” than its reduction to trauma, a complexity she draws on in “imagining a historicism from within a discontinuous present.”⁵²

Such will not be the method of this study: it does not share Fleissner’s emphasis on building national and cultural identity, Bürger’s on the possibility of an avant-garde, nor Berlant’s on the theorization of the contemporary. One thing this study does do, however, is show that some postwar novelists had long ago turned towards a narrative of *Nachträglichkeit* as one of the many ways they sought to address, in literary form, the same questions of temporality, history and periodization that have so occupied recent critics of postwar literature and culture. But in the same spirit that motivates these critics, this thesis also attempts to work through historicism as a methodology from within; in this case, by showing that attention to artistic relations across media requires more complex and “non-synchronous” theories of a historical moment and period. And by focusing on the hermeneutics of poiesis, a poiesis which includes the production of historicity within a work, it hopes to show that a theoretically rejuvenated historicism does not have to come at the expense of close attention to composition, style and form. This might not be the only cure for current critical anxieties, but it does hope to show that for postwar critics at least, these do not have to be anxieties terminable and interminable.

⁵⁰ Fleissner, “Historicism Blues,” 707.

⁵¹ Peter Bürger, “Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of Theory of the Avant-Garde,” trans. Bettina Brandt and Daniel Purdy, *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (2010): 710.

⁵² Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 80; 93.

Given that historicism and historicization have been doing so much work in recent criticism, it is worth pausing to unpick the different procedures and assumptions that underlie the term. To make an historicist move: much of what is termed historicism has its origins in the German reaction to the French Enlightenment, in Hamann, Herder, Goethe and Hegel, and in developments in biblical hermeneutics in the work of Schleiermacher.⁵³ From these writers, and their successors, three broad kinds of historicism can be distinguished, although this does not mean they are not often intertwined: interpretative, evaluative, and teleological. Interpretative historicism, as in Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, is a philosophy of language which insists linguistic meaning can only be understood in its original context. More recent manifestations of this approach have been the Cambridge School of historiography, with its stress on the importance of the context of utterance, or the attention to an expanded conception of "discourse" in the New Historicism.⁵⁴ Evaluative historicism, as in Herder's stress on cultural uniqueness and specificity, can be both moral and aesthetic: peoples as well as artifacts should be judged by the conventions of the culture from which they arose. Teleological historicism, the belief that the past should be interpreted as part of an unfolding process of development, is the form made infamous by Karl Popper's attacks on the poverty of historicism.⁵⁵ If rarely adhered to today, it does have an afterlife in literary criticism in the projects of identity politics, which follow the nations of nineteenth-century Europe in positing an organic community united across time and space, an identity-based community which delimits fields of research. The projects of identity politics, as Wendy Steiner has written, tended to dominate the contemporaneous criticism of much postwar fiction, polarizing approaches, as in John Barth's swipe at

⁵³ Friedrich Meinecke, *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, trans. J. E. Anderson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972); Paul Hamilton, *Historicism*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁵⁴ Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8 (1969): 3–53; H. Aram Veesser, ed., *The New Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1989).

⁵⁵ Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957).

“secular news reports,” between innovation and identity.⁵⁶ The attempt to move beyond such distortions has meant that historicizing postwar fiction has largely involved, and will do in this thesis, an interpretative and evaluative historicism, one which necessarily brings the question of periodicity into play.

It is inevitable that questions of historicity and periodization have become particularly acute for scholars working on the postwar period. If only because it is being done for the first time, conceptualizing the most recent past is a more difficult task than thinking of a past as clearly separated from the present. Indeed, an intervening zone of the recent past is precisely what such other acts of historical periodization depend upon. Eric Hayot has complained that “[p]eriod is the untheorized ground of the possibility of literary scholarship.”⁵⁷ In his view, one should invent new, more world encompassing periods, whose sole *raison d’être* is to temporarily defamiliarize through difference – though it is not difficult to see how this reactive strategy would quickly exhaust itself. Through tracing the historical emergence of the period-based teaching of literature in the nineteenth century, Ted Underwood has recovered and articulated one theory of why the period has “endured in a discipline where almost nothing else does.” Periodization enabled a practice of historical contrast, premised on the idea that the literature of a distinct period, and then ultimately a literary work itself, eventually becomes incomprehensible to succeeding interpreters. Paradoxically, however, this historical discontinuity justified both the autonomy of literature, as distinct from other forms of cultural expression, and an ongoing practice of institutionalized research and instruction. Upon these foundations rested “broader assumptions about literature’s broader power to mediate historical change and transmute it to a community – or in other words, with a

⁵⁶ Wendy Steiner, “Rethinking Postmodernism,” in *The Cambridge History of American Literature Volume 7: Prose Writing 1940-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 444–450; Barth quoted *ibid.*, 441.

⁵⁷ Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 154.

model of literary culture.”⁵⁸ Like Hayot, Underwood seeks a model of literary study based not on contrast but on modeling “gradual change,” but this too merely replaces one form of periodizing change with another, larger in scale. In the search for different ways of conceiving periodization and historicism, instead of these expansive moves to the largest scales, striving for the totalizing viewpoint at which nothing will be lost, another solution is that suggested by Alworth, Fleissner, Berlant, James and other scholars of postwar literature. Such literature should be read closely and intensively to uncover its own theorizations of periodization and history, attending to gaps and lacunae as much as unexpected connections, not because the method must match its object, but because of the distinct forms of literary historical thinking they offer.

Above and beyond the more pragmatic indications of a scholarly field coming into being – handbooks, companions, and scholarly associations – this self-reflexivity about historicization and the theoretical premises of literary history has the potential to be a distinctive feature of critical work on postwar literature, one which it can contribute to literary studies more broadly.⁵⁹ Claims for distinction inevitably raise hackles, and of course it is obtuse to imply that long running debates about the differences between “the Renaissance” and “the early modern,” or between “modern” and “modernist,” are

⁵⁸ Ted Underwood, *Why Literary Periods Mattered: Historical Contrast and the Prestige of Literary Studies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 2; 3.

⁵⁹ David James, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to British Fiction since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Amy Hungerford, *The Cambridge Introduction to the American Novel Since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (forthcoming)); John N. Duvall, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction After 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Jennifer Ashton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Brian W. Shaffer, *A Companion to the British and Irish Novel 1945-2000* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004); These works build upon foundational surveys of postwar fiction such as Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Morris Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple: The Transformation of American Fiction, 1945-1970* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2002); Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History, 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996); Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995); D. J. Taylor, *After the War: The Novel and England Since 1945* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993); Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971). Also significant in terms of the consolidation of the period as a field are the *Post45* scholarly collective, online journal, and series of conferences: <http://post45.research.yale.edu>.

lacking in theoretical self-consciousness. Rather the risk of such a claim bears on more recent critical debates. At a time when scholarship on the postwar period is reaping the benefits, both intellectual and institutional, from the richly productive methodologies of historicism and contextualization, and drawing as in this study on recently available archival materials, other periods, to use Fleissner's phrase, are searching for cures for their "historicism blues." There has been the willful embrace of "presentism" and "transversality" in the study of early modern drama.⁶⁰ Scholars of nineteenth-century America such as Lloyd Pratt have called for kinds of historicism that move beyond "hierarchical renderings of present and past" and recognize more fully who and what is present in that past.⁶¹ Studies of the modernist period have shifted from "literary-critical engagement with thick textures of history" to claims that modernism is the response to a wholly ahistorical conception of modernity considered as any period of rapid change.⁶² Whatever the merits of such an approach, or its critique by Stephen Kern, David James and Urmila Seshagiri, it is an example of one of the most extreme reactions against what Mark McGurl has called the general "hegemony of history" in literary studies of recent decades.⁶³

Yet historical thinking, as McGurl points out, is not so much a methodology to be discarded at the whims of academic fashion, nor even only a discipline; it is a

⁶⁰ Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, eds., *Presentist Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 2007); Bryan Reynolds, *Transversal Enterprises in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries: Fugitive Explorations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁶¹ Lloyd Pratt, "Stranger History," *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 155.

⁶² Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, "The New Modernist Studies," *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (May 2008): 745; Susan Stanford Friedman, "Planetary: Musing Modernist Studies," *Modernism/modernity* 17, no. 3 (2010): 471–99.

⁶³ Stephen Kern, *The Modernist Novel: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 222 n.8; David James and Urmila Seshagiri, "Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution," *PMLA* 129, no. 1 (January 2014): 87–100; Mark McGurl, "Ordinary Doom: Literary Studies in the Waste Land of the Present," *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010): 332.

“fundamental intellectual modal[ity].”⁶⁴ And at least in Gramsci’s sense a “hegemony of history” is somewhat of an oxymoron: what enables any hegemony is the silencing of the historical differences between competing groups, the imposition of one worldview over many. Scholars of different periods are not classes in historical struggle, but the bathetic comparison has a mundane point: different periods, at different moments in the history of their study, require differing emphases of history in that study. Alworth’s worries that a historicizing phase in the study of postwar literature risks leaving it out of kilter with developments in other more well-trodden periods, suffering like Nietzsche from a “surfeit of history,” are misplaced. Nietzsche’s counsel was that “*the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture* [italics original]” – and, one might add, a discipline.⁶⁵

The lure of historicism in postwar studies might be driven not only by the brute passing of time, the opening up of new archives, and by developments in theoretical discourse. It might, as much of the new work on postwar literature suggests, be a response to a characteristic feature of the literature of the period. In an early account of the postwar English novel, Steven Connor proposed a view where one “sees the novel not just as passively marked with the imprint of history, but also as one of the ways in which history is made, and remade.” Connor stresses that “this is not to reduce history to textuality,” but in spite of this, many critics, most notably Linda Hutcheon, have argued that this textualization of history is the defining feature of the explosion of “historiographic metafiction” produced in the postwar period.⁶⁶ Complex writings and rewritings of history through fictional form appear in the works of so many postwar writers that this development seems in retrospect to exceed the bounds of the

⁶⁴ McGurl, “Ordinary Doom: Literary Studies in the Waste Land of the Present,” 332.

⁶⁵ Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” 63.

⁶⁶ Connor, *The English Novel in History, 1950-1995*, 1; Linda Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory and Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988).

postmodernism that Hutcheon posits as its determining cause. John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Berger's *G.* (1972), Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988) Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* (1997)...The point of such a list is to show that the writing of history as a formal challenge exceeded the bounds of any style or national culture to the point that it seems a far more significant literary development than postmodernism as either stylistic choice or the cultural logic of a discrete phrase of pre-1989 Western society.

Such is one argument of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's *After 1945: Latency as the Origin of the Present* (2013), a book which attempts to lay the foundations for future historical engagements with postwar literature. For Gumbrecht, this will mean having to come to terms with the distinct features of the chronotope of the postwar years, one defined for him by latency. This is a certainty of presence that nevertheless "we cannot grasp or touch"; we know something is there, but "[w]e are unable to say where, exactly, our certainty of the presence comes from, nor do we know where, precisely, what is latent is located now."⁶⁷ The model for this complex phenomenological and historically specific *Stimmung*, or mood, is *Waiting for Godot*, which "not only stages the latent conditions of the period after the Second World War – it positively condenses an entire sea of latency into single *Stimmung*."⁶⁸ Gumbrecht's argument is that this particular *Stimmung* of waiting for something that certainly exists, but not knowing how it would be present, defines the postwar relationship to history, traceable in literature, one that generates the frantic obsession with history shown in the works listed above. All this resulted in a chronotope whereby "the postwar period of latency was a first wrinkle in

⁶⁷ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *After 1945: Latency as Origin of the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 23.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

the smooth running of ‘historical time’” beginning “a protracted metamorphosis of the historicizing chronotope.”⁶⁹ Unsure as to when and where “History” was taking place, but certain that it was, a whole period asked the question posed by Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*: “Will Postwar be nothing but ‘events’, newly created one moment from the next? No links? Is it the end of history?”⁷⁰ But that this was a question shows that for postwar writers at least, this obsession with their own historicity was not calmed by Alexandre Kojève’s serene vision of the end of history. As Gumbrecht proposes, returning to this postwar obsession with historicity, and relating it to the histories inscribed in the forms of postwar literature, is one of the most significant tasks awaiting future literary scholarship.

This study takes a few steps in that direction by showing that an engagement with visual art was one of the ways in which postwar writers of fiction engaged with this problem of history. In this it parallels an argument made by David J. Alworth, for whom attention to the spatial “sites” that preoccupied postwar writers is one way for a historicizing approach to generate new modes of sociological thinking for the period.⁷¹ This double historicism, then, both as a revisionary methodological approach, and as a thematic interest in how writers mediate their interaction with visual art, is what distinguishes this study from previous attempts to trace the literary responses to visual art in the postwar period. These were faced with a very different task: what Osborne describes as the task of contemporaneity. Such attempts were necessarily often fragmentary, achieved in passing, tracking literary responses to art as part of larger attempts to define a contemporary moment.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 200–1.

⁷⁰ Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, 56.

⁷¹ David J. Alworth, “Supermarket Sociology,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 301–27.

Postwar Fiction and Visual Art: From Contemporaneity to Postmodernism to Periodization

One way to read Susan Sontag's essays collected in *Against Interpretation* (1966) is to see Sontag offering one of the earliest accounts of the ways in which responses to art define new forms of postwar fiction, forms implicitly exemplified in her own work. This might seem willfully perverse in relation to essays which decry such acts of hermeneutic suspicion as "an open aggressiveness, an overt contempt for appearances." But contempt in "Against Interpretation" is most fully held for "those arts [in America] with a feeble and negligible avant-garde: fiction and the drama."⁷² Sontag's disdain for the state of the novel in English in the early 1960s is so excessive that it is difficult not to suspect some ulterior motive: "there is no genre in greater need of sustained reexamination and renovation...[i]t has sunk to the level of an art form deeply, if not irrevocably, compromised by philistinism." Modernism was a false start in the necessary "coming-of-age of the novel," for its greatest figures – Proust, Joyce, Gide, and Kafka – were writers who "close off rather than inaugurate, who cannot be learned from so much as imitated."⁷³ This view of literary modernism typifies the ways in which Sontag's snobbish critical *hauteur* often cloaks the penetrating insights and anxieties of a practitioner. Novelists, Sontag claims, have not learned from painting and cinema, which have staged a "flight from interpretation." Novelists must learn from the paintings of Frank Stella and Jasper Johns to abandon plot and story, or from collage, like Burroughs.⁷⁴ So when one reads Sontag's introduction to the essays collected in *Against Interpretation*, tellingly dedicated to the artist Paul Thek, in which she claims they resulted from the energy that

⁷² Susan Sontag, *Essays of the 1960s & 1970s* (New York: The Library of America, 2013), 13; 17.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 100; 101.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 16; 733–744.

spilled over after completing her first novel *The Benefactor* (1963), and when this is read alongside *The Benefactor's* call for “revolutions of feeling and seeing” and its language of splintered gazes and cinematic frames, a picture emerges of a writer basing the contemporaneity of her fiction on her strenuously trained sensibility for the visual arts, claiming her place alongside Beckett, Genet and Burroughs.⁷⁵

For all that posterity might not have agreed with Sontag’s ambitious self-positioning as a novelist, she does stand out as an early critic in the postwar period who was interested in tracking the response to visual art in writers of fiction, and for her suggestion of the impact of visual art on Beckett and Burroughs. Far more common have been studies of the impact of visual art on poetry. Indeed, as Sontag herself noted in 1966, “[t]he possible exchanges between writing and painting have also been important to certain recent American poets, notably John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and Frank O’Hara.”⁷⁶ Beginning with her study of O’Hara, Marjorie Perloff has chronicled the shifting relationships between postwar American poetry and the visual arts, from the poetry of the New York School to the “radical artifice” of poetry in the age of new media.⁷⁷ Charles Altieri has proved an equally dedicated chronicler of the American poetic response to the visual arts, and in an essay on John Ashbery, he argues that this is a means of understanding Ashbery’s contemporaneity.⁷⁸ “The easiest way to discuss a poet’s contemporaneity,” he argues, “is to compare his or her work to other materials that are more obvious indicators of social change. This is why I want here to take up Ashbery’s relationship to the experiments in visual art that first set themselves the task of

⁷⁵ Susan Sontag, *The Benefactor* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964), 7.

⁷⁶ Sontag, *Essays*, 740.

⁷⁷ Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O’Hara: Poet Among Painters* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁷⁸ Charles Altieri, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

constructing a postmodern sensibility.”⁷⁹ For Altieri, as for Perloff, as for the many other studies of responses to the visual arts in postwar poetry, this response becomes a mark of poetic contemporaneity. This stems from the perception that because of their more visible entanglement with the logic of capital in the form of the art market, the transformation of this entanglement into a thematic of institutional critique, and because of the sheer speed of development in postwar art and theory, the visual arts, in the postwar period, often came to be privileged as “more obvious indicators of social change.”

Responding to such indicators of social change in order to grasp the contemporary posits an analogy between the “disjunctive unity” of contemporary time and the “disjunctive unity” of different artistic media in relation to one another: a contemporizing of Marx’s intuition of unequal development within the sphere of art, and of Bloch and Pinder’s “non-simultaneity of the simultaneous.” In 1998, Altieri reflected that in his own work, the “postmodern” too unreflectively became a replacement for what was primarily an investigation of “contemporaneity.”⁸⁰ Yet, for Altieri, this does not mean a simple abandonment of postmodernism as an aesthetic concept. Rather, what needs to be re-contextualized and dialectically historicized from the present is precisely why, in the postwar period, often conflicting conceptions of postmodernism did the work of the contemporary, and why this substitution is now no longer convincing.

Altieri has elsewhere written of “the notion of the poem as aesthetic object that has governed both traditional and experimental views of literature for almost a

⁷⁹ Charles Altieri, *Postmodernisms Now: Essays on Contemporaneity in the Arts* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 55.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

century.”⁸¹ That the term “object” is called to do too much metaphorical work in a sentence like this is exactly Altieri’s point; but nevertheless, the notion of the aesthetic object has proved an enduring third-term in mediating the relationship between poetry and visual art for poets and critics alike. As Sianne Ngai puts it, poems that “invite us to draw metaphorical comparisons between themselves and the objects they describe” also gain leverage on “the ambiguous status of the contemporary avant-garde in general, and on the closeness between the avant-garde and the commodity.”⁸² But this comparison doesn’t hold for fiction, even if metaphorically speaking a fictional text is as much an object as a poem, simply on a larger scale. It is narrative which makes the equation between fictional text and object strained and unconvincing. Indeed, from Pound’s “[p]etals on a wet, black bough,” to Bob Perelman’s *Primer* (1981) with its measuring and outlining, the poetic turn to the object seems so often to be a wish to escape from narrative, and in doing so to isolate what is distinctively “poetic” in contrast to the discourse of fiction. As in Eliot’s vision, the poem becomes “the still point of the turning world.”⁸³

Therefore, when critics have given attention to the relationship between postwar fiction and visual art, it is not surprising that narrative has emerged as a mediating topic of focus. Patricia Waugh and Brian McHale have analyzed postwar fiction with the concept of the narratological frame, a concept borrowed from the work of Erving Goffman and Gregory Bateson.⁸⁴ As Marie Laure-Ryan writes, the frame is one of “the family of metaphors through which narratologists have traditionally attempted to deal

⁸¹ Charles Altieri, “What Theory Can Learn from New Directions in Contemporary American Poetry,” *New Literary History* 43, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 65.

⁸² Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2012), 70; 4.

⁸³ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 191.

⁸⁴ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London; New York: Methuen, 1984); Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987).

with the divisions of discourse and story.”⁸⁵ Thus in Waugh and McHale’s readings of Beckett, Pynchon, Barthelme, Robbe-Grillet and others, visual art is a means by which these texts construct and allegorize narrative features arising from the discourse/story distinction: possible worlds, embedding, or causal indeterminacy. Allegory itself has also been used to understand the narrative relationship between visual and verbal art in the postwar period. Reflecting on both theory and practice of the 1960s and 1970s, on Paul de Man as much as Robert Smithson, Craig Owens defined postmodernism in terms of its “allegorical impulse”: postmodern allegory proposes a “reciprocity...between the visual and the verbal: words are often treated as purely visual phenomena, while visual images are offered as script to be deciphered.”⁸⁶ In light of this aspect of allegory’s saying otherwise, a saying in a different medium, critics have explored the relationship between allegory and the blurring of boundaries between visual and verbal representation in the work of writers such as Angela Carter, Alasdair Gray, and Salman Rushdie.⁸⁷ One indication that the writers in this thesis do not fall under this (admittedly tendentious) definition of postmodernism is that, as will be shown, they figure the relationship between the visual and the verbal as one of resistance rather than reciprocity. Linda Hutcheon has presented parody as “one of the major forms of modern self-reflexivity; it is a form of inter-art discourse.”⁸⁸ However, Hutcheon’s contrast between her more neutral definition of parody as “imitation with critical difference” and the Russian Formalist’s emphasis on the “historical role of parody” as both historicizing and generating literary change complicates an argument that would make parody a defining

⁸⁵ Marie-Laure Ryan, “Stacks, Frames and Boundaries, or Narrative as Computer Language,” *Poetics Today* 11, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 873.

⁸⁶ Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” *October* 12 (April 1980): 74.

⁸⁷ Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère, “The Interplay of Text and Image, from Angela Carter’s *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* (1977) to *The Bloody Chamber* (1979),” *Journal of the Short Story in English* 56, no. 1 (Spring 2011); Robert Crawford and Thom Nairn, eds., *The Arts of Alasdair Gray* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991); Ana Cristina Mendes, ed., *Salman Rushdie and Visual Culture: Celebrating Impurity, Disrupting Borders* (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁸⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (London: Methuen, 1985), 2.

feature of postmodernist interactions between literature and visual art.⁸⁹ As with Owens's allegorical impulse, arguments which attempt to make the postmodern both a stylistic and periodizing concept fray under the pressure of the history the postmodern paradoxically seeks to escape.

In light of his conviction that “the post-war years gave birth to a period of artistic achievement quite distinct from that of modernism,” but also the conviction that this could not be reduced to a singular postmodernism, Christopher Butler discerned across postwar literature, music and art a common set of aesthetic principles rather than theoretical impulses: serialism, chance, abstraction and collage. It was at this level of technique “that the close analogies between the arts can be appreciated and an implied *Zeitgeist* discerned.”⁹⁰ Butler's belief that his then contemporary moment could be distinctively periodized by comparing different art forms brings out an assumption underlying all these studies of the relationship between literature and art. His invocation of that *bête-noire* of cultural history, the *Zeitgeist*, is exceptional only in making explicit what so many historians of the relationships between the arts rarely admit: that some version of the concept of the *Zeitgeist* lurks beneath almost all cultural history. It seems that like it or not, as Jacques Lacan quipped, “everybody is Hegelian without knowing it.”⁹¹

One of the clearest (though hardly Hegelian) articulations of this relationship between interartistic comparison and periodization has come from Alastair Fowler's theory of genre. Fowler claims that the “study of period styles is ontologically entailed,

⁸⁹ Ibid., 36.

⁹⁰ Christopher Butler, *After the Wake: An Essay on the Contemporary Avant-Garde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 160; x.

⁹¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 73.

directly or indirectly, in the criticism of individual works.” “[C]omparisons between the arts,” he writes, “give valuable help, sharpening our sense of period,” presenting as proof the fact that “our existing period concepts have all been arrived at in the light of interart analogies, on whose validity their own appears.” For Fowler, “period style belongs...to the category of preliminary heuristic genre, or even extrinsic genre. For period is part of what a work *takes for granted* stylistically [italics original].”⁹² But as Sontag has written, “the very notion of ‘style’ needs to be approached historically.” After Romanticism, and certainly by Sontag’s postwar present, style, as she puts it, means “the signature of the artist’s will.” While “stylistic decisions can always be correlated with some historical development,” what is being correlated in the rapid succession of postwar styles is “the indefinite number of stances” of the human will itself.⁹³ In the postwar period, an individual style is no longer the signature of the period; rather the signature of a period is the principle of stylistic change itself, a signature for which interart analogies can still, if not more so as Altieri suggests, continue to do their periodizing work.

Pierre Bourdieu (an equally reluctant Hegelian), also makes the relationship between art forms essential to defining the historicity of a field which the successful modern entrant must take for granted in order to “*continually banish the past* [italics original].” The historicity of the field of modern art is necessarily constituted comparatively: “[i]f the innovations that led to the invention of the modern artist and art are only intelligible at the level of all the fields of cultural production together, this is because artists and writers were able to use the lags between transformations occurring in the literary field and the artistic field to benefit, as in a relay race, from advances carried

⁹² Alastair Fowler, “Periodization and Interart Analogies,” *New Literary History* 3, no. 3 (April 1972): 489; 488; 500.

⁹³ Sontag, *Essays*, 23; 37.

out at different moments by their respective avant-gardes.”⁹⁴ Bourdieu’s ascription of a relatively autonomous history to a field was motivated by the same reasons that Fowler claimed the styles of genres had relatively autonomous periodizations, and both can be seen as theoretical responses to what Marx saw as the unequal development of the “different kinds of art within the realm of the arts.” Different as they are, however, both Fowler and Bourdieu ascribe an agency to art and artworks in generating these comparisons, and thus producing their own periodizations; indeed, that Marx could not account for this agency is what made it difficult for him to find a “general formulation of these contradictions.” As a consequence of this relative agency, one can either document period styles from without; or one can point to how, by what means, and by what kinds of interart analogies, individual works produce their own periodizations.

Tracing these productions in postwar literary works is the aim and method of this study; its proof lies in the chapters that follow. It does not make a claim for a distinct period style, nor, like Butler, for a number of styles across the arts. Instead, it points to how, at discrete and local moments, postwar writers made their own comparisons with the visual arts in order to historicize their own works. The goal is to show, by drawing on archives and tracing processes of composition, the work that such comparisons and analogies do and their consequences for the production and interpretation of literary works. Thus, although this study draws on the disciplines of art history and visual studies, it is above all interested in the responses of literary writers. These responses are then put in service of the wider project of historicizing postwar fiction by showing how postwar writers historicized themselves. But postwar writers were not the first to produce their period through comparisons between the visual and verbal arts, nor indeed were Fowler and Bourdieu the first to conjoin periodization and inter-arts comparison.

⁹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emmanuel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 157; 132.

In fact, such a move is as old as the discipline of art history itself. Or even older still: W. J. T. Mitchell has claimed that “[t]he history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs, each claiming for itself certain proprietary rights on a “nature” to which only it has access.”⁹⁵ Mitchell’s work has done much to draw attention to revealing moments in this struggle, but what has been less explored is the implied suggestion that the history of narratives around this struggle has been a way of articulating historical specificity and change. Therefore, in order to give the broad historical context for these postwar writers, a context of which they themselves were well aware, and to show how the disciplinary resources of art history can be put in service of the interpretation of postwar literature, it is worth risking a glancing overview of “the history of the history” produced between literature and visual art.

A History of the History Between Art and Literature

Having very carefully turned all this over in my mind, I have come to the conclusion that it is inherent in the very nature of these arts to progress step by step from modest beginnings, and finally to reach the summit of perfection. And I believe this is so from having seen almost the same progression in other branches of learning; the fact that the liberal arts are all related to each other in some way is a persuasive argument for what I am saying.⁹⁶

For all that such breezy confidence in artistic progress has been assailed by everyone from the Pre-Raphaelites to postmodern theorists, and by both relativists like Herder and positivists like Popper, Vasari’s position as the founder of the history of art is, by dint of such illustrious enemies, irrefutable. This derives in part, as Georges Didi-Huberman has written, from Vasari’s movement between the double grammatical function of the

⁹⁵ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 43.

⁹⁶ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. George Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 85.

genitive in the “history of art”: the subjective sense that art has a history that changes, and the objective sense of the disciplinary study of that change.⁹⁷ Erwin Panofsky brought out exactly how Vasari crystallized the emergence of “a historical point of view”: he proposed not just the periodization of the history of art, but also made the more decisive claim for the stylistic unity of each period, and that each period be evaluated according to the criteria of its own time.⁹⁸ Vasari, then, is not just the founder of the history of art, but of a wider historicist understanding of cultural history that would extend down through Vico, Herder, Hegel, and Marx, who unsurprisingly saw “general contractions” where Vasari saw a “persuasive argument.” This historicism, as we have seen, has become the dominant mode of academic literary scholarship for the past three decades. In Foucault’s sense, Vasari initiated a “discursive practice” with implications far beyond the study of the Renaissance.⁹⁹ Samuel Beckett had as little time for Panofsky’s “iconographie de quatre sous” (“three penny iconography”) as for Vasari’s praise for Renaissance art.¹⁰⁰ Yet like his fictional *alter ego* Belacqua Shuah, Beckett couldn’t escape the pull of Vasari, “the even-fisted pettifogger,” even if he did dismiss his “anecdotes” as the sixteenth-century version of *Harper’s Magazine*.¹⁰¹ But why for Vasari is it a “persuasive argument” that one sees the same developments in all the liberal arts, since they are all related to each other “in some way”? And how did this claim become part of the legacy that Vasari bequeathed to the practice of cultural history that dominates academic literary studies today?

⁹⁷ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 53–4.

⁹⁸ Erwin Panofsky, “The First Page of Giorgio Vasari’s ‘Libro,’” in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1955), 205.

⁹⁹ Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), 114.

¹⁰⁰ Beckett, *Disjecta*, 118.

¹⁰¹ Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (London: Calder, 1993), 77; Beckett, *Disjecta*, 119.

As Svetlana Alpers has argued, Vasari's understanding of the relationship between verbal and visual expression lies not in what he writes, but in how he writes: his revival of the rhetorical trope of ekphrasis. While he often "equate[s] painting with poetry as a fiction with a moral purpose," this is both mediated and hierarchical: mediated by being a narration of emotions, and hierarchical in that the verbal narration of emotions is the guiding form.¹⁰² This is both in the sense of being prior, as the source narrative, but also anterior, in that the visual narrative must be susceptible to the kinds of ekphrasis Vasari is writing, and this "susceptibility to ekphrasis could be said to be a symptom of the virtues and superiority of Renaissance and classical art over the art of the medieval period." For Vasari, as for Renaissance theorists more generally, to depict reality was to tell a story (*istoria*): visually mimetic style (*disegno*) convinced through narrative susceptibility. The revival of this mode of verbal-visual relations did not just define Vasari's contemporary period, with its revival indexing historical change, it also shaped Vasari's "necessarily anti-individualistic" conception of history: "The relationship between the artist and style is the same as that between the artist and the story. The artist does not interpret the story, he narrates it. So he does not use stylistic conventions individually, but can only contribute to a common style."¹⁰³ Just as the production of images is subordinate to textual narrative, so the development of the individual artist is subordinate to the impersonal development of a distinct period in cultural history.

Towards the end of his *Lives*, Vasari announces that with Michelangelo Buonarroti, "the three fine arts have been brought to a state of complete perfection" – at the inaugural moment in the history of art, Vasari had, in a real sense, also announced

¹⁰² Svetlana Leontief Alpers, "Ekphrasis and Aesthetic Attitudes in Vasari's *Lives*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 23, no. 3/4 (July 1, 1960): 196.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 198; 199; 212; 213.

the end of that history.¹⁰⁴ Coupled with his insistence on progression, periodization and the trans-individuality of style, Vasari, in such a reading, emerges as a Hegel *avant la lettre*. This belief that the history of art had ended is what gives the subsequent project of Academic classicism and neo-classicism its peculiar temporal change, and its uncanny model of history. As Denis Hollier has written, theories of classicism depend upon the existence of a “dead language,” and this death “is what permits the dead to return. Ghosts, in other words, are not romantic; they are classical.”¹⁰⁵ Every work of classicism is shadowed by the ambiguity of Poussin’s *Et in Arcadia ego*: this work, too, was in Arcadia; and therefore so too was death. For every work of classicism in the visual arts, it might be added, *Et poeta ego*: just as Academic classicism attempted to place itself in history by elevating the past over the present, so too it turned susceptibility to ekphrasis into a rigid hierarchy of genres. One detail from Poussin, whose theories provided the model for the French Academy, founded in 1648, is telling. In composing a “Definition of Painting and of the Imitation Proper to It,” Poussin copied a passage from Tasso, and simply replaced “poesia” with “pittura.”¹⁰⁶ For the founders of the French Academy, their art differed from the merely mechanical copying of the guild system, as André Félibien argued, by representing a “History or Fable in a Picture...an Imitation of some Action.”¹⁰⁷ In Academic theory the mode of the relationship of painting to poetry was the foundation for three acts of historicization: that the era of the Academy comes after that of the Classical era; that it, at the same time, returns to this timeless past; and that, more locally, it comes after the medieval system of the guilds.

¹⁰⁴ Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, 254.

¹⁰⁵ Dennis Hollier, “On Literature Considered as a Dead Language,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (March 1993): 28.

¹⁰⁶ Anthony Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1967), 361.

¹⁰⁷ André Félibien, “Preface to Seven Conferences,” in *Art in Theory, 1648-1815: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Jason Gaiger (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 113.

Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses on Art* (1778) are a summa and coda to the first era of Academic theorization on the relationship between painting and poetry, and Reynolds's comparative approach brings out all the more clearly the historicizing implications of this ordering. According to Reynolds, "it is not the eye, it is the mind, which the painter of genius desires to address."¹⁰⁸ Artists who do not address the mind, focusing only on light, colour, and detail, cannot convey a narrative, merely "*a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing* [sic; italics original]." To transcend what fleetingly appears to the eye, the artist must turn to what is general, and depict "an instance of action, supplied by the Poet or Historian." Vasari's susceptibility to ekphrasis becomes here a principle of translatability between the textual and the visual through narrative, one which secures a certain temporality for art. For Reynolds, "[p]resent time and future may be considered as rivals, and he who solicits the one must expect to be discountenanced by the other."¹⁰⁹ The present of the merely visual contrasts with the future of the endlessly repeatable textual narrative. The dream of the Academy is a historical one: by turning away from imitating the present, a work of art secures the possibility of lasting into the future. This model of history was revived in the postwar period by Ad Reinhardt's call for a "New Academy" based not on translatability, but on the separation of the arts. Reinhardt declared that fine art has always been "academic...negative, absolute, timeless...The tradition of art is art 'out of time'...Tradition shows the artist what not to do."¹¹⁰ If the demand here is for a social form to ensure disciplinary separation, negation, and the rejection of the past, it does so, like Reynolds, and against Vasari, to ensure art will have a historical future.

¹⁰⁸ Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 50.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 64; 57; 73.

¹¹⁰ Ad Reinhardt, "Twelve Rules for a New Academy," in *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 203–4.

Reinhardt's manifesto shows the influence of a text which was the focus of an enormous revival of interest in postwar American criticism: Lessing's *Laocöon*. It was used to provide historical authority for the canonization and institutionalization of modernist literature's "spatial form," or postwar painting's emphasis on abstraction.¹¹¹ Sponge of the 1950s that he was, Gaddis placed the Laocöon sculpture at the end of *The Recognitions* as a characteristic act of self-destructive double satire: satire of such claims for historical authority as well as of his own work for risking the same claim.¹¹² But Lessing's theorization of the differences between verbal and visual representation, as E. H. Gombrich and W. J. T. Mitchell have argued, should not only be understood as responding to his own historical context; it also is an attempt to theorize the historical specificity of that context.¹¹³ Lessing positions himself after the *querelle des anciens et modernes*, as well as after Wincklemann and a host of early eighteenth-century confusions epitomized by English theorists such as Spence and Richardson. Lessing claims his authority from coming after and learning from this series of mistakes. However, he also wants to "derive the matter from its first principles." His authority depends on two kinds of temporality: one successive and progressive; and one as the eternal recurrence of the same. These are the two kinds of temporality that Lessing divides between poetry and painting; or more dialectically, the two media shape his conceptions of time. From first principles, Lessing works out that "[o]bjects or part of objects which exist in space are called bodies." "However," he continues, "bodies do not exist in space only, but also in time. They persist in time, and in each moment of their duration they may assume a different appearance or stand in different combination."¹¹⁴ Painting must limit itself to a

¹¹¹ Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature: An Essay in Two Parts," *The Sewanee Review* 53, no. 2 (April 1, 1945): 221–40; Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocöon," *Partisan Review*, August 1940, 23–38; Clement Greenberg, "The Impressionists and Proust," *The Nation*, August 31, 1946, 95–97.

¹¹² William Gaddis, *The Recognitions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), 905.

¹¹³ E. H. Gombrich, "Lessing: Lecture on a Master Mind," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 43 (1958): 133–56; Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, 95–115.

¹¹⁴ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocöon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 78.

“single moment” so it can signify, and make known to use, objects that “persist in time.” On the contrary, “succession of time is the province of the poet”: if he can be legislated into only producing a “progressive imitation,” then a progressive model of time can be put into friendly alliance with one where the object persists.¹¹⁵ Legislation on the expressive capabilities of painting and poetry attempts to secure a philosophy of history, one which can be both progressive and open to the future, while still retaining a place for that which persists in time. Little wonder, then, that Lessing’s work resonated down the centuries, for remove the enlightened faith in progress, and we are not far from the dream that “[m]odernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable.”¹¹⁶

The seductive power of Lessing’s theory of encoding a double temporality onto the division of the arts is that it almost offers a way out of the problem of periodization: so long as one respects the laws of the medium one can be both historical and eternal; one can have one’s historicist cake and eat it too – forever. Thus it is unsurprising to see the same principles outlined, over a hundred years later, by Walter Pater, who presents his aesthetics as an update of Lessing’s *Laocöon*. In Pater’s version, “[e]ach art, therefore, having its own peculiar and untranslatable sensuous charm, has its own special mode of reaching the imagination, its own special responsibilities to its material.”¹¹⁷ Ezra Pound borrowed from Pater to announce his variation, or rather amplification, of the theme in his Vorticist manifesto: “EVERY CONCEPT, EVERY EMOTION PRESENTS ITSELF TO THE VIVID CONSCIOUSNESS IN SOME PRIMARY FORM. IT BELONGS TO THE ART OF THIS FORM...The vorticist will use only the primary

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 91–2.

¹¹⁶ Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 403.

¹¹⁷ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 122.

media of his art.”¹¹⁸ But Pound’s work blasts the delicate balance achieved by Lessing. As Louis Menand writes, “the notion that experience naturally sorts itself into corresponding modes is Pound’s contribution” to the theory begun by Lessing, but it also marks his departure, for Lessing’s categories of time and space were transcendental, not psychological, as Pound tends here.¹¹⁹ At the same time Pound exposes the limitations of Lessing’s settlement, by retrospectively showing the asymmetry between the categories of time and space, the five senses, and the contingent materiality of media, which as cinema was proving, didn’t map one-to-one onto discrete categories of senses. Yet Pound and modernism more generally did not break the link between historical periodization and inter-art relations. A manifesto like *BLAST* strengthens the link more than ever, by making its mode of inter-art relations part of the avant-garde strategies of rupture, the blasting away from the “BOURGEOIS VICTORIAN VISTAS” of “1837 to 1900.”¹²⁰

As Menand and Ann L. Ardis have argued, a more historically novel influence on the modernist separation of the arts was the increasing specialization and disciplinary organization of the social production of knowledge.¹²¹ Rebecca West observed in 1913 that the Imagists “desire the poet to be as disciplined at his job as the stevedore”; Eliot in 1918 excoriated the English dislike of the “specialist” for standing in the way of his demand that “we must learn to take literature *seriously* [italics original]”; by 1922 Wyndham Lewis did not believe “that any *painter or sculptor has been understood, ever, by anyone except a painter or sculptor*: any more than the astronomical mathematics with which

¹¹⁸ Ezra Pound, “Vortex, Pound,” in *BLAST 1*, ed. Wyndham Lewis (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1981), 154.

¹¹⁹ Louis Menand, *Discovering Modernism: T. S. Eliot and His Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 40.

¹²⁰ Wyndham Lewis, “Manifesto - I,” in *BLAST 1*, ed. Wyndham Lewis (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1981), 18.

¹²¹ Menand, *Discovering Modernism: T. S. Eliot and His Context*, 97–132; Ann L. Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict, 1880-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Einstein plays are to be understood by anyone but a specialist in that branch of mathematics [*italics original*].”¹²² In this way, the modernist claim for medium specificity indexed, often quite explicitly, a new historical period defined by the proliferation of disciplines, not least that of “English Literature.” But this pact with modernity soon proved itself a Faustian one; by 1934 Eliot was “not very much interested in literature” preferring all he had cut out: “theology, politics, economics, and education”; while Pound was reintroducing, not without consequence, the same disciplines back into his *Cantos*.¹²³ A less disastrous terminus was reached in the postwar period with the writings of Clement Greenberg, where the parallel between medium specificity and disciplinary specialization fossilized into what Caroline A. Jones describes as a rigid Cold War “bureaucracy of the senses.”¹²⁴ Pound also illustrates another imbalance in the modernist desire for medium specificity, one that would cast a long shadow over the postwar period. Although Pound seemed, like Lessing, to distribute the arts into a competition among equals, as Rebecca Beasley has argued, due to the specific critical vocabulary he developed during the 1910s, and because it was this vocabulary rather than others that mid-century critics turned to, literary modernism proved itself to be a “visual culture.”¹²⁵ This dominance of the visual over the verbal was seen as a threat as much as an opportunity, but in either case, as Laura Marcus has written, whether in searching for luminous detail or in Duchamp’s anti-retinalism, the first half of the twentieth century again and again used this new dispensation in the hierarchy of the arts to define its modernity in distinction to that which went before.¹²⁶

¹²² Rebecca West, “Imagisme,” *The New Freewoman* 1, no. 5 (August 1913): 86; T. S. Eliot, “Professional, Or...,” *The Egoist* 5, no. 4 (April 1918): 61; Wyndham Lewis, “Editorial,” *The Tyro* 1, no. 2 (1922): 7.

¹²³ T. S. Eliot, “The Problem in Education,” *The Harvard Advocate* 121 (1934): 11–12.

¹²⁴ Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

¹²⁵ Rebecca Beasley, *Ezra Pound and the Visual Culture of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4; See also Karen Jacobs, *The Eye’s Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

¹²⁶ Laura Marcus, “Modernism and Visual Culture,” in *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 239–54.

Inevitably, when the postwar reaction came, it hit hard. In the realm of art practice, initially playful stabs at the hegemony of vision, as in Johns's *Book* (1957) or *The Critic Sees* (1964), gave way to the polemically iconoclastic turn to language in 1960s Conceptual Art. In the work of Sol LeWitt, Lawrence Wiener, Carl Andre, Joseph Kosuth and the Art-Language Group, language oscillated between material and the propositional form of an "art" existing only in scare quotes.¹²⁷ As Liz Kotz has observed, "the adoption of linguistic models and materials in the visual arts took place alongside, and roughly at the same time as, the much-recognized 'linguistic-turn' in philosophy and critical theory – yet the range and diversity of these artistic projects can only partially be assimilated to prevailing semiotic and structural models."¹²⁸ The rich diversity of linguistic philosophies that shaped postwar art, from Wittgenstein and Quine to branches of information theory, was less prominent in later postwar art criticism, theory and history, where the influences were predominately French forms of structuralism and poststructuralism. Introducing a collection of essays in 1988 with a glance over his shoulder at developments in literary theory, Norman Bryson wrote that "[t]he status of painting as sign is so fundamental for this alternative or New Art history...[and] that what this term must in the first instance displace is the term *perception* [*italics original*]."¹²⁹ Bryson retrospectively expressed a widespread narrative where postwar criticism and theory declared itself to follow practice by moving from image to text, from visual to verbal, from perception to signification.

¹²⁷ Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (London: Studio Vista, 1973); Stephen Melville, "Aspects," in *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*, ed. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 1995), 228–45; Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2005).

¹²⁸ Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At*, 8.

¹²⁹ Norman Bryson, "Introduction," in *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France*, ed. Norman Bryson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), xviii.

The strongest historical claims for this shift were made in the early work of Rosalind E. Krauss. Beginning as a disciple of Clement Greenberg's opticality, her criticism increasingly turned to the writings of Saussure, Barthes, Foucault and Lacan to understand American visual art of the 1970s and 1980s. Krauss might have been right in claiming that this trajectory was shared by "a generation of American critics," whose British parallel coalesced around the journal *Screen*. Yet Krauss's initial historical alignment of the move from visual perception to linguistic sign with the move from modernism to postmodernism, whereby "[p]ostmodernist art enters this terrain (the theoretical domain of both structuralist and poststructuralist analysis)," has proved in retrospect to confuse rather than enlighten the history of postwar criticism.¹³⁰ Indeed, along with critics such as Hal Foster and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Krauss's subsequent work has largely concerned itself with redefining the terms of modernism, producing an increasingly melancholic brand of modernist art history, alienated from much postwar visual production aside from a select few "knights of the medium."¹³¹ Nevertheless, in mapping the dismantling of modernist myths onto the "linguistic turn," artistic and literary critics and practitioners alike once again claimed the shifting fortunes of inter-artistic hierarchies as markers of historical difference. On Kawara's *Today Series* makes this point with a simple clarity: his paintings of dates in white on black since 4 January 1966 precisely historicize the conceptual turn of art to language. More recently, the self-proclaimed pictorial turn and the rise of visual studies have had the merit of showing how little space "the visual" had in previous disciplinary formations, and how much it still requires its own terms of analysis.¹³² While many have failed to be convinced that we live in an unprecedentedly visual age in distinction to other periods of history, the fact

¹³⁰ Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge MA; London: MIT Press, 1985), 2; 6.

¹³¹ Rosalind E. Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2011), 32.

¹³² W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Pictorial Turn," in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 11–34; Keith Moxey, "Visual Studies and the Iconic Turn," *Journal of Visual Culture* 7, no. 2 (August 2008): 131–46.

that this is the grounds of contemporary critical debate – how visual is the *Geist* of our *Zeit* – shows how readily the shifting fortunes of the visual and the verbal are put in the service of historicizing claims.

From Virginia Woolf's "we are under the dominion of painting" to Wittgenstein's "a *picture* held us captive [*italics original*]" to Derrida's "age of the sign": as a narrative of the visual-verbal *paragone* in the twentieth century, it is far too simple to be true.¹³³ Yet to settle for the alternative, a smotheringly even-handed position of visual and verbal in constant and complex interaction, is to ignore a central feature of how the twentieth century narrated itself. Of course these claims were always selective, but from the outset, with Vasari, was not their aim to be persuasive? Although this study does not take as its main aim to be persuasive about the relative dominance of the visual over the verbal in postwar literature, it does aim to push back against the totalizing assumptions of the "linguistic turn" as a context for the interpretation of postwar literature. Throughout this study, what makes visual art an object of fascination for these postwar writers is its difference from literature, its resistance to interpretation, its silence in the face of textuality. More central to the intentions of this thesis is to show the ways in which the writers themselves framed their responses to visual art historically, how they participated, extended, and complicated this history of defining history between art and literature.

The aim of presenting this brief history of the historicizing thrust of comparisons between art and literature has been to introduce the following chapters in two ways. Firstly, while I present these writers' responses as particular to the postwar period, I do

¹³³ Virginia Woolf, "Pictures," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV: 1925-28*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1994), 243; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 4th ed. (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 53; Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 14.

want to present them within a longer history of writers and critics responding to the visual arts. Secondly, I want to show that this history has always been concerned with history, with the ways in which the mode of relation between literature and visual art, whether one of hierarchy, easy commerce, or medium specificity, has again and again been used to make claims for historical periodization. Thus tracing the historicizing motivation of literary responses to visual art can contribute to the wider project of historicizing postwar fiction. This does not mean, however, that questions of history were the only motivations driving the engagements of Beckett, Gaddis, Berger and Sebald with visual art. It is worth repeating that these writers are equally united by pervasive concerns with the legacy of modernism, with maintaining the category of the aesthetic and often idealizing the visual art object in order to do so, and using techniques of visual representation to rethink and reformulate models of narrative perspective. As the following chapters hope to show, the historical emphasis postwar writers placed on their response to visual art by no means precluded other concerns; in fact, it was the very condition for them.

Summary of Chapters

This thesis is organized into six chapters: an introduction, then four central chapters each dealing primarily with a single author, followed by a short conclusion. The four central chapters are arranged in largely chronological order, progressing from Beckett's vision of a "humanity in ruins" in the aftermath of the Second World War, to Sebald's 2001 life of Jacques Austerlitz. This combination of author-focused chapters and a wider historical chronology allows a broader sense of the period to emerge from chapters devoted to close analyses of individual works. No study attempting to give a sense of a period,

unless it were to take as its model Borges's *Book of Sand*, can ever be comprehensive, and inevitably, to turn again to Borges, this thesis is in some ways a garden of paths not taken. In some cases, this is simply because certain paths have been already so thoroughly mapped out. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), for example, is as significant in defining the postwar novel as Beckett's postwar trilogy, and as Gumbrecht has suggested, these two works have much in common.¹³⁴ With its existential thematics of vision, Ellison's own study of the visual arts in the 1930s, and his long friendship with and writings on artists such as Romare Bearden, it is unsurprising that critics such as Lena M. Hill, Kimberley Lamm and Elizabeth Yukins have argued for the importance of Ellison's engagement with the visual arts to his work.¹³⁵ In drafts for both *Invisible Man* and *Juneteenth* (1999), and in Ellison's correspondence, Cubist strategies of multiple perspectives, mediated by Bearden, proved an important early impetus. The complex relationship traced by these critics between the effacement of this initial engagement with Cubism and Ellison's disillusionment with Communist politics bears comparison with the work of John Berger and Doris Lessing, discussed in Chapter 4. Comparing Ellison, Berger and Lessing suggests an equation between narrative and political perspectives, a technique which Ellison, like Berger, attempted to extend back into history in *Juneteenth*; an attempt, however, which Ellison, unlike Berger, could not satisfactorily bring to fruition.

As in the work of James Baldwin and Langston Hughes, photography was also an important influence on Ellison's work, primarily for conceptualizing the kind of documentary aesthetic that Berger would turn to in *A Fortunate Man* (1967) and *Another Way of Telling* (1982), and which Sebald would so subtly undermine in dialogue with the

¹³⁴ Gumbrecht, *After 1945: Latency as Origin of the Present*, 59–64.

¹³⁵ Lena M. Hill, "The Visual Art of *Invisible Man*: Ellison's Portrait of Blackness," *American Literature* 81, no. 4 (December 2009): 775–803; Kimberley Lamm, "Visuality and Black Masculinity," *Callaloo* 26 (July 2003): 813–35; Elizabeth Yukins, "An 'Artful Juxtaposition on the Page': Memory, Perception, and Cubist Technique in Ralph Ellison's *Juneteenth*," *PMLA* 119, no. 5 (October 2004): 1247–63.

critical writings of Berger and Sontag. Sontag, as we have seen, began her writing career in intense dialogue with postwar visual art, before turning to photography in the late 1970s. But Sontag's writings on photography had surprisingly little impact on her later fiction, a consequence of Sontag's ambivalent attitude towards the medium in *On Photography* (1977). As will be discussed in Chapter 5 in relation to Sebald, ambivalence towards photography in the postwar era was decisively shaped by critiques of mass media, the culture industry, and the society of the spectacle, anxieties which tempered an earlier generation's more utopian embrace of what Julian Murphet has termed the early twentieth-century's shifting media ecology.¹³⁶ This produced a sufficiently distinct set of concerns around the relationship of photography to postwar writing to place it outside the scope of the present study, with its primary focus on painting, the aesthetic and questions of history. Similarly, the explorations of other media technologies in J. G. Ballard's *Crash*, (1972), Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), Angela Carter's *Wise Children* (1991), and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1995), while requiring precisely the kind of revisionary work in progress on postwar writing in order to understand them on their own terms rather than as instances of a generalized postmodernism, also require the kind of specialized attention that the present study cannot give. As shall be discussed in the conclusion, it has only been in the more recent era of digital media, and often under the explicit influence of Berger and Sebald, that twenty-first century writers have been able to return to photography and rethink its relationship to fiction in ways that move beyond concerns with simulacra, pastiche, appropriation and the gaze.

The most significant literary representative of these concerns of the 1980s was Kathy Acker. As she has said of her own practice of appropriation, "[w]hen I did *Don Quixote* [1989], what I really wanted to do was a Sherrie Levine painting. I'm fascinated

¹³⁶ Julian Murphet, *Multimedia Modernism: Literature and the Anglo-American Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

by Sherrie's work."¹³⁷ Levine's work was part of what Douglas Crimp, in 1977, termed the "Pictures Generation," artists who deployed strategies of appropriation and copying to explore modes of image making, identification, and mass culture, and who willfully embraced the market as an art form.¹³⁸ Acker's relationship to such artists is further important in showing how the art world offered a channel of access to postwar European philosophy, a fact too often ignored by academic critics who see "theory," especially in the United States, as the sole preserve of academia. Under the influence of visual art, for Acker, linguistically oriented philosophers were less important than the works of Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari, and the later work of Michel Foucault. Earlier instances of how literary responses to the visual arts framed engagements with postwar philosophy or "theory" recur throughout this study, from Beckett's dismissal of Sartre's Marxist humanism, to John Berger's early reception of Walter Benjamin, to Sebald's interest in the work of Adorno. Where Acker differs from these writers, however, and where she differs from the scope of this thesis, is in how she willfully framed her reception of these thinkers under the sign of postmodernity. So while for this reason Acker's work in itself does not receive detailed discussion in this thesis, it is situated within this broader tendency within the postwar period for the visual arts to be just as significant a mediator of philosophical thought as the academy.

The paths that this thesis has taken, then, should be understood as linking up with the work of these other writers and critics. But they do trace a coherent journey of their own. Chapter 2 begins with the work of Samuel Beckett, whose work forms a bridge from the late modernist period of the 1930s to the immediate postwar years. Beckett's study of visual art, as with all of the writers in this study, extended back from

¹³⁷ Ellen G. Friedman and Kathy Acker, "A Conversation with Kathy Acker," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 9, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 12.

¹³⁸ Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8 (April 1979): 75–88.

his present moment into a study of the history of art, and the chapter begins by identifying Beckett's distinct interpretation of art history through a close analysis of his "German Diaries" and correspondence. The preferences shown there for the "still" image which resists narrative ekphrasis, and the rejection of the spatial constructions of Renaissance perspective, recurred in the art criticism Beckett wrote in the immediate postwar years. In these writings, however, Beckett's art criticism was a means to engage, if obliquely, with the intense debates around politics and aesthetics that raged in post-Liberation France. The chapter concludes by studying the manuscript of *The Unnamable* (1953) to show just how closely Beckett's art criticism and the composition of that work were intertwined, thus confirming the centrality of Beckett's engagement with art to the composition of his most important works of fiction.

Chapter 3 shifts across the Atlantic to discuss the work of William Gaddis, a writer who occupies a similar place to Beckett in American literary genealogies of the transition from modernism to postwar fiction. The chapter begins by drawing on Gaddis's letters and archive to show just how self-consciously he framed this transition from literary modernism. But just as with Beckett, the transformed postwar situation forced a rethink of the assumptions of modernist aesthetics. In Gaddis's case, his own experience of Cold War propaganda, and of the deadening effects of 1950s mass culture, called into question the autonomy of the art object from its interpretative context and mediation. Thus his epic novel *The Recognitions* (1955), through its discussion of works of art, and its own formal strategies of multiple perspectives and repetition, intersects with many of the same questions which occupied 1950s New York artists such as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, but asks them with a much more critical and pessimistic attitude.

The Cold War in Britain and Europe forms a crucial context of interpretation for the early criticism and fiction of John Berger, whose writings are the subject of Chapter 4. Unlike Beckett and Gaddis, but like many British writers in the early 1950s, Berger saw a philosophically and politically renewed realism as the immediate successor to modernism, a case he argued in his extensive art criticism throughout the decade. However, this realism was rejected when Berger turned to writing fiction in 1956, and in a move that would prove prophetic for later British writers, Berger looked back to modernism in order to move forward in fiction. Berger's turn to fiction was also part of the intellectual developments surrounding the formation of the British New Left, where for a time he was involved with Doris Lessing, whose *The Golden Notebook* (1962) engages in many of the same struggles with life-writing and the legacy of modernism as Berger's *A Painter of Our Time* (1958). After revising his interpretation of Cubism in the 1960s Berger's re-writing of modernism would culminate in his 1972 novel *G*. If that novel marked an end for Berger, who afterwards increasingly turned to photography, its narrative models of delayed action and a deferred understanding of modernism nevertheless preserved the future potential of a past "moment."

Chapter 5 focuses on the work of W. G. Sebald, whose use of photography and engagement with history has made him one of the most widely acclaimed writers of the later twentieth century. The main subject of this chapter, however, is on a more overlooked aspect of Sebald's engagement with the visual arts: his interest in painting. Or more precisely, this chapter shows how throughout his work, but especially in his early criticism and works such as *Vertigo* (1990) and *The Emigrants* (1992), Sebald dialectically opposes painting and photography to engage with questions of aesthetics, under the influence of Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno. Oppositions between mechanical destruction and attentive seeing and between photographic forgetting and

layered memory form central themes of Sebald's work. Painterly techniques of framing and perspective were also means by which Sebald conceptualized and constructed what he called his own "periscopic form of narrative."¹³⁹ But this opposition was not static in Sebald's work, and the chapter ends by showing how in *Austerlitz* (2001), Sebald decisively turned towards photography as part of his most explicit engagement with the consequences of the Holocaust.

Although Sebald's final work, *Austerlitz*, takes this study up to the borders of the present, like all of Sebald's work, it is profoundly concerned with the postwar past. Or rather, like the dead that are always returning to us in *The Emigrants*, his work repeatedly shows the interweaving of the past and present. This coming together of time distributed along a historical axis is what, in Peter Osborne's sense, distances Sebald's work from an engagement with contemporaneity. "As a historical concept," Osborne writes, "the contemporary thus involves a projection of unity onto the differential totality of the times of human lives that are, in principle, or potentially, present to each other in some way...the concept of the contemporary projects a *single historical time of the present* as a living present: a common, albeit internally disjunctive, present historical time of human lives."¹⁴⁰ In Sebald's work, it is the work of memory and the return of the dead that weave together a disjunctive unity of past and present. The disjunctive unity of the contemporary, in contrast, takes as its model the relationship between the living. In what Osborne calls the grounding fiction of the contemporary "in the sense of fiction as a narrative mode," the fiction that differential presents can be present, such a fiction departs from what Gumbrecht claims is the founding fiction of the chronotope of the postwar era: the fiction that what is present is exactly that which cannot come into

¹³⁹ Michael Silverblatt and W. G. Sebald, "A Poem of an Invisible Subject (interview) [6 December, 2001]," in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 83.

¹⁴⁰ Osborne, *Anywhere Or Not At All*, 22.

presence.¹⁴¹ This thesis concludes by briefly discussing how in their very different quest to be contemporary, or to engage in new ways with the visual arts, writers such as Jonathan Franzen, Tom McCarthy, Ben Lerner, and Teju Cole have drawn on the work of the writers discussed in this thesis. In doing so, and to finish with a final Borgesian flourish, in inventing their own predecessors, contemporary novelists have inscribed the writers of this thesis into their own personal histories. With this, however, they also inscribe them into literary history, making them the past they both draw on and supersede. From the perspective of such contemporary novelists, the literature of the postwar period has receded into history; from the perspective of this study, this is what enables its responses to visual art to come into focus.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 23.

Chapter 2

Samuel Beckett

In a 1981 conversation with the artist Avigdor Arikha, Samuel Beckett stated that “[l]iterature and painting are like oil and water...like fire and water they are separated by a zone of evaporation.”¹ This overlapping pair of similes condenses into material terms Beckett’s lifelong and often abstract reflections on the relationship of visual art to his writing. The first simile expresses the irresolvable difference between the two media that is at the core of painting’s significance for Beckett’s literary work: no matter how much they may be brought together, literature and painting are mutually resistant and mutually exclusive. The “zone of evaporation” following the second simile binds this late reflection into a chain which stretches back to Beckett’s first work, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932). There it is appended with a knowing wink: “the profound antagonism latent in the neutral space that between victims of real needs is as irreducible as the zone of evaporation between damp and incandescence (We stole that one. Guess where.)”² This points to Proust’s *Du côté de chez Swann* (1913), where the narrator describes what comes between his consciousness and “un objet extérieur” as a “zone d’évaporation,” a “mince liséré spirituel qui m’empêchait de jamais toucher directement sa matière” (“an external object...a zone of evaporation...a thin spiritual border that prevented me from ever touching its substance directly”).³ Proust’s “empêchement”

¹ Quoted in Anne Atik, *How It Was: A Memoir of Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 112.

² Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, 191–2.

³ Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 83; Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past: Volume I*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (London: Chatto & Windus, 1981), 90.

would become a central term in Beckett's art criticism, and the "zone of evaporation" was used to form a bridge between Beckett's art criticism and his literary project. In "Recent Irish Poetry" (1934), this was first outlined as evincing "awareness of the new thing that has happened," as revealed in Eliot's "The Waste Land": the "rupture of the lines of communication" that has left a "no man's land" between subject and object.⁴ In a 1949 letter to the art historian Georges Duthuit discussing the painting of Bram van Velde, Beckett referred back to the "no man's land" created by this rupture. What he saw in van Velde's work was the same rupture he described in "Recent Irish Poetry": "the only terrain accessible to the poet...the no man's land that he projects round himself, rather as the flame projects its zone of evaporation."⁵ Through patterns of retrospective allusion, the zone between subject and object is made analogous to the zone between literature and painting, philosophical categories are realized in artistic material, and both are placed at the heart of Beckett's attempts to theorize his literary aesthetics through writing about painting.

Figuring the opposition between literature and painting as the resistance of oil to water also suggests a more general significance of this opposition for Beckett's work. In the working terminology of painting, a medium is the substance in which an emulsion is suspended: the figure of oil and water thus invokes the concept of a medium as such. That the concept of a distinct medium is important to Beckett's work can be shown by his titles alone: *Texts for Nothing* (1955); *Words and Music* (1961); *Play* (1963); *Film* (1965). This reduction to the medium has been central to some of the strongest philosophical interpretations of Beckett's work. For Theodor W. Adorno, Beckett's drama exemplifies "the tendency of modern art to make its own categories thematic through self-

⁴ Beckett, *Disjecta*, 70.

⁵ 2 March 1949, Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume 2: 1941-1956*, ed. Gordon Craig et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 131.

reflection.” In the more Hegelian vocabulary with which his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) is in dialogue, “the determinate negation of its [*Endgame*’s] content [*Inhalt*] becomes its formal principle and the negation of content altogether,” and only this negation of “all manifestly social content [*Inhalt*]” can provide the grounds for a critique of postwar society.⁶ The three *langues* that Gilles Deleuze extracts from Beckett’s work are organized around the exhaustion of the potential of the name, the voice, and image and space; each *langue* is most exhausted in the specificity of a different medium.⁷ And for Alain Badiou, “Beckett’s fundamental tendency [is] towards the *generic*,” or “the reduction of the complexity of experience to a few principal functions, the treatment in writing of that which alone constitutes an essential dimension...in order to exhibit or to *detach* those rare functions to which writing can and should restrict itself, if its destiny is to say generic humanity [*italics original*].”⁸ These three different readings occur as part of three very different philosophical projects, projects for which the skeptic might feel that Beckett’s work all too readily becomes the sensuous appearance of the philosophical Idea. Yet they all rely on the assumption that Beckett’s work tests the boundary of a medium, whether drama, literature, film, or radio. Before this turn to dramatic and technological media, however, the boundary between literature and painting provided Beckett with the original testing “zone” for the limits of a medium, inaugurating a fixation that would continue throughout the rest of his work.

As Adorno suggests, Beckett’s self-reflexive thematizing of “artistic categories” is a continuation of one of modernism’s most characteristic features. David Lloyd, in contrast, has observed that “Beckett’s writings on visual art seem to have offered him the opportunity to address indirectly, and therefore perhaps to find a means of moving

⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 340; 250.

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, “The Exhausted,” in *Essays Clinical and Critical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998), 152–74.

⁸ Alain Badiou, *On Beckett*, ed. Alberto Toscano and Nina Power (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2003), 3.

through or around, the obstacles that his growing sense of the exhaustion of literary modernism in the 1930s had presented and that his philosophical sense of the predicament of modernity posed to the most fundamental categories of aesthetics.”⁹ These positions can be brought together by seeing that Beckett’s writings on visual art enabled a discovery of how to continue modernism’s thematizing of categories through exhaustion. Exhaustion was the leitmotif of Beckett’s impact on subsequent postwar fiction. For writers such as Paul Auster, John Barth, J. M. Coetzee, Lydia Davis, B. S. Johnson and Don DeLillo, what Barth called Beckett’s “literature of exhaustion” had a decisive and often oppressive influence on their work.¹⁰ Critics too have seen Beckett’s trilogy of *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Dies* (1951), and *The Unnamable* (1953) as inaugural works of postwar fiction. Laura Marcus has written how the closing words of *The Unnamable* were a “challenge” to a generation of writers, “asserting both the impossibility and the necessity of literature.”¹¹ Peter Boxall writes that in giving the “fullest expression to the sense of historical and cultural agedness as it accumulates across the second half of the twentieth century,” Beckett’s work defines one narrative of postwar literary history.¹² For both philosophy and literary history, Beckett’s work is a hinge in the middle of the twentieth century, a hinge which pivots on the resistance of painting to literature.

This chapter traces the work of art in Beckett’s criticism and fiction from the 1930s to the writing of his trilogy of novels in postwar France. It adopts a more historicizing approach than previous discussions of Beckett’s relationship to visual art.¹³

⁹ David Lloyd, “Beckett’s Thing: Bram Van Velde and the Gaze,” *Modernist Cultures* 6, no. 2 (October 2011): 270.

¹⁰ John Barth, “The Literature of Exhaustion,” in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 62–76.

¹¹ Laura Marcus, “The Legacies of Modernism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel*, ed. Morag Shiach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 83.

¹² Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 23.

¹³ Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1993); Lois Oppenheim, *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett’s Dialogue with Art* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); David Albright, *Beckett and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

This attempts to reflect Beckett's own understanding of that relationship, which was so historical as to approach a modernist historicism in which abstraction was the necessary culmination of art history. It also attempts to follow Anthony Uhlmann and Andrew Gibson in extending recent historicist studies of Beckett's work of the 1930s, and of his relationship with Ireland, on into his work of the 1940s, and his relationship with postwar French art, theory and cultural politics.¹⁴ It will begin by discussing Beckett's voluminous writings on art contained in his letters and his "German Diaries" in order to bring out Beckett's distinct interpretation of the history of art as well as of contemporary painting. As with all of the writers in this thesis, this interpretation of the history of art was important because it was used to historicize his own postwar writing. In his postwar criticism, Beckett used his writing on art to imbricate his writing within debates on politics and aesthetics in post-Liberation France, and a close examination of his publishing contexts allows a historically specific and politicized understanding of Beckett's criticism and postwar fiction to come to the fore. At the same time, Beckett's postwar art criticism, culminating in the "Three Dialogues," has long been recognized as a commentary on the trilogy he was writing at that time, and as raising aesthetic questions and problems that would be played out after the 1940s in much of Beckett's later work. The aim of the readings that conclude this chapter are to show that close attention to the chronology of the composition of the trilogy, especially *The Unnamable*, reveals just how closely intertwined the "Three Dialogues" were with the genesis of that text. Such a reading brings to light the importance of the work of art in the production and ongoing interpretation of these inaugural novels of the postwar period.

2000); Pascale Casanova, *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2006).

¹⁴ Anthony Uhlmann, *Beckett and Poststructuralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 91–106; Andrew Gibson, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Reaktion, 2010); Andrew Gibson, "French Beckett and French Literary Politics 1945-52," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 103–17.

“the act of an obsessional neurotic”: Beckett’s study of painting

In the diary Beckett kept while on a six-month tour of Germany in 1936-7, his notes on art became so extensive that towards the end of his travels he dismissed “this absurd diary with its lists of pictures, [which] is only the act of an obsessional neurotic.”¹⁵ As Mark Nixon has commented, “[a]ny reader glancing at the German diaries could be forgiven for thinking that they were written by an art critic, and not a creative writer.”¹⁶ This stands equally true for Beckett’s correspondence of the period, especially with Thomas MacGreevy, the poet and art historian. While there is something of the displacement activity of the obsessional neurotic in the preference for listing over interpretation in Beckett’s notes on art, it was not wholly without precedent: Beckett had applied for a position at the National Gallery in London in 1933 and his aspirations towards a career as an art historian are ironically recorded in the autobiographical fragment “Lightning Calculation,” written in London around September 1934.¹⁷ One Quigley, sharing Beckett’s address in S.W. 10, is working on an art historical monograph on *The Pathetic Fallacy from Avercamp to Campedonk*; unable to bring himself to enter the National Gallery to carry out his research, he prevaricates instead with tea and biscuits.

Unlike Quigley, Beckett’s own study of European painting did occur inside the museum. At a time when theorists such as Walter Benjamin and André Malraux were proclaiming the decline of the aura of the immediately experienced art object and the advent of the technologically reproduced *musée imaginaire*, Beckett’s practice of art

¹⁵ Samuel Beckett, “German Diaries,” 1936-1937, 2 February 1937, Beckett International Foundation, University of Reading. As the six volumes of Beckett’s “German Diaries” are not paginated, further citations will be of the date of entry.

¹⁶ Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett’s German Diaries 1936-1937* (Continuum, 2011), 132.

¹⁷ Samuel Beckett, “Lightning Calculation,” 1934, UoR MS2902, Beckett International Foundation, University of Reading.

spectatorship was always based on an embodied, first-hand experience of the work of art.¹⁸ This does not mean that the question of reproduction was absent from Beckett's engagement with painting. In the early drafts of *Watt*, when the titular character first encounters the painting of the circle and dot in Erskine's room, he is not sure whether it is a "coloured reproduction" or the "original painting," because it is tacked to the wall "mounted, but not framed."¹⁹ The resulting sequence of confusion in the published text links the uncertainty about whether the painting is a reproduction to the absence of a frame, implying that without a "frame," whether institutional, contextual or historical, the interpretation of painting becomes as interminable as that novel's serial permutations. Beckett's adherence to the institutional frame of the museum results in his study of European painting being traceable to visits to specific collections. As James Knowlson has documented, this study began at the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin, where "he was weaned on the Gallery's eclectic collection of Old Masters and developed an abiding passion for seventeenth-century Dutch painting."²⁰ This preference is one of the distinguishing features of Beckett's taste in art history, one revealed in the names that appear most frequently in his "absurd" lists: Hendrick Avercamp, Adriaen Brouwer, Aelbert Cuyp, Adam Elsheimer, Dirck Hals, Frans Hals, Meindert Hobbema, Salomon van Ruysdael, Jacob van Ruisdael, Hercules Seghers, Gerard ter Borch, Jan van Goyen and Jan Vermeer. Beckett's knowledge of these painters' lives and works was drawn in part from R. H. Wilenski's *An Introduction to Dutch Art* (1929), which he read in 1933 and from which he took over 30 pages of verbatim notes.²¹ Of these works, it was to genre

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version," in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1949*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 251-83; André Malraux, *Psychologie de l'art, Vol. 1: Le musée imaginaire* (Geneva: Albert Skira Éditeur, 1947).

¹⁹ Samuel Beckett, "Watt Notebooks," 1940-1948, Notebook 3, 173, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, box 6 (folders 5-7); box 7 (folders 1-4).

²⁰ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 57.

²¹ Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries 1936-1937*, 133.

painting and above all to the tradition of landscape painting that Beckett's note taking was directed.

The ways in which notes were taken on these painters and their work and the criteria for which they were praised offer a means to understand the interest in this specific school of artists. In a visit to the Hamburger Kunsthalle in 1936, Beckett pinpointed the historical novelty of the treatment of landscape by late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Dutch and Flemish painters. Comparing the work of Albrecht Altdorfer and Adam Elsheimer, he recorded: "7 lovely Altdorfer (Regensburg), a revelation, sacred subjects pretext for landscape, not at all like Elsheimers, gay rather, but immediately suggesting Elsheimer...Interesting the quality of miniature unlimited in so many of his [Elsheimer's] landscapes." In Altdorfer's religious paintings, sacred narratives such as the Flight into Egypt are the dominant pretext for the presentation of landscape, unlike Elsheimer's miniature "night landscape," which merely shows "[w]ater, moon, shepherds, fire, glade, all."²² Instead of recording the narrative Altdorfer depicts, Beckett prefers to list the elements in Elsheimer's static scene. This emancipation from narrative defined seventeenth-century Dutch landscape: in the words of Wolfgang Stechow, once landscape painting "had shed – with what after all are few exceptions – its bonds with religion, mythology and allegory, it was landscape and little else."²³ The generic, descriptive titles of the paintings recorded by Beckett on other visits to the Hamburger Kunsthalle give a sense of these paintings' lack of narrative incident: "Hugellandschaft," "Winterlandschaft," "Hirtenlandschaft" or simply just "Landschaft."²⁴

²² Beckett, "German Diaries," 18 December 1936.

²³ Wolfgang Stechow, *Dutch Landscape Painting of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Phaidon, 1966), 11.

²⁴ Beckett, "German Diaries," 13 November 1936.

These landscapes that captured Beckett's attention were part of the larger category of genre pieces, a term first used by Diderot: "One calls genre painters, without distinction, those who busy themselves with flowers, fruits, animals, woods, forests, mountains, as well as those who borrow their scenes from common and domestic life."²⁵ This depiction of contingent and common objects makes such paintings peculiarly resistant to discursive narrativization: what lemon has ever taken flight into Egypt? Beckett described works outside of the confines of Dutch genre in similar terms. He praised Giorgione's *Self-Portrait* (c. 1510) in Brunswick for its "profound reticence," and its quality of the "unsaid."²⁶ The same equation between "the stillness & the unsaid" was used to praise the modern work of Willem Grimm and Karl Ballmer, an equation which associated the "still" resistance to narrative with a broader resistance to language or speech.²⁷ The association between the representation of movement in visual art, and the ability to translate a painting through ekphrasis into a verbal narrative, has been present in European art theory since Vasari's *Lives* (1550-68), which Beckett owned, and Lessing's *Laocöon* (1766), which Beckett recorded using in his "German Diaries" in a discussion of Joyce in Munich.²⁸ Closer to Beckett's own time, both Aby Warburg's theory of the *Pathosformel* and Freud's interpretation of frozen movement in "The Moses of Michelangelo" (1914) were grounded on the association between visual movement and verbal narrative.²⁹ Beckett's judgments work within these longstanding frameworks while reversing their value: what is praised is the still image, the "unsaid," resistant to

²⁵ Quoted in Christopher Comer and Wolfgang Stechow, "The History of the Term Genre," *Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin* 33 (76 1975): 89.

²⁶ Beckett, "German Diaries," 6 December 1936; quoted in Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries 1936-1937*, 144.

²⁷ Beckett, "German Diaries," 26 November 1936.

²⁸ Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 219; "German Diaries," 26 March 1937.

²⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XIII (1913-1914): Totem and Taboo and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 211-36; Aby Warburg, "Dürer and Italian Antiquity," in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the Italian Renaissance* (Los Angeles, CA: The Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999), 729-30.

narrative ekphrasis. For example, of Vermeer's *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (1657-9) in Dresden, Beckett noted: "Probably painted in a mirror. His people always using their eyes, as though to emphasise the optical relation. Marvellous composition."³⁰ This painting stages an asymmetry between optical relations and verbal narrative: the letter the anonymous woman reads is inaccessible to the viewer, who is forced instead, as Beckett's comments so incisively make clear, into tracing the optical relations of seeing and not seeing around which the painting is constructed. These optical relations become a static, structural condition, the exploration of which occupies much of Beckett's postwar work. What this interest in Dutch genre betrays, then, is a fascination with visual images that resist ekphrastic narration, that bring out the difference between literature and painting, and as a result, generate alternative ways of writing about the visual. As he wrote to MacGreevy after his trip to Germany: "I used never to be happy with a picture till it was literature, but now that need is gone."³¹

As Svetlana Alpers has influentially argued, this resistance to ekphrasis defines Dutch genre painting and results in a number of consequences for its interpretation. As discussed in Chapter 1, the interpretative strategies of academic art history were developed in relation to Italian humanist painting, a mode of picturing defined by its "susceptibility to such narrative evocations – to the rhetorical device known by the name of ekphrasis."³² Although more recent discussions of ekphrasis have attempted to broaden its meaning to include "the verbal representation of visual representation," or even "a fundamental tendency in all linguistic expression," Alpers's work shows that ekphrasis, certainly until Beckett's time, had always meant a specifically narrative

³⁰ Beckett, "German Diaries," 5 February 1937.

³¹ 28 November 1936, Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume 1: 1929-1940*, ed. Lois More Overbeck and Martha Dow Fehsenfeld (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 388.

³² Svetlana Alpers, "Describe or Narrate? A Problem in Realistic Representation," *New Literary History* 8, no. 1 (Autumn 1976): 17.

translation of visual to verbal, and she has shown the ideological motivations that have long accompanied attempts to broaden its scope to include all forms of writing about visual representation.³³ Against this narrative mode, Alpers sees the “descriptive” art of the Netherlands, through its focus on the optical rendering of individual objects without an implied central perspective, as posing irreconcilable difficulties for narrative ekphrastic translation.³⁴ It is revealing in light of Alpers’s work to note Beckett’s almost complete lack of interest, verging on disdain, for the narrative art influenced by the Italian Renaissance. To MacGreevy he expressed his “impatience with the immensely competent bullies and browbeaters and highwaymen and naggers, the Rembrandts & Halses and Titians and Rubenses, the Tarquins of art,” asking whether it is “a pettiness to move away from the art that takes me by the scruff of the neck?,” hinting at an aversion to the demands of a narrative that controls the viewer’s interpretation.³⁵ He was equally dismissive of Panofsky’s narratological approach to interpreting images, dismissing it as “notre iconographie de quatre sous” (“our three penny iconography”).³⁶ For Alpers, these contrasting modes of narration and description reflect deep seated aesthetic and cultural oppositions: “Time and again the hierarchy of mind over sense and of educated viewers over ignorant ones has been summoned to round out the argument for narration with a blast at an art that delights the eyes.”³⁷ In the twentieth century, Roland Barthes saw these narrativeless genre pieces as prefiguring modernism: “To paint so lovingly these meaningless surfaces, and to paint nothing else – that is already a ‘modern’ esthetic of silence [sic].”³⁸ Beckett’s own attraction to and textual expression of a seventeenth-century “aesthetic of silence” departs from the presumptions of Italian

³³ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 152; 153.

³⁴ Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), xxi.

³⁵ 18 January 1937, Beckett, *Letters 1*, 430.

³⁶ Beckett, *Disjecta*, 118.

³⁷ Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, xxi.

³⁸ Roland Barthes, “The World as Object,” in *Critical Essays* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 3.

humanist aesthetics and historiography, and prefigures his own modernist aesthetic of the “unsaid.”

If Beckett was fascinated by the embodied “optical relations” of Vermeer, his response to the space of Albertian perspective realized in Italian Renaissance painting was much more hostile. This is related to his preference for the “unsaid” over narrative: as Michael Baxandall has shown, the development of Albertian perspective was driven by the need for a coherent space in which to present Christian religious narratives.³⁹ Beckett’s interpretation of perspectival space is best shown in a letter written to Georges Duthuit some ten years after viewing Antonello da Messina’s *Saint Sebastian* (1477-9) in Dresden. Describing that painting’s “[p]ure space by dint of mathematics, tiling, flagstones rather, black and white, with long Mantegna style foreshortenings,” Beckett saw “the whole thing invaded, eaten into by the human. In front of such a work, such a victory over the reality of disorder, over the pettiness of heart and mind, it is hard not to go and hang yourself.” Beckett’s description of Saint Sebastian, depicted in the painting pierced with arrows, as the *lapidé* (“victim of the stoning”), reveals that for Beckett, the painting shows Saint Sebastian in the period of stasis between his two deaths, first by arrows and then by stoning. In this transitional state, the Saint’s body becomes a pure form that aligns with the architectural columns that structure the painting’s illusion of depth produced by single point perspective. But it is also a bleeding human intrusion into the purity of that space, emphasized by the fallen column in the right foreground which Sebastian’s body visually replaces. In “displaying himself,” as Beckett writes, “to the admiration of the courtiers taking the Sunday air on their balconies,” the lines of sight within the painting and the perspective by which the composition is structured center on a human object displayed to human subjects; thus the purity of geometrical space is

³⁹ Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition, 1350-1450* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

“eaten into by the human [*mangé par l’humain*].” In aligning the structure of single point perspective with the human as subject and object, but also showing that a body can be a pure form, Antonello’s painting shows the “the illusion of the human and the fully realized.”⁴⁰

This interpretation of single point perspective in terms of its implied subject has been shared by art theorists from Panofsky, who discerned in perspective’s “symbolic form” the birth of modernity and the humanist subject, down to Foucault’s extraction of the regime of “Classical representation” from Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656).⁴¹ In this letter, Beckett too saw the mastery implied in the infinite space of perspective as illusory, and he explicitly linked this to the postwar revival of realism in France, advocated by Sartre (and to a lesser extent Breton), which threatened to “go through this whole thing again,” failing to reveal the “full bewilderment of ignorance regained” of “the reality of disorder.”⁴² A kind of anti-humanism, while different from that of Foucault, was, as shall be discussed below, central to Beckett’s postwar art criticism. But the conceptualization of the intrusion of the human body into space in the corporeal form of “eating,” and a fascination with geometrical spaces in which the body can only figure as an intrusion, would also come to recur in Beckett’s own postwar writing.

Beckett’s study of art during the 1930s was not only focused on the past. But his responses to modern art show many of the same “neurotic obsessions” emerging. For Beckett, Cézanne was the key figure in modern art; his paintings revealed modernity’s process of alienation from the natural world in the genre of landscape painting. In a letter to MacGreevy written in September 1934, occasioned by viewing Cézanne’s works in the

⁴⁰ 27 July 1948, Beckett, *Letters* 2, 86.

⁴¹ Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Routledge, 2002), 3–18.

⁴² 27 July 1948, Beckett, *Letters* 2, 86.

National Gallery in London, Beckett wrote of the “relief [of] the Mont Ste. Victoire after all the anthropomorphised landscape – van Goyen, Avercamp, the Ruysdaels, Hobbema, even Claude, Wilson & Chrome Yellow Esq., or paranthropomorphised by Watteau...after all the landscape ‘promoted’ to the emotions of the hiker, postulated as concerned with the hiker (what an impertinence, worse than Aesop & the animals).” “Cézanne,” he declared “seems to have been the first to see landscape & state it as material of a strictly peculiar order, incommensurable with all human expressions whatsoever.”⁴³ This focus on anthropomorphism shows Beckett’s tendency, as in his interpretation of perspective, towards explicating the philosophical implications of pictorial practice. In relation to landscape, Cézanne “could understand the dynamic intrusion to be himself & so landscape to be something by definition unapproachably alien, unintelligible arrangement of atoms, not so much ruffled by the kind attentions of the Reliability Joneses.” The figuring of intrusion as “dynamic” shows how, as in his interpretation of Old Masters, Beckett’s criticism focused on a problematic of motion, what he called the “discrepancy between that which cannot stay still for its phases & that which can.” Unlike the “Impressionists darting about & whining that the scene wouldn’t rest easy!” and the “snapshot puerilities of Manet & Cie,” Cézanne is praised for presenting a static landscape.⁴⁴ These criticisms of the attempt to represent motion on canvas reveal a thinking in terms of medium specificity, of what painting can do in contrast to photography, but also, implicitly, to the moving images of cinema. Beckett praised the same dispassionate depiction of the “heterogeneity of nature & the human denizens, the unalterable alienness of the 2 phenomena” in the painting of Jack B. Yeats; his works were “a painting of pure inorganic juxtapositions” in which man and woman will “never mingle.”⁴⁵ In both Cézanne and Yeats, if alienation and juxtaposition without

⁴³ MacGreevy, 8 September 1934, Beckett, *Letters 1*, 222.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁴⁵ MacGreevy, 14 August 1937, Beckett, *Letters 1*, 540.

relation are inorganic, then relation is theorized as a process of organic, heterosexual, fluid mingling, and the body as much as the mind, as in Beckett's and Watt's practice of embodied spectatorship, becomes the locus of relation to the painting.

Other than Cézanne, French modern art had little appeal for Beckett in the 1930s. Viewing the collection of modern painting in the Hamburger Kunsthalle in 1936 he noted: "Some good French stuff, Courbet, Renoir, Manet, Monet. But tired of all that." Later in the trip, this was sharpened: "How I hate the impeccable tedium of 1900-1910 Paris aesthetic."⁴⁶ This was a constant during years when German Expressionism gradually assumed a more central role in Beckett's attempt to expand his thinking on visual representation in terms of subject-object relations. That Beckett encountered these paintings hidden "in the cellar" under the pressure of the Nazi regime, also provided an increasing awareness of the politics of modern painting and its institutional promotion.⁴⁷ An introduction to the Jewish art historian Rosa Schapire, who was under house arrest, offered access to her collection of the work of Karl Schmitt-Rotluff. In his record of their meeting written in his diary, Beckett recorded his attempts to respond to one of Schmitt-Rotluff's portraits of Schapire. He first recalls a "[l]aunch into mixed disputation, twine object-subject around stem of art as prayer," only to move to seeing "what a pitiless-pitiful portrait of her it is, expression of consternated sterility on woman + artist, lip lifted in a dribble of bitter cultivation."⁴⁸ His response moves from abstract theorization to figuring alienation, as with Yeats, within the portrait as an abject, bodily, dribbling, "sterility." A similar pattern of interpretation was recorded in reflections on another female portrait, this time by Karl Ballmer:

⁴⁶ Beckett, "German Diaries," 6 October 1936; 22 November 1936.

⁴⁷ Mary Manning Howe, 14 November 1936, Beckett, *Letters 1*, 384.

⁴⁸ Beckett, "German Diaries," 15 November 1936.

Wonderful red Frauenkopf, skull earth and sky. I think of Monadologie & my Vulture. Would not occur to me to call this painting abstract. A metaphysical concrete. Nor nature convention, but its source, fountain of Erscheinung. Fully a posteriori painting. Object not exploited to illustrate an idea, as in say Léger or Baumeister, but primary. The communication exhausted by the optical experience that is its motive & content. Anything further is by the way. Thus Leibniz, monadologie, Vulture are by the way. Extraordinary stillness.⁴⁹

This record reads like a willed exercise in pictorial interpretation and forced erudition, moving first to associate the picture with Leibniz and Beckett's own poem "The Vulture," only to turn, as with the portrait of Schapire, to stress the primacy of the object. The optical experience "exhausts" communication, leaving any attempt at verbal ekphrasis "by the way," and the reflection ends with the recurring fascination with images of stillness.

The art and theoretical writings of Franz Marc, encountered in Germany, also enabled a clarification of terms such as "subject," "object" and "relation" which, as these diary entries show, increasingly formed the framework of Beckett's thinking on modern art. Beckett had noted Marc's paintings of horses in Hamburg, and acquired a copy of his *Briefe, Aufzeichnungen und Aphorismen* (1920), recording:

Interesting notes in Marc re subject, predicate, object relations in painting. He says: paint the predicate of the living. Picasso does that by the inanimate. By that he appears to mean not the relation between subject + object, but the alienation (my nomansland). The object particularises, banalises, the 'thought.'⁵⁰

Beckett then copied a page of notes from Marc's attempt to outline theoretically his non-anthropomorphic philosophy of painting. For Marc, naturalistic depictions of animals or objects such as apples revealed what he called the *Weltbild* of humans, but told us nothing of how the object itself related to other objects independent of the perceiving subject. Marc's interest was in painting the "predicate," what was between subject and object,

⁴⁹ Ibid., 26 November 1936.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 19 November 1936.

which Beckett connects with his definition of the “nomansland” that had opened up as a result of the modernist “rupture of the lines of communication.” If this looks back to Beckett’s literary criticism, it also looks back to Beckett’s readings in philosophy, which as Matthew Feldman has shown, were also focused on subject-object relations, and the relationship between perception, movement, and time. While, as Feldman writes, these “‘years of learning’ during the 1930s culminate with philosophically complex recriminations against the utility of knowledge,” these notes on Marc show that Beckett was increasingly seeing modern painting as realizing the same problems in aesthetic form, a form closer to what he was attempting to achieve in his writing.⁵¹ Beckett’s postwar art criticism offered a means to further develop this criticism of modern painting, a criticism which would in turn be used to comment on his own fiction. But this criticism and fiction would occur in a very different historical situation than the 1930s, one which Beckett would not shy away from addressing.

“un amateur (éclairé)”: Beckett the art critic

Beckett wrote three pieces of art criticism in the late 1940s that were his major contribution to the genre: “La peinture des van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon” (1946); “The New Object/Peintres de l’empêchement” (1948); and the co-authored “Three Dialogues: Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit” (1949).⁵² These writings were part of a wider move into publishing in French periodicals, with Beckett’s work now appearing in *Les Temps Modernes* and *Fontaine* as well as the briefly revived *Transition* under the editorship of Duthuit. These publications and other translation work undertaken at

⁵¹ Matthew Feldman, *Beckett’s Books* (London: Continuum, 2006), 117.

⁵² Samuel Beckett, “La peinture des van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon,” *Cahiers d’art* 20–21 (October 1946): 349–59; Samuel Beckett, “Peintres de l’empêchement,” *Derrière le Miroir* 11–12 (June 1948): 3–7.; Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit, “Three Dialogues: Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit,” *Transition Forty-Nine*, no. 5 (December 1949): 97–103.

the time were undoubtedly driven by financial hardship, but they were also a strategic and ultimately highly successful entry into what Anna Boschetti, drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, has analyzed as the field of intellectual journals of post-Liberation France.⁵³ Given that this period from 1945 to 1949, what he later called “his frenzy of writing,” was one in which many of his major works were written – the *Nouvelles*, the trilogy, *Waiting for Godot* – Beckett’s art criticism has rightly been seen as offering a critical accompaniment to these works.⁵⁴ However, understanding Beckett’s criticism as positioned within Boschetti’s dynamic periodical field allows a richer and more politicized understanding of his criticism of the time to come into focus. It shows Beckett’s awareness of the changed meanings and resonances that many of the concerns of his earlier writings on art took on in the postwar context. And it shows that by using the terms of his art criticism to describe his fiction, Beckett was inscribing his fiction within the “complex field of French literary politics in the years immediately after the war” that Andrew Gibson has outlined as a context for interpreting Beckett’s postwar writing.⁵⁵ If Beckett’s primary correspondent about art shifted after the war from MacGreevy to Duthuit, his art criticism put him into contact with a number of more indirect correspondents: Jean-Paul Sartre, Francis Ponge, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Bringing Beckett’s art criticism into dialogue with the contemporaneous writings of these figures brings to light the more historically situated features of the dialogue he was conducting with visual art in order to reflect upon his writing of the trilogy.

“La peinture des van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon” was written in January 1945 and published in the October 1946 issue of *Cahiers d’Art*, an issue Beckett described

⁵³ Anna Boschetti, *The Intellectual Enterprise: Sartre and Les Temps Modernes*, trans. Richard McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

⁵⁴ Quoted in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, 353.

⁵⁵ Gibson, “French Beckett and French Literary Politics 1945-52,” 103.

to George Reavey as the “2nd post-liberation number of the Cahiers.”⁵⁶ “Post-liberation” was an apt description of the concerns of the issue. In his introduction to a dossier of quotations by Lenin and Stalin that appeared in the issue, the journal’s editor, Christian Zevros, promised that the quotations showed the possibility of the “future condition humaine” (“the future human condition”).⁵⁷ It is precisely such a vision of the future human condition that Beckett attacks in his essay. In discussing the work of Bram and Geer van Velde, Beckett writes that what unites their different approaches is an interest in “la condition humaine” (“the human condition”). This means to be condemned to strive to paint the impossible, since for the painter, Beckett writes, “la chose est impossible” (“the thing is impossible”).⁵⁸ Returning once more to the problematic of time discerned in Impressionism, Beckett declared that for both the van Veldes, it is impossible to perceive and thus represent an object due to the inescapable condition of time. In the work of Bram van Velde, this leads him to turn to the interior field in order to paint “la chose morte...[l]a chose immobile dans le vide” (“the dead thing...the thing immobile in the void”) (126). This striving after the impossible thing is contrasted with a dismissal of Georges Braque’s mere “méditations plastiques sur les moyens mise en oeuvre” (“visual meditations on the means employed”), from which the “hypothèse qui s’en dégage” (“hypothesis derives”) that one can bracket off the problem of temporality, while optimistically assuming it will be solved “demain” (“tomorrow”) (127). Geer van Velde’s work, in contrast, is seen as being entirely turned towards the outside in an attempt to capture time. Yet this is described as being as futile an effort as representing Heraclitus’s river, in which no one can step twice, and his work thus appears as a second form of a “*memento mori*” (129). In fact, in this essay, Beckett defines the entire history of

⁵⁶ 31 October 1945, Beckett, *Letters 2*, 24.

⁵⁷ Christian Zevros, ed., “Des problèmes de la création littéraire et artistique d’après quelques textes de Lénine et de Staline,” *Cahiers d’art* 20–21 (October 1946): 341–42. My translation.

⁵⁸ Beckett, *Disjecta*, 129; all translations of this essay are my own, and further citations will be in the main body of the text.

representation in terms of this problematic of time: “A quoi les arts représentatifs se sont-ils acharnés, depuis toujours? A vouloir arrêter le temps, en le représentant” (“For what have the representative arts always thirsted? To want to stop time by representing it”) (126).

Steven Connor has written that “[t]he most important aspect of being-in-the-world, for Beckett, is being in time.”⁵⁹ This essay on the van Veldes certainly proves that true, but in relating the issue of “the human condition” to the impossibility of representing the fundamental temporality of existence, Beckett uses their painting to propose that recognizing that the object of perception and representation is an “impossible...thing” makes confidence in the category of the human an equally “impossible...thing.” Later in the essay, Beckett describes a jet of sheep’s urine in a painting by Paulus Potter as the “symbole par excellence de la fuite des heures” (“the symbol *par excellence* of the flight of the hours”) (126). The passing of time is shown in a scatological image that makes temporality a condition of the animality to which humanity implicitly belongs. This is an important foreshadowing of Beckett’s later work, as well as an important point of connection to the critical field of postwar France. As Jean-Michel Rabaté has written, Georges Bataille recognized an important affinity with Beckett’s work, because to Bataille, “what Beckett accomplishes in *Molloy* is to question the limits of humanity by exploring the very legitimacy of that concept.”⁶⁰ Beckett concludes this essay by returning to the question of this impossible human condition, sardonically deploying scare quotes to question the concept itself: “Pour finir parlons d’autre chose, parlons de l’humain” (“To finish, let us speak of something else, let us speak of the ‘human’”) (131). This is a word, Beckett notes, that has returned like never before to

⁵⁹ Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 45.

⁶⁰ Jean-Michel Rabaté, “Beckett’s Three Critiques: Kant’s Bathos and the Irish Chandos,” *Modernism/modernity* 18, no. 4 (2011): 705.

postwar critical debates, especially those around the purpose of art, and he is highly cynical about its presence, calling it “un vocable, et sans doute un concept aussi, qu’on réserve pour les temps des grand massacres” (“a word, and no doubt a concept also, that is reserved for the time of great massacres”) (131). But for Beckett it “épouvantable” (“appalling”) that art or an artist should have anything to do with the human, and its reintroduction to the sphere of art, he declares, could destroy poetry, music, painting and thought for the next 50 years.

Beckett was entirely correct in his act of cultural diagnosis: that humanism had returned with a vengeance to postwar French criticism. Yet as early as October 1945, the Surrealist Pierre Naville was complaining of the term’s nebulosity: “Today, unfortunately, the term humanism is used to designate philosophical schools of thought, not according to two meanings, but according to three, four, five, or six. Nowadays, everybody is a humanist.”⁶¹ Stefanos Geroulanos describes this postwar period as witnessing a “short-lived humanist reconciliation,” prompting a sequence of critiques by Maurice Blanchot, Martin Heidegger and Jean Hyppolite, culminating in the theoretical anti-humanism of Althusser and Lacan in the 1960s.⁶² One motivation for Althusser’s re-reading of Marx was the fact that, as Naville also perceived, in the immediate post-Liberation era, “[e]ven certain Marxists, who pride themselves on being classical rationalists, are [now] humanists in a diluted sort of way, stripped of the liberal ideas of the previous century.”⁶³ This stemmed firstly from the overwhelming prestige and moral authority that the Parti Communiste Français enjoyed as a result of its leading role in the Resistance, earning it

⁶¹ Quoted in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, trans. John Kulka (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2007), 62.

⁶² Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges In French Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 210.

⁶³ Quoted in Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 62.

the title of the “parti des fusillées” (“executed martyrs”).⁶⁴ The P.C.F. won the largest share of the vote in Assembly Elections on 21 October 1945 and 10 November 1946, a dominance which lasted until the crisis of 1947, when the Communists were expelled from government on 5 May 1947.⁶⁵ It was also prompted by a resurgent interest in Marx’s early writings, particularly the theory that “[c]ommunism as completed naturalism is humanism and as completed humanism is naturalism,” outlined in the “1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts.”⁶⁶ As Mark Poster notes, French editions of this text “did not appear until 1937 and even then it was ignored until after the Liberation...[thus] for political and textual reasons, which were interconnected, no real reading of Marx was possible in France until after the Second World War.”⁶⁷ A final philosophical development important for thinkers such as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty was what Vincent Descombes has termed the humanist interpretation of Hegelian idealism developed by Alexandre Kojève in his course on Hegel given at the École des Hautes Études in Paris from 1933 to 1939. In Descombes’s account, Kojève’s replacing of the Spirit with Man in his “*anthropological version* of Hegelian philosophy [italics original]” ultimately requires “[t]he identity of subject and object...[and that] man (subject) would encounter nothing outside of himself (in the object) to impede the realisation of his projects.” This was, according to Descombes, an inverted theology: “Humanist atheism reclaims them [divine attributes] for the human subject, who in this way becomes the true God. It is precisely this substitution, whereby everywhere the word ‘Man’ is written to replace the word ‘God,’ which defines *humanism* [italics original].”⁶⁸ Judith Butler has written of the influence of this reading of Hegel on Sartre: “[t]he effort at

⁶⁴ Jean-Pierre Rioux, *The Fourth Republic, 1944-1958* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 54.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 59; 110.

⁶⁶ Karl Marx, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 97.

⁶⁷ Mark Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 42.

⁶⁸ Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 27; 28; 29.

anthropogenesis elaborated by Kojève finds existential transcription in the Sartrean contention that all human desire is a function of the desire to become God. But for Sartre, this desire is bound to fail.⁶⁹ At the time, however, Sartre stressed that this refusal “to grant man an eternally established nature” did not have as a consequence the quietism decried by his critics on the left; rather, “*existentialism is no mournful delectation but a humanist philosophy of action, effort, combat, and solidarity* [italics original].”⁷⁰ In his October 1945 lecture “Existentialism is a Humanism,” Sartre stressed the transcendental subjectivity of the universal human condition: “[s]ince man is this transcendence, and grasps objects only in relation to such transcendence, he himself is the core and focus of this transcendence.”⁷¹ For Sartre, subject and object were reconciled by the domination of the latter by the former’s engaged projects.

Beckett encountered the impact of Sartre’s humanist philosophy of art in the criticism of Francis Ponge, which he translated for an issue of *Transition Forty-Nine* in 1949. In his “Existentialism” lecture and elsewhere, Sartre had praised Ponge’s “Notes Premières de l’Homme,” publishing it in the inaugural issue of *Les Temps Modernes*. In this aphoristic text, written between 1943 and 1944, Ponge prophesied a humanized deification of man: “Il faut réintégrer l’idée de Dieu à l’idée de l’homme. Et simplement vivre” (“We must return the idea of God to the idea of man. And simply live”). In a phrase quoted by Sartre in his lecture, Ponge declared: “L’homme est l’avenir de l’homme” (“Man is the future of man”).⁷² In the article translated by Beckett, “Braque ou l’art moderne comme événement et plaisir,” originally published in *Action* in January

⁶⁹ Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 95.

⁷⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, “A More Precise Characterization of Existentialism,” in *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre*, vol. 1 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 157; 160.

⁷¹ Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 52.

⁷² Francis Ponge, “Notes Premières de l’Homme,” *Les Temps Modernes* 1, no. 1 (October 1945): 73; 75. My translation.

1947, Ponge drew on Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach" to define the role of the artist as, in Beckett's translation, "one who *in no wise* explains the world, but changes it [italics original]." For Ponge, by not simply representing objects in the world but creating new forms of viewing them, Braque "presents you with the future. The future of nature, the future of man." Braque's depictions of objects "draw us forth from our night, forth from obsolete man (and its so-called humanism), to reveal to us, Man, the order to come."⁷³ Ponge was clear on the reciprocal relations between his politics and aesthetics, declaring himself the "disciple and friend" of the "political realists" of the P.C.F.⁷⁴ As we have seen, Beckett had already dismissed Braque's work as presenting a "hypothesis." His comments to Duthuit on Ponge's essay are revealing.

Ponge on Braque It is revolting. 'Braque is now over 60 and the world is beginning to fit into his groove'!!. What oft was thought. For someone who is a pupil of the realists in politics he is pretty unsteady on his feet. He has a struggle to get out of that groove of his, making great play with 'muffled' verbs and parentheses. What a relief to know that we are back for good and all from the fête galante, and pitched, naked once more, in front of the dead fish (and the lumps of coal).⁷⁵

The difference between the two writers is clear, as is Beckett's understanding of the political implications of Ponge's aesthetics. This is underlined by the contemptuous reference to the "dead fish," an allusion to André Fougeron's *Parisiennes aux Marché* (1948), which was exhibited at the Salon d'Automne in 1948, and the scandal surrounding it which was reported in the "Documents" section of *Transition-Forty Nine* that Beckett was translating. According to Serge Guilbaut, the rotting fish that Fougeron used to symbolize the food shortages affecting postwar Paris became a reference point for debating the political and aesthetic implications of *réalisme socialisme* in what became

⁷³ Francis Ponge, "Braque, or Modern Art as Event and Pleasure," trans. Samuel Beckett, *Transition Forty-Nine*, no. 5 (December 1949): 45–46.

⁷⁴ Ponge, "Braque, or Modern Art as Event and Pleasure." 43.

⁷⁵ 1 March 1949, Beckett, *Letters* 2, 122.

known as “La Bataille réalisme-abstraction” in the immediate postwar years.⁷⁶ These are the debates within which Beckett is positioning his own criticism, contrasting his own art of incapacity against Fougeron’s demand for a committed and effective *réalisme socialisme*. And in his fiction too, unsteady feet had already been contrasted with triumphalist Marxism. In “The End,” written in early 1946, as the narrator lies begging on a street corner, pissing, shitting and scratching himself, he witnesses a “strange scene,” a man bellowing: “Union...brothers...Marx...capital...bread and butter...love.” He is dismissed with a quip that parodies the Marxist humanism of Ponge: “He must have been a religious fanatic, I could find no other explanation. Perhaps he was an escaped lunatic. He had a nice face, a little on the red side.”⁷⁷

Beckett’s second essay on the van Veldes placed his criticism in a more extensive field than the Parisian intellectual press. It was commissioned to accompany an exhibition of their work in the Samuel Kootz Gallery in New York, *Introducing Two Modern French Painters: Geer van Velde, Bram van Velde*, which took place from 8-27 March in 1948. It was composed in French in March 1947, and translated by Beckett himself into English to appear in the catalogue for the New York exhibition with the title “The New Object”; the French version appeared as “Peintres de l’empêchement” in the June 1948 issue of *Derrière le miroir*, the journal of the Galerie Maeght in Paris. The exhibition in New York was part of an exchange with the Galerie Maeght, which in return presented the first exhibition of postwar American Abstract Expressionist art in France. As Serge Guilbaut has written, this exchange program, coming in the wake of France’s acceptance of the Marshall Plan, was widely perceived by French critics as “part of a wide-ranging and all but unstoppable cultural offensive against France,” and

⁷⁶ Serge Guilbaut, *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945-1964* (Cambridge MA; London: MIT Press, 1990), 44.

⁷⁷ Samuel Beckett, *The Expelled / The Calmative / The End / First Love*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 52.

furthermore, Guilbaut has documented how this exchange program with Galerie Maeght was indirectly funded by the American Embassy in Paris.⁷⁸ Beckett's essay opens with an explicit acknowledgement of this shift of the visual avant-garde from Paris to New York: "We are now freely informed...that the Paris school, whatever that means, is finished, whatever that means."⁷⁹ His strategy to reject this claim, and to justify the art of the van Veldes, is to place their work within a long history of painting, a "history of its relation to its object, a relation evolving, necessarily, in terms first of extension, then of penetration" (878). Taking up the "empêchement" of the essay's French title, which is also the "empêchement" of the Proustian "zone of evaporation" which links Beckett's theories of art to his own aesthetic practice, Beckett writes that "the object of representation is at all times in resistance to representation" (879). This has led to a contemporary "crisis": "For what remains to be represented if the essence of object is to elude representation?" (879). His answer is that "[t]here remain to be represented the conditions of that elusion" (879). And this is what Beckett states the art of the van Veldes achieves, realizing an "art of confinement" (880). As Beckett writes in the French version of this essay, their work promises a "bel avenir" ("great future") because "le même deuil les mène loin l'un de l'autre, le deuil de l'objet" ("the same mourning carries them away from each other, the mourning of the object").⁸⁰ Significantly, as Peter Fifield observes, in the typescript for this essay, Beckett had originally written "recherche" instead of "deuil," and "search" is what appears in the English version. But this was replaced with "deuil" in Beckett's hand, giving the French version a sharper contextual resonance.⁸¹ Declaring that the task of painting is to carry out an endless work of mourning for an irrecoverable object undercuts and ironizes the kind of rhetoric seen in Ponge, which proclaimed a new

⁷⁸ Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, 151; 237–8 n.174.

⁷⁹ Beckett, "The New Object," 878. Further citations will be in the main body of the text.

⁸⁰ Beckett, *Disjecta*, 135.

⁸¹ Peter Fifield, "Introduction to Samuel Beckett, 'The New Object,'" *Modernism/modernity* 18, no. 4 (2011): 874.

humanist future of the reconciliation of subject and object. The nuances of Beckett's criticism show that if this engagement with art was being used to define the terms of his own aesthetics, it was also working to distance them from the political and philosophical positions of his French contemporaries.

Comparison with the art criticism of Maurice Merleau-Ponty allows the extent and implications of reading the politics of Beckett's criticism to come into focus. Beckett at this time had encountered Merleau-Ponty's politics rather than his recently published phenomenological work. His "Poèmes 38-39" appeared alongside the second part of Merleau-Ponty's *Humanism and Terror* (1947) in the November 1946 issue of *Les Temps Modernes*. *Humanism and Terror* began attacking Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1940), leading Beckett to quip to George Reavey upon reading the piece that "[t]he boys are very cross with Koestler."⁸² Yet *Humanism and Terror* can be read as an attempt to develop a politics out of *Phenomenology of Perception*, which had appeared in 1944. As was the case with Sartre and Ponge, Merleau-Ponty drew on Marx's "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" to explore whether postwar "communism [is] still equal to its humanist intentions?"⁸³ The answer was a cautious yes, so long as history "moves towards the recognition of man by man." This can only be achieved by the historical proletariat, which is "the sole authentic intersubjectivity because it alone lives simultaneously the separation and union of individuals." *Humanism and Terror* ends by comparing this political philosophy to "a view which like the most fragile object of perception – a soap bubble, or a wave – or like the most simple dialogue, embraces indivisibly all the order and all the disorder of the world."⁸⁴ This stress on the recognition of man through intersubjective perception, which must be a historically situated process, grows out of

⁸² 15 December 1946, Beckett, *Letters 2*, 49.

⁸³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: The Communist Problem*, trans. John O'Neill (Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), xviii.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 111–2; 116–7; 189.

Phenomenology of Perception, which stressed that there is a perceiving subject “only in so far as he is historically situated.”⁸⁵ In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Cézanne’s painting is proposed as a model of the unity of sense perception with its environment; it is described as “[t]his subject-object dialogue, this drawing together, by the subject, of the meaning diffused through the object, and, by the object, of the subject’s intentions – a process which is physiognomic perception.” It is Cézanne’s disclosure of an “immanent or incipient significance in the living body.”⁸⁶ Cézanne works as a thread binding together Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, political theory and art criticism. In his major essay on the painter, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” Merleau-Ponty admits that “the inhuman character of his paintings” could be seen to “only represent a flight from the human world, the alienation of his humanity.” And this too could be an alienation from the landscape which “itself is stripped of the attributes which make it ready for animistic communions.” But ultimately, this doubt is overcome: Cézanne was able to revive “the classical definition of art: man added to nature.” Merleau-Ponty approvingly cites Cézanne’s statement: “‘The landscape thinks itself in me,’ he said, ‘and I am its consciousness.’”⁸⁷ In the troubled climate of 1945, Cézanne’s past reconciliation between subject and object, man and nature, is held up as a model for a future reconciliation to come.

As we have seen, Beckett’s interpretation of Cézanne in the 1930s was rather different, a contrast enabled by the close similarity of terms such as “animism” for describing Cézanne’s treatment of landscape. Against recognition and reconciliation, Beckett’s Cézanne was pure alienation, and his description of Cézanne’s portraits as showing the subject “more & more hermetic & alone & his neighbour a coagulum as

⁸⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002), n. 18, 200.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 152–3; 230.

⁸⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 10–1; 16; 17.

alien as a protoplast or God,” with its dissolution of sensation into a indistinct coagulum, represents this as a breakdown in the kind of physical sensation so valorized by Merleau-Ponty.⁸⁸ This emphasis on alienation, mourning and resistance, and the object eluding representation, was continued in Beckett’s writing on the van Veldes, and the point of this comparison with Merleau-Ponty is to show the political meanings they now had. Against this Marxist humanism, Beckett’s art criticism was developing what the Spectator in *Eleutheria*, written in 1948, called Victor Krap’s “negative anthropology”: Krap’s strategy of defining his life, and that of “the human race,’ in terms of what “it isn’t.” In this first, aborted effort at writing for the stage, Dr. Piouk is so effusive for his love of humanity that Madame Krap is led to ask “You wouldn’t be a Communist?” In contrast, Victor ends the play crawling into his bed and “*turning his emaciated back on humanity* [italics original].”⁸⁹ This is a performative enactment of the art of confinement Beckett praised in the art of the van Veldes, and in this play the opposition of Krap’s “negative anthropology” to the Communist aesthetics and politics of 1948 is clear. The clarity of this positioning within the postwar literary field made Beckett uncertain about the play, shifting from trying to get the play produced, attempting to revise it, only finally deciding to reject its publication as late as 1956.⁹⁰ That this occurred so late, however, means that the politico-aesthetic positioning implicit in the play stands true for the turnings away that are also present in the “Three Dialogues” and the trilogy.

“Three Dialogues: Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit,” Beckett’s third and culminating essay on the visual arts, has attracted an extensive critical commentary due to its clear role as acting as less of a dialogue with the van Veldes’ work than a monologue

⁸⁸ MacGreevy, 8 September 1934, Beckett, *Letters 1*, 223.

⁸⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Eleutheria*, trans. Barbara Wright (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 147; 145; 43; 170.

⁹⁰ Maurice Nadeau, 25 June 1956, *Letters 2*, 628–9.

on Beckett's own aesthetics.⁹¹ By the end of "Three Dialogues" this is openly admitted, with "B." speaking of "what I am pleased to fancy he is, fancy he does," conceding that "it is more likely that he is and does quite otherwise."⁹² While most critical glosses on the "Three Dialogues" read the text as offering a commentary on Beckett's postwar writing, it also relates this commentary to his contemporaries and the field of postwar French art theoretical debate. As with his previous essays, Beckett's art criticism opens up a more historically contextualized perspective on his dreams, as he puts it, of an art with "no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (139). Beckett's hostility to the Marxist humanism of contemporaries such as Ponge, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty is registered in "Three Dialogues" through a dismissal: "[t]he realization that art has always been bourgeois, though it may dull our pain before the achievements of the socially progressive, is finally of little interest" (144). The force of this dismissal is increased if the "Three Dialogues" is considered in its original publication context, in the December 1949 issue of *Transition*: there, it appeared alongside the journal's "Documents" section, a survey of the latest developments on the French critical scene for its English-speaking readership. More precisely, as advertisements for *The Hudson Review* and *The Partisan Review* make clear, this was an American audience; more precisely still, it was aimed, like Beckett's essay for the Samuel Kootz gallery, at the critical debates of the postwar New York visual avant-garde. One of the main *scandales* reported in the December 1949 issue of *Transition*, for the benefit of American readers, is "the Fougeron case": the debates caused by Fougeron's *Parisiennes aux Marché* that Beckett had already noted in March 1949, while translating Ponge, and which he had already scorned.⁹³ The original publication context of "Three Dialogues" presents its readers with a simplified image of

⁹¹ See the special issue Marius Buning et al., ed., "Three Dialogues Revisited," *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd'hui* 13 (2003).

⁹² Beckett, *Disjecta*, 144. Further citations will be in the main body of the text.

⁹³ "Documents," *Transition Forty-Nine*, no. 5 (December 1949): 110–26.

Paris divided into two camps: Ponge, Fougeron and the P.C.F on the one hand, and Beckett, the van Veldes, and disinterest on the other.

This opposition also manifests itself in a reappearance of Beckett's attacks on humanism. In the dialogue on Bram van Velde, "B." declares that "[a]mong those whom we call great artists, I can think of none whose concern was not predominantly with his expressive possibilities, those of his vehicle, those of humanity. The assumption underlying all painting is that the domain of the maker is the domain of the feasible" (142). "B.'s" claim that van Velde moves beyond this "misapprehension...that its [art's] function was to express, by means of paint" also marks a move beyond a humanism of man in a creative and constructive relationship with the world (143). In the earlier dialogues, "B." gives this artistic humanism a longer history by linking it to the single-point perspective whose effects Beckett had deplored in his interpretation of Antonello's *Saint Sebastian*. Disagreeing with "D." that the painting of Tal Coat differs from the "utilitarian servility" implied by single-point perspective's "lick of Euclidian geometry" (138), "B." responds: "What we have to consider in the case of the Italian painters is not that they surveyed the world with the eyes of building contractors, a mere means like any other, but that they never stirred from the field of the possible, however much they enlarged it" (139). The "domain of the feasible" in Beckett's postwar criticism is the domain of the human bound up with a philosophy which sees objects in space as having possible relationships with a human subject. This hostility towards the abstract space of perspective appears just as strongly in the fiction Beckett was writing at this time, making it one of the most significant shared concerns between his fiction and his criticism.

It would be wrong, however, to over-read the "Three Dialogues" as a conclusive theoretical or aesthetic statement on Beckett's trilogy. Chronology provides one caution.

The text was composed through an exchange of letters with Duthuit in June 1949; that is, after *Molloy* and *Malone Dies* were completed, but while *The Unnamable* was being composed, the first draft of which would not be finished until January 1950. Beckett's correspondence also shows that, if *Molloy* and *Malone Dies* were conceived as a pair, *The Unnamable* was not originally conceived as their culmination: in July 1948, just before beginning his exchange with Duthuit, Beckett wrote to George Reavey that "Malone Meurt" was "the last I hope of the series Murphy, Watt, Mercier & Camier, Molloy, not to mention the 4 Nouvelles and Eleuthéria."⁹⁴ As Shane Weller points out, the unanticipated nature of *The Unnamable* is shown by a revision made by Beckett when translating *Molloy* into French in collaboration with Patrick Bowles. The second paragraph of the published French text reads: "Cette fois-ci, puis encore une je pense, puis c'en sera fini je pense, de ce monde-là aussi. C'est le sens de l'avant dernier." In the published English translation, this statement of intent is expanded: "This time, then once more I think, *then perhaps a last time*, then I think it'll be over, with that world too. Premonition of the last but one *but one*" [emphasis added to indicate addition].⁹⁵

"Three Dialogues," then, is a reflection upon a series of works in progress, rather than the "acceptable conclusion" "B." worries he might have made (145). It has a prospective rather than retrospective relationship to *The Unnamable*: "Three Dialogues" spurred the writing of another "last one," but this is not to say that the way in which *The Unnamable* goes on is the same way predicted, or not, in "Three Dialogues." The manuscript of *The Unnamable*, then *L'Innommable*, shows it was begun on 29 March 1949.⁹⁶ That is, three weeks after two long responses to letters from Duthuit, which "[push] me out into too many currents for me to worry about how I swim," and which

⁹⁴ 8 July 1948, Beckett, *Letters 2*, 80.

⁹⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, ed. Shane Weller (Faber and Faber, 2009), xix, n.9; 4.

⁹⁶ Samuel Beckett, "L'Innommable Notebooks," 1949-1950, Notebook 1, 1, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, box 3 (folder 10); box 4 (folder 1).

prompted Beckett to think about the question of relation crucial to *The Unnamable* and “Three Dialogues” alike.⁹⁷ Close study of Beckett’s correspondence and manuscripts shows that the impetus provided by Duthuit to write a dialogue on painting was crucial to Beckett’s decision to begin writing *The Unnamable*; it might not be too strong to say it was the impetus to write Beckett’s most important work of prose fiction. But studying the genesis of that text also shows that moving away from a concern with painting was pivotal in completing *The Unnamable*. Such chronological details are crucial for mapping the shared concerns between Beckett’s postwar criticism and the fiction of his *Trilogy*.

“The horror-worn eyes linger abject”: painting in the trilogy

The creatures of Beckett’s *Trilogy* are condemned to narrate. Whether scrawling on a page or murmuring in the dark, Molloy, Moran, Malone, Mahood and “the unnamable” are tormented by their inability to write or speak without a fiction coming into being; it is being, after all, that they want to escape. As well as their saying, there is something else which they long but fail to escape: their seeing. The *Trilogy* is unquestionably a journey to voices in the dark, to aural rhythms, to the sound and spacing of breath. But as Malone writes: “it is hard to leave everything. The horror-worn eyes linger abject on all they have beseeched so long, in a last prayer, the true prayer at last, the one that asks for nothing.”⁹⁸ Try as these creatures might to move into a world made purely of sounds and words, they fail to expel the eye and its images. This failure, of course, is one of the many failures of the *Trilogy*, failures which become its means of going on. In B’s “fancy” in

⁹⁷ 2 March 1949, Beckett, *Letters* 2, 129.

⁹⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*, ed. Peter Boxall (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 107. Further citations will be in the main body of the text.

“Three Dialogues,” van Velde is “the first to admit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world.”⁹⁹ Painting is made the object of a necessary critical fantasy – perhaps even a phantasy – in order for Beckett’s fiction to come into being, but it is a fantasy that began before the *Trilogy*, in *Watt*.

Watt shows that painting was shaping the style and structure of Beckett’s prose well before his encounter with Duthuit, reflecting his own “neurotic obsessions” of the 1930s. As David Hayman has documented, early drafts of *Watt* contained many references to Beckett’s study of art, references which served as cruxes around which *Watt*’s textual architecture was constructed. The first of these appeared early in the novel’s first draft, in the second notebook describing Mr. Quin’s dining room, preserved in the “Addenda” to the published text.¹⁰⁰ The “[s]econd picture in Erskine’s room” appeared in the first attempt at describing the house of “Mr. Quin,” who would in a later revision become “Mr. Knott,” but whose narrative description was also the origin of *Watt*. The “second picture” depicts Mr. Quin’s father, a “gentleman seated at piano, full length, receding profile right, naked save for a stave-paper resting on lap.”¹⁰¹ It is a bravura parody of ekphrasis, a parody because it does not transform the picture into a narrative. Instead, it pushes a description of the still image to breaking point by detailing a proliferating, fleshy, sexualized body:

On muscles of brawny neck, arm, torso, abdomen, loin, thigh and calf, standing out like cords in stress of effort, Mr. O’Connery had lavished all the resources of Jesuit tactility. Beads of sweat, realized with a finish that would have done credit to Heem, were plentifully distributed over pectoral, subaxillary and hypogastrical surfaces. The nipple, from which sprang a long red solitary hair, was in a manifest state of tumescence, a charming touch (219).

⁹⁹ Beckett, *Disjecta*, 145.

¹⁰⁰ Beckett, “*Watt* Notebooks,” Notebook 2, 7–11.

¹⁰¹ Samuel Beckett, *Watt*, ed. Chris Ackerley (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 219. Further citations will be in the main body of the text.

The reference to Jan de Heem alludes to the kind of seventeenth-century Dutch still-life painters whose meticulous attention to visual detail subverted an image's narrative potential. In doing so, Beckett breaks up the body into a listed series of fluid and sexualized body parts.

If this painting relegated to the Addenda is all Jesuit "tactility," the painting encountered by Watt in Erksine's room in the published version of the text is a model of Protestant iconoclasm:

A circle, obviously described by a compass, and broken at its lowest point, occupied the middle foreground, of this picture. Was it receding? Watt had that impression. In the eastern background appeared a point, or dot. The circumference was black. The point was blue, but blue! The rest was white (109).

This time, the painting resists narrativization – "Was it receding?" – through its bare minimum of figurative content. Watt's pondering on the picture then extends to wonder: "How the effect of perspective was obtained Watt did not know. But it was obtained. By what means the illusion of movement in space, and it almost seemed in time, was given, Watt could not say" (109). Here we see how the problem of perspective that would come to occupy Beckett's postwar criticism was present years before. Even with this minimal figurative content the broken circle and dot resolve into a figure-ground relationship which necessarily requires the "illusion of movement in space...and in time"; objects related in perspective become subject to "some force of merely mechanical mutual attraction, or the playthings of chance" (110). As a technique of representation, single-point perspective is a means of regulating relationships in space and time, whose "mechanism" and "chance" are two sides of the same coin, and which for Beckett were

associated with Geulincx's Occasionalist mechanism and Pascal's probability.¹⁰² Single point perspective is equated with the epistemic regimes of Cartesian mechanism and Pascalian probability, making it a synecdoche for modernity as a whole. With the thought that the circle and its center are abandoned in perspective's "boundless space, in endless time," Watt's "eyes filled with tears he could not stem, and they flowed down his fluted cheeks unchecked, in a steady flow, refreshing him greatly" (110). Watt's only response to the horror of endless abstract space and time is to respond with tears, producing a blurry vision which is embodied, fluid, and faulty.

This understanding of perspective as a form of representation that articulates causal relations in necessarily infinite space and time is what links the perspective of painting to the narrative structure of Beckett's texts, detoured through the closed space of the room. As Rosalind E. Krauss has written: "Perspective is the visual correlate of causality – that one thing follows the next in space according to rule. In that sense, despite differences of historical development, it can be likened to the literary tradition of the omniscient narrator and conventional plot...perspectival space carry[s] with it the meaning of narrative: a succession of events leading up to and away from this moment; and within that temporal succession – given as a spatial analogue – [is] secreted the 'meaning' of both that space and those events."¹⁰³ Watt concludes his meditations on this painting by pondering its relation to the room it is in: whether it is "a fixed and stable member of the edifice...or was it simply a manner of paradigm...[or] a term in a series" (111). The painting could be part of the room, a representation of the room, or part of *Watt's* narrative of serial permutations and combinations; or it could be all three, a way of relating what is narrated to how it is narrated. This relationship between perspective (as a

¹⁰² David Tucker, *Samuel Beckett and Arnold Geulincx: Tracing "a Literary Fantasia"* (London: Continuum, 2012); Anthony Cordingley, "Beckett's Ignorance: Miracles/Memory, Pascal/Proust," *Journal of Modern Literature* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2010): 129–52.

¹⁰³ Rosalind E. Krauss, *Perpetual Inventory* (Cambridge MA; London: MIT Press, 2010), 123.

form of causal relations), rooms, and narrative, can be illuminated by a comparison with a novel that Maurice Blanchot was writing at the same time as Beckett was writing *Watt*. *Aminadab* (1942) was Blanchot's second novel; its subtitle *roman* in distinction to the classification of his later works as *récits* indicates that this work is an investigation of the novel as a novel, a reading supported by the criticism Blanchot was writing on "The Pure Novel" at this time.¹⁰⁴ *Aminadab* opens with a character later identified as Thomas entering a house, where he moves through a series of rooms, encountering a series of guests. One initial room contains paintings representing rooms available for Thomas to enter; a later room is the studio in which these paintings of rooms are painted. Thomas's progress figures narrative as a progress through a series of rooms, and the paintings are the mirror images of the "space of literature" that would become so important in Blanchot's later critical work.¹⁰⁵

According to Michel Foucault, the paintings in *Aminadab* are the negatives of literary space; conversely, the space of literature is the negative of the visual image. "Therefore," Foucault writes

fiction consists not in showing the invisible, but in showing the extent to which the invisibility of the visible is invisible. Thus, it bears a profound relation to space; understood in this way, space is to fiction what the negative is to reflection (whereas dialectical negation is always tied to the fable of time). No doubt this is the role that houses, hallways, doors, and rooms play in almost all of Blanchot's narratives: placeless places, beckoning thresholds, forbidden spaces that are nevertheless exposed to the winds...¹⁰⁶

Given the parallels between the wanderings of Watt and Thomas through the houses of narrative, Foucault's interpretation of the role of doors and rooms as the spaces of

¹⁰⁴ Maurice Blanchot, "The Pure Novel," in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. Maurice Holland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 38–42.

¹⁰⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982).

¹⁰⁶ Michel Foucault, "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside," in *Foucault/Blanchot*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Zone Books, 1987), 24.

literature, and as negative reflections of the representation of visual space, offers a means to interpret the relationship between rooms and narrative in Beckett's *Trilogy*. The enclosed room of the space of literature is the negative distortion of the infinite space of visual perspective, and its form of logical, causal relations. Perspective, and its cognates point-of-view and focalization, are metaphors taken up by theorists of narrative precisely because of the kinds of relation they imply: they describe the relation of aspects of the discourse (who is narrating) to events in the story (when and where is the narrator situated). Understanding that Beckett's closed rooms are attempts to subvert both perspective's infinite space and its causal relations accounts for the well-documented ways that Beckett's work challenges and subverts the conventions of fictional narrative. Aporia and indeterminacy have been marshaled for arguments concluding that in Beckett's trilogy, in Wolfgang Iser's succinct formulation, we are presented with "narration narrating its own invalidation."¹⁰⁷

While there is little need to descend once more, in Leslie Hill's phrase, into the "verbal labyrinth" of Beckett's novels, there is a need to show that, beginning with *Molloy*, the discontinuities of this narrative labyrinth are associated with the terminal spaces of closed rooms as opposed to open spaces, and with oscillations between writing in darkness and seeing in space.¹⁰⁸ *Molloy* opens with Molloy stating: "I am in my mother's room."¹⁰⁹ He is writing, and the association between writing and the enclosed space of a room, rather than Watt's "boundless...endless time" of perspectival space, are invoked from the outset. Abstract space, following Foucault, is made invisible in order to make this fiction visible. And writing for Molloy threatens the loss of visibility: "A little more and you'll go blind" (4). At the same time, he is only able to narrate the incident of

¹⁰⁷ Wolfgang Iser, "Erasing Narration: Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies* and *Texts for Nothing*," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 4, no. 2 (2006): 2.

¹⁰⁸ Leslie Hill, *Beckett's Fiction: In Different Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), ix.

¹⁰⁹ Beckett, *Molloy*, 2009, 3. Further citations will be in the main body of the text.

A and C from an “observation post”: the condition for this story being the authority of visibility (10). But what, he asks himself, “do I mean by seeing and seeing again?” (12). Seeing from the open space of observation is contrasted with writing in his room. This room where writing occurs shows how *Molloy* invalidates its own narrative logic from the outset. The discourse begins with Molloy narrating in the first person at what emerges as an unspecified time in the future as regards the events he recounts. But the discourse terminates with Molloy in the forest, narrated in the third person, with no resolvable temporal relationship between the two situations. His first person narration produces no temporally causal relationship with what he narrates; in this, as Steven Connor puts it, Molloy/*Molloy* “disobey[s] the principal rule of first person narration, which is that the life of the narrated character can be projected forward until it joins with the life of the narrator.”¹¹⁰ The use of “projection” here to express a temporal relationship show just how deeply the optical metaphors of perspective are buried within the assumptions of the narratology that Beckett’s work undermines.

Moran’s narrative also begins with writing in a room, and again the dark room where writing takes place is opposed to the open space of seeing and its causal relationships. When Moran emerges from the forest to his observation point, he comments that “the land from where I was, and even the clouds in the sky, were so disposed as to lead the eyes gently to the camp, as in a painting by an old master” (160). The spaces of painting, of perspective, and of an endless sky, are opposed to the dark rooms of writing. Moran, like Molloy, claims to eschew vision: “Some apply the eye, I the ear, to key holes” (128-9). The only visual image he obtains of Molloy is an inner vision, where he appears “massive and hulking” and “without being black, of a dark colour” (118). Yet Moran shares what Molloy calls his “visual needs” (84). Molloy only

¹¹⁰ Connor, *Samuel Beckett*, 55.

has one seeing eye, but with it he sees the world “in a way inordinately formal, though I was far from being an aesthete, or artist” (49). Vision produces an open, formally ordered space, like the “pure space” of Antonello’s Saint Sebastian, whose temporality writing undermines. After journeying through open space to find Molloy, Moran returns to his room only to invalidate the distinction between discourse and story – to break the frame narrative convention of the latter half of the novel. The discourse ends with Moran claiming to write the lines: “It is midnight. The rain is beating on the window. It was not midnight. It was not raining” (184). As with Molloy, no logical temporal relationship of cause and effect can relate these two scenes. Instead of a text representing a world of cause and effect whose narration is related to it through a “perspective,” writing in *Molloy* is presented as the production of these causes and effects.

Beckett’s writings on art also enable these well-known features of his narrative to be understood historically, as occurring in relation to specific postwar events which forced visibility and causality to the fore, although this is not to say that the novel doesn’t do so itself. Moran’s reference to “Goering?” (149), as well as Molloy’s fear of the night time lynching taking place as part of the “purge” (67), whose meaning is more forceful in the original French of “l’épuration,” make this a novel whose world, tenuous as it is, is that which followed the Second World War.¹¹¹ Molloy also reflects upon the intellectual developments used to explain one’s position in this world. Alluding to the “latest discoveries” of the disciplines, Molloy opines that “[w]hat I liked in anthropology was its inexhaustible faculty of negation, its relentless definition of man, as though he were no better than God, in terms of what he was not.” “But,” he concludes, “my ideas on this subject were horribly confused, for my knowledge of men was scant and the meaning of being beyond me” (37-38). Molloy’s taste for the negations of anthropology anticipates

¹¹¹ Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1954), 102.

Krap's "negative anthropology" in *Eleutheria*, which is presented as a reaction to the same Marxist humanism that Beckett was decrying in his art criticism, and which was arguing for a specific visual regime: the figural realism of Fougeron. In Beckett's words this was to return to the Renaissance space and humanist body of Antonello: "to think that they intend to go through the whole thing again, eyes irredeemably lowered so as not to cause offence by revealing the full bewilderment of ignorance regained, in part at least."¹¹² Through these allusions to historical events, and the echoing of the terms of Beckett's own critical discourse, which located the classical humanist subject in a perspectival ordered space governed by logical rules of cause and effect, the narrative forms Beckett developed to subvert these premises can be understood as indexes of foundational political and intellectual shifts that defined the postwar era.

In his writing, Molloy refused to be an "aesthete, or an artist." But for the eponymous writer of *Malone Dies*, "[a]esthetics are therefore on my side, at least a certain kind of aesthetics."¹¹³ One aspect of Malone's literary aesthetics continuing on from *Molloy*, according to John Bolin, is his use of diary writing to create "multiple fictional frames" and to deploy the technique of "composition en abyme," models Bolin convincingly argues are drawn from that master of narrative framing and *mise-en-abyme*, André Gide.¹¹⁴ The narrative of Malone in his room frames those he writes about the Lamberts and Saposcat. Malone's room contains frames of a different kind: the window out of which he gazes, his "porthole" (64). He writes the window into his story about Macmann: "[t]he others are there too, or at their windows, like me, but on their feet" (104). Shifting between a frame looking into a world and a frame shared with a world, Malone's window is indeed "whatever I want it to be, up to a point" (64). It is a "window

¹¹² Duthuit, 27 July 1948, Beckett, *Letters* 2, 86.

¹¹³ Beckett, *Malone Dies*, 6. Further citations will be in the main body of the text.

¹¹⁴ John Bolin, *Samuel Beckett and the Modern Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 126.

that sometimes looks as if it were painted on the wall, like Tiepolo's ceiling at Würzburg, what a tourist I must have been" (62-3). Malone is given one of Beckett's own memories, from his travels through Germany in the 1930s, but this allusion has its own significance in the novel's narrative of frames. Tiepolo's ceiling is a work of *trompe l'oeil*, painted to give an illusion of infinitely receding height. The window frame, and its use as a metaphor for the distinction of different levels of narrative discourse, is compared to a mere illusion, a trick of the eye. Malone's comparison of this with the window out of which he stares recalls another visual technique: Dürer's window. Beckett had been fascinated by Dürer's *Melancholia* (1514) engraving since a child, and had taken notes on his work during the 1930s. In his visual representation of single-point perspective in *The Painter's Manual* (1525), Dürer illustrated its working as analogous to the male painter looking at a naked female through a window, the window frame demarcating the borders of the perspectival space. The comparison of window gazing with Tiepolo's *trompe l'oeil* undermines its claims to naturalness, showing that the space produced by perspective is merely an illusion produced by representation. So too is the difference between the narratives Malone creates and the frame narrative that contains them: within the novel, this difference is also illusion, and the novel ends with Lemuel raising his hatchet, his hammer, his stick and his first, and Malone's writing peters out into "never anything / there / any more" (119).

Dürer's window opening onto the naked female body figures perspective as a sexualized gaze, and as we have seen, heterosexual relations were a means by which Beckett theorized subject-object relations in his writings on art. Malone prefers the grey of his room, a grey "going murky and dim, thickening is perhaps the word, until all things are blotted out except the window which seems in a manner of speaking to be my umbilicus, so that I say to myself, When it too goes out I shall know more or less where I

am” (50). The visual line of sight between Malone and his window is his “umbilicus,” nourishing him even as he turns away from it. He is neither male subject nor female object of the gaze, but an embryonic middle term between the two: his gaze is pre-sexual, and it is only when his gaze is reduced to a window that he will have completed his subject formation and know who he is. Optics are also contrasted with haptics through Malone’s “obsession” with touching and enumerating his “things,” his “chattels personal” that hide behind his “furniture” (21-2). The strange significance of furniture and the body in Beckett’s thinking on visual art is shown in a letter written to Georges Duthuit after *Malone Dies* was finished, as a draft for “Three Dialogues.” The letter opens with Beckett’s admitting that “Bram and I are a long way apart from each other”; an admission that the letters are a means to “talk about me.”¹¹⁵ What he originally wanted to see in van Velde was that they were trapped in “one and the same stuckness.” Echoing the contrast between Malone’s room and the world outside the window, this is a box-like “place” in contrast to the “paradise-space” about which “so many artists have gone on about so eloquently.” Close as he has come, van Velde has failed to give Beckett what he wants, the possibility of “fidelity to the prison house,” the art of confinement described in “The New Object.” This is the same art, Beckett continues, that he described with the figure of the “zone of evaporation” in his essay on “Recent Irish Poetry.” This recurring failure to escape from the object relation is described as the “ghastly ceremonies over the years: the artist rubbing himself, more and more wheedlingly [*cálm*], as you say, against his furniture, out of terror of being abandoned by it...What if we simply stopped having erections? As in life, enough sperm about the place.”¹¹⁶ What Beckett writes of van Velde could stand true of Malone, whose sexualization of looking and touching is, as in Dürer’s drawing, a process of having erections. The predicament of the painter in escaping this tangle of relations is presented as just as impossible as that of the writer.

¹¹⁵ 2 March 1949, Beckett, *Letters 2*, 129; 131–2.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 129–131.

Beckett completed the first draft of *Malone Dies* on 30 May 1948.¹¹⁷ With his projected “series” of fictions seemingly complete, he turned to drama, writing first *Eleutheria* and then *En Attendant Godot*, which was completed in January 1949. He remained in close correspondence with Duthuit, discussing the composition of *Godot* and translating articles for *Transition*. Working on Duthuit’s magazine drew Beckett back to discussions of the painting of Bram van Velde, which were expressed in two long letters written in March 1949. The first opened with Beckett’s aforementioned comparison between his own box-like spaces and the “paradise-space” of van Velde. His attempt to represent this space is betrayed, to Beckett’s eye, by the body parts that “you can see emerging, five or six times in a year, unwanted, a hand, a shoulder, an eye, reaching imploringly towards the grasp that he has not been able to secure.” What this depicts is “the beauty of attempt and failure, instead of the kind, so calm and even gay, that I claim haunts me...because of this fidelity to the prison house, the refusal of any probationary freedom.” This letter shows a realization that the art of failure that Beckett is looking for ultimately cannot be realized in painting, and towards its conclusion, he admits to Duthuit that he has begun again to “talk about me.” The letter ends with Beckett describing himself being “in front of a blank page...see[ing] a little better what has to be done, and by what means. It will be a boundary work, a passage work, in which as a result the old rubbish can still be some use, while the dying is going on. A long slow fading.”¹¹⁸ From a discussion of painting, then, Beckett suddenly shifts to proposing a new “work” of his own, a “long slow fading” which refers back to his old “rubbish,” one slipping from narrative boundaries to passages – a proposal which sounds like what would come to be the opening of *The Unnamable*. Duthuit’s reply to this letter was to try again to prompt Beckett “to write something about Bram,” but once more Beckett could

¹¹⁷ Beckett, “Watt Notebooks,” Notebook 7, 219.

¹¹⁸ 2 March 1949, Beckett, *Letters 2*, 129–132.

not resist slipping into writing about a possible new phase of his own work.¹¹⁹ After torturously attempting to theorize a form of “expression in the absence of relations of whatever kind,” Beckett concludes by dismissing his need for “watertight theories” for practice, invoking instead an “unintelligible, unchallengeable need to splash colour on it [a canvas], even if that means vomiting one’s whole being.” Beckett also compares his dissatisfaction with van Velde’s painting by comparing himself to another of his creatures: van Velde’s painting now leaves him “as cold as Malone.” The letter ends with Beckett again returning to his own writing: “I am no longer capable of writing in any sustained way about Bram or about anything. I am no longer capable of writing *about* [italics original]”. Yet this is exactly the kind of expression that Beckett is trying to articulate; impossible in painting, it might be possible in his own writing. Beckett’s inability in these letters to theorize about van Velde’s painting and his rejection of the task of criticism prompted new possibilities for his own writing, making him see a blank page, and what is to be written on it. As Beckett concluded this letter, “bear in mind I who hardly ever talk about myself talk about little else.”¹²⁰

Two weeks after this letter, on 29 March 1949, Beckett began to write in French the text that would become *The Unnamable*. It was composed in two notebooks that together make up the first autograph draft. The first draft of the opening paragraph, although longer, contains both the opening questions: “Où maintenant, Qui maintenant?” added on the inside flyleaf of the first notebook, and the closing declaration: “Cependant je suis obligé de parler. Je ne me tairai jamais. Jamais.”¹²¹ Aside from this opening, the first draft is remarkably close to the published French text, with

¹¹⁹ 5 March 1949, quoted in Beckett, *Letters 2*, 143.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 139–141.

¹²¹ Samuel Beckett, “L’Innommable Notebooks,” 1949–1950, Notebook 1, 1, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, box 3 (folder 10); box 4 (folder 1). Further citations, of notebook and page number, will be in main body of the text, followed by the corresponding page number in the published English edition.

only minor revisions in a second draft. Therefore, the early months of composition can be correlated quite closely with the composition of “Three Dialogues” that Beckett was undertaking at the same time in correspondence with Duthuit. The early parts of *The Unnamable* that Beckett composed in April and May show traces of the concerns of the “Three Dialogues.” *The Unnamable* opens with the speaker sitting in the dark, “tears stream[ing] down my cheeks from my unblinking eyes.”¹²² He is forced to see, but his tears make this vision embodied, limited, and circumscribed: “I only see what appears immediately in front of me, I only see what appears close beside me, what I best see I see ill” (7). This “ill” seeing represents the inverse of the “possessiveness” of perspectival space that “B.” in “Three Dialogues” would decry as hypocritical in “the notebooks of Leonardo who, when he speaks of *disfazione*, knows for him not one fragment will be lost.”¹²³ The opening of *The Unnamable* continues the *Trilogy’s* running campaign against the abstracted space of perspective, making the claim for a limited, ill-seeing vision. But even this limited seeing quickly degenerates; his fixed eyes “must be as red as live coals” (11). His eyes, however, are something of which he is certain: “I, of whom I know nothing, I know my eyes are open, because of the tears that pour from them unceasingly” (14). This faintly secure knowledge of seeing contrasts with the speaker’s attitude towards his voice: “[i]t issues from me, it fills me, it clamours against my walls, it is not mine” (18). In the manuscript, this passage continues: “[comment?] je ne peux pas l’arrêter, [comment?] je ne peux pas l’empêcher, de me déchirer, de me secouer, de m’assiéger” (“Notebook 1,” 36). In the English text, this was rendered: “I can’t stop it, I can’t prevent it, from tearing me, racking me, assailing me” (18). The choice of “empêcher” in the French deploys a central term in Beckett’s thinking on painting, the “empêchement” lifted from Proust that was initially seen in the work of Bram van Velde. This inability to

¹²² Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, ed. Steven Connor (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 3. Further citations will be in the main body of the text.

¹²³ Beckett, *Disjecta*, 141.

“empêcher” or prevent the voice contrasts it with the realm of vision and painting. This section of the text was written before 20 May 1949 (dated on “Notebook 1,” 41), and a letter to Duthuit written on 26 May shows that Beckett was thinking about his earlier theories of “empêchement” at this time. After receiving a first draft of Duthuit’s contribution to “Three Dialogues” in which Duthuit alluded to his earlier articles on the van Veldes, Beckett wrote “the only thing...worth keeping” from his earlier pieces was “the *painting/preventedness* motif immediately retracted, smartened up, its hair parted as neatly as a young arse”; or in the original French: “le motif peinture empêchement.”¹²⁴ The same letter also responded to Duthuit’s attacks on perspectival space, but while Duthuit aimed to replace this with truth to the medium, “the very conditions of painting,” Beckett disagreed, writing that he would rather “die of starvation.”¹²⁵ As Alys Moody has argued, in “Three Dialogues” Beckett uses “the figure of starvation in the promotion of a new art without an object.”¹²⁶ The introduction of the trope of starvation is here used to figure Beckett’s withdrawal from and rejection of the medium of painting once writing *The Unnamable* has begun, with painting becoming the object Beckett will now do without.

The dawning realization of the impossibility of Beckett’s demands on painting, which would be so clearly expressed in “Three Dialogues,” was accompanied by an important shift in the composition of *The Unnamable*. In his next letter responding to Duthuit, on 1 June 1949, Beckett expressed his increasing distaste for Duthuit’s theories of art. In response to Duthuit’s description of van Velde’s work as a “window on the future,” inadvertently echoing the association between the window and the painting in *Malone Dies*, Beckett wrote he almost responded with “bile mixed with leucocytes.” In the

¹²⁴ 26 May 1949, Beckett, *Letters* 2, 155; 152.

¹²⁵ 26 May 1949, Beckett, *Letters* 2, 156.

¹²⁶ Alys Moody, “Tasteless Beckett: Towards an Aesthetics of Hunger,” *Symploke* 19, no. 1–2 (2011): 56.

same letter Beckett informed Duthuit: “I wrote the last page of the book I am working on, whereas I am only on my 30th. I am not proud of myself. But the outcome is already so little in doubt, whatever the writhings that lie between me and it, of which I have only the vaguest ideas.”¹²⁷ This “ending” is pasted into the back of the first notebook of *The Unnamable*, a passage opening with: “Ma voix, la voix, mais voilà ce que je l’entends avoir bien,” and ending with “pour bien d’entendre, avant ~~de mourir~~ d’être mort.” (“Notebook 1,” inserted flyleaf 1v; inside back cover). This recalls Beckett’s first description to Duthuit in March that his work would be about a “dying going on.” Yet the confidence expressed in this ending to Duthuit appears to have lasted only a day, for it was crossed out and a passage dated “2.6.49” in the main body of the notebook opens with a possible discovery of a new task: “Curieuse idée, d’ailleurs, et fort sujette à caution, que celle d’une tâche à accomplir, ~~pour~~ avant de pouvoir être tranquille. Curieuse tâche que d’avoir parler de ~~moi~~ soi” (“Notebook 1,” 44). In Beckett’s English translation, this reads: “Strange notion in any case, and eminently open to suspicion, that of a task to be performed, before one can be at rest. Strange task, which consists of speaking of oneself” (22). The French grammatical slip in the manuscript, using “moi” instead of “soi,” suggests the significance of the discovery of “ma voix,” and the passage continues: “N’ayant que ma voix, que la voix, il peut sembler naturel, une fois avalée l’idée d’obligation, que j’y voie une chose quelconque à dire” (“Notebook 1,” 44); “Possessed of nothing but my voice, the voice, it may seem natural, once the idea of obligation has been swallowed, that I should interpret it as an obligation to say something. But is it possible?” (22). “Swallowing” the idea of obligation closely echoes the formulation expressed in “Three Dialogues” that Beckett wished to see in the painting of Bram van Velde “the obligation to express.”¹²⁸ But if that essay ended with a recognition of the impossibility of this obligation being realized in painting, this passage in *The Unnamable* suggests in that in

¹²⁷ 1 June 1949, Beckett, *Letters* 2, 162.

¹²⁸ Beckett, *Disjecta*, 139.

swallowing and accepting this impossibility in writing, a new kind of expression might be realized through the voice. This discovery of a voice coincided with the actual composition of “Three Dialogues” in June 1949, a composition which began with Beckett admitting in correspondence that there could not exist “a painting that is poor, undisguisedly useless, incapable of any image whatever, a painting whose necessity does not seek to justify itself.” What he thought he saw was “really no more than an unprecedented renewal of the relationship, of the banquet.”¹²⁹ The intimacy between these two processes of composition is suggested by the fact that the section of *The Unnamable* that Beckett dated the previous day, 8 June 1949, opened with a rueful admission of being “duped”: “Ne pas été dupe, j’ai la mer à boire. Ne pas été dupe, c’est ce que j’aurais de meilleur, fait de meilleur” (“Notebook 1,” 52); “Not to have been a dupe, that will have been my best possession, my best deed, to have been a dupe, wishing I wasn’t, thinking I wasn’t, knowing I was, not being a dupe of not being a dupe” (25). “Three Dialogues” was completed by the end of June, and Beckett’s rejection of art criticism was complete, leaving the voice of the unnamable temporarily “rejuvenated” enough to begin to tell the story of his family (27).

The attempt to escape seeing, however, would not be so easy, and the opposition between the eye and voice becomes after this opening section one of the main themes of the text. When Worm appears, he is a creature of sound, breath, and movement in contrast to a still gaze. His head grows out of his ear, and “they” observe him through a “little hole” (70). But he too is given a “great wild black and white eye, moist, it’s to weep with” (74-5), an eye which is “hard of hearing” (76). A remarkable drawing in the manuscript during this section dealing with Worm illustrates the struggle to escape from the eye. Page 40 of the second notebook opens “toujours été le cachot,” corresponding

¹²⁹ Duthuit, 9 June 1949, Beckett, *Letters* 2, 166.

to the passage in the English text where Worm contemplates his punishment: “They’ll clap me in a dungeon, I’m in a dungeon, I’ve always been in a dungeon.” In this dungeon, “open eyes” return while the prisoner sleeps, and gaps appear: “it’s the voice stopping, it’s the voice failing to carry me, what can it matter, perhaps it’s important, the result is the same” (85). At this point in the manuscript, four repeatedly crossed out lines suggest an impasse in composition, with the crossed out section concluding in a little drawing of what looks like a small body in a circle. On the facing page is drawn the only major drawing in the manuscript: a depiction of a homunculus trapped inside the head of a creature with eyes and a shriveled, tentacular lower body (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Drawing by Samuel Beckett in the manuscript of *L'Innommable*, Notebook 2, page 41. © The Estate of Samuel Beckett. Image by permission of the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

The failing of the voice in the text, leading to an impasse in composition, leads to a very literal re-emergence of vision conceived as a form of imprisonment, echoing the art of confinement that Beckett used to describe the painting of the van Veldes, but from which *The Unnamable* is now attempting to move beyond. The text after the crossed out section continues the theme of visual imprisonment: “mais ne compte pas être exceptionnellement. Ah résolutions. Ils m’ont ~~????~~ ^{enferme} ici, maintenant ils essaient de me faire sortir, pour m’enfermer ailleurs” (“Notebook 2” 40). “They shut me up here, now they’re trying to get me out, to shut me up somewhere else, or to let me go, they are capable of putting me out just to see what I’d do” (85). Once this prison is described, the voice continues, restoring once more the text’s compositional flow.

This homunculus drawing associates vision in *The Unnamable* not only with the terms of Beckett’s art criticism but also with an earlier philosophical concern: Descartes. The allusion here is not textual so much as pictorial. Descartes’s mind-body dualism coupled with his physiology notoriously led to the positing of a homunculus inside the brain located at the pineal gland. Beckett owned an anthology of texts by Descartes, *Descartes: choix de textes*.¹³⁰ It contained illustrations of Cartesian physiology which show the problem of the Cartesian homunculus: the eyes receive rays from a object through the cornea, are refracted on to the retina, and then are transported and emitted to the pineal gland sitting inside the brain (Fig. 3).

¹³⁰ Hulle and Nixon, *Samuel Beckett’s Library*, 268; René Descartes, *Descartes: choix de textes avec étude du système philosophique et notices biographique et bibliographique; 16 gravures et portrait par L. Debricon; préface de Labescat* (Paris: Louis Michaud, n.d).

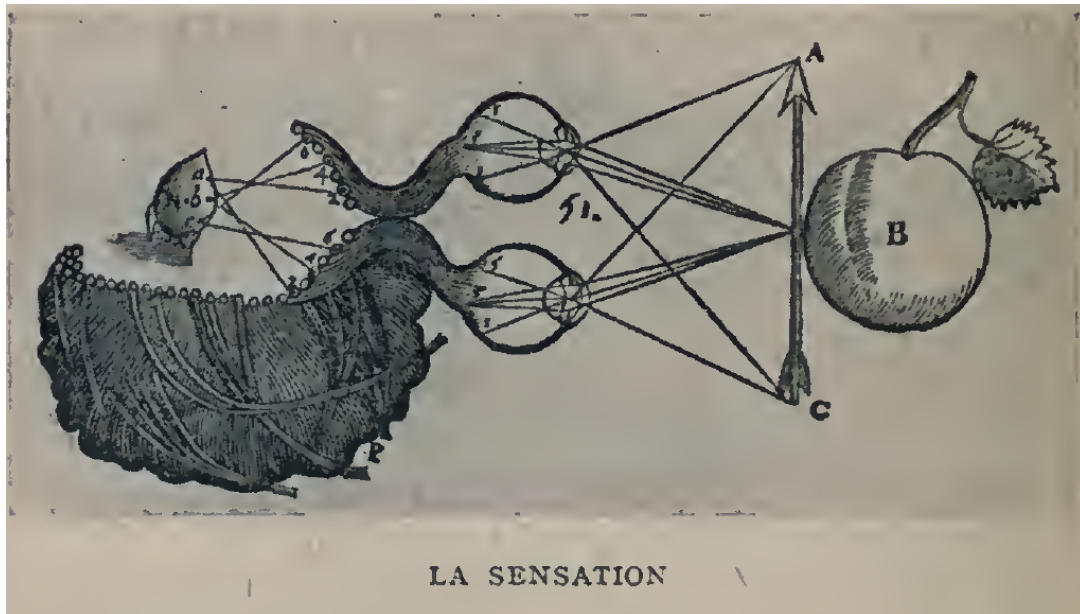


Fig. 3. L. Debricon, 'La Sensation,' in *Descartes: choix de textes avec étude du système philosophique et notices biographique et bibliographique; 16 gravures et portrait par L. Debricon; préface de Labescat* (Paris: Louis Michaud, n.d.), p. 200. Image by kind permission of the Principal and Fellows of St. Anne's College, Oxford.

That Descartes is a shadowy presence behind the thematisation of vision in *The Unnamable* is suggested by an earlier note on the inside cover of the first notebook from Thomas Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind* (1764): "A man that disbelieves his own existence, is surely as unfit to be reasoned with, as a man that believes he is made of glass" ("Notebook 1," back inside cover). The quote comes from the end of a passage in which Reid attacks Descartes's founding resolution to disbelieve in his own existence until he can provide an explanation based on reason.¹³¹ Reid was in fact using Descartes's own image against him: in the first of the *Meditations* (1641), Descartes compares his doubt that he exists to "madmen" who believe that "their heads are made from earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass."¹³² Reid is using the image to criticize Cartesian rationalism and its privileging of vision as the sense of reason, and Beckett does the same in order to illustrate what he is trying to escape from while

¹³¹ Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind: On the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. Derek R. Brookes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 16. My thanks to Dirk van Hulle for this information.

¹³² René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writing of Descartes: Volume II*, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 13.

momentarily at an impasse in the composition of *The Unnamable*. The man of glass is both the subject of philosophical rationalism and a purely transparent, smooth, and fleshless object of vision: the polar opposite, that is, of the corporeal, embodied, opaque creature of the voice that Beckett's text is struggling to produce. There is another pictorial precedent for this homunculus in the diagram of Freud's structure of the mind that Beckett sketched out upon reading "Anatomy of the Mental Personality" in the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1933).¹³³ Beckett's remark to MacGreevy that "Leibniz [is] a great cod, but full of splendid little pictures" shows that however much Beckett came to see systematic philosophy and psychoanalysis as a "cod," he remained drawn to their schematic representations of visuality, just as Beckett's writings on art show him returning again and again to the visual scheme of perspective.¹³⁴ In addition to what Anthony Uhlmann has termed Beckett's use of the "philosophical image," one might call this Beckett's use of the "philosophical picture."¹³⁵ Indeed, this pictorializing of philosophical schemes was one way in which Beckett translated, traduced, and undermined them in order to liberate the "voice" of his fiction.

Liberation, however, is not quite how the opposition between sound and sight concludes in *The Unnamable*. Once Worm departs, sight is once more opposed to sound: "Perhaps it would be better to be blind, the blind hear better"; yet on the other hand "there's great fun to be had from an eye" (89). This oscillation to and from vision continues until the end of the text; for example, it is "curious how this eye invites inspection, demands sympathy, solicits attention, implores assistance" yet quickly the voice claims "[b]alls, all balls, I don't believe in the eye either." It would be a "merciful

¹³³ Everett Frost and Jane Maxwell, "Catalogue of 'Notes Diverse Holo[graph],'" *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 16 (2006): 160.

¹³⁴ 5 December 1933, Beckett, *Letters* 1, 172.

¹³⁵ Anthony Uhlmann, *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

coincidence, when you think what it would be, a world without spectator, and vice versa, brr! No spectator then, and better still no spectacle, good riddance” (91-2). But towards the end of the text, there is a marked change in rhythm. After a sequence of long sentences, the last almost six pages long, wherein the voice is “in words, made of words, others’ words” (104), there follows a sequence where “[s]omething has changed nevertheless” (108). Sprawling sentences are replaced by short “resolutions” in the imperative mood: “Assume...Situat...Carry...Evoke,” and “Overcome, that goes without saying, the fatal leaning towards expressiveness” (107-8). If in these rhythms something indeed has changed, the voice might have moved beyond “B.’s” desire for an expression “that there is nothing to express.”¹³⁶ With this change registered in the distinctly sonic realm of syntactic rhythm, this overcoming implies that vision can be restored, in a delicately tender sentence: “Open up, open up, you’ll be alright, you’ll see” (109). There is a glimpse of reconciliation between seeing and saying through the discovery of a different form of sonic expression, a reconciliation that would lead to the ability to ask, as in the conclusion to “B’s” final monologue: “What is this coloured plane that was not here before.”¹³⁷ That this opening contained one way of going on from *The Unnamable* is shown by the fact that it was the epigraph chosen by B. S. Johnson for his second novel, *Albert Angelo* (1964), a writer who recognized this as a passage out of Beckett’s labyrinth. But the change in *The Unnamable* is not to be: “nothing, I see nothing, well that is a disappointment, I was hoping for something better than that, is that what it is to be unable to lose yourself” (110). It turns out “we must have eyeballs” (124).

Yet *The Unnamable* does not conclude this conflict between the eye and the ear in a banal “aporia, pure and simple” (1). The visual cannot be expelled, because it is “thinking, it’s visions, shreds of old visions, that’s all you can see” (124). One of the

¹³⁶ Beckett, *Disjecta*, 139.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

voice's final visions is a memory of "all the words they taught me": "they were on lists, with images opposite, I must have forgotten them, I must have mixed them up, these nameless images I have, these imageless names" (127). In this conclusion, the mixing and separation of word and image becomes something learned through years of study: it is given a history, rather than being an abstract, timeless condition. And because this relationship has a history, it can have a future. The voice can have one final vision of a "rock": "it's an image, those are words, it's a body, it's not I" (130). The paratactic syntax of this phrase lists out what is to come in Beckett's later works: rocks, images, words, bodies, the "not I." Returning again and again to the impossible relationship between word and image generates new permutations, introducing new terms; but only by remembering what has been learned can this process be kept going on.

Conclusion

The failure of *The Unnamable* to banish the eye from the ear, and the recognition that this failure is a lesson that keeps a process going on, shows that the "zone of evaporation" between literature and painting, present since Beckett's early criticism, is also a zone of generation. Beckett's later prose, from *All Strange Away* (1964) onwards, returns again and again to describing darkness and light, the workings of the eye, and landscapes of rocks and stones. "Ping" (1966) and "Still" (1975) find a way to translate into words the images of stillness and motion that Beckett's early criticism could only describe as "unsaid"; *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1981) takes as its title and focus the very practice of writing badly about what one sees badly. Due to their intense focus on seeing, these late pieces have been called Beckett's "frescoes of the skull"; exercises in "graphic palinody" by a "supreme verbal colorist"; full of "virtual images" and "image-pieces that don't assemble

into anything intelligible.”¹³⁸ Part of what makes the exploration of seeing in these pieces seem so unintelligible is their hermetic, enclosed, self-referential nature. What this chapter has shown is that these late explorations come in the wake of reflections on the relationship between literature and painting that were, in contrast, articulated in response to a specific set of postwar debates, intensely historically self-conscious, and that Beckett’s works derive their aesthetic force from this self-conscious historicism.

These late pieces were also often published in illustrated *livres d’artistes*, adding a different aspect to Beckett’s relationship to visual art in his later years.¹³⁹ One of these books was an edition of *Fizzles/Foirades*, produced by Jasper Johns in 1976. Although Beckett and Johns met a number of times to discuss the volume, Beckett only supplied fragments he had already written, with Johns being responsible for every other element of the book’s design.¹⁴⁰ Yet in spite of not being a true collaboration, Beckett and Johns come close in both using this volume to refer back to their previous work. Johns’s engravings bear little obvious illustrative relation to Beckett’s text. Almost all of the prints are based on one earlier painting, *Untitled* (1972), which itself is part of a series of cross hatch paintings that ironically look back to earlier phases of modernist painting: Monet’s *Water Lilies* and particularly Pollock’s Abstract Expressionism.¹⁴¹ The body parts affixed to the reverse of Johns’s painting were the source for a second group of prints of separated body parts, such as an ear, accompanied by verbal descriptions in both English and French. These partial body objects and their disparate labels remind the viewer of one of Johns’s recurring themes: the limitations of vision, in never being able to obtain a

¹³⁸ James Knowlson and John Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull: The Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1980); Tom Conley, “Samuel Beckett: Color, Letter, and Line,” *Visible Language* XIX, no. 4 (Autumn 1985): 487; 496; Albright, *Beckett and Aesthetics*, 135.

¹³⁹ Lois Oppenheim, “Beckett and the Livre d’Artiste,” in *Publishing Samuel Beckett*, ed. Mark Nixon (London: British Library, 2011), 187–204.

¹⁴⁰ Judith Goldman, “Foirades/Fizzles,” in *Foirades/Fizzles: Whitney Museum of American Art, October 11–November 20, 1977* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1977), 1–4.

¹⁴¹ Rosalind E. Krauss, “Jasper Johns: The Functions of Irony,” *October* 2 (July 1976): 91–99.

full body-image without a reflection, and the difference between embodied vision and language, figured in the floating, isolated ear. The explicitness with which Johns mines his own archive of exploring the relationship between seeing and saying, however, brings to light the way in which Beckett does the same: the first fizzle mourns the impossibility of the voice that *The Unnamable* struggled to find, the second remembers Murphy's first rate legs; the third echoes the ravenous eyes and the figure staring out the window of *Malone Dies*. In these late works, then, the period with which this chapter has been concerned becomes itself historicized through practices of quotation and allusion.

Foirades/Fizzles shows late work of both artists becoming a citation of their own archives: Beckett's of words, Johns's of images. But Johns's archival approach to the image, his probing of the gaps between visual and verbal representation and perception, and his foregrounding of the book as a object in which these gaps can be contained, have their origins in developments in postwar American art of the 1940s and 1950s. Even Beckett, as we have seen, was not immune to the well-nigh world-historical rise in prominence of the artistic activity that took place in New York after the war. The transition from the Abstract Expressionism of Pollock to the ironic, questioning, archival images of Johns and Rauschenberg transformed the course of postwar visual art. It was this precise moment of transition that impacted so strongly on the work of William Gaddis, and his engagement with this moment in postwar art makes his work the subject of the next chapter in the history of the work of art in postwar fiction.

Chapter 3

William Gaddis

William Gaddis's final novel, *Agapē Agape* (2002), opens with a dying writer launching into one last monologue: "No but you see I've got to explain all this because I don't, we don't know how much time there is left and I have to work on the, to finish this work of mine [sic]."¹ That work was one Gaddis himself pursued intermittently for almost forty years, "The Secret History of the Player Piano," which he described in the early 1960s as "a satirical celebration of the conquest of technology and of the place of art and the artist in a technological democracy."² But as the narrator of *Agapē Agape* tries to write while lying on his sickbed, his monologue falters, and he realizes this work could never be finished, for he has devoted his life not to a history, but to a fiction. Not a "pure unadulterated falsehood," but "what Plato calls the lie in words that's only sort of an imitation, a shadowy image that's useful sometimes," like the images of "this honeyed muse painting inferior views of truth" (58-9; 71). Fiction, he realizes, "is the heart of it, the heart of the whole thing...what we've been arguing from the start isn't it? These lies and fictions of the, getting a little confused get my legs straight steady against the, careful? [sic]" (70-1). In his confusion he pulls together his notes on Vaucanson's duck, Michelangelo, Tolstoy, Heidegger, Hawthorne, and Freud; stages a debate between Huizinga and Benjamin on art and reproduction; but nothing in his "thesis" coheres (45).

¹ William Gaddis, *Agapē Agape* (London: Atlantic Books, 2002), 1. Further citations will be in the main body of the text.

² William Gaddis, *The Rush for Second Place: Essays and Occasional Writings*, ed. Joseph Tabbi (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002), 142.

The monologue ends with the narrator looking back to “my first book...the only reality where the work that’s become my enemy got done” (95).

Agapē Agape is a portrait of a writer looking back on a failed career, written by a writer for whom failure was an abiding theme, the subject of one of the few university classes he taught, at Bard College in 1979. In the words of Hal Foster, “as the dying man works to get his estate in order, he identifies with Lear, but he is a High Modernist Lear maddened by a neglectful world gone to the mass-cultural dogs.”³ Other maddened modernist attempts haunt his monologue: “Pound’s cry for the new” (61); Beckett’s definition of *Finnegans Wake* as being “not about something Madam, it is something” (18). The narrator’s closest literary precursor, a decomposing dying writer, might indeed be Beckett’s Malone, and like Beckett’s unnamable, Gaddis’s narrator, “can’t go on and I’m, I am the other. I am the other” (20). These allusions to Beckett are not coincidental. In 1997, one of Gaddis’s editors presumed he knew enough about Beckett’s work to ask him to write a blurb for James Knowlson’s biography, *Damned to Fame* (1996). Although Gaddis stood firm, insisting “I’ve never & don’t do or solicit blurbs,” he looked forward to reading the biography with care, and announced in the same letter that he was finally finishing a project “50 years in the gestation”: *Agapē Agape*.⁴ These echoes of Beckett and modernism more generally also sound in the form of the novel. As Foster writes, “*Agapē Agape* exists on the threshold between the collage technique of many Modernists and some other mode or archive that is not yet adequately theorized.”⁵ This might stand as a comment on Gaddis’s *oeuvre* as a whole.

³ Hal Foster, “Long Live Aporia!,” *London Review of Books* 25, no. 14 (July 24, 2003): 13.

⁴ Alice Mayhew, 21 June 1996, William Gaddis, *The Letters of William Gaddis*, ed. Steven Moore (Champaign, IL; London; Dublin: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), 519.

⁵ Foster, “Long Live Aporia!,” 15.

It is telling that an art critic like Foster was such a perceptive reader of Gaddis's final work, for few postwar American novelists have been as concerned as Gaddis with the double-sided legacy bequeathed to America by modernist art. From the Abstract Expressionism that is the focus of *The Recognitions* (1955), to the Rothko-like paintings that end up decorating corporate America in *JR* (1975), to the sculptures of Richard Serra that were the source for the legal cases in *A Frolic of His Own* (1994), Gaddis has tracked what T. J. Clark has called "the bad dream of modernism" in America: its smooth and often willing assimilation within the institutional structures of neoliberal capitalism and its commodification of culture and subjectivity.⁶ At the same time, Gaddis never quite gave up the belief that exposing this complicity was the test of a truly critical modernism. Those writers who claimed Gaddis as a predecessor share Foster's view, above all Don DeLillo, for whom Gaddis's work was a "revelation," and *JR* one of most "realistic" novels of postwar American life.⁷ For DeLillo, Gaddis was "among the great American novelists...I think of Gaddis as belonging to the great modernist line of writers who want to get everything down, who think of the novel as a kind of warehouse or museum." DeLillo's description of Gaddis's "recycling" style, which "takes tired voices, jargon, self-interest, and makes literary capital out of them," pinpoints how Gaddis takes the collage technique of modernism and uses it to create an archive, museum or warehouse of modernism itself.⁸ Synthesizing modernism and the "untheorized" mode intuited by Foster, this archival poetics replicates on a formal level the historical process it describes: modernism becoming jargon, self-interest, a form of capital, ending up as an archive in the museum, yet for all that unwilling or unable to stop going on and crying for the new.

⁶ Clark, *Farewell To An Idea*, 308.

⁷ Don DeLillo, "On William Gaddis," *Conjunctions*, no. 41 (Fall 2003): 390–91.

⁸ Quoted in Dinitia Smith, "Gaddis in the Details," *New York Magazine*, January 3, 1994, 37.

Cynthia Ozick aptly described Gaddis as suffering from “[t]he Modernist Dream,” his “coming on the scene when it was already too late to be ambitious in that huge way with a vast modernist novel.”⁹ That novel was *The Recognitions* – “my first book...the only reality where the work that’s become my enemy got done” – a novel which Ozick said made Gaddis “famous for not being famous enough.”¹⁰ But when critical success came in the form of National Book Awards, a MacArthur “Genius Award,” and election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Gaddis was awkwardly claimed as a founder of American postmodernism.¹¹ However, to quote Clark once more, postmodernism has now come to be better understood as not the rejection but the “ruins” of those representations that modernism dreamed up of modernity.¹² With the posthumous publication of *Agapē Agape* presenting nothing other than a fictional archive of the dreams and nightmares of Freud and Benjamin, Pound and Beckett, Gaddis now appears better understood, as by Lisa Siraganian, within the context of a “long modernist era” in American literature. Siraganian has argued that Gaddis’s fiction, “habitually labeled postmodern *avant la lettre*...[can] seem to work as a different version of high or aesthetic modernism, one at odds with stereotypical accounts of the modern art object’s independence.” True as this is, as she writes, “*The Recognitions*’s historical contextualization is a work in progress.”¹³

This chapter undertakes that work, in part to show that an account of Gaddis’s relationship to modernism cannot be understood without it. But it also does so to show that the institutionalization of modernism is not the only context of interpretation – and

⁹ Cynthia Ozick and Tom Teicholz, “Cynthia Ozick, The Art of Fiction No. 95,” *The Paris Review*, no. 102 (Spring 1987): 165.

¹⁰ “William Gaddis and the Scion of Darkness,” in *What Henry James Knew and Other Essays on Writers* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993), 220.

¹¹ John Johnston, *Carnival of Repetition: Gaddis’s The Recognitions and Postmodern Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); Gregory Comnes, *The Ethics of Indeterminacy in the Novels of William Gaddis* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994).

¹² Clark, *Farewell To An Idea*, 3.

¹³ Siraganian, *Modernism’s Other Work*, 4; 5; 215 n.35.

of evaluation – for Gaddis’s work. The archival poetics that Gaddis deploys in *The Recognitions* make it one of the most evocative novels of the decade after the Second World War in America, one of the novels of the period most concerned to grasp its contemporary moment and to understand that moment in history. The world of *The Recognitions* is New York at the height of its cultural influence, the world of the Bomb and Communist hysteria, where an entire nation is in psychoanalysis: the world of Kerouac and Burroughs, of Greenberg and Pollock, of the *New Yorker* and *Partisan Review*, of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) and Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963). The book is most “absolutely of the early fifties,” as Jonathan Franzen has written, in that “[p]eel away the erudition and you have *The Catcher in Rye*: a grim winter sojourn in a seedy Manhattan, a quest for authenticity in a phony modern world.”¹⁴ This opposition between Gaddis’s erudition and Salinger’s simplicity manages to be slightly patronizing to both writers. But the comparison holds true, especially in light of Salinger’s 1951 story “De Daumier-Smith’s Blue Story,” in which a narrator relates how easy it is to fake being a modernist artist, the heir to Picasso, only to find that even faking a conviction in art is no substitute for the disenchantment of the world as revealed in front of a shop window. Whilst expressing a similar disenchantment with both religion and capitalist modernity, Gaddis does not share Salinger’s turn to the kinds of mysticism that Amy Hungerford has shown haunts *Franny and Zooey* (1955-57).¹⁵ Instead, Gaddis uses intertwining plots about the forgery of Flemish Masters and contemporary “drip” paintings to understand the disenchantment of the postwar period historically: comparing the beginning and imagined end of technological modernity, citing the modernist techniques of Picasso, James and Barnes as the predecessors of the present, and historicizing the 1950s in a welter of archival detail. As with the Beckett he turned to at the end of his life, and as

¹⁴ Jonathan Franzen, “Mr. Difficult,” *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2002, 104.

¹⁵ Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 8–14.

with all of the writers in this study, Gaddis sees the work of art in his fiction as a way to do the work of history.

In his pioneering survey of postwar American fiction, Tony Tanner placed Gaddis as a founding figure. “The notion that the ordinary individual and the artist alike may be living their lives within an intricate system or pattern of fictions, and the related search for some recognition of non-fictional reality, form a recurrent American theme which no one has explored at greater length than William Gaddis in his novel *The Recognitions*.” According to Tanner, “[t]his amazing one-thousand-page work...could be taken as inaugurating a new period of American fiction in which the theme of fictions/recognitions has come to occupy the forefront of the American writer’s consciousness.”¹⁶ Tanner was more prescient than he knew: in his working notes Gaddis wrote: “The *Recognitions* as a title I like perfectly because it implies the impossibility of escape from a (the) pattern.”¹⁷ This intuition of the novel’s central question – how to recognize the difference between fiction and reality in postwar American society, a difference kept open by the crucial use of “implies” – is also an insight into its central narrative technique: that of the recognition plot and scene. Or rather, Gaddis’s novel explores the different kinds of recognitions a narrative fiction can offer and withhold: those that occur for a character, those that occur for a reader, and the kinds of narrative “pattern[s]” moments of recognition require.

Gaddis, however, also takes his models of narrative recognition from the forms and techniques of visual art: modes of perspective and point of view. In this, as in its

¹⁶ Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970*, 393.

¹⁷ Gaddis’s extensive archive is housed in numbered folders and boxes, in collection MSS049, at the Olin Library Special Collections, Washington University, St. Louis. It mostly consists of non-paginated loose sheets of typescript, collected in numbered boxes and folders. References will be to the folder and box numbers and, where possible, page numbers. William Gaddis, “Reading Notes,” n.d., 85, MSS049 32/206, Olin Library, Washington University, St. Louis.

relationship to modernism and history, *The Recognitions* explores questions central to the aesthetics and social purchase of postwar American fiction by writing a novel not about a writer – although plenty of failed writers populate the novel’s cast – but about a forger of painting. The many aspects of the work of art in *The Recognitions*, a novel which as Ozick writes “matches in plain bulk four or five ordinary contemporary novels,” are the subject of this chapter.¹⁸ It begins by looking at what DeLillo called Gaddis’s archive of modernism, not within the novel, but within Gaddis’s own archive: the letters, notebooks and drafts in which Gaddis constructed his own relationship to literary history. It then moves to discuss the ways in which the Cold War shadows the novel’s themes of forgery and of the contextual determination of meaning, and how the Cold War is figured as an interpretative context which threatens to override modernist claims for the autonomy of the art object’s meaning. Gaddis’s own experience of propaganda and investigation shaped his understanding of Cold War paranoia, an experience written into the novel’s own obsessive exposure of inauthenticity. Finally, the chapter moves to discuss the narrative technique of recognition that the novel presents as pointing a way out of the labyrinth of forgery, if not completely constructing an exit. Matthew Wilkens has written that one of the difficulties in historicizing the formal techniques of *The Recognitions* is its apparent “failure to find a large audience to propagate the advances it did suggest.”¹⁹ This is simply down to a weak understanding of what it means to historicize a technique: seeing this as working only with what is present in the published work, rather than tracing the development of a technique in composition, a development which inscribes a process of historicity into the emergence of that technique. By tracking Gaddis’s study of theories of modernist fiction, and his engagement with visual art, this chapter shows that Gaddis’s work enacts a shift from conflicting narrative perspectives

¹⁸ Ozick, “William Gaddis and the Scion of Darkness,” 218.

¹⁹ Matthew Wilkens, “Nothing as He Thought It Would Be: William Gaddis and American Postwar Fiction,” *Contemporary Literature* 51, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 624.

as a function to explore the consciousness of a character, to conflicting perspectives as a function for the generation of complex plots, the “patterns” that later writers such as Burroughs, Pynchon and DeLillo would use to represent the social systems of postwar American life. In doing so, Gaddis and these writers shift the locus of recognition from a character within a novel to the reader of that novel. Out of Wyatt’s failure as one kind of artist emerges the novel’s claim for recognition in and of fiction as a means to find a place for the novel in the culture of postwar America.

Modernism and the Problem of Authenticity

The Recognitions is a novel of New York in the late 1940s, with the vast majority of the action taking place in the week before Christmas 1949. But it was written elsewhere: in Mexico, Panama, Spain and Paris, eventually being completed when Gaddis returned to Long Island in 1952. Gaddis drew on visual art from the novel’s inception. The first version was a screwball satire called *Blague*, composed in 1947, and Gaddis wrote to his friend Barney Emmart that he wanted to “have George Grosz illustrate it – he has the same preoccupation with nates [buttocks] that I do – grounds enough to ask him.”²⁰ To his mother he explained “I have long liked his work, serious painting and cartooning,” knowledge of which he obtained from reading Grosz’s autobiography, *A Little Yes and a Big No* (1946), and most likely visiting Grosz’s first exhibition in New York while Gaddis was working at *The New Yorker* in 1946.²¹ Gaddis took more than tonal inspiration from Grosz’s “serious painting and cartooning”; they anticipate much of the way the satire works in the novel. Drawings such as *Menschen im Café* (1917) or *Menschen in Kaffeehaus* (1918) are visual models of the teeming proliferation of characters that populate *The Recognitions*. In their distribution of characters evenly over the page, intercut with curves

²⁰ [n.d.] April 1947, Gaddis, *Letters*, 67.

²¹ Edith Gaddis, 3-4 May 1947, *ibid.*, 75.

and angles deriving from Grosz's exposure to Futurism, they also visualize the destabilizing lack of focus induced by the novel's proliferation of characters. This is not to say that Grosz's satire was without perspective: its excoriating depictions of the rise of Fascism in Weimar Germany came, during the 1920s, from a militantly Marxist position. His equation of social fraud with formalism and aestheticism could act as an epigraph for *The Recognitions*: "Perhaps unintentionally, the painter acts as a banknote factory, an equity machine...How does the artist today rise within the bourgeoisie? By fraud!"²² As with Grosz in the Weimar Republic, Gaddis took the art object's commodity status as the starting point for a much larger questioning of authenticity and value.

While travelling through Mexico and Panama in 1947-48, Gaddis was preoccupied with modernist precursors of a more literary kind. A harshly critical 1947 essay on Gertrude Stein by Katherine Anne Porter in *Harper's Magazine*, attacking Stein's egotism, self-promotion and support of the Pétain regime, summed up as her enjoyment of "both the wars," prompted a short correspondence between Gaddis and Porter.²³ Porter's dismissal of Stein for her support of Pétain was in stark contrast to her decision a few months later, as part of the judging committee, to award Ezra Pound the Bollingen Prize, highlighting the inconsistencies and paradoxes that surrounded both the institutionalization and critique of modernism in the immediate postwar years. Gaddis's response to Stein was more ambiguous. He confessed to Porter a long obsession with Stein, "[b]ecause she has worried me...how far can a writer's writer go?" In adopting a style of "[e]verything being equal, unimportant in itself," Porter had accused Stein of suspending all judgment, moral, intellectual and aesthetic. For Gaddis this was an act of "monumental thoroughness"; even if it eventually fell into the "nihilism" of colluding

²² Quoted in Frank Whitford, ed., *The Berlin of George Grosz: Drawings, Watercolours and Prints 1912-1930* (London; New Haven: Royal Academy of Arts; Yale University Press, 1997), 34.

²³ Katherine Anne Porter, "Gertrude Stein: Three Views," in *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katharine Anne Porter* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1970), 268.

with Pétain, it “must have been a fantastically big talent.” “Her absolute denial of responsibility – and this is what always troubled me the most – made so much possible.”²⁴ Gaddis saw Stein as a limit case of modernism’s claim for autonomy: the denial of social and moral responsibility to the world was a condition for formally making “so much possible.” This ambiguous attitude towards Stein is written into *The Recognitions*. The letter Agnes Deigh sends to Doctor Weisgall, apologizing for the false accusation of sexual assault that leads to Agnes’s breakdown, is written in a parody of Stein’s style, signaled with an allusion: “The book I am going to write will be called *Flowers of Friendship*.”²⁵ While Agnes initially represents the corruption of the New York literary world, with her omnipresent Mickey Mouse watch a sign of her embrace of mass culture, her mimicry of Stein’s style opens up a possible moment of redemption. Adopting Stein’s technique of writing in the third person – “Do you understand her doctor?” – enables her to allude to a past of horrific sexual abuse, “[r]aped across three state lines,” thus explaining why a imagined scene of abuse caused her to break down (760). Here, the complexity of Stein’s mode of expression is given an ethical necessity and purpose, one which, however, passes unnoticed by Agnes’s doctors: “for those lines written in frantic haste took time to interpret” (763). This also serves as a warning to the reader not to pass over in haste the novel’s own complex echoes and ideological *détournements* of modernist styles.

The notebooks Gaddis kept while travelling record his study of modernist fiction, a study for which Katherine Mansfield was the most important theorist. Gaddis took notes from Mansfield’s *Novels and Novelists* (1930) that reveal her as a source for his treatment of character, the theme of recognitions, and indeed for the title *The Recognitions* itself. Gaddis copied out one of Mansfield’s most penetrating critiques of the stream of

²⁴ Katherine Anne Porter, 21 January 1948, *Letters*, 84–5.

²⁵ Gaddis, *The Recognitions*, 757. Further citations will be in the main body of the text.

consciousness technique, one which David Trotter takes as marking a “significant disagreement” between Mansfield and her contemporaries.²⁶ From her review of Dorothy Richardson’s *Interim* (1919) Gaddis copied: “(In certain modern authors) the whole arc of writing consists in the power with which they are able to register that faint shock of recognition. Glancing through life they make the discovery that there are certain experiences which are...peculiarly theirs...instead of attempting to relate their ‘experiences’ to life or to see them against any kind of background.”²⁷ According to Mansfield, Richardson’s heroine Miriam receives “as usual, shock after shock of inward recognition...produced by such things as well-browned mutton, gas jets, varnished wallpapers...[which] leaves us feeling, as before, that everything being of equal importance to her, it is impossible that everything should not be of equal unimportance.”²⁸ Mansfield’s criticism is of the sense of undifferentiated narrative attention towards incident, thought and object in *Interim*, a style producing a flowing temporality associated with cinematic recording and dreaming, where anything can enter the narrative frame. Gaddis’s note-taking makes a connection with Porter’s interpretation of Stein, where “everything being equal, [was] unimportant in itself.” The notes of Gaddis’s journal suggest that this approach to narrative attention was contrasted with Mansfield’s, and with Conrad’s. Gaddis copied out the entirety of the “Preface” to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897), lining in the margin that the goal of the novelist was to “make you see,” to “snatch in a moment of courage, from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life,” and to hold up “the rescued fragment before all eyes in the light of a sincere mood.” In the margin to this description of one form of narrative recognition,

²⁶ David Trotter, “The Modernist Novel,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael Levenson, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 90.

²⁷ William Gaddis, “Commonplace Book ‘Panama,’” 1947-1948, 12, MSS049 54/274, William Gaddis Collection, Olin Library, Washington University, St. Louis; Katherine Mansfield, *Novels & Novelists* (London: Constable, 1930), 137–8.

²⁸ Mansfield, *Novels & Novelists*, 140.

aimed at the reader, Gaddis wrote: “Mansfield.”²⁹ The opposition which emerges – which is Gaddis’s own interpretation – is between Stein and Richardson’s narratives of undifferentiated attention and suspended judgment, and Mansfield’s and Conrad’s narratives where plot and story are shaped around a pivotal “moment” of “recognition,” rescued from the flow of time, and communicated to the reader.

Yet Mansfield’s concern with “recognition” in fiction is more complex than it first seems, for it is also a comment on her own writing. “A Dill Pickle” (1917) opens with Vera recognizing a past lover in the “‘special’ way” he peels his orange, and “[h]e must have felt that shock of recognition in her.”³⁰ However, the story fails to live up to the expectation that the reader will gain access to the complex of associations that made up this moment, alternating between the disastrous meeting between Vera and her lover, and her memories of the past. It also undercuts narrative expectations, placing the recognition scene that traditionally concludes a plot at the opening of a story. Short as it is, the story plays self-reflexively with an association between narrative and psychological recognition in fiction. As with the inexplicable feeling that is the subject of “Bliss,” or the ellipses that conclude “Prelude,” Mansfield’s stories foreground the absence of scenes of narrative recognition in order to present, as in “Prelude,” a “false self.”³¹ In *The Recognitions*, what Gaddis took from Mansfield was this association between the lack of moments of narrative recognition and the exposure of false, inauthentic, and forged subjectivity. As with Stein, Gaddis’s reading of Mansfield is archived into *The Recognitions*, with a quote from Mansfield about the soul being “set before its Maker, hatless, disheveled and gay” referenced three times, each time ironically plagiarized and

²⁹ William Gaddis, “Record Notebook on *The Recognitions*,” 1948, 35–9, MSS049 54/248, William Gaddis Collection, Olin Library, Washington University, St. Louis.

³⁰ Katherine Mansfield, *The Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield, 1916-1922*, ed. Gerri Kimber and Vincent O’ Sullivan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 98.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 91.

misunderstood (125; 304; 716). It was a symptom of the highly gendered construction of the mid-century modernist canon that rather than responding to such textual allusions, *The Recognitions* was long dogged with the shadow of Joyce's influence, no doubt in part due to a jacket blurb by Stuart Gilbert calling the novel the American *Ulysses*. Gaddis's reading notes validate his repeated claim not to have read *Ulysses*: in a list of potential books to read, unlike *Portrait*, it was not crossed off.³² Against his despised "blurbs," Gaddis's archive reveals the far more diverse and complicated lines of modernist influence that shaped his work, and the postwar novel more generally.

Gaddis was preoccupied with the legacies of visual and literary modernism when he began *The Recognitions* in 1947-48, but its long period of gestation only saw it finished in 1954. This led to the quirk of literary history that Gaddis had appeared as the model for a character in two novels before he had completed his own. In Chandler Brossard's *Who Walk in Darkness* (1952), Harry Lees, nostalgic for the 1920s, is writing an "exposé" of the present that is also about the "end of the Renaissance."³³ Gaddis was also the source for Harold Sand in Jack Kerouac's *The Subterraneans* (1958), written in three days in 1953. Sand is "a young novelist looking like Leslie Howard who'd just had a manuscript accepted and so acquired a strange grace in my eyes," always "chattering about every tom dick and harry in art."³⁴ Aloof, erudite, and bookish, Sand is an outsider to the subterraneans of the Beat generation. This masked appearance allows Gaddis's novel to be understood as in part a reaction to Beat writing, one mediated through the very different attitudes taken by Gaddis and Kerouac to postwar American painting, and the very different interpretations they had of the aesthetic ideologies of that painting.

³² William Gaddis, "Spain Notebook," 1945-1950, 138, MSS049 55/249.1, William Gaddis Collection, Olin Library, Washington University, St. Louis.

³³ Chandler Brossard, *Who Walk in Darkness* (London: John Lehman, 1952), 25; 74.

³⁴ Jack Kerouac, *Pic; The Subterraneans* (London: André Deutsch, 1973), 208; 217.

While the influence of jazz on Kerouac's prose is undeniable, Kerouac also theorized his "spontaneous prose" through analogies with painting. In 1957, Kerouac declared that one of the "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" was that "[t]he object is set before the mind, either in reality, as in sketching (before a landscape or teacup or old face)." This "sketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, *blowing* (as per jazz musician) on subject of image."³⁵ In a letter that same year Kerouac retrospectively placed the spontaneous sketch at the origins of Beat writing, telling Ed White "you started a whole new movement of American literature (spontaneous prose & poetry) when (1951) in that Chinese restaurant on 125th street one night you told me to start SKETCHING in the streets...And how in Dickens did you know always I wd. become painter somehow?"³⁶ The "spontaneous brush stroke" is equated with a literary poetics of non-revision, and the injunction: "Never afterthink to 'improve' or defray impressions," a poetics whose iconic artifact is the original scroll of *On the Road*.³⁷ Non-revision was the mark of a true genius, exemplified in painting by Jackson Pollock: "Artists of genius, like Jackson Pollock, have painted things that have never been seen before. Anybody who's seen his immense Samapattis of colour has no right to criticize his 'crazy method' of splashing and throwing and dancing around."³⁸ The original scroll and the drip painting: the totems of the authentic postwar genius.

Spontaneity, originality, authenticity, and the work as the secondary record of the primary but inaccessible moment of inspiration: the neo-Romanticism that joins Kerouac's theory if not practice of writing with Pollock's work is clear. This was

³⁵ Jack Kerouac, "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," in *Good Blonde & Others*, ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1993), 69.

³⁶ Ed White, 28 April 1957, Jack Kerouac, *Selected Letters 1957-1969*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Viking, 1999), 30.

³⁷ Kerouac, "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," 70.

³⁸ "Are Writers Made or Born?," in *Good Blonde & Others*, ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1993), 77.

diametrically opposed to Gaddis's own emerging poetics of the archive, quotation, and allusion. The opposition is sharpened by the appearance of Pollock and Abstract Expressionist painting within *The Recognitions*. Pollock is referenced towards the end of the novel, when the action returns to Paris in the spring of 1950. "On the terrace of the Flore," the fashions of the year are catalogued: "Anyone could have seen it was *Partisan Review* she was reading"; "a passably dressed man" – who can only be Sartre – "had compounded a new philosophy"; a voice interjects: "And you know how he paints them? He climbs up a ladder with a piece of string soaked in ink, and he drops it from the ceiling onto a canvas on the floor" (938; 939; 940). While not an absolutely exact description, Pollock's use of a ladder in composing his drip paintings was widely advertised in the media from 1948 onwards.³⁹ When asked in 1982 whether *The Recognitions* was intended as an "attack on modernism in art," Gaddis responded "[t]hat was not my purpose...[but] abstract expressionism...seems part of the disorder."⁴⁰ The interpretation of Pollock's technique has been (to put it mildly) one of the most contested grounds in the historiography of modern art, the test case on which any definition of modernism must be defined.⁴¹ Gaddis's knowledge of the formation of these debates was informed, as the Parisian allusion suggests, by *Partisan Review*. The journal is a recurring presence and central archival intertext in the novel: Catherine Carver, Gaddis's editor at Harcourt Brace, was also an editor of *Partisan Review*, as is the character Don Bildow (105). Correlating the dates, the issue being read on the terrace of the Flore included a series of articles by William Barrett declaring nothing less than "The End of Literature" in Paris due to the fact that the city had capitulated to "[c]ommunism

³⁹ Peter Kalb R., "Picturing Pollock: Photography's Challenge to the Historiography of Abstract Expressionism," *Journal of Art Historiography* 7 (December 2012): 1–17.

⁴⁰ Tom LeClair, "An Interview with William Gaddis," in *Paper Empire: William Gaddis and the World System*, ed. Joseph Tabbi and Rone Shavers (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 20.

⁴¹ See the summary of positions collected in Francis Francina, ed., *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2000).

and communist ideology.”⁴² The placing of an allusion to Pollock among the expatriates in Paris ironizes a critical rhetoric that had from its inception framed Pollock in opposition to the decline of French art, and to left-wing politics. Within the longer history of interpretations of Pollock, Gaddis’s focus on “disorder” brings him closest to T. J. Clark, for whom Pollock’s resonance lay in his providing a “relatively stable set of signifiers” for “previously dis-organized aspects of self-representation – the wordless, the somatic, the wild, the self-risking, spontaneous, uncontrolled, ‘existential,’ the ‘beyond’ or ‘before’ the conscious activities of mind.”⁴³ In *The Recognitions*, where all these qualities are under suspicion, the stability of these signifiers is subjected to probing skepticism.

This is pursued in the presentation of an earlier painting, which Otto calls “*L’Ame d’un Chantier*,” Maude translates as “[t]he soul of a singer” (131), and neither, revealingly, gets right: the more accurate translation being either “The Soul of a Building Site” or “The Soul of a Mess.” The painting, apparently done by Max, is described at the first Village party in an omniscient narrative voice:

No one was looking at it. The unframed canvas was tan. Across the middle a few bright spots of red lead had been spattered. The spots in the lower left-hand corner were rust, above them long streaks of green paint, and to the upper right a large smudge of what appeared to be black grease. It looked as though the back of an honest workman’s shirt had been mounted for exhibition, that the sleeves, collar, and tails might be found among the rubble in the fireplace (176).

Later, at the second Village party, Anselm offers another description, just before he castrates himself: “Christ, don’t you know Max by now? Like that shirt he cut up and framed, he called it a painting, ‘The Workman’s Soul?’” (623). In her interpretation of these conflicting descriptions, Lisa Siraganian correctly points out that we never know “whether this ‘honoured’ painting actually is an honest workman’s shirt, a dishonest

⁴² William Barrett, “The End of Literature,” *Partisan Review* XVI, no. 9 (September 1949): 949.

⁴³ T. J. Clark, “Jackson Pollock’s Abstraction,” in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris and Montreal 1945-1964* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 1990), 180.

workman's shirt, a painting of a workman's shirt, or a painting designed to counterfeit a workman's shirt." But in assuming that the painting could allude to either "a Pollock, a Kline, a De Kooning, or slightly anachronistically, an early work of Pop art such as Rauschenberg's *Bed* (1955)," she collapses a distinction between two radically opposed forms of postwar American art, and in doing so, elides what is at stake in the ambiguous presentation of Max's painting as regards the novel's engagement with postwar art as a whole.⁴⁴

This distinction is expressed in the contradictory descriptions of the "canvas" as "unframed" and/or "framed." The absence of a frame, implying the "canvas" really is a workman's shirt, is the condition for its ability to pass judgment on the first Village Party:

Above them all the Worker's Soul hung silent, refusing comment; though the red lead recalled bridges built by horny hands, sexually unlike any that fluttered glasses beneath it now, the spots of rust a heavy male back straining between girders, generically different from any weaving here. For all its spatters of brightness, that canvas looked very tired, hanging foreign and forlorn over the sad garden (185).

If the shirt really is a found object, appropriated from its original context and repositioned in the room, "framed," according to Anselm, by the act of Max as an artist, it truly bears the traces of masculine "heavy hands" and can provide a critically oppositional perspective on the social world of the novel. On the other hand, if the canvas is a Pollock-like painting, which merely looks like a "workman's soul," this critical perspective is lost, and Max is just a cynical artist exploiting the simulacrum of labour for the profit of exchange, and painting is indeed, in Grosz's words, "a banknote factory." But the twist of the screw is that if the work of art is to offer a (dubiously gendered) critical perspective on the social world of the Village, it must give up the assumption that

⁴⁴ Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work*, 119.

the art object's meaning is self-determined; rather it is Max's act of "framing" and recontextualization of a found object in a specific site which gives it oppositional power. If it is a "painting" created by Max, then no-one looks at it while it forges labour- for exchange-value: the autonomous art object is the worst kind of commodity. But if it is a socially critical found object, made art by the nomination of Max, the object itself is made irrelevant in the pursuit of the critique-driven "generic" art of Duchamp, to use Thierry de Duve's term.⁴⁵ Both options available to the art object in the capitalist economy of the New York art market are forgeries of what art could be, and the skill of Gaddis's novel is that neither of these conflicting perspectives are resolvable.

The prescience of the novel is that this crux anticipates to an uncanny degree of precision the debates around "art and objecthood" crystallized by Michael Fried in 1967, but which in retrospect were present from the moment Pollock's painting prompted Greenberg to discern in 1948 "The Crisis of the Easel Picture": the "all-over picture...dispenses, apparently, with beginning, middle, and ending."⁴⁶ In recognizing that the relationship of a work to its physical environment and audience had become a problem for the definition of that work as art, Fried, as Rosalind E. Krauss has written, drove a "theoretical wedge into '60s discourse on art, somehow dividing that period into a *before* and *after* [italics original]."⁴⁷ But Fried's essay only served to spur rather than restrain the art he criticized, and even more perversely, has been taken up as a point of origin for Conceptual Art.⁴⁸ This was because of his seeming lack of awareness of the consequences of what is implied in "Art and Objecthood," but articulated elsewhere:

⁴⁵ Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 1996), 145–165.

⁴⁶ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148–72; Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 221–225; 222.

⁴⁷ Rosalind E. Krauss, "Theories of Art after Minimalism and Pop," in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture: Number 1*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987), 59.

⁴⁸ Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 1991), 29–62.

“Criticism that shares the basic premises of modernist painting finds itself compelled to play a role in its development closely akin to, and only somewhat less important than, that of new paintings themselves.” This self-admittedly “intolerably arrogant conception of the critic’s job of work,” failed to recognize that in a search to secure the possibility of one particular form of critical judgment, such a conception collapses the boundaries it seeks to uphold: those between work and criticism, and those between “art” as something beheld, and art as the product of a propositional linguistic statement.⁴⁹ In this scenario, who decides where art begins and objecthood ends: artist or critic?

What about the novelist? In this case, the novelist chose not to decide. In presenting a superimposed image of an autonomous painting and a critiquing object, both independent from and dependent upon its environmental site and audience, Gaddis presents a model of the relationship of his own novel’s satire to postwar America. In readings of Pynchon and DeLillo, David J. Alworth has proposed that a theory of the “site,” drawn from the writings of Fried and Robert Smithson, offers a way in which postwar art can be used, through analogy, to theorize the relationship between fiction and its represented locale; that is, to explore the question: “Can a novel, in other words, ‘give itself up’ to an ‘environmental context’ to such a degree that it becomes ‘formally determined or directed by it?’”⁵⁰ In *The Recognitions*, Gaddis presents, or perhaps discovers, this problem for himself, focusing on the unstable status of a painting as an object. Otto gives a name to this instability: “Of course, a painter is limited by his materials, isn’t he. I mean there are pigments you can’t just mix together in certain mediums and expect them to bind...Inherent vice, I believe they call it” (181-2). Basil Valentine also sees “[i]nherent vice” as the essence of painting: “no one will insure

⁴⁹ Michael Fried, “Three American Painters,” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 219–20.

⁵⁰ David J. Alworth, “Pynchon’s Malta,” *Post45*, October 10, 2012, <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2012/10/pynchons-malta/>; Alworth, “Supermarket Sociology.”

against inherent vice.” In Old Masters as well as the works of “our moderns,” paint eventually “breaks up” to reveal other layers underneath (234). Revealing an unexpected aspect of the contemporary critical discourse Greenberg had developed on medium-specificity, this “inherent” quality of painting is what enables Valentine’s forgeries, since it enables fakes to be disguised as restorations. It also undoes fantasies of an authentic, because unmediated, gestural expression, for the decay of material changes the meaning of the painted mark over time.

The inherent vice of medium specificity was also explored, at the same time as Gaddis was writing *The Recognitions*, by Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, who like Gaddis were interrogating the difference between the painted canvas and objecthood, and the signification of gesture and expression. In Rauschenberg’s series of *White Paintings* (1950-1), pure white paint on canvas evacuates the claims of the painted mark as an expression, as seen in Pollock and De Kooning; to make the point clearer, Rauschenberg exhibited *Erased De Kooning Drawing* in 1953. The companions to *White Paintings* were a set of pure black paintings, *Untitled* (1951). But these white and black paintings were, if not a forgery, then a plagiarism, or at best a self-conscious repetition of Malevich’s *White on White* (1918) and *Black Square* (1915). Rauschenberg’s self-consciousness about his repetition is shown in the works produced alongside these repetitions. *White on White* (1918) and *Black Square* (1915) are works where the inherent vice of the medium, as Valentine understands it, is most poignantly visible. Intended as the negation of the material world, their surfaces are now cracked and peeling; they have become material, all too material. Rauschenberg made this inherent vice a theme of his painting, thus self-reflexively moving beyond mere repetition: a second black painting *Untitled* (ca. 1951) is painted over newsprint so that the surface intentionally cracks and splits; *Dirt Painting (for John Cage)* (ca. 1953) is simply dirt: the medium is decaying matter.

Close to *The Recognitions*' paralleling of forgery and alchemy, in *Untitled (Gold Painting)* (ca. 1953), the canvas is covered in peeling, flaking, gold leaf and fabric on newspaper. Like Wyatt's forgeries, the inherent vice of painting is the condition for forgery, its transformation into pure gold; yet here too the art work flaunts its status as a banknote factory.



Fig. 4. Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled* ca. 1955; collection SFMOMA, purchase through a gift of Phyllis Wattis. © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. Image by permission of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation and DACS London.

The same year *The Recognitions* was published, Rauschenberg even produced a combine consisting of a shirt spattered with green and rust coloured paint, layered with newsprint and a reproduction of an Old Master painting, called *Untitled* (ca. 1955), bringing the concerns of Gaddis's novel even closer to the work of his contemporaries (Fig. 4).⁵¹ But as revealing as these comparisons are for historically contextualizing Gaddis's interest in painting's inherent vice as a medium, and as a response to modernist painting's claims for autonomy, they also bring out some stark differences. The commodification of the work of art, or more precisely, the use of a simulacrum of labour value in service of exchange value, is the focus of the novel's critique of Max's painting/found object, as is the threat of nominalism: of the status of the art work being defined by Max's act of framing. In this Gaddis and Rauschenberg diverge. During 1956-7, Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns operated as Matson Jones, designing window displays for the Bonwit Teller department store on Fifth Avenue, often using their paintings, later to be sold in art galleries, as back-drops for the department store's luxury commodities. That only nominalism remains to define art once it fully embraces commodity status is shown by Rauschenberg's telegram of 1962 which declared: "This is a Portrait of Iris Clert if I Say So." As Charles Harrison archly observes of this act: "the idea that a work of art achieves its identity as such through the stipulating power of the individual artist is a weak form of the critique of the fetishization of the artist as author."⁵² Of course, the bad dream of modernism, and this is what haunts Gaddis's *oeuvre*, is that this critique is meant to be weak, just weak enough so that its transgression doesn't get in the way of next season's display in the Bonwit Tellers that are the galleries of midtown Manhattan.

⁵¹ The combine is given catalogue number 81 in Susan Davidson and Walter Hopps, eds., *Robert Rauschenberg: A Retrospective* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1997), 112.

⁵² Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language*, 93.

What this bad dream looks like is seen in the poetry of Frank O'Hara, whose New York flâneur persona uses his purchasing power to transform the avant-garde into a series of consumer choices. In "The Day Lady Died" (1959), the speaker proceeds from the bank to buy "a little Verlaine / for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do / think of Hesiod, trans. Richmond Lattimore or / Brendan Behan's new play or *Le Balcon* or *Les Nègres* / of Genet, but I don't I stick with Verlaine."⁵³ In "A Warm Day for December" (1960), the speaker reflects upon "a hydrogen bomb too tiny / to make an eye water" only to "toddle along / past the reverential windows of Tiffany / with its diamond clips on paper bags / street of dreams painterly / Sidney Janis and Betty Parsons." Postwar painting as luxury commodity is simply one more of the "pleasantness distractions of New York"; the poem can at most register its numb inability to comprehend contemporary history in the form of the Bomb, to connect the "microcosm in your macrocosm."⁵⁴ In contrast, when Otto looks into a New York store front, he sees:

Your portrait in oil (a genuine original oil painting) from favorite snapshot, 4 ½ x 5 ½ inch canvas, decorative wooden easel and palette free; a dusty imitation ink-blot; a dusty imitation dog spiral; a talking doll; Blessed Mother, Infant of Prague and Saint Joseph, 24K gold-plated, in pocket-identification case, 25c; Venus de Milo with a clock in her belly...a false face, mounted on another false face; all these, as well as many more durable, beautiful, useful, inspiring things lay stretched before Otto's gaze where he stopped to pin up the sling (485).

Otto is not opposed to these objects: they serve to highlight the plagiarisms of his play, damning by comparison. Shortly before looking in the window, accused of unintentionally plagiarizing Faulkner, Otto thinks he has become a "clay reproduction...[t]o be sold as part of a series, a series of the original, a series that never existed" (462). Unable to recognize his own forgery, Otto sees little relief in either art or consumption. In the shop window, portraits, painting, the ink-blot hope of

⁵³ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 325.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 375–6.

psychoanalysis, the salvation of religion, the classical past: all are collapsed into a indistinct jumble. If there is to be no recognition of the difference between art and commodity, then there will be no “pleasantness distractions of New York.”

Otto is the spectator of both Max’s painting and the junk store front, tying together two scenes in the novel which parallel the interrogation by postwar artists of the status of modernist painting as a locus of original, gestural expression; of its commodity status and exchange value; and of the critical potential of forgery, bought at the expense of truth. As a writer, whose plagiarisms of Mansfield and Faulkner echo Gaddis’s reading notes, Otto brings the stylistic and expressive claims of modernist fiction into the terrain of these critical debates by looping back to Gaddis’s initial reflections on the styles of Mansfield, Richardson, Conrad and Stein. In this, Gaddis followed Greenberg, for whom the literary parallel of the all-over style in painting, which “render[s] every element, every part of the canvas equivalent,” was “*Finnegans Wake* and Gertrude Stein.”⁵⁵ Both fiction and art, in their suspension of judgment and elisions of beginnings and ends, threaten their status as aesthetic works. In classical dialectical form, the response of *The Recognitions* to this crux of postwar aesthetic production is the negation of a negation. It denies the claims of Beat spontaneity and authentic expression, as well as O’Hara’s enjoyment of art as commodity, taking as its subject the teeming mass of forgeries which constitute the social world and form of the novel. New York itself is exposed as an intricate pattern of forgeries, the recognition of which becomes the reader’s task. In doing so, however, the novel discovers a different cause of the compromising of expression, and the obsession with forgery: the Cold War.

⁵⁵ Greenberg, *Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 2*, 224.

Cold War as Context, Forgery as Reproduction

“The book is a novel about forgery.”⁵⁶ This description of *The Recognitions* Gaddis sent to J. Robert Oppenheimer is deceptively simple. The novel is not about one forgery, but an endlessly expanding collection of forgeries: of paintings, plays, novels, and selves. As Gaddis later wrote to an early student of his work, the novel is “in fact in itself...a kind of forgery.”⁵⁷ This is true as regards its use of the Faust plot, signaled from the opening epigraph, a plot also used by Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* (1947) to address the same issues of authenticity, parody, and the legacy of modernist aesthetics. A poem published by Karl Shapiro in 1946 illustrates the resonance of the Faust plot in the atomic age: “expelled / From the Third Reich in 1939,” Faust reappeared “[i]n an American desert at war’s end / Where, at his back, a dome of atoms rose.”⁵⁸ After the Manhattan project, enabled by an influx of German émigré scientists, the Faust plot is recast as the archetypal plot of technological modernity, a recasting which receives its most elaborate treatment in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973). For Adorno, after Auschwitz, Goethe’s *Faust Part II* shows how little the “reason that dominates nature can tolerate anything unlike itself.”⁵⁹ For Marshall Berman, Faust in Goethe’s treatment becomes, from the perspective of postwar theorizations of modernization, the harbinger of both modernizing developer and atomic engineer.⁶⁰ Running across all these postwar interpretations of Faust is the fusion of modernity with the archaic, exposing the irrationality of nuclear technology. *The Recognitions* takes up the postwar Faust myth, but

⁵⁶ J. Robert Oppenheimer, 4 January 1955, *Letters*, 219.

⁵⁷ George Hegarty, 18 September 1978, *ibid.*, 338.

⁵⁸ Karl Shapiro, “The Progress of Faust,” *The New Yorker*, May 11, 1946, 28.

⁵⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature I*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholzen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 119–20.

⁶⁰ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1988), 60–86.

gives it a characteristically recursive twist when Valentine passes information over the phone to a friend on behalf a “Willie” who is writing a “novel”: “*The Recognitions?* No, it’s Clement of *Rome*. Mostly talk, talk, talk...Its been referred to as the first Christian novel. What? Yes, it’s really the beginning of the whole Faust legend” (372-3). Paradigmatic for the novel as a whole, its primary plot source is turned back on itself to be declared a copy of a copy.

Why explain this to Oppenheimer, father of the atomic bomb? “But for having read your recent address at Columbia’s anniversary...I was so *stricken* by the succinctness, and the use of language, with which you stated the problems which it has taken me seven years to assemble and almost a thousand pages to present.”⁶¹ Gaddis wrote that his novel had been summed up when Oppenheimer described the consequences of the period of “radical, formal experimentation” of the arts in the first half of the century, and the parallel revolutions in the sciences: “What is new in the world is the massive character of the dissolution and corruption of authority, in belief, in ritual, and in temporal order. Yet this is the world that we have come to live in...To assail the changes that have unmoored us from the past is futile, and in a deep sense, I think, it is wicked. We need to recognize the change and learn what resources we have.”⁶² This statement of modernity in the atomic era ends with the demand for recognition which is the subject of Gaddis’s novel. But this was also modernity in the Cold War, a war of which Oppenheimer had recently become one of the most high profile victims. In 1953 and 1954 Oppenheimer had been investigated in a bout of anti-Communist hysteria, his national security clearance very publicly revoked. *The Recognitions* contains its own atomic bomber: Charley was in the plane which dropped the bomb on Hiroshima; he ends up a “a publicity agent for the Hiroshima tourist bureau, advertising “Come see that Atom City,” only to

⁶¹ J. Robert Oppenheimer, 4 January 1955, *Letters*, 218.

⁶² J. Robert Oppenheimer, *The Open Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), 135; 141.

eventually commit suicide (578). Oppenheimer's persecution was a consequence of the Cold War obsession with authenticity, and the fear of being unable to tell who or what is fiction or reality: the obsession allegorized into the arts in *The Recognitions*.

The Cold War was present from the novel's inception. In Mexico in 1947, Gaddis wrote to his mother: "I have the idea – which as you know I have had for some time – that war comes soon. And *Blague* must be done before that, concerning itself with Armageddon &c [italics original]."⁶³ When *Blague* was abandoned and *The Recognitions* begun, his attitude towards the Truman Doctrine darkened: "America I have such pity at, such fury at...Barren ignorance is most horrible when it is in power – the picture of the American soldier abroad will never cease to make me shudder. And the prospect of another war, wanting to fight the good fight and not finding it in my country's side, worst of all."⁶⁴ When Gaddis returned to America, the Cold War intruded in a more direct manner upon his writing. From October 1951 to mid-1952 Gaddis worked for the New York Office of the U.S. State Department's Office of International Information and Current Affairs, working for the Voice of America radio service and writing articles for the magazine *America Illustrated*, which appeared in Russian and Farsi. One article, which he called a piece of "propaganda," concerned a 1951 stage adaptation of Melville's *Billy Budd*.⁶⁵ For the adaptors of the play, Melville's story of "good, evil, and the way the world takes such absolutes was material enough for two veterans of a war, a depression, and the moving cold front...This is a morality play and we do not apologize for its being such."⁶⁶ Geraldine Murphy has written that for the "anti-Stalinist modernists" associated with *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* in the late 1940s and early 1950s, "*Billy Budd* became

⁶³ Edith Gaddis, 15 April 1947, Gaddis, *Letters*, 69.

⁶⁴ Edith Gaddis, 29 January 1948, *ibid.*, 87.

⁶⁵ Fred Palmer, [April-May?] 1954, *ibid.*, 215.

⁶⁶ Louis O. Coxe and Robert Chapman, *Billy Budd: A Play in Three Acts. Based on a Novel by Herman Melville* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 57–8.

their object lesson in the danger of innocence.”⁶⁷ In Lionel Trilling’s novel *The Middle of the Journey* (1947), differing interpretations of *Billy Budd* expose, as Trilling claimed in 1975, “the clandestine negation of the political life which Stalinist Communism had fostered among the intellectuals of the West.”⁶⁸ Looking more broadly at the postwar reception of Melville, William V. Spanos has argued that the rediscovery of Melville inaugurated by F. O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* (1941) saw “the harnessing of *Moby-Dick* as such to the global Cold War scenario, the scenario that privileged Ishmaelite America as the symbolic agent of the ‘free-world’ in its self-ordained effort to resist Ahabian communist aggression.”⁶⁹ Gaddis also participated in the Cold War re-writing of Melville, but his recognition that it was Government sponsored “propaganda” betrays a more skeptical and critical intelligence than that of Trilling’s novel. It also betrays awareness of the ways in which the events of postwar history were shaping the act of literary interpretation.

The composition of *The Recognitions* became subject to this Cold War paranoia surrounding the interpretation of texts. In 1952, due to repeated suspicions that it harbored Communist sympathizers, the New York Voice of America office was investigated by the F.B.I.⁷⁰ Gaddis was interviewed by F.B.I. agents, and the Bureau maintained a file on him until the end of the 1980s. The declassified file, obtained by Gaddis for his archive, reveals the extent of his imbrication within Cold War domestic surveillance. After Gaddis applied to work for the Voice of America in August 1951, on 13 September 1951 J. Edgar Hoover personally authorized an investigation of Gaddis as

⁶⁷ Geraldine Murphy, “The Politics of Reading *Billy Budd*,” *American Literary History* 1, no. 2 (June 20, 1989): 377.

⁶⁸ Lionel Trilling, *The Middle of the Journey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), xx–xi.

⁶⁹ William V. Spanos, *The Errant Art of Moby-Dick: The Canon, the Cold War, and the Struggle for American Studies* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 1995), 33.

⁷⁰ Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 67–80.

part of the House Un-American Activities Committee investigation into Public Law 402, and this is what led to Gaddis being interviewed.⁷¹ Gaddis blamed the “*Voice of America* business” on Joseph McCarthy “and the way things can be twisted.” This twisting of meaning was how the Cold War impacted his writing, as shown by a letter to his mother whose self-conscious enactment of interpretive paranoia justifies a lengthy quotation:

As taking things out of their original context (as, as far as this goes, and, as far as, like an idiot, I told the State Dept ‘Special Investigator’ cops could quite easily be done with my work to support their side (I mean this work I’m now on, the Dale Carnegie business for instance; not what I wrote for the State last winter)) is a common and obviously effective ‘trick’, and that’s what propaganda is, you know. I mean falsifying to the extent of not telling the whole story (the way women lie). What advertising is, and that’s what’s risible at this point, that we’re being eaten out from the inside by advertising like no other nation in history (‘selling’) and from the outside by this bullying voice on the radio now.

Good God, maybe Martin Dworkin’s a top-Communist, maybe Bill Haygood is, (this I suppose should be burned, you know how I mean it but those lines ‘out of context’: - Now Mr Gaddis, you do respect your Mother?/Yes sir./ And I would assume that you usually tell her the truth about things which concern you and your affairs?/ Yes sir./ Is it true that you wrote her a personal letter dated 19 february 1953, in which you mentioned the possibility of two men whom you knew and worked with in the State Department being ‘top-Communists’/ Yes sir, but I.../And did you use it in reference to these two men who had been your close associates? But I...

But I...

But I...⁷²

What emerges from the letter’s performance of the paranoia it describes (apart from some crude misogyny) is an anxiety about meaning and context similar to that shown in the treatment of Max’s painting/object. The technique used by the “Investigator Cops” is to remove statements from their original context in order to produce the meanings they desire; but this is the same technique that Gaddis himself is using in quoting from Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) within his novel. The “Cold War” here is not simply the name of a geopolitical period: it is an interpretative practice, one in

⁷¹ William Gaddis, “Gaddis F.B.I. File,” n.d., MSS049, 142/523, Olin Library, Washington University, St. Louis.

⁷² Edith Gaddis, 19 February 1953, Gaddis, *Letters*, 203.

which it becomes almost impossible, in Gaddis's words, to mean "out of context." This effect of the Cold War as a totalizing context has been described by Donald E. Pease as coming from its ability to be "*the explanation* [italics original]," to appear "persuasive without having undergone the work of persuasion": the paradigm of the "Cold War" simply is this contextual determination of meaning.⁷³ The pervasiveness of this effect on the other side of the Iron Curtain will be shown in the next chapter, where in Berger's *A Painter of Our Time*, the words of the ex-poet Lazslo cannot be understood outside of the context of their enunciation in the rituals of Communist Party Politics. As was the case with Gaddis, it was Berger's experience of how Cold War politics had the power to overdetermine the meaning of an art object, in his instance the controversy around the 1952 competition for a Monument for the Unknown Political Prisoner in London, that provided a model for how a similar process could be depicted in fiction. For both writers the impossibility of extracting the art object from the context of political discourse forced a rethinking of modernist claims for interpretative autonomy in the postwar era, and provided a model for their carefully ambiguous fictions.

The "Dale Carnegie" business refers to the inclusion of *How to Win Friends and Influence People* among the self-help books that guide Mr. Pivner in *The Recognitions*. He is the character most susceptible to the advertisements for "Rootiscoola" drinks and "Necrostyle" medication that in his letter Gaddis sees as part of a program of national propaganda. To question Carnegie's propaganda of the self would be to question "that conspiracy of self-preservation known as patriotism" (501). A character lying between the sociological signposts of David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), Pivner, who owns of a "shelf-full" (289) of lifestyle medications, is the American equivalent of the consumers of Stanislaw Witkiewicz's

⁷³ Donald E. Pease, "Moby Dick and the Cold War," in *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, ed. Walter Benn Michaels and Donald Pease (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 113–4.

“Murti-Bing” pills, mentioned at a Village party (569). In Witkiewicz’s dystopian novel *Insatiability* (1930), “Murti-Bing” pills are offered to the populace of Poland in order to quash their ability to resist the invasion of a totalitarian leader from the East. When Czesław Miłosz’s essay on Witkiewicz appeared in *Partisan Review* in 1951, Murti-Bing pills became a symbol of the conformist effects of Marxism-Leninism on postwar Eastern European intellectuals.⁷⁴ Gaddis had read Miłosz’s essay and had dedicated the first 1951 draft of the novel to Witkiewicz, using the closing lines of Miłosz’s essay as an epigraph.⁷⁵ While the implied equivalence in such an epigraph between conformism on both sides of the Iron Curtain would become a common move in the 1960s, most influentially in Herbert Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man* (1964), at the time its subversion appeared to have been a step too far for Gaddis, and after his investigation by the F.B.I. the dedication was removed.

Pivner also consumes guides to art forgery: advertisements for the “*Paint it Yourself Collection* [italics original]” (563), and “THE GHOST ARTISTS...We Paint it You Sign it Why Not Give an Exhibition?” (741). These were lifted by Gaddis from the 13 December 1953 issue of the *Sunday News*, an example of his own archival poetics of re-contextualization. If these advertisements are among the ways in which Pivner suffers the colonization of artistic production by consumer capitalism, then the fact that forgery is just another business of this capitalism means that Wyatt too is subsumed into the logic of consumerism. From his first drawing, Wyatt’s art is tainted by the accusation of forgery. To draw a robin as a child is to take the place of the Protestant God, “the only true creator” (34). Wyatt’s Faustian seduction by Valentine is enabled by Wyatt’s belief in the truth of his forgeries, in the power of a mimesis of a mimesis to transcend history,

⁷⁴ Czesław Miłosz, “Murti-Bing,” *Partisan Review* XVIII, no. 5 (October 1951): 556.

⁷⁵ William Gaddis, “Rough Draft Mss. of The Recognitions,” n.d., MSS049 37/216, Olin Library, Washington University, St. Louis.

and the impossibly polarized field of Cold War artistic production. In contrast, Valentine's historicizing sense threatens Wyatt's theory of forgery: "Most forgeries last only a few generations, because they're so carefully done in the taste of the period, a forged Rembrandt, for instance, confirms everything that that period sees in Rembrandt" (230). Valentine is clear on the difference between an original and a fake. "Forgery is calumny," he accuses Wyatt, "[e]very piece you do is calumny on the artist you forge" (250). The ellipses in Wyatt's response signify what he cannot call his "work": "No it's...the recognitions go much deeper, much further back, and I...this...the X-ray tests, and ultraviolet and infra-red, the experts with their photomicrography and...macrophotography, do you think that's all there is to it?" His work is an attempt to "look with memories that...go beyond themselves, that go back to...where mine goes" (250). This is an important distinction: it is a historicizing approach that enables Valentine to tell the difference between an original and a fake, an ability that Wyatt lacks, which ultimately drives him insane. This suggests his problem, and the problem of inauthenticity in postwar America more generally, lies in a lack of the kind of historical thinking that *The Recognitions* produces through archivally incorporating its present.

Wyatt's belief in transcending history and recuperating the past is opposed to technologies of reproduction: "This...these reproductions, they have no right to try to spread one painting out like this [...] This...my painting...there's only one, and these reproductions, these cheap fakes is what they are, being scattered everywhere" (250). Ironically, Wyatt does not recognize the implications of the fact that he too works from reproductions. Of his studio we are told: "Littered about the room were details of paintings, magnified reproductions of details from Bouts, van der Weyden, van der Goes; and some photographs of such high magnification that few experts could have told whose work they represented, details of brush work" (271). These reproductions recall

Max's latest abstract paintings, based on magnified "fragments lifted right out of Constable canvases" (623). Right to his end, Wyatt sees the test of his work as being equal to "X-Ray pictures," "a Leitz mirror condenser," "a micro extraction apparatus" (874). Among the many ironic misrecognitions that lead to Wyatt's failure as an artist is his inability to recognize his dependence upon the very means of photographic reproductions he claims are destroying art.

Tracking these textual clues shows that while Wyatt fails to achieve a recognition of his own implication within the history of technology, it is a carefully planned aspect of the novel's narrative architecture that the reader can recognize this implication. Wyatt's seemingly antiquarian forgeries are inadvertent engagements with a wider crux of technological modernity: what is the status of painting in a world of mass photographic reproduction? And if Wyatt is an allegory of a writer, then what of fiction's claim to reproduce reality in the postwar explosion of technologically driven mass culture that permeates *The Recognitions*? Gaddis's theories on the relationship between art and technology, the impact of the Cold War on this relationship, and how fiction is impacted by these changes, are alluded to by Benny's friend: "I've written a history of the player piano. A whole history. It took me two years, its got everything in it" (579). This is an early version of the same project that obsesses the narrator of *Agapē Agapē*: "the place of art and the artist in technological democracy." Work on the player piano project had begun the same time as *The Recognitions*, in 1948, as Gaddis informed Katherine Anne Porter, and an extract appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in July 1951 as "Stop Player. Joke No. 4."⁷⁶ If that unfulfilled project took music as its focus, then *The Recognitions* explores the same questions in relation to visual art. But as with the history of the player piano, the novel's forgeries of paintings from the dawn of modernity place this emerging

⁷⁶ Katherine Anne Porter, May 1948, Gaddis, *Letters*, 107.

postwar mass culture in a *longue durée* perspective; this novel of patterns takes its place in a theory of larger historical patterns.

In Gaddis's notes for the history of the player piano, kept while composing *The Recognitions*, the player piano's development, dominion and decline spans the transition from the industrial to the digital age. In a summary of the project written once *The Recognitions* was completed, the player piano is credited with introducing "(1) punched-roll programming of 'information,' which is the basis of modern automation communications and control systems, and (2) the possibility of 'creative participation' in artistic endeavor."⁷⁷ But the true "secret history" of the rise and fall of the piano player between 1876 and 1929 is its embodiment of the onset of the "application of systems designed to accomplish tangible and predetermined ends, to such intangible goals as those of the arts which are determined only in their accomplishment." From Gaddis's postwar perspective, "mechanization itself was not that era's real contribution to our modern technology, but rather the related but more pervasive principle of organization and programming manifest today in the anxious concern with patterns in automation and cybernetics, mathematics and physics, sociology, game theory, and, finally, genetics" (143).⁷⁸ With this thesis of the goal of modernity as the management of risk, Gaddis anticipates the influential theories of postindustrial society developed by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Niklas Luhmann, themselves products of a shift of focus in theorizations of modernity away from mechanization to the production and management of information.⁷⁹ Unlike these sociologists, however, Gaddis's interest in the history of the player piano lies in what happens when the drive towards the management of risk is

⁷⁷ Gaddis, *The Rush for Second Place*, 142.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁷⁹ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992); Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990); Niklas Luhmann, *Risk: A Sociological Theory* (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 1993).

applied to “the areas of the arts where truth and error are interdependent possibilities in the search for unpredetermined perfection.” Instead of a sociological dissertation, Gaddis declares that “only satire can project the pathos of a society at the peak of its development seeking...to demonstrate that the illusion of intimacy and proficiency is but the first step toward alienation” (143).⁸⁰

Novelistic satire is Gaddis’s *métier* and an earlier outline of the project, published in 1951 while writing *The Recognitions*, shows how the novel is a development of these ideas in fiction. “Roused by the steam whistle, democracy’s claims devoured technology’s promise, banishing failure to inherent vice where in painting it remains today.”⁸¹ Painting becomes the art form which can show most fully the effects of technological modernity precisely because it has become an obsolete “failure”: inherently imperfect, risk cannot be eliminated from even the most mechanical of painting techniques, as Warhol’s silkscreens programmatically show. Gaddis’s attraction to the failure of painting is a socio-historical version of Beckett’s more aestheticized valorization of Bram van Velde’s art of “failure”: for both writers, the failure of painting in postwar modernity is what makes it an aesthetic model for their fiction. Gaddis’s research notes on the player piano project are clear on the relationship of this understanding of painting to his novel, and the critical potential of this understanding in the era of the Cold War. Again foreshadowing Marcuse, he proposed the “[c]oalescence of US/USSR in Soviet NAM’s dialectical materialism; [and] total organization (technology and collective society).” Both societies were engaged in the “obliteration of arts” through “[b]oredom and entertainment; USSR theory to practice; US practice to theory.” Both societies were intent on the “[e]limination of the artist – and forgery /// Elimination of failure” and he wondered in parentheses “(then what of painting?).” However, the more dialectical

⁸⁰ Gaddis, *The Rush for Second Place*, 144; 143.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

attitude that would appear in *Agapē Agape* is discernable in these notes: “Art the parent of technology; ie boredom parent of entertainment (Schopenhauer).” Both were aimed at “[r]uling out failure.” At the end of these notes he concluded “mention THE RECOGNITIONS.”⁸² These notes make clear what is at stake in presenting Wyatt’s failure to paint in a programmed postwar society, and why painting specifically was of such interest to Gaddis. Painting’s “inherent vice,” its redundancy and obsolescence in comparison to technological reproduction, is what makes it a source of critical resistance to a technological modernity organized around the elimination of risk and failure. If painting can only fail in comparison to technological reproduction, it can fail as dramatically as possible to expose the blind spots of technological modernity. However, this is not a frozen opposition: Gaddis’s dialectical view of history, like that of his view of the relationship between the “US/USSR”, sees art and technology repeatedly producing and negating each other.

Given this exploration of the relationship between art and technology between 1876 and 1929, the years of high modernism, it is unsurprising that in *Agapē Agape* Gaddis belatedly recognized Walter Benjamin’s anticipation of these concerns. Benjamin’s work brings out the full significance of Wyatt’s dependence upon photographic reproductions. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” Benjamin distinguishes technological reproduction from a “reproduction made by hand, which it [the authentic work] generally brands a forgery.” But technological reproduction in the form of photography “can bring out aspects of the original that are accessible only to the lens (which is adjustable and can easily change viewpoint) but not to the human eye...to record images which escape natural optics

⁸² William Gaddis, “PP Out’ (1950s); Notes on ‘Player,’” n.d., MSS049 119/419, Olin Library, Washington University, St. Louis.

altogether.” This is one form of the “optical unconscious” the camera reveals, where “a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious.”⁸³ Within the framework of Benjamin’s essay, Wyatt fails to recognize his “optical unconscious,” the dependence of his forgeries by hand on the enlarged and microscopic worlds revealed by the camera eye. But Gaddis’s novel also exposes the shortcomings of Benjamin’s theory in relation to the postwar period. For Benjamin, “the social basis of the aura’s present decay” was the desire of “the masses” for “overcoming each thing’s uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction,” the desire of a perception which “extracts sameness even from what is unique.” Thus “is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing significance of statistics.”⁸⁴ In this equation, Miriam Hansen observes an abandonment of Benjamin’s “distinction between similarity and sameness,” therefore “collapsing the mimetic faculty into the manifest, ‘obvious’ iconicity of photographic representation.” Generally in Benjamin’s writings, the experience of “similarity” is the product of the mimetic faculty’s ability to trace non-sensuous affinities between humans and nature, and between times and places, and is the ground of the experience of the aura; it is opposed to a mistaken notion of “sameness” as identity, which in the sphere of vision, photographic reproduction had collapsed into iconicity. As a consequence, “Benjamin splits off the element of similarity from his concept of mimesis and attaches it, as ‘sense of sameness,’ to the masses; he further positivizes it by placing it in diametrical opposition to the aura...he also makes the discontinuities of memory and history congeal into the linear presence of polytechnical education, popular expertise and a pseudo-scientific noting of ‘testing’ which cannot be dissociated from its industrial-capitalist origin.”⁸⁵ In other

⁸³ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version,” 253–4; 254; 266.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 255–6.

⁸⁵ Miriam Hansen, “Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: ‘The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,’” *New German Critique*, no. 40 (January 1987): 202.

words, Benjamin sees technological reproduction as facilitating the inability to distinguish “sameness” from “similarity,” and posits this as congruent of the statistical organization of a programmed society.

In *The Recognitions*, the distinction between “similarity” and “sameness,” which first appears as the theological distinction between *Homoiosuian* and *Homoousian* (9), or whether Christ and God are of similar or identical substance, is the distinction upon which Wyatt claims to found his practice as a forger. His forgeries are identical with the originals: for him “[t]here’s only one” painting, to which his forgeries return (250). But this belief in the identity of his forgeries with their originals depends, as we have seen, upon the use of photographic reproductions, and a belief in their iconic “sameness” which he in turn copies. Ironically, what Wyatt believes is a form of resistance to a programmed society is premised upon its mechanical basis. In light of this, painting’s “inherent vice,” its material revelation of its “similarity” as opposed to iconic “sameness,” and Wyatt’s ultimate failure to forge, are means by which flaws are introduced in a system which threatens total control.

As *The Recognitions* progresses the distinction between Wyatt’s forgeries and the images produced by postwar mass culture becomes increasingly tenuous. If his forgeries are enabled by the optical unconscious of technology, then what is repressed repeatedly returns in the details of the novel’s narrative. Both Pivner’s painting by numbers and Otto’s glance in a junk store window are moments which present the equivalence of Wyatt’s forgeries and the techniques of postwar capitalism. When directly confronted by Ellery, the advertising executive, and told that his forgery skills would be perfect for Ellery’s new campaign for “*Mother of God* [italics original]” pain relief, the impossibility of admitting the repression is registered in the narrative discourse through the abrupt

disappearance of Wyatt (370). Ellery and the television producer Morgie are ushering in “[t]he Age of Publicity,” whose equally psychoanalytically inflected strategy is “sublimation, see? This is the whoring of the arts and we’re the pimps, see?” (736). The recurring advertisements for *Necrostyle* products reveal the goal of postwar commodification as the control of sexual and biological risk: “*Necrostyle*, in the vanguard of modern civilized living...*Necrostyle*, the wafer-shaped sleeping pill, no chewing, no aftertaste. *Zap*, the wonder-wakener. *Cuff*, its on the cuff. And *Pubies*, the newest...[italics original]” (737-8). Advertising and television have become the new avant-garde. In the novel, 1949’s biggest television hit in New York is a live feed of a suicide attempt: Gaddis anticipating by a decade Warhol’s *Death and Disaster* series as well as late twentieth-century reality television.

This is the novel at its most prophetic, inaugurating the novelistic investigation of postwar media culture by writers like Burroughs, Acker, and DeLillo. But like these writers, for all that Gaddis engages with postwar visual art and culture, it is the status of novelistic fiction in relation to this world that is his concern. Within *The Recognitions*, Wyatt’s failure to recognize his dependence upon technological reproduction and his attempt to deny the historicization of his work leaves him, ultimately, using the same strategies as Dale Carnegie and *Necrostyle*. In the novel’s convoluted and carefully constructed plot, the only guarantee that his very first forgery, that of his father’s Bosch table-top, was not a copy of a copy, is based on the testimony of Basil Valentine (689). The only assurance, in the terms of the novel’s alchemical symbolism, that there was “gold to forge,” or that the difference between original and reproduction in the visual world can still be ascertained, depends on the word of one of the novel’s novelists. Valentine is planning to “use” Wyatt “in this novel,” and it is Valentine who is helping “Willie” write his own novel about recognitions (252). These self-reflexive moments are

pointers suggesting that the structure of the novel is that structure from which the kinds of recognitions that cannot be achieved by characters in the novel can be induced in readers of the novel. By including a character who is in the process of transforming the events of the novel the reader is reading into a novel that sounds a lot like that novel, *The Recognitions* draws attention to its own status as a novel, and thus to the fact that it will be read. This is at a level above the “implied reader” Wolfgang Iser posits as implicit in any fictional text, whose central experience is the “discovery” of the meaning of that text through its “patterns” of communication.⁸⁶ Gaddis’s novel hypothesizes within itself a kind of future reader who will not be part of the fictional world of the novel, who will experience not a primary “discovery,” but the “recognition” of something already there. Therefore, the recognition that cannot be achieved by the characters in the novel can be induced by the narrative form of the novel.

The Recognition of Fiction

Perhaps, however, this distinction between content and form should not be made too easily; Gaddis is a writer, after all, who quoted with approval Beckett’s belief that a novel is “not about something Madame it is something.” So, *The Recognitions* is not only a novel about recognitions, its narrative form produces a series of recognitions in a reader. But instead of the totalized identity claimed by Beckett wherein “form is content, content is form” – a vision the impossibility of which Beckett’s art criticism ended up discovering – what Gaddis’s novel is “about” is the interplay between these two kinds of recognitions: those that occur in the world of the novel, and those produced by the form of the novel.⁸⁷ That this can take place, and that finding the critical language to describe it

⁸⁶ Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), xiii; xiv.

⁸⁷ Beckett, *Disjecta*, 27.

threatens to become so clunky and tautologous, is an effect of the uniquely ambiguous status of recognition in poetics and narrative theory. This ambiguity is the topic of Terence Cave's *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics*, a book which surveys a tradition of critical commentary and literary practice from Aristotle and Sophocles to Barthes and Henry James. In this history, the recognition scene in narrative was first theorized in Aristotle's *Poetics* as *anagnorisis*. It is a necessary element of a plot, a structural feature that "brings about a shift from ignorance to knowledge; it is the moment at which the characters understand their predicament fully for the first time, the moment that resolves a sequence of unexplained and often implausible occurrences; it makes the world (and the text) intelligible." In doing so, the recognition scene becomes "a focus for reflections on the way fictions as such are constituted, the way in which they play with and on the reader, their distinctive marks *as* fictions – untruth, disguise, trickery, 'suspense' or deferment, the creation of effects of shock and amazement, and so on."⁸⁸

From the beginning of its theorization, however, the recognition scene in narrative is a problem because it has a "double character": it is both a "formal device and [a] vehicle of themes of knowledge."⁸⁹ Formally, the events of a story, as discoursed into a plot, resolve themselves in a moment of recognition into a causal relationship; simultaneously, a character or the reader – or both – gains a kind of knowledge. The immediately apparent problem is that in being both formal device and vehicle of knowledge, the recognition scene as object of study transgresses the boundaries between description and evaluation upon which disciplines such as narratology are founded; or, at best, it shows up how either description or evaluation alone is insufficient to the complexity of fiction. Equally, in being an element of plot, recognition deals with that aspect of narrative which, up until the work of Peter Brooks and Paul Ricoeur in the

⁸⁸ Terence Cave, *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 1; 46.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

1980s, had been relatively marginalized in academic narratology.⁹⁰ This in many ways was a legacy of theory responding to modernist fiction: its drift towards the depiction, as Gaddis noted of Mansfield, towards ever more “inward” forms of experience and shock, as against the imitation of action that Aristotle had defined as the object of a plot. Gaddis’s incorporation of readers of modernist fiction into *The Recognitions*’s elaborate return to plot as action makes his novel a transitional work, one which thematizes the passage from the modernist “inward” turn towards the complex, action-based plots of Burroughs, DeLillo, and Pynchon. In terms of the neo-Aristotelian typology that R. S. Crane was developing at the same time as Gaddis was writing *The Recognitions*, and working with the same modernist authors, his novel enacts a self-conscious shift from a “plot of thought” towards the postwar “plot of action.”⁹¹ What Pynchon’s Oedipa Mass calls “a plot, an elaborate, seduction *plot* [italics original],” becomes after Gaddis one of the central devices of postwar fiction in structuring the relationship of the individual to the patterns of society.⁹²

One aspect of what “Aristotle says” about plot is mentioned in *The Recognitions*, when Stanley complains of the “modern disease” of conceiving time not as a “continuum” but in “fragments”: “every fragment consists of itself, and that’s why we live among palimpsests, because finally all the work should fit into one whole, and express an entire perfect action, as Aristotle says” (615-6). Gaddis had read his Bergson and memorized his Eliot, and Stanley, whose musical composition ends the novel by destroying a church, is an artist figure who shows the limitation of the belief in the “self-sufficiency of fragments” in the age, as a voice interrupts him, of “atom bombs” (616).

⁹⁰ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984); Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, 3 vols. (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁹¹ R. S. Crane, “The Concept of Plot and the Plot of Tom Jones,” in *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern*, ed. R. S. Crane (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 620.

⁹² Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Vintage, 2000), 19.

Stanley alludes to Aristotle's discussion in the *Poetics* of "well-constructed plots...[which] should make use of the patterns stated" – those of "reversals and recognitions." "A plot is not unified, as some think," Aristotle states, "if built around an individual." Instead, just as "in the other mimetic arts" – exemplified by painting – "a unitary mimesis has a unitary object, so too the plot, since it is mimesis of an action, should be of a unitary and indeed whole action," otherwise "the sense of the whole is disturbed and dislocated."⁹³ Gaddis's novel flaunts the fact that it is not unified around its hero Wyatt by having him change his name, but it is hardly the imitation of a whole action, "disturbed and dislocated" being an apt description of its plot and style. Instead, from the signal of its title, the novel is structured around the patterns of plot, and of recognitions, making the content of the novel's form the function and potential of fictional recognition in the postwar era.

Mansfield's tracking of the ever more inward drift of the "shock of recognition" was the reading of modernist fiction that Gaddis followed in constructing the pre-history of his writing, and although she is not mentioned, Cave too writes of how "[r]ecognition delivers a shock" in foregrounding the scandal of the literary: the revelation that it is both more and less than a mimesis, and that this artifice makes a claim for a distinct kind of knowledge. Cave follows Mansfield's account wherein recognition as an event in a plot increasingly becomes an event that takes place in a character's psyche, a shift that reaches its peak in Freud's re-interpretation of the Oedipus plot as a psychoanalytical "complex." But just as Freud solidifies a shift of centuries (or one suspects because of this), plots of "imperfect recognitions" begin to emerge: in James, Proust, and Faulkner, where "imperfect recognitions are usually a direct function of a character's limited point of view, so that novels which experiment with such limitations may well lead towards

⁹³ Aristotle, *Aristotle: Poetics*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 55; 53; 57; 59.

moments of incomplete, uncertain or illusory knowledge or present more than one angle from which a given set of relations or state of affairs may be seen.” And at “the extreme limit of this class (and indeed of the possibility of anagnorisis itself) there appears – again in modern narrative and drama – the instance in which an expected recognition wholly fails to materialize: *Waiting for Godot*.”⁹⁴ In this history of narrative form, *The Recognitions* operates at precisely this juncture between the modernist atrophy of imperfect recognitions due to contrasting points of view, and the absence of recognition in *Godot*.

One way this takes place is in the parade of modernist styles deployed in the novel, parodies often identified through allusion to the author from which they are lifted. Dialogue is reported without association with a speaker, as in Faulkner; narrative is focalized around characters such as Esther in the manner of James; social dialogue is marked with period details when characters allude to Djuna Barnes; Wyatt’s descent into the madness which transforms him into Stephen is a hallucinatory interior monologue, a extended exhaustion of the Joycean mode’s ability to reveal inward psychological recognition. The notion of the individual modernist stylistic sign is incorporated within and satirized by the novel’s economy of forgery. As well as this parodying of the styles of writers known for their narration of the same narrative events from multiple points of view, the novel extends this technique, with almost every major narrative event being narrated from multiple and often conflicting points of view. Max’s painting/object is the exemplary case in point, the case which relates issues around multiple points of view, as critical positions, to those surrounding art and objecthood in postwar art theory. But Wyatt’s forgeries provide a different visual analogue for the novel’s narrative technique, one which places both Gaddis’s novel and his modernist predecessors within a larger historical perspective.

⁹⁴ Cave, *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics*, 233.

Wyatt forges paintings from a specific moment in art history: Flemish works from the fifteenth century by artists such as Bouts, Memling, van der Goes and Hubert van Eyck. Wyatt is well aware of their historical significance:

the art historians and the critics talking about every object and...everything having its own form and density [...] Do you know why everything does? Because they found God everywhere. There was nothing God did not watch over [...] There isn't any single perspective, like the camera eye, the one we all look through now and call it realism, there...I take five or six or ten...the Flemish painter took twenty perspectives if he wished, and even in a small painting you can't include it all in your single vision, your one miserable pair of eyes, like you can a photograph, like you can painting when it...when it degenerates, and becomes conscious of being looked at (251).

Max echoes Wyatt's judgment of the "great sense of lucency and multiple perspectives about these early Flemish," and Otto concurs: "The separate multiple consciousness of the...things in these Flemish primitives, that is really the force and the flaw in these paintings" (460). The flaw rather than the force in this visual mode is underlined by Valentine, in his stripping of Wyatt's illusions of the nobility of his forgeries, his "insane upside-down apology for these pictures, every figure and every object with its own presence. [...] Do you know what it was? [...] Fear, fear, pessimism and fear and depression everywhere, the way it is today, that's why your pictures are so cluttered with detail, this terror of emptiness, this absolute terror of space. Because maybe God isn't watching. Maybe he doesn't see" (690). These appropriately conflicting perspectives place the introduction of multiple perspectives in Flemish painting as marking the transition from a sacred to a secular world, a transition which, as we have seen, Beckett also focused on in historicizing the birth and death of the humanist subject.

Like Beckett, Gaddis returns to the origins of modernity figured through a mode of visual construction, but while Beckett figured this modernity in terms of a single

perspective, in Gaddis's novel, the Northern mode of a secular multiplicity of perspectives is the synecdoche for modernity. The rise of modernity is given its counterpart in decline in the work of Picasso, the only modernist artist Wyatt admires. *Night Fishing at Antibes* (1939) prompts in Wyatt "one of those moments of reality, of near-recognition of reality...When I saw it all of a sudden everything was freed into one recognition, really freed into reality that we never see, you never see it" (91-2). This painting could not be seen as representing any claims for a Cubist re-ordering of the visual world, whether through multiple perspectives, the grid, or the admission of the materiality of the painted sign. Instead, what this painting shows is that each of these claims for Cubism's revolutionary nature had descended back into a night-world of Christian apocalyptic imagery. With the painting completed on the cusp of war in 1939, it represents the decline of modernism into what Joyce called that same year in *Finnegans Wake* "our own nighttime."⁹⁵ Wyatt's forgeries juxtapose the origins and decline of the pictorial regime of modernity, interpreting that regime as the increasing relativity of conflicting perspectives, and making this interpretation a means to theorize modes of narrative construction in fiction.

The fate of Wyatt as a character unfolds another consequence of this interpretation of modernity, through modes of visual representation, as the increasing multiplicity and relativizing of perspectives. The novel begins with an account of Wyatt's childhood, the discovery that he is an artist, and his *éducation sentimentale* in Paris and New York; in short, the classic *Bildungsroman* whose plot consists of a series of recognition scenes. But Wyatt loses his mind and his name, only to be reborn as Stephen (or maybe Stephan), and his fate soon recedes to become one plot thread among many. Gaddis's choice to dissolve the character of an archetypal *Bildungsroman*, and the ways in which

⁹⁵ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.

this is meant as an index of postwar historicity, is illuminated by his reading of an essay on “The Hero in Crisis” by the Italian novelist Corrado Alvaro, which appeared alongside Gaddis’s short story “Les Chemin des Anes” in a 1952 two-volume anthology of *New World Writing*. For Alvaro, the crux of then recent debates around the postwar novel “is nearly always the hero of the novel, that is, the protagonist of our time. But does our time have a protagonist, a hero?” This possibility of a novelistic hero would also concern John Berger, who titled his first novel *A Painter of Our Time*. Gaddis marked out a number of passages of Alvaro’s argument that bear upon his own novel. Firstly, that the classic European novel from *Madame Bovary* (1856) to *Lord Jim* (1900) is structured around the protagonist’s “struggle against a limitation, a law which cannot be broken with impunity,” governing the social world. But in the upheaval of the postwar era, all “the old certainties...have now become open to doubt...fiction today no longer has a hero along the lines of the adventurous Ulysses.” This, as Gaddis notes, “is all the stranger because, though the hero is gone, true protagonists are not lacking in our daily life. But they are occult, their name is a collective name, that of great undertakings, great companies, great political formations, great states, great ideologies,” the cumulative effect is one of “depersonalization” which the postwar novel must address.⁹⁶

In her discussion of the postwar “zany” character, whose incessant activity and adaptability is an index of the demands of affective labour in a neoliberal service economy, Sianne Ngai points out that in 1953 Adorno first began to theorize that there might be something “increasingly funny about character as an aesthetic form” by analyzing the popularity of the occult explanations offered by the astrology column of the *Los Angeles Times*. Unable to identify what Alvaro called the “collective formations” which were demanding they develop a more malleable personality in order to succeed in

⁹⁶ Corrado Alvaro, “The Hero in Crisis,” in *New World Writing: Second Mentor Selection* (New York: New American Library, 1952), 117; 123; 124.

the workplace, readers of the newspaper eagerly displaced these demands onto the movements of the stars. Thus for Ngai there is always something disturbing about the tribulations suffered by a zany character, like Pynchon's Oedipa Mass. This pressure to constantly adapt one's character without knowing why explains the zany character's penchant for destruction against the demands of the "compulsory pleasure that defines it."⁹⁷ The transformation of Wyatt from an artist into the subject of a blackly comic zany finale of cannibalism, murder and mistaken identity, and the novel's mapping of a shift from the artist as originator, to forger, to Willie the writer of television scripts, makes the novel's "depersonalization" of character part of an attempt to realize a fictional form to reflect the new collective formations structuring the post-Fordist economy of postwar life: advertising, medication, and the society of the spectacle – from Wyatt the artist to Morgie the television producer.

Wyatt's misrecognition of his "optical unconscious," is one of the reasons for the failure of his fate to take the form of a *Bildungsroman*, which pivots on a recognition scene where the hero discovers his or her true self; a shift, in Aristotle's terms, from "ignorance into knowledge." In the variation of the modernist *Künstlerroman*, especially in Joyce and Woolf, the moment of recognition is the discovery of artistic vocation through self-knowledge. In Proust, the recognition occurs to both character and reader: Marcel recognizes his vocation as an artist, and the reader recognizes that what she has been reading is the account of that recognition. The example of Proust shows the way in which the subject of recognition can be both character and reader, blurring the boundaries between poetics and interpretation. Part of what makes *The Recognitions* depart from this form of modernism is the way in which its plotting foregrounds characters who fail to achieve recognition, or misrecognize the situation they are within: Wyatt his

⁹⁷ Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 174; 185.

optical unconscious; Otto his plagiarism of Faulkner; Sinisterra the identity of Otto when handing over the forged money; Revered Gwyon the dependence of his Christianity on pre-Christian rituals; a list which could go on as long as the novel itself. But the fact that such a list can be made shows that the reader knows these are failed recognitions, and the reader is able to piece together the plot strands and multiple perspectives and assemble Stanley's fragments into, if not a continuous flow, then at least a collage; or perhaps a Rauschenberg combine of Old Masters and mass cultural advertising.

In doing so, the novel replaces descriptions of what Mansfield called the inward "shock of recognition" with the shocks of plot recognition. That the reader is reminded three times that a writer called "Willie" is writing a novel called *The Recognitions* for a "very small audience" (478), sharpens the reader's sense that they are reading a fiction. This emphasis on recognition as an effect that takes place in a hypothesized reader as opposed to within the consciousness of a character within the novel distinguishes the novel's engagement with forged images and subjectivity as being part of a "series that never existed" from both later theorizations of the simulacrum by Jean Baudrillard and their exploration in the fiction of Don DeLillo and Kathy Acker. It also distinguishes the novel's self-reflexivity from the strategies of metafiction which came to be seen as the literary equivalents of the appropriation strategies of artists such as Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine. What led to these literary and visual techniques being grouped together under the banner of postmodernism was the shared assumption, expressed by John Barth, that there was no difference between novels which "imitate actions more or less directly" – the Aristotelian definition of plot Gaddis plays with – and novels "which attempt to represent not life directly but a representation of life." For Barth, such works

are not “removed from ‘life’,” because the subject of both “ultimately, is life.”⁹⁸ But if a representation of life is a real as life itself, then the difference between fiction and reality disappears. This is the state of the relationship between the novel and postwar American society that *The Recognitions* takes as its theme, and it would be to miss the edge of the novel’s satire to state that any of its characters have an answer to Barth. But by shifting this recognition from the inward subjectivity of character to an effect of the plot, the novel shows that the difference between reality and fiction can be shown by the form of the novel: there is a way to produce a position outside a system of patterns, and that way is in the writing of fiction structured around a logic of plot recognition. This provides one “escape” from the “pattern[s]” that govern life in postwar commodity capitalism.

Peter Boxall has written that the work of Don DeLillo, who claimed to take so much from Gaddis, can be understood “as at once a critique and an enactment of the possibility of fiction in the post-war [period].”⁹⁹ This chapter has shown that in discerning that Abstract Expressionism had posed an unanswerable question about the difference between art and objecthood, and by drawing on the resources of the artistic tradition it was annulling to model and historicize a novel of irresolvable perspectives and labyrinthine plots, this commitment to the possibility of fiction is one which could equally define Gaddis’s work. It was because of this maintenance of the possibility of the distinction between fiction and reality in the form of fiction that the German critic Martin Lüdke argued at the end of the 1990s that Gaddis is the key author not for the origin, but for the working through and emergence from postmodernism in postwar American fiction. Taking up the language of systems theory Gaddis drew upon for *JR*, Lüdke saw Gaddis’s *oeuvre* as whole, with its analysis of the systems of art, economics, religion and law, as charting a move “from description to second-order description.” Or,

⁹⁸ Barth, “The Literature of Exhaustion,” 72.

⁹⁹ Peter Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2006), 15.

rather, from the mimesis of action to the mimesis of the social and inherited fictional patterns that govern action. However, “[i]n the confusion that his novels depict, where blindness and insight, conceptually speaking, are conveyed as one side of a distinction, whose other side we naturally cannot know,” the distinction between representation and reality “at least still sounds for Gaddis, if softly, and in the background.”¹⁰⁰ To doubt the possibility of distinguishing representation from reality while still providing a form where this recognition can take place is very different from denying this possibility altogether.

Conclusion

The last time “Willie” appears in *The Recognitions*, he is stumbling through Morgie’s television studio, employed as a script writer for his new show *The Lives of the Saints* (734). This was Gaddis uncannily anticipating his own future: when *The Recognitions* was completed, Gaddis began writing television plays to secure some income, the first of a series of jobs writing for companies such as I.B.M. that lay behind his pitch perfect grasp of the idioms of corporate America in his later novels. One play was called *Waste*; although rejected, it stands as an apt coda to *The Recognitions*. The play is set in the engine room of a freighter ship, where a failed painter Michael spends his time idly pulling out handfuls of waste from a trash can. One of his ship mates has hidden a priceless but stolen Old Master in the trash. Michael discovers the painting, and the play concludes with Michael preferring to take the painting ashore to present it to a museum, risking a jail sentence, rather than allow the painting to be smuggled onto the black market. So that “saving painting is his redemption,” Michael must give up his own painting, but also,

¹⁰⁰ Martin Lüdke, “Keine Handvoll Amis, Diese Vier, Mehr Erst Mal Nicht. Einundzwanzig Versuche, Die Verwendung Des Begriffs ‘Postmoderne’ Zu Unterlaufen,” *Rovohlt Literaturmagazin* 39 (1997): 131. This is my translation of “von der Beschreibung zur Beschreibung zweiter Ordnung. In dem Rauschen, als das sich seine Romane darstellen, vermittelt sich, begrifflich gesprochen, Einsicht und Blindheit als eine Seite der Unterscheidung, deren andere Seite wir natürlich nicht kennen (können), die aber, leise, im Hintergrund, bei Gaddis zumindest anklingt.”

potentially, his freedom. But Michael doesn't care: "I used to study painting, I used to think it was the most important thing in the world, I used to think I'd give up anything I had if...but now its all...like this, like this waste, these threads, all these different colours, tangled up, knotted, twisted (his hand closes slowly on the waste) with no pattern and no point at all..."¹⁰¹ In this description of a Pollock-like work, which has no point because it cannot represent that "pattern[s]" governing postwar society, painting thus becomes subject to the logic of commodification wherein it will eventually become just another piece of waste. Treading the line between *arrière-garde* reaction and *avant-garde* provocation, the play has close similarities to Rauschenberg's juxtapositions of discarded newspaper advertisements and the signification of gestural brushstrokes, which make a similar point about the commodification of style in 1950s American painting.

Demoting painting to the subject of "trash TV," *Waste* also stages the ascendancy of television over painting as the medium of focus in Gaddis's exploration of the visual cultures of postwar America: an ascendancy that had already taken place in the seven years between the beginning and publication of *The Recognitions*. The ascent of television was one cause of the difficulties, as Philip Roth wrote in 1961, that "the American writer in the middle of the 20th century" has in making "*credible* much of the American reality [*italics original*]." Nixon might seem believable as a "literary creation," Roth wrote, but "on the TV screen, as a real public image, a political fact, my mind balked at taking him in." Television, for Roth, "produced a kind of professional envy." But in this oft-discussed treatise on postwar American fiction there is another aspect of postwar America that incites Roth's envy: the baroque plotted Bedwell murder case that opens the essay. Faced with the double demands of plot complexity and the perceived unreality of television, Roth's essay concludes with the path that his work was to take: the novelist

¹⁰¹ William Gaddis, "Summary of WASTE: A Half-Hour Television Play (live)," c.1955, MSS049 32/206, William Gaddis Collection, Washington University Library, St. Louis.

could turn “to the self, which may, in a variety of ways, become his subject, or even the impulse for his technique.”¹⁰² *JR*, in contrast, can be understood in literary history as engaging with rather than turning away from the televisual plots of postwar life. Television replaces painting as Gaddis’s model for fiction, its live transmission becoming the spur for the novel’s real-time narration. Painting, in contrast, has become simply a valuable tax dodge.

JR also marks a distinct shift leftwards in the politics of Gaddis’s work. In a rare interview in 1997 Gaddis admitted to being “politically so far to the left, so very much against wealth and the present Republican Congress and against the system...not against the capitalist system, but against its abuse and this abuse is what my satire generally represents.”¹⁰³ Marx’s communist slogan of “from each according to his ability” is the motto of *JR*’s school – not that any character in the novel recognizes this. Continuing the exploration of the aesthetics of failure first theorized in *The Recognitions* in relation to painting’s “failure” to find an oppositional role in the postwar economy, Nicky Marsh has written that in *JR*, “Gaddis poses failure as a formal and thematic alternative to the tautological success story that neoliberalism has promulgated for so long.”¹⁰⁴ If the absence of a critical function for painting in the novel implies it has become redundant for a novelistic project informed by a critique of neoliberal capitalism, its role as the original “failure” in Gaddis’s aesthetics underlines its importance in his work as a whole. Belief in the failure of painting was widespread among visual artists in the 1960s and 1970s, with the critique of its commodity status a recurring justification for Conceptual

¹⁰² Philip Roth, “Writing American Fiction,” *Commentary* 31, no. 3 (March 1961): 224; 225; 233.

¹⁰³ William Gaddis and Paul Ingendaay, “Agent Der Veränderung. Ein Gespräch Mit William Gaddis,” *Rowohlt Literaturmagazin* 39 (March 1997): 89. My translation of: “...warum ich politisch so weit links stehe, so sehr gegen Reichtum und den gegenwärtigen, konservativen Kongress eingestellt bin, gegen das System...[dass ich] nichts gegen das kapitalistische System bin, sondern gegen den Missbrauch, und dieser Missbrauch ist das, was ich im allgemeinen satirisch darstelle.”

¹⁰⁴ Nicky Marsh, “Hit Your Educable Public Right in the Supermarket Where They Live” Risk and Failure in the Work Of William Gaddis,” *New Formations* 80/81 (2013): 191.

Art's "dematerialization of the art object."¹⁰⁵ Among postwar novelists, a melancholic attitude towards the ebbing of the critical potential of painting would be shared by a writer at some distance from Gaddis: John Berger. But if Gaddis's fiction marks a passage away from the work of art in postwar fiction, Berger's novels represent a different trajectory, one which moves backwards to Cubism to escape from the polarizing effects of the Cold War, in order to move forward to develop the possibilities of postwar fiction in Britain.

¹⁰⁵ Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*.

Chapter 4

John Berger

John Berger's body of writing, the product of a career lasting more than fifty years, has been defined by a ceaseless process of revision and transformation. His early role as the leading critical advocate of Social Realism in Britain in the 1950s was followed by a turn to writing fiction and a return to the political and aesthetic promise unfulfilled in an earlier modernism. This concern with painting and fiction was followed by a shift to focus on the aesthetics of photography and the production of film and television work; the self-conscious renewal of modernist fictional technique was in turn replaced with an ethnographic approach to the lives of peasant labourers. His repudiation of journalistic criticism was revised by a pioneering engagement with Marxist critical theory, feminism, and animal ethics in art history; an initial training as a draughtsman and painter was revisited late in life with books of sketches. Finally, a life concerned with ways of seeing has had as its coda *Cataract* (2011), a meditation on the loss of sight and the consolation of words.

Berger's singular, multifaceted *oeuvre* has been difficult to assess as a whole.¹ A similar difficulty has dogged attempts to situate Berger's fiction in relation to histories of postwar British literature. To Andrzej Gasiorek, Berger's fiction does not sit comfortably with the work of other postwar realists.² As in Charles Ferrall's account, the trajectory

¹ Geoff Dyer, *Ways of Telling: The Work of John Berger* (Pluto: London, 1986); Nikos Papastergiadis, *Modernity as Exile: The Stranger in John Berger's Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

² Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After*, 73–81.

sketched out for Berger's fiction sees his early realism as a point of departure for a series of re-investigations of modernist fictional technique, culminating in the 1972 Booker Prize-winning *G*.³ According to Tim Armstrong, while *G* is representative of a wider "re-engagement with Modernism" in British literature in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it stands out by being, at the same time, a "self-conscious revision of historical method."⁴ More than a belated revival of modernist technique, *G* is a fictional historiography of how this return could take place, meditating on what kind of historical understanding of the twentieth century is necessary in order to return to modernism, and on whether modernism is something to be returned to, rather than a still unfulfilled "moment."

Berger's first phase of fiction, from *A Painter of Our Time* (1958) to *G* (1972), presents itself as representative of the wider and complex re-engagement with the legacy of modernism that characterized postwar British writing. Berger helped to define a realist moment in the 1950s through his polemical art criticism in the *New Statesman*, but he was soon to unfold the limitations of this version of realism in *A Painter of Our Time*. Later, *G*'s self-reflexivity about the historiography of modernism places these postwar returns to modernism in British fiction in a historical perspective of their own. Reading Berger's fiction alongside his criticism, and attending to the publishing contexts from which it emerged, allows a more precise historicization of Berger's work and the postwar re-engagement with modernism it represents. This re-engagement initially developed out of debates surrounding the foundation of the British New Left after 1956. Along with Doris Lessing, with whom he became close through their membership of the "Geneva Club," Berger can be understood as one of the leading writers of the early New Left. By

³ Charles Ferrall, "From Wells to John Berger: The Social Democratic Era of the Novel," in *The Cambridge History of the English Novel*, ed. Robert L. Caserio and Clement Hawes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 807–22.

⁴ Tim Armstrong, "The Seventies and the Cult of Culture," in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*, ed. Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 597; 592.

1973, B. S. Johnson had included Berger in his list of what he called the postwar “avant-garde”: “Samuel Beckett (of course), John Berger, Christine Brooke-Rose, Brigid Brophy, Anthony Burgess, Alan Burns, Angela Carter, Eva Figes, Giles Gordon, Wilson Harris, Rayner Heppenstall.”⁵ In turn, Max Saunders has recently written of Berger’s *Corker’s Freedom* (1964) that “in its mixture of formal invention and sexual liberation it especially recalls the novels of B. S. Johnson.”⁶ Recent and increasing attention to Johnson’s film and television work has helped bring out the ways in which this group of writers can also be distinguished by their engagement with what Raymond Williams was theorizing as the new media “communications” of the postwar Welfare State, and Berger’s hugely influential television series *Ways of Seeing* (1972) is perhaps the highpoint of this postwar coalescence between the re-engagement with modernism and the resources of new media: Benjamin meets the B.B.C.⁷

Berger’s first phase of fiction is both an opening and closing reflection on the engagement with the legacy of modernism in postwar British fiction. In the previous chapter, this engagement was explored in relation to postwar American fiction through the specific case of William Gaddis. These two chapters therefore complement each other in showing the similarities and differences that accompanied both the engagement with the legacy of modernism and the response to contemporary art on different sides of the Atlantic. For both writers, the Cold War was experienced not as a specific event, but as an interpretative paranoia that threatened to undermine the autonomy of the meaning of the modernist art object. Equally, both writers contested the canonization of Abstract Expressionism as the logical end point of modernist art; or, as Berger put it in 1958, they contested Pollock’s “influence as a figure standing for something more than this [his own

⁵ B. S. Johnson, *Aren’t You Rather Young to Be Writing Your Memoirs?* (London: Hutchinson, 1973), 29.

⁶ Max Saunders, “File under Freedom,” *Times Literary Supplement*, December 10, 2010, 21.

⁷ B. S. Johnson, *You’re Human Like The Rest Of Them: The Films of B. S. Johnson*, DVD (British Film Institute, 2013); Raymond Williams, *Television* (London: Fontana, 1974).

style].” Then, Berger saw Pollock as “negatively” giving a sign to “disintegration.”⁸ Even in a later, more positive revaluation, Berger insisted against Greenberg that Pollock “negated” painting by showing that “there was only *that which was done to the canvas on the side facing us.*”⁹ More importantly, what was being negated in the insistence that Pollock was the culmination of modernist painting was an understanding of modernism not as a teleological sequence, but as a process shot through with “moments” of anticipation and retrospection, moments which could be returned to and transformed by later generations. It is this revaluation of historicism, drawing as it does on the traditions of European Marxism, that ultimately distinguishes Berger’s engagement with the legacy of modernism from that of Gaddis, for in his later work, Gaddis became more focused on the contemporary and specifically American economic and legal structures determining “the place of art and the artist in a technological democracy.” After *G.*, Berger turned away not just from modernism but national specificities more generally, adopting a documentary and quasi-anthropological approach, shaped by his turn to photography, in his trilogy *Into Their Labours* (1992).

Absent from such a summary account of Berger’s *oeuvre* is a detailed exploration of how the stylistic and aesthetic development of his novels developed in relation to his extensive writings on visual art; indeed, Berger’s fiction is incomprehensible without them. A detailed unfolding of the work of art in *A Painter of Our Time* and *G.*, the two novels where this work is at its most intense, will be the concern of this chapter. It will track how Berger’s early advocacy of realism was abandoned after the shock of the Hungarian uprising of 1956 and the resulting crisis in the British Left which forms the subtext of *A Painter of Our Time*. Writing this work of fiction led Berger to return to the unfulfilled possibilities of Cubism, which were further explored in the 1960s, and whose

⁸ John Berger, “The White Cell,” *New Statesman* 56, no. 1445 (November 22, 1958): 722; 723.

⁹ John Berger, “A Kind of Sharing,” in *John Berger: Selected Essays* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 531–2.

potential for literary innovation was most fully realised in *G*. But this chapter's concern with Berger's work will be undertaken with a constant eye as to how he is related to wider contexts and concerns: his engagement with Central European Marxist art historians and theorists from Georg Lukács to Frederick Antal to Walter Benjamin; his relation to contemporaries like Lessing; the connections between his writings on Cubism and those of later art historians such as Rosalind E. Krauss; and the openings that *G*'s self-consciousness about modernism's temporality and historiography can offer to contemporary modernist studies. Balancing a detailed reading of Berger's criticism, literary archive, and fiction with such wider connections will help to give this first phase of Berger's writing the literary and intellectual context it still lacks, and to write Berger into the history of the engagement of postwar writers with art that is a central concern of this thesis.

The Failure of Realism

Berger's career as a full-time art critic began in 1951, at the age of 25, when he began writing for the *New Statesman & Nation*. James Hyman has written of "the richness and range of Berger's early writing and the power and fire with which he promoted his vision of realism during the 1950s." Situating him in a tradition of artist-critics such as Walter Sickert and Wyndham Lewis, Berger, he writes, "was one of the twentieth century's liveliest and most vivid polemicists on art."¹⁰ Hyman places Berger as a key player in what he calls the "battle for Realism" which dominated British artistic debate in the 1950s, setting what he terms Berger's Social Realism against the Modernist Realism theorized by David Sylvester in relation to the works of Francis Bacon. But focusing on Berger's polemicism can obscure the more doubtful side of his criticism, present from

¹⁰ James Hyman, *The Battle for Realism: Figurative Art in Britain during the Cold War, 1945-1960* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2001), 7–8.

the outset. “The fact is,” Berger wrote in 1951, “that the modern movement – with all its subdivisions – has now disintegrated; partisan discipline has disappeared and most of the theories have finally lost their precision in practice.” Equally, the critic “cannot be, as he was in the Twenties, a confident, dogmatic missionary. He must be an interpreter, aware of the validity, not only of the artist’s intentions, but also of the layman’s doubts.”¹¹ The economy of modernist artistic production, Berger reflected, had also disintegrated. “The disappearance of what was really an official system of private patronage has robbed the contemporary artist of any vital *sense of communication*, and his work has therefore tended to become – in an ironically different sense – more and more private [*italics original*].” Public subsidy, he argued, can put the artist “into closer contact with his ‘collective patrons’,” giving him or her the “opportunity of working under the stimulus and tension of rather more definite directives.”¹² It is not difficult to spot the originating tension between these two responses to the legacy of painterly modernism. On the one hand, the acceptance of doubt on the part of the artist as well as the critic. On the other, the promotion of working under the “definite directives” of public bodies, responding to the demands of the collective, not the individual. The split between the individual and the collective would haunt Berger’s criticism throughout the decade, soon intersecting with much wider geopolitical concerns.

Immediately apparent from Berger’s opening foray into art criticism is his stress on all aspects of art as a social production: tradition, the relationship between theory and practice, patronage, audience, and the role of the critic. These aspects of Berger’s criticism are the legacy of his time spent as the “unofficial student” of the Hungarian art historian Frederick Antal.¹³ In an obituary published in the *Burlington Magazine*, Berger

¹¹ John Berger, “Present Painting,” *New Statesman & Nation* 42, no. 1080 (November 17, 1951): 560.

¹² John Berger, “Brobdingang,” *New Statesman & Nation* 41, no. 1060 (June 30, 1951): 744.

¹³ John Berger, *The White Bird: Writings by John Berger* (London: Hogarth Press, 1988), 197.

wrote vividly of the impact of their weekly meetings during the early 1950s. Antal had trained in Berlin under Wölfflin and then in Vienna under Max Dvorák before returning to Budapest in 1916, where he was a member of the *Sonntagskreis* discussion group along with Georg Lukács, Béla Balász, Karl Mannheim and Arnold Hauser, the group which introduced him to the Marxism that became the cornerstone of his art historical method. After serving briefly as the Chairman of the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest during the short lived Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, Antal moved to Berlin, developing a Marxist approach to art history in the journal *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen* that was praised by Walter Benjamin for pushing the formal interpretation of art up against the “concrete bedrock of past historical experience.”¹⁴ Antal was Jewish, and was forced to flee to London in 1933, becoming a British citizen in 1946. A representative of the Central European émigré tradition that Berger drew on in his own criticism, Antal’s life became a source for the character Janos in *A Painter of Our Time*. Antal’s approach to art history saw style as “a specific combination of the elements of subject and form, [where] the thematic elements offer an immediate transition to the general outlook on life, the philosophy, from which the pictures in question derive.”¹⁵ His approach drew not only on Marxist theories of culture, but also on the art historical methodology of the Warburg Institute, which was praised for its approach to style as a unity of form and subject matter. In his obituary, Berger emphasized two aspects of Antal’s legacy. “Art history for him was not just an ‘interesting’ field to be excavated: it was a revolutionary activity. Facts were weapons unearthed from the past to be used for the future.” But Berger also emphasised, in a telling looseness of terminology, “Antal’s *feeling* for paintings and sculpture. He never simplified the mystery out of art – and by mystery I mean the power

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, “The Rigorous Study of Art,” in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1931-1934*, ed. Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 668.

¹⁵ Frederick Antal, *Florentine Painting and Its Social Background* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1986), 4.

of a work of art to affect the heart [*italics original*].”¹⁶ This portrait of his mentor betrays a conflicted attitude towards the art work as a weapon in the class struggle versus the art work as the site of individual, mysterious experience.

In his early criticism, Berger attempted to square the circle of individual experience versus collective demands through a concept of the art work as a record of experience. Experience as identification with the object was what Berger saw as “the philosophic basis of realism,” which “differs from naturalism – the mere copying of appearances – by stressing the underlying and reliable facts of the physical world, by disclosing the common intensity of sensuous experience, by identification with the life and natural development of the subject.”¹⁷ In the process of composition the artist is brought “closer to the object, until finally you are, as it were, inside it: the contours you have drawn no longer marking the edge of what you have seen, but the edge of what you have become.”¹⁸ This phenomenological approach bears comparison with Merleau-Ponty’s contemporaneous writings on Cézanne in *Phenomenology of Perception*, previously discussed in relation to Beckett, where Cézanne’s paintings are “[t]his subject-object dialogue, this drawing together, by the subject, of the meaning diffused through the object, and, by the object, of the subject’s intentions – a process which is physiognomic perception.”¹⁹ Like Merleau-Ponty, Berger was drawing on the revisionist, humanist Marxism of the postwar period. More specifically, this understanding of realism owes much to Lukács, to whose work Berger was introduced by Antal, and whose *Studies in European Realism* was published in Britain in 1950. In it, Lukács defined realism in literature as “the recognition of the fact that a work of literature can rest neither on a

¹⁶ John Berger, “Frederick Antal - A Personal Tribute,” *The Burlington Magazine* 96, no. 617 (August 1954): 258; 260.

¹⁷ John Berger, “Direct Communication,” *New Statesman & Nation* 43, no. 1099 (March 29, 1952): 372.

¹⁸ John Berger, “Drawing Is Discovery,” *New Statesman & Nation* 46, no. 1173 (August 29, 1953): 232.

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 152–3.

lifeless average, as the naturalists suppose, nor on an individual principle which dissolves its own self into nothingness. The central category and criterion of realist literature is the type, a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular in both characters and situations.”²⁰ But this advocacy of realism was not and could not remain merely theoretical, and commentary on major exhibitions during the mid-1950s offered Berger a chance to claim its actualization in practice.

Reviewing the Arts Council’s *Young Contemporaries* exhibition in 1952, Berger expressed his sense that “[s]lowly but quite certainly something is happening to British painting” in the works of “John Flavin, Derrick Greaves, Susan Horsfield, Stewart Waghorn, Leonard Roads, Elizabeth Dolby, and most outstanding of all, those by Edward Middleditch.” He saw in them “a deliberate acceptance of the importance of the everyday and the ordinary,” a realism in the sense of “the painters’ imaginative identification with the thing or person painted so that the result, however usual the subject, is compelling and real.”²¹ Many of the same artists were selected by Berger when he curated an exhibition entitled *Looking Forward*, also in 1952, which toured Britain with the support of the Arts Council. In his introduction, Berger repeated that these artists were realist insofar as they “are more concerned with the reality of that subject [in the work] than with the reality of their subjective feelings about it,” and that, following Lukács, the realist painter “tries to deduce a *typical* truth [italics original].” In this sense, “[r]ealism is not a method but an attitude of mind.”²² This new realism was not confined to Britain, with Berger noting a similar “identification with the life and natural development of the subject” in the French painters Roger Grand and Paul Reyberolle,

²⁰ Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism: A Sociological Survey of the Writings of Balzac, Stendhal, Zola, Tolstoy, Gorki, and Others*, trans. Edith Bone (London: Hillway, 1950), 6.

²¹ John Berger, “For the Future,” *New Statesman & Nation* 43, no. 1089 (January 19, 1952): 64–66.

²² John Berger, *Looking Forward: An Exhibition of Realist Paintings & Drawings by Contemporary British Artists* (London: The Arts Council, 1953), 1.

and the *neorealismo* of postwar Italian cinema.²³ Attempting to define what this pan-European realism had in common, Berger claimed to separate realism's aesthetic and epistemological claims: "Realism is not a manner but an approach and an aim. The Realist is not concerned with presenting facts for their own sake, but with proving the objective reality of conclusions which can be drawn from them."²⁴ Yet the common illusionism and figuration of all these works makes it difficult to accept this proclaimed distinction between a realist aesthetics and epistemology.

Berger's criticism did not just position British art in relation to European realism: he also noted the highly politicized traffic between American and European postwar visual art, traffic in which Beckett and Gaddis, as has been seen, could not help being ensnared. These trans-Atlantic politics were most sharply defined in Berger's response to the controversial competition for a "Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner," sponsored by the I.C.A. in 1953. The I.C.A. was a pivotal site for a revisionary institutionalization of modernism in postwar Britain, whose impact can be traced in the art and architecture of the Independent Group, and in the fiction of B. S. Johnson, Alison Smithson, and Brigid Brophy.²⁵ Given the dramatic politicizing of the postwar institutionalization of modernism in America, discussed in the previous chapter, it is unsurprising that the I.C.A. was similarly caught up in early Cold War politics. The competition prize was eventually awarded to Reg Butler, but Berger's attacks in the *New Statesman* were directed at the concept of the competition itself. He attacked the "generalising' illusion" of a prisoner without a name, for a sculpture without a site, "open to all ideologies: well intentioned, but impossible." The competing ideologies of different prisoners are "totally opposed," and to fail to acknowledge this means ignoring

²³ Berger, "Direct Communication," 372.

²⁴ John Berger, "The Biennale," *New Statesman & Nation* 44, no. 1113 (July 5, 1952): 12.

²⁵ Kevin Brazil, "'Histories of the Immediate Future': The Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Reconstruction of Modernism in Postwar Britain," *Modernism/modernity*, (forthcoming 2016).

that “we are all implicated in that conflict.”²⁶ The competition sealed the link between modernist, abstract sculpture and the ideology of being beyond all ideology. In fact, as Robert Burstow has proved, unbeknownst to the I.C.A., the competition had been secretly supported and funded by the Office of Strategic Services, a forerunner of the C.I.A. It was part of a propaganda effort to build a “modern-day ‘Statue of Liberty’ commemorating the victims of what Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., in the bible of Cold War liberalism, had recently identified as the ultimate symbol of totalitarianism, the concentration camp.”²⁷ This was not the last time C.I.A. interventions in postwar British culture would affect Berger; as we shall see, they directly affected the reception of his first novel.

The controversy around the Unknown Political Prisoner competition and a sense of the success of what he called “the Movement” of Social Realism hardened Berger’s confidence and political beliefs in the middle of the decade. At the beginning of 1956, Berger confidently declared in an article entitled “The Battle”: “The movement gathers more and more force...What is this movement? The kitchen-sink school? Social Realism? The name, deprecating or proud, doesn’t matter. It is a movement of protest.”²⁸ The same year, artists championed by Berger such as Bratby, Greaves and Smith represented Britain at the Venice Biennale. The awarding of the International Sculpture Prize to Lynn Chadwick focused international attention on British art, and led to the perception of Social Realism as a distinctive national style. Yet at the height of his critical influence, in 1956 Berger announced a year’s break from criticism in order to write a novel. In his “Exit and Credo” written in the *New Statesman*, however, he doubted this

²⁶ John Berger, “The Unknown Political Prisoner,” *New Statesman & Nation* 45, no. 1150 (March 21, 1953): 337–8.

²⁷ Robert Burstow, “The Limits of Modernist Art as a ‘Weapon of the Cold War’: Reassessing the Unknown Patron of the Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner,” *Oxford Art Journal* 20, no. 1 (January 1, 1997): 74.

²⁸ John Berger, “The Battle,” *New Statesman & Nation* 51, no. 1298 (January 21, 1956): 70.

victory in the “Battle for Realism.” “In fact,” he wrote, “very little has been won, and it is only the petty minded who reduce a philosophical belief to one superficial, easily recognizable ‘style.’” Waning too was belief in the role of criticism: “[t]he critic is a bastard – in more senses than one. Finally he has no definite status. He is merely the index of the tension, the relationship between the changes taking place in art and the changes taking place in the ideas and economics of the time.” As of yet his political beliefs remained: “I am with” – though not one of – “the Communists.”²⁹ What was changing, however, was Berger’s understanding of what kind of art realized the desires of revolutionary politics. In an article significantly titled “The Necessity for Uncertainty” which appeared in June 1956, Berger elaborated on the problems of the contemporary painter. “We do not know,” he declared, “what British socialist art will be like”; therefore an openness to uncertainty was required to allow it to come into being. This involved a reassessment of the potential of modernism: the “discoveries of the modern masters such as Cézanne, Van Gogh, Léger and Picasso...[are] now in the hands of Socialists to continue and make their own.” These were now seen as a form of repressed revolution: “*But because they did not then understand the social and political nature of this revolution, they put all their revolutionary fervour into their art considered as art. Because they did not see how to make a revolution in the streets, they made one on their canvases [italics original].*”³⁰ 1956 was a turning point for Berger. He quit criticism to write a novel, he was increasingly disillusioned with the aesthetic and political promise of Social Realism, and he began to turn back to the unexplored potential of painterly modernism. As he began writing, however, these personal changes would be joined by those of much wider significance.

²⁹ John Berger, “Exit and Credo,” *New Statesman & Nation* 52, no. 1333 (September 29, 1956): 372.

³⁰ John Berger, “The Necessity for Uncertainty,” *Marxist Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (July 1956): 171; 170; 176.

A Painter of Our Time

On 26 June 1956, Berger sent an outline of a proposed book, subtitled *A Portrait of the Artist as an Émigré*, to Fredric Warburg, at the publishers Secker & Warburg. The book, he wrote, “is to be written in the 1st person. And this ‘I’ will be myself, Berger, art-critic.” He continued:

The main character is to be an elderly émigré painter, a refugee from the Nazis, whom I get to know during the last years of his life in this country. My relationship to him, in terms of the book, will be (very roughly) that of a Boswell to a Johnson. There are many prototypes for him: Kokoschka, Adler, Martin Bloch, and so on. But, although he will obviously be drawn from my experience of men like these, he will be a composite and imaginary character. N.B. The reader must not realise this. He must be left in doubt, tending to believe that he is a real painter whom I know but he has not heard of.³¹

From the beginning, then, Berger’s “story” was aimed at a generically unstable auto/biographical space, with Berger as both the “I” and a contemporary Boswell. Berger’s own autobiographical “I” is intended to be split between the “I” of the narrator and the portrait of the émigré. And this in turn is folded within a fictional biography masquerading as a true one, a deception which the “reader must not realise.” Laura Marcus has written how this generic “instability or hybridity” of auto/biographical writing has been central to its deployment concerning “topics such as subject/object, self and identity, private and public, fact and fiction.” Autobiographical writing can appear as “either a dangerous double agent, moving between these oppositions, or as a magical instrument of reconciliation.”³² As has been shown, an understanding of realism drawn from Lukács as a reconciliation between subject and object, an identification that brings the object “inside” the subject, and between the individual and history, was central to

³¹ “John Berger, “Rough Outline of Proposed Book as Already Discussed with Mr. Warburg,” 1956, MS 1089/59b, Secker & Warburg Archive, Reading University Library.

³² Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 7.

Berger's early critical writings. Framing auto/biographical writing with the metaphors of "double agent" and "reconciliation" brings out its particularly charged status during the early Cold War, a charge noted in Gaddis's paranoia about autobiographical writing while under investigation by the C.I.A. Berger's intended "auto/biographical" instability, his complication of identification through the use of deception, signals from the outset a problematizing of literary realism, and that questions of form and genre were paramount.

As Gordon Johnston has shown in his account of the book's publishing history, the generic instability of the work in progress that Berger submitted during 1957 caused Warburg much unease.³³ After reading a draft in April, Warburg wrote to Berger that he was "worried about this book."³⁴ Challenged by Berger, he explained his doubts in a subsequent letter:

In the main I feel that it is falling at the moment, between two stools. On the one hand it has not the vitality of a novel and the characters don't come to life. On the other, it has not the authenticity of a documentary or non-fiction book on art and artists. In other words it is a hybrid, or to use a nastier word, a mongrel, and, as I said, I am worried about it.³⁵

Berger's response was acerbic: "We began this affair on grounds of what I naively believed to be mutual understanding – compare my previous letters with yours – my illusion has fortunately been destroyed. Let us reduce our relationship to the purely business level, and about that I will come to see you in due course."³⁶ In the end, Berger completed the manuscript, and Warburg agreed to publish it in the autumn of 1958, but not without expressing his concern to Berger about "how we treat the book, which is on

³³ Gordon Johnston, "Writing and Publishing the Cold War: John Berger and Secker & Warburg," *Twentieth Century British History* 12, no. 4 (2001): 432–60.

³⁴ "Letter from Fredric Warburg to John Berger," April 11, 1957, Secker & Warburg Archive, Reading University Library.

³⁵ "Letter from Fredric Warburg to John Berger," April 17, 1957, Secker & Warburg Archive, Reading University Library.

³⁶ "Letter from John Berger to Fredric Warburg," August 2, 1957, Secker & Warburg Archive, Reading University Library.

a strange borderland between fiction, reportage, and aesthetics.”³⁷ Warburg’s response to Berger’s hybrid, mongrel text places his response firmly within the view of auto/biographical writing as a dangerous double agent, a particularly useful phrase when one senses that much of Warburg’s anxiety came from the blurring of the borders between fact and fiction, between the supposed neutrality of aesthetics and the politically biased nature of reportage. Their exchange shows Berger’s awareness and exploitation of this perceived generic instability, and his refusal to settle on either of the “two stools” set out by Warburg. Warburg’s recourse to the generic label of reportage is revealing, for it points to a crucial shift which had occurred between Berger’s proposal and his writing of the novel, which was finished by February 1958. This was caused by the Hungarian uprising of 1956, the resulting crisis it caused among the British Left in general, and in Berger’s own writings in particular.

On 23 October 1956, up to 200,000 people assembled in front of the Parliament building in Budapest demanding the departure of Soviet troops from Hungary, the termination of military and economic dependency on the Soviet Union, a multiparty system, free elections, civil rights, freedom of belief, and freedom of expression. From 24 October this uprising spread throughout the entire country, with the formation of local revolutionary councils supporting the revolution’s demands. By 28 October a new government had been formed under Imré Nagy, which included Georg Lukács, and which agreed to the revolutionary program and freed political prisoners. On 4 November, Soviet forces attacked Budapest, Nagy fled to the Yugoslav embassy, and by 11 November the uprising was broken. A minimum of 2,700 people died, 200,600 people, or 2 per cent of the population, fled as refugees, and János Kádár was installed in

³⁷ “Letter from Fredric Warburg to John Berger,” 20 February 1958, Secker & Warburg Archive, Reading University Library.

power by the Soviets, initiating a period of brutal repression that would last until 1963.³⁸ In the era of the Cold War, the fate of the Hungarian uprising of 1956 could only be decided, and its full significance understood, in the context of overall world politics. It was inconceivable that the Soviet Union would allow the independence of an Eastern Bloc state, and it was equally inconceivable that the United States would risk a nuclear confrontation. In this lay one of the many tragedies of the Hungarian uprising.

These events intruded into the composition of *A Painter of Our Time* in the most literal sense: Berger pasted two highly significant articles from the *Daily Worker* into his manuscript notebook.³⁹ The first article was the first report to appear about the uprising, which appeared on 24 October 1956.⁴⁰ The next day an editorial denounced the “counter-revolution,” a line that the paper maintained, and was backed up by a statement by the Communist Party of Great Britain.⁴¹ The second article that Berger pasted into his manuscript, however, by the journalist Peter Fryer, was one which triggered a crisis which reverberated far beyond the *Daily Worker*.⁴² Fryer was the *Daily Worker’s* Special Correspondent in Hungary, but in a letter published on 16 November, he announced that this article and three others sent to the paper had been severely cut, altered, or not published, and that staff were not even allowed to read them, because they contradicted the Party line: “The danger of counter-revolution did not exist”; the Soviet troops who entered on 4 November “fought workers, soldiers and students; and they could find no Hungarians to fight alongside them.”⁴³ Although Fryer’s claims were denied by the

³⁸ György Litván, ed., *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956: Reform, Revolt, and Repression, 1953-1963*, trans. János M. Bak and Lyman H. Legters (London; New York: Longman, 1996), 30–50.

³⁹ My thanks to Tom Overton, curator of Berger’s archive at the British Library, for this information.

⁴⁰ “100,000 March in Hungary: Mixed Motives at Rallies,” *Daily Worker*, October 24, 1956, 1.

⁴¹ “Hungarian Workers Answer,” *Daily Worker*, October 25, 1956, 1.

⁴² Peter Fryer, “The Hell That Was Horthy’s,” *Daily Worker*, October 25, 1956, 3.

⁴³ Peter Fryer, “Reports Were Not Published,” *Daily Worker*, November 16, 1956, 1.

editors, he went on to publish his reports that year in a pamphlet entitled *Hungarian Tragedy* and it soon became clear that his reports were accurate.⁴⁴

The uprising in Hungary thus became a central concern of Berger's work in progress, where the émigré artist became a Hungarian named Janos Lavin. But the articles collected show that the focus on Hungary was part of a larger set of questions about truth and falsehood, censorship, political loyalty, uncertainty, and the artistic representation of historical events. These were questions which raged in the letters pages of the *Daily Worker*. Eric Hobsbawm wrote a letter admitting the "tragic necessity" of the Soviet invasion, "approving, with a heavy heart, what is happening in Hungary."⁴⁵ Christopher Hill, the historian and later Master of Balliol College, Oxford, demanded an auto-criticism: "a very self-critical article...of the *Daily Worker's* presentation of news from Socialist countries," a request that went unheeded.⁴⁶ Berger's focus on Hungary looked back to Antal, who had autobiographical resonance as his mentor in Marxist art history, and whose life provided an important source for the character of Janos. It also added another oblique autobiographical portrait to the novel: Janos being the Hungarian form of John. The practice of including newspaper clippings mimicked the technique of Cubist collage, his understanding of which Berger would explain in a 1958 article on Cubism written shortly after completing *A Painter of Our Time*: "one of the subsidiary aims of the Cubists in incorporating bits of actual newspaper and other scraps into their pictures was to prove that art could be made even out of 'waste material'." This incorporation of news print contributed to what Berger saw as the revolutionary nature of Cubism:

⁴⁴ Peter Fryer, *Hungarian Tragedy* (London: D. Dobson, 1956).

⁴⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, "Suppressing Facts," *Daily Worker*, November 9, 1956, 2.

⁴⁶ Christopher Hill, "Accuracy," *Daily Worker*, November 22, 1956, 2.

Theoretically, the reality of an object for a Cubist consisted of the sum total of all its possible appearances. Yet in practice this total could never be arrived at, because the number of possible visual appearances (or aspects) was infinite. Consequently, the most the Cubist could do, was somehow to suggest the range of, the infinity of possibilities open to, his vision.⁴⁷

While this was written after *A Painter of Our Time* was completed, it seems clear that the adoption of Cubist newspaper collage into the manuscript and the choice of clippings which pointedly exposed the falsity of a single viewpoint meant that this understanding of Cubism was being deployed for the novel's own investigations of historical and autobiographical truth. Both the totality of history and that of the individual, this suggests, can never be arrived at, only suggested through multiple viewpoints. And it suggests that one subject of this novel would be the function of the multi-perspectival narrative itself.

A second major consequence of the Hungarian uprising which directly impinged on *A Painter of Our Time* was the uprising's role in catalysing the emergence of the British New Left. The news of the uprising and its repression led to what Hobsbawm in his memoirs, perhaps alluding to his own actions, called "the political equivalent of a collective nervous breakdown" among British Communists.⁴⁸ Doris Lessing, like Hobsbawm a member of the Party, elected in her autobiography to describe it as resulting in a "mass social psychosis."⁴⁹ Hobsbawm, Lessing and Berger were members of the "Geneva Club," an informal discussion group organised by Berger, whose monthly meetings spanned the crucial years of 1955-1957.⁵⁰ Lessing's autobiography compresses into a single vignette a retrospective portrait of the Geneva Club:

⁴⁷ John Berger, "The Star of Cubism," *New Statesman* 55, no. 1407 (March 1, 1958): 268.

⁴⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), 206.

⁴⁹ Doris Lessing, *Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography, 1949-1962* (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 198.

⁵⁰ Julian Spalding, *The Forgotten Fifties* (Sheffield: Arts Department, 1984), 38.

John Berger had decided it was a bad thing writers met only writers, painters painters, architects - their own kind...He hired the large room over a pub a minute away from Oxford Circus [the Argyll Arms]...The place was full, it buzzed, it jumped, it vibrated. What a good idea we all thought, how clever of John Berger to have thought of it, and of course there must be many more such occasions. And then John called us to order and made a speech. It was a good cause of some kind, political. At once it was observed that the painters exchanged looks, were making for the door...‘Not *again*,’ people were saying. ‘We’ve been here before, too often.’ And so ended a brave attempt; but if politics had not intruded, we would all be there yet [*italics original*].⁵¹

As loose as the Geneva Club and New Left groupings were in the late-1950s, they did provide the self-consciously fashioned literary and intellectual coterie in which Berger’s first novel was written. The fevered debates among the British and European Left that took place during 1957 and early 1958, while *A Painter of Our Time* was being written, further shaped the writing of this self-consciously mongrel text; it is a representative of a specifically literary response to the crisis triggered by the events of 1956, to be placed alongside the intellectual developments, such as the founding of *The New Reasoner* and *Universities & Left Review*, that constituted the foundation of the New Left in Britain.

For Lessing, only with *The Golden Notebook* (1962) did she find a form capable narrating this generational loss of faith in Marxism. Indeed, a central statement of this novel is Anna Freeman’s declaration to her psychoanalyst that “[i]t’s a question of form.”⁵² More specifically, this is a question of form after modernism, and of its possibilities after Stalinism. In her Blue Notebook, Anna attempts her own “single day” novel, a key modernist narrative form used by Joyce, Woolf, and Richardson, wherein the recording of her period is compared to Leopold Bloom’s defecation. In an earlier entry in her “Red Notebook” intended to record her political life, Anna records attending a meeting to read Stalin’s writings on linguistics, the falsity of which causes her

⁵¹ Lessing, *Walking in the Shade*, 201–2.

⁵² Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (London: Michael Joseph, 1972), 406.

to think “of the novels about the breakdown of language, like *Finnegans Wake*.”⁵³ In *The Golden Notebook*, the loss of faith in revolutionary Communism is presented in various forms, all of which centre on modes of writing. In the first entry in the “Red Notebook,” Anna’s friend Molly tells of how, when asked by the Party to enact a self-criticism, to write about her “doubts and confusion,” she found herself writing “a whole thesis – dozens of pages...What is it I want – a confessional?” Anna’s own work for the Party involves proof-reading endless pro-Communist stories, whose falsity leads her to uncertainty – she cannot be sure whether they could be read “as parody, irony, or seriously.”⁵⁴ Around the crucial year of 1956, Anna’s “Red Notebook,” like Berger’s manuscript for *A Painter of Our Time*, is taken over by newspaper cuttings, before concluding with a vignette about a Comrade Harry’s disillusionment with Communism after a visit to the Soviet Union, and the failure of his plan to write the true history of Communism. *The Golden Notebook* is a testament to the centrality of the practice of writing to British Communism in the 1950s, its ambiguous relation to modernist forms, and the difficulties of writing about the end of Communism from an auto/biographical perspective.

Lessing’s dramatization of attempts to find a literary form for the narration of the loss or questioning of Communist political beliefs were part of a much larger literary genre, one in which Berger’s novel is situated. In Britain, earlier examples included Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* (1940), and the collection *The God That Failed* (1950), featuring contributions by Koestler, Richard Wright, Stephen Spender, and André Gide. Wright’s contribution, “The Initiates,” is particularly insistent on the relationship between Communist beliefs and writing, not just in providing an impetus to write, but also insistent on the change that occurs with the

⁵³ Ibid., 291; 258.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 135; 259.

loss of Communism: “I knew in my heart that I should never be able to write that way again, should never be able to feel with that simple sharpness about life, should never again express such passionate hope, should never again make so total a commitment of faith.”⁵⁵ In Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), Ellison’s former faith in Communism becomes a secret which cannot be named in his novel. But the crises surrounding 1956 sparked a second wave of literary self-interrogations, which were noted in France by Maurice Blanchot in a 1959 review, who claimed that the attempt to write about the loss of Communist belief might require a new kind of writing. Blanchot distinguished between theoretical works concerned with the “renouvelée de la méthode et des problèmes” (“renewal of method and problems”) and those more searching works which attempted to interrogate “tout la vie et que presque rien de leur histoire n’en fut tout à fait exclu” (“the whole of life and in which almost nothing of their history would be completely excluded”).⁵⁶ In this category Blanchot placed Edgar Morin’s *Autocritique*, Henri Lefebvre’s *La Somme et le reste*, and Andre Görz’s *La traître*.⁵⁷ Blanchot questioned how to write about a political belief which in its true sense was one’s “expérience quotidienne” (“daily experience”); if it is given up, he asked: “Que demeure-t-il d’une pensée qui, ayant accueilli les exigences totales du marxisme, c’est-à-dire la remise de la pensée au sérieux d’une action capable de la rendre réelle et vrai” (“What will remain of such a thought which welcomed the total demands of Marxism, that is to say, the delivery from a thought seriously capable of rendering it [thought] real and true”). In these works, neither “autocritiques,” nor autobiographies, “[n]ous sentons qu’entre l’histoire des pensées et l’histoire personnelle, le récit, ainsi que la contestation, hésite, cherchent de nouvelles voies” (“we feel that between the history of thought and personal

⁵⁵ Richard Crossman, ed., *The God That Failed: Six Studies in Communism* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1950), 166.

⁵⁶ Maurice Blanchot, “La Fin de la philosophie,” *La Nouvelle Revue française* 80 (August 1959): 286–7.

⁵⁷ Edgar Morin, *Autocritique* (Paris: René Julliard, 1959); Henri Lefebvre, *La Somme et Le Reste*, 2 vols. (Paris: Nef de Paris, 1959); André Gorz, *Le traître: Avant-propos de Jean-Paul Sartre* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1958).

history, the narrative, as well as the challenge, hesitates, searching for a new voice”).⁵⁸ Blanchot’s probing questions were those which Berger’s novel was attempting to answer.

A Painter of Our Time opens with a frame narrative entitled “The Beginning,” which unfolds many of the concerns surrounding auto/biography, narrative perspective, and contemporary history that Berger grappled with while composing the novel. The unnamed narrator arrives at a painter’s studio: “On the door was a strip of metal foil with ‘Janos Lavin’ printed on it.”⁵⁹ Lavin has disappeared without trace, abandoning his studio, and the narrator, his friend, is searching for clues among his studio. Searching through the studio, he projects “my own feeling of confusion of loss,” onto everything except his painting, *The Games*, which was “already beginning to outlast the circumstances that had given rise to its being painted” (2). Projection is followed by a double mirroring: first the narrator sees a “piece of mirror” (2), then he sees another mirror, which “probably originally belonged to the same one as the shaving piece. This one was for squinting at the canvas in” (3). Janos’s reflection is split between his intimate life and his work, a work that requires its own reflection in order to squint at the canvas, to produce the painting. Other scraps of Janos’s life in the studio force the narrator to realize how little he knew about his friend. He sees photographs taken at Budapest University in 1918, then in Prague in 1919, after “having been forced to leave Hungary after the overthrow of the Soviet revolutionary government of 1919” (4). Another photograph shows Janos in Berlin in the 1920s, with his then abstract paintings in the background. The eighteenth-century furniture in the living space upstairs from the studio is described as “autobiographical...[t]hey had reflected – literally – a way of life” (5). Searching for his copy of Diderot which he had lent to Janos, an allusion which quietly places the novel in

⁵⁸ Blanchot, “La Fin de la philosophie,” 278.

⁵⁹ John Berger, *A Painter of Our Time* (London: Verso, 2010), 1. Further citations will be in the main body of the text.

the tradition of art writing inaugurated by Diderot's *Salons*, the narrator comes across a journal, in English, French, and Hungarian, detailing Janos's life. It is this journal, translated by an anonymous friend, that follows the frame narrative, and it amounts to "a *Portrait of the Artist as an Émigré*." In introducing the "journal" the narrator claims that "it was necessary to have also a commentary of background facts. This I have tried to write. I have also, with the help of my friend, tried to polish the translation." And the introduction ends: "Naturally, I have changed most of the names" (7).

With its projections, multiple reflections, split mirrors, photographs and found texts, this frame narrative sets up a complex visual model of multiple perspectives, identifications and displacements. The search for the truth about Janos will be a projection and reflection of the narrator, but one which is split between two mirrors. The truth-value of the private journal is brought into question: it is presented in translation, already commented upon by the narrator. The narrator is identified as "John," who both is and is not John Berger the author. In a further layering, the original manuscript's working title, "A Portrait of the Artist as an Émigré," becomes the title of Janos's journal, placed with a commentary inside the text of *A Painter of Our Time*. This use of the formal device of the personal journal or confession narrative within a larger text recalls the literary self-criticisms and diary keeping of Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, making it a key formal device for the literature of postwar "autocritique" to investigate the relationship between the personal and the public, the private and the political. Ironically, it also became a way for two of the most prominent British painters claimed by Berger as "Social Realists" to reveal how inadequate such an interpretation was of their work. John Bratby's novel *Breakdown* (1960) is a thinly veiled account of the breakdown of the painter Jack Brady. Bratby in fact is described in the novel as a modern Kokoschka, and the narrative revels in presenting solipsism, subjectivism and a grotesque series of "crack-

ups” as if to programmatically reject the tenets of realism, Social or otherwise. Keith Vaughan, whom Berger had praised for “communicating visual sense and experience, complete and consistent” published his own painter’s journal in 1966.⁶⁰ With its documentation of Vaughan’s loneliness, depression, and above all his homosexuality, it is a powerful work of autobiographical writing that shows how little was and could be communicated in his or perhaps any realist painting of the period. It is not difficult to understand why in 1959 Vaughan would dismiss Berger’s claim that that painting should “encourage men ‘to know and claim their social rights’” as “surely one of the least helpful definitions of artistic values ever invented.” The following entry reveals his preference for an approach that was closer to Berger the novelist than Berger the critic: “A favourite device of Vermeer (and myself) is to turn the second figure back to the viewer, thus presenting the viewer in relation to the first figure.” Or as a 1964 entry said, “I find it a constant baffling mystery – the duality of I am myself. *Je est un autre*.”⁶¹ Rimbaud’s aphorism is the subtext of Janos’s introductory explanation for keeping his journal: “I need to see myself again” (11). Janos the painter needs to write to see himself, the mirror image of the writer’s relationship to painting. “John Berger” too becomes *un autre*, or perhaps: *des autres*.

The novel’s diary and commentary structure shows how the autobiographical truth of both Janos and John arises from an interplay between one and the other. Janos’s diary entries, often short and aphoristic, lay out his ideas concerning the visual nature of intersubjective recognition. The model of projection recurs in a recording of one of Janos’s dreams about his native Hungary: “On to the huge Aföld sky a film was being projected as if it were a screen – a film of incidents from my life and paintings” (22). But this, as John comments, was the dream of a “*sky mirage that appears over the Hungarian plain*

⁶⁰ John Berger, “Keith Vaughan,” *New Statesman & Nation* 51, no. 1318 (June 16, 1956): 687.

⁶¹ Keith Vaughan, *Journals 1939-1977* (London: John Murray, 1989), 117; 141.

[italics original]” (22). When Janos describes the technique of cross-hatching, he calls it “the simplest visual example of the dialectical process” (43); when one set of parallel lines are crossed by another, a potential future arises from the spatial field created, the space of encounter and recognition between self and other. But this is also true for Janos of the relationship of the refugee to his own past: “You arrive somewhere, alone. And then you want to take out your memories, which are also dreams, and hang them round your room – like pictures. And between each picture you think of placing an imaginary mirror with your own face in it. That is how you furnish a room with the past” (48). These images of the past, always projections from the present, haunt Janos as the diary progresses. Janos’s friend Laszlo, a poet, remained in Hungary during the war to support the Communist regime. Two months later, his diary records that “Laszlo has been executed” (56). Janos is haunted by Laszlo’s act of public confession in a show trial before his execution. The confession, warped by the practice of Communist self-criticism, holds no truth-value, but Janos can no longer “assume that you were as I knew you,” and so his ability to interpret Laszlo’s speech is impossible (73). Unable to know whether he was innocent or guilty, what remains “small as the pain is sharp” is “your confession and my doubt” (75). With the status of verbal confession placed in interminable doubt, Laszlo’s haunting takes the form of visual images. Janos’s last memory of Laszlo is in Berlin, where his last words were “I shan’t see you,” and when Janos leaves on the train as a refugee, Laszlo doesn’t acknowledge him nor return his departing gaze (109). As the narrative and the diary continue, it becomes clear that the more that is revealed to John, the more he realizes how little he actually knew Janos, mirroring the duplicity of the staged confession in Laszlo’s trial. The dialogic understanding of realism as the reconciliation between subject and object breaks down in the novel, in the refusal of Laszlo to return Janos’s gaze, and in the gap opened up between John’s reading and writing of Janos.

Laszlo's image and his gaze haunt Janos as he begins to work his way out of mourning by embarking on a new, giant painting, *The Games*. Working on it, Janos thinks: "How difficult it is to paint eyes that do not appeal to the spectator. How difficult to think more of Laszlo's life than his death" (138). As he works on the painting, his thoughts on politics and art vacillate. His realization that "art is the most inconvenient of activities, the least susceptible to will or legislation" is "bitter for me to admit...I who, as a man, believe in the collective, in the revolutionary class not the revolutionary individual" (140). Simultaneously, realism is replaced as Janos rediscovers the potential of Cubism. He wants "as many frontal views as possible" (130), leading him to doubt his "formalism" (148), to imagine how the Party would criticize him. But he believes that "in my painting their [the working-class's] victory consists of the way in which they have been painted" (148). It is Cubism which liberates this picture: "Twist the back of the extreme left-hand figure. What eyes Cubism has given us! Never can we make a painting of a single view. We now have a visual dialectic. How easy it should be for Marxists to understand!" (145). This visual dialectic also liberates Janos from his mourning of Laszlo, and the disappointments of revolutionary failure, for Laszlo "died" when he refused to return Janos's gaze in Berlin. A dialogic realism, where the gaze can be refused and identification prevented, is sublated into a truly dialectical interpretation of Cubism. And this view is also the narrative form of the novel, the journal inside the book, the views of John and Janos, implying a concomitant rethinking of the relationship between literary form and political potentiality: exploring what is beyond both omniscient narration and the individual autobiography. As Laszlo reflects: "It is like listening to a story-teller because he tells good stories and then suddenly realizing that he is talking about his own life, about himself in the third person" (128).

But the visual dialectic achieved in *The Games* is only temporary. John's commentary on the diary in the year in which Janos struggled to complete his painting reveals how hidden this was at the time: "*The outward evidence of Janos's moods at this time was very undramatic [italics original]*" (143). There are points in Janos's documentation of his work when he thinks he might "show these last few notes to J.," upon which John comments: "*He never did show them to me. And although obviously these pages are argued in the kind of way that suggests Janos had public readers in mind, I now believe in the light of later events that he was really arguing with his own conscience [italics original]*" (155). At the narrative height of Janos's aesthetic and political breakthrough, the commentary reminds us of the later events with which his narrative began: Janos's disappearance. Laszlo might be buried, but the narrative haunting of Janos's absence is not dispelled. An enigmatic entry in March attests that "LAZLO WAS INNOCENT (176)." It is not clear if this refers to what might have happened during the thaw in Hungary, when many killed by the regime were declared innocent, or whether it is in Janos's imagination. His diary begins to fade out: "I have nothing to write...All around people are talking, but I have nothing to say" (176). His final diary entry, appearing two days after the opening of his first exhibition at which he disappeared, opens: "If we think of ourselves as special creators, we are wrong" (198). The novel ends with John discovering a letter from Janos, on a train going eastwards, accompanied by a Viennese student: "*I go now to tell my mistake to those who are like I was [italics original]*" (199). John concludes:

What happened to him after this? We do not know...Even worse, we do not know what he did. Did he stand by and watch during those terrible days in Budapest? Did he join with the revisionists of the Petöfi circle? Did he fight side by side with those workers' councils who resisted the Red Army...Each of these possibilities is reasonable (200).

Even with access to “this man’s most intimate hopes, thoughts, [and] confessions” through his diary (200), the novel’s carefully balanced overlapping of biographical and historical truth shows both to be beyond a single mode of understanding.

It was this closing statement, not the subtle and complex development of a narrative form to match Janos’s return to Cubism, nor the portrait of the mourning of the loss of revolutionary hope, that caused Berger’s novel to receive an extremely hostile review by Stephen Spender. For Spender, both this final commentary and the diary portion of the text were simply the views of John Berger, indistinguishable from those expressed in the *New Statesman*. Thus, Spender’s review became an attack on Berger’s justifications of “Communism”; the truth of which is, in fact, Nazism: “Janos Lavin is an advocate of judicial murder...This method was put into practice at Auschwitz, where victims were spared for the purpose of murdering other victims, thus facilitating the liquidation of several million people.” Spender’s only attention to the form of the novel is to conclude that it reminded him of a book he found in Germany in 1945: “It was written by a man who was himself a frustrated poet and artist, in a form consisting partly of a diary, partly of vignettes, sometimes of narrative, sometimes satirical...The novel was called ‘Michael’; and the author was the youthful Joseph Goebbels.”⁶² Spender is writing, of course, from a distinct position in Britain’s literary field of the 1950s: he had narrated his own disillusionment with Communism in *The God that Failed*, and at this time was editing the staunchly liberal periodical *Encounter*. *Encounter* appeared in *A Painter of Our Time*, thinly disguised as *Impact*, presented as a mere front for “American museums” (192). Ironically, Berger would be proved right in this respect, when it was revealed that *Encounter*, like the I.C.A. Competition for the Unknown Political Prisoner, was being funded by the C.I.A. Ultimately, the extremity of Spender’s attack, its offensiveness in

⁶² Stephen Spender, “Mixing Politics with Paint,” *The Observer*, November 9, 1958.

comparing Berger, who was of Jewish descent, to Goebbels, is testimony to the power of Berger's fictional creation, but nevertheless, Spender's attack helped to bury the novel. Low sales, and the perception that the book was poorly distributed, led Berger to accuse Warburg of losing confidence in his book after Spender's attack, particularly because Secker & Warburg were the publishers of *Encounter*. In a later letter in 1966, Berger went so far as to accuse Warburg of deciding "not to distribute the book," adding, "I hope you will remember telling me this yourself."⁶³ This charge was repeated in a 1988 afterword to a reprint of the novel, claiming that after Spender's violent reaction "Secker (who at that time were also publishing *Encounter*) decided to stop distributing the novel."⁶⁴ As Gordon Johnston has written, "Secker & Warburg published a body of literature whose critical reception and promotion in the 1950s was heavily circumscribed by the cultural polemics of the Cold War," publishing books like Czesław Miłosz's *The Captive Mind* in 1953, receiving funding from the Congress for Cultural Freedom for translations of Tibor Déry's *Niki* in 1958, and selling the film rights for *Animal Farm* to the C.I.A.⁶⁵ Johnston is right to deny that *A Painter of Our Time* was censored by Secker & Warburg, even in an indirect sense; but the fate of Berger's novel shows the extent to which global politics shaped the course of British literature in the 1950s. Removed from the deeply polarised world of London publishing, George R. Clay's review for *The New York Times* had the perspective to perceive that "[i]t is in the nature of Mr. Berger's message that we should never learn what Janos did when he got to Hungary"; and in doing so, "Mr. Berger has managed to dramatize one of the cardinal dilemmas of our age."⁶⁶

⁶³ "Letter from John Berger to Fredric Warburg," December 11, 1966, Secker & Warburg Archive, Reading University Library.

⁶⁴ John Berger, *A Painter of Our Time* (London: Granta Books, 1992), 196.

⁶⁵ Johnston, "Writing and Publishing the Cold War: John Berger and Secker & Warburg," 450–1.

⁶⁶ George R. Clay, "Artist in Limbo," *The New York Times*, March 8, 1959, sec. VII, 43.

G.: the moment of Cubism

The year after *A Painter of Our Time* was published, Berger outlined the new critical position developed from his novel: the rejection of realism and the return to the unfulfilled promises of Cubism, and the attempt to give this return to Cubism a Marxist interpretation. “Staying Socialist,” one of the last pieces Berger published in the *New Statesman* before leaving England to live in France, is both a melancholic and defiant look back at the 1950s:

For nearly ten years in this paper I have argued for and defended the concept of socialist art...I have done my best to promote the work of the Italian and French realists and what was dubbed the English Kitchen-Sink School...Now nothing remains of our success – except the genius or talent of the artists concerned...Nowhere in Western Europe is there a Realist stronghold left.

Evidently, therefore, we made a mistake.⁶⁷

Yet realism should be maintained not as describing “a set subject matter or style,” but as a future-oriented attitude towards the world, an aspiration to answer Gramsci’s question: “What can man become?” But the weakness of this thinking is highlighted by the article’s pessimistic conclusion. In an era whose ideology is best expressed by the slogan “‘You’ve never had it so good’...The official values of our society are no longer capable of nourishing or even encouraging art...So complete is the inner, but not the outer, collapse of our society.”⁶⁸ Such pessimism had already seen Berger outflanked by criticism on the Left. An article in *The New Reasoner*, translated from the Soviet journal *October* where it appeared in 1958 entitled “Revisionism of Marxism in Britain,” singled Berger out for attack:

In his article on ‘The Necessity for Uncertainty’ John Berger, too, proves himself a strong supporter of contemporary Modernism...It is not hard to guess what

⁶⁷ John Berger, “Staying Socialist,” *New Statesman* 58, no. 1494 (October 1959): 576.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 576–8.

this obsequious apologist of Modernism advocates: he disapproves of socialist realism in art and immediately gives himself away.⁶⁹

This may read like a stock piece of Zhadanovism, but its almost comic unreality as an interpretation of Berger's earlier criticism shows how little room for manoeuvre there was on the Left for aesthetic debate at the height of the Cold War. Perhaps, however, the Soviet writer could baldly state what Berger as of yet could not: he was now, in fact, an "obsequious apologist of Modernism."

More specifically, like Janos, Berger was now an apologist for Cubism, now the fundamental movement of twentieth-century art. And Berger offered Janos's interpretation, his critical position transformed by his fiction. "The static single viewpoint in painting and sculpture," he wrote in a review of Lipchitz, "can no longer satisfy the expectations deriving from our new knowledge of history, physical structure, psychology. We now think in terms of processes rather than substances." The Cubist adoption of "multiple view-points *within* the picture" was a discovery of a "new knowledge," as "self-sufficient as the truth."⁷⁰ Writing on Juan Gris in 1958, he declared that "the real subject [of a Cubist painting] is always the same, and is the function of sight itself...The artist, in other words, became his own subject, not in any subjective or egocentric manner, but as a result of his considering himself and the functioning of his own senses as an integral part of the Nature he was studying." It was now Cubism which had the potential to effect the reconciliation between subject and object that Lukács saw in his theory of realism: "the Cubist formula presupposed, also for the first time in history, man living unalienated from Nature."⁷¹ These reviews were responding to a series of exhibitions in London and Europe which, in the wake of the major

⁶⁹ V. Ivashева, "Revisionism of Marxism in Britain," *The New Reasoner*, Winter 1958, 147.

⁷⁰ John Berger, "Controlling the Spin," *New Statesman* 56, no. 1450 (December 27, 1958): 905–6.

⁷¹ Berger, "The Star of Cubism," 268.

retrospective *Le Cubisme*, at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris in 1953, had stimulated the re-evaluation of Cubism in art historical terms, and its re-sale value on the market. For both these reasons, the art historian and collector Douglas Cooper was a driving force, curating exhibitions of Léger in Paris in 1955, Braque at the Tate in London in 1956, Gris in Berne the same year, followed by another Gris exhibition in London in 1958. Roger Penrose curated a *Portrait of Picasso* at the I.C.A. in 1956, publishing his second study of Picasso in 1958. All this culminated in John Golding's *Cubism: A History and an Analysis 1907-1914* (1959), a doctorate supervised by Cooper at the Courtauld, which offered a hitherto unparalleled level of detail about Cubism and its earliest critical reception, a study which Berger drew on in his own writings on Cubism in the 1960s.⁷²

Berger's re-interpretation of Cubism was most fully expressed in 1967's "The Moment of Cubism," in part a response to Golding's exhaustive if dry art historical approach. It opened with the curious assertion that the most extreme Cubist works "were yet to be painted"; they exist, rather, in "an enclave of time, waiting to be released and to continue a journey that began in 1907."⁷³ Cubism, in this reading, is neither a "style" nor a "policy," and it is not something which is defined within the terms of the discipline of the "dealers, collectors and cataloguers who go by the name of art historians" (4). Instead Cubism was a "moment...experienced" (5) when the convergence of imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism, developments in physics, mathematics, and technological communications, and the invention of cinema, the automobile, and synthetic materials, cumulatively "changed the meaning of both time and space" so that "the world, as a totality, ceased to be an abstraction and became *realizable*" [italics original] (6). If this anticipates later influential theorizations of

⁷² Golding's bibliography records the major exhibitions of Cubism up to 1959; see John Golding, *Cubism: A History and an Analysis 1907-1914*, 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 202–218.

⁷³ John Berger, "The Moment of Cubism," in *The Moment of Cubism and Other Essays* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), 3. All further citations in the main body of the text.

modernity in terms of its “culture of time and space,” it differs by making Cubist technique an active participant rather than a mere reflection of the experience of modernity: Cubist paintings “do not illustrate a human or social situation, they posit it” (29).⁷⁴ Cubism “changed the nature of the relationship between the painted image and reality and by doing so it expressed a new relationship between man and reality” (15).

It did so because of the formal innovations of a delimited period, 1907 to 1914: the presentation of a “multiplicity of viewpoints” which “makes it impossible to *confront* the objects or forms in a Cubist work,” and which means “the forms portrayed never present them as a totality. The totality is the surface of the picture, *which is now the origin and sum of all that one sees* [italics original]” (21-2). This surface diagrammed “the interactions between objects,” with space considered, not as the opposite of time, as a “container,” but as an “event, comparable with other events,” so that the “space between objects is part of the same structure as the objects themselves.” Thus “[t]he Cubists created the possibility of art revealing processes instead of static entities. The content of their art consists of various modes of interaction” (23).

Throughout the essay, the way in which Cubism transformed an understanding of time, space and causality is repeatedly compared to the discovery of Renaissance perspective, and there is a clear echo, and attempt to mirror, Panofsky’s association between single-point perspective and a theory of history. What makes Cubism different from other modes of representation is that, like Panofsky’s theory of perspective as a “symbolic form,” it presented the model of history by which it could be later understood, for it is the point of Berger’s interpretation that “the Cubists were not aware of all that we are now reading into their art” (27). As an event, Cubism was a moment of

⁷⁴ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1983).

“incongruity” and “shock” which cannot be situated in the linear time of positivist history, but can only be understood in the on-going process of its repeated re-interpretations (31). These re-interpretations include the one Berger is self-consciously enacting, sixty years later, a distance which allows him to see Cubism in its wider historical context, thus liberating the true potential and understanding of the “moment.” Griselda Pollock has written that this theory of the historical “moment” is “one of Berger’s critical contributions to a non-teleological approach to the history of regimes of representation,” comparable to Walter Benjamin’s messianic theory of history.⁷⁵ As is the case with Benjamin’s dialectical image, the “moment” of Cubism is one whose potential to be understood depends on its alignment with a moment in the future, so that the dialectic of events reaches a standstill in a moment of illumination. While Berger would later write some of the first introductory essays to Benjamin in Britain, and make his work the basis of *Ways of Seeing*, the significance of his essay on Cubism is to show he had developed his own theory of the “moment” before encountering, and realizing its similarity to, Benjamin’s theory of history.

This emphasis on Cubism as a moment of rupture and discontinuity in history, and on the most significant aspect of its formal innovations being its multiple perspectives, cut against the grain of the dominant interpretations and evaluations of the 1950s and 1960s.⁷⁶ These were encapsulated in Golding’s *Cubism*, which largely accepted Alfred H. Barr’s placing of Cubism within a strictly formalist, teleological narrative of the development of modern art, as well as Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler’s Neo-Kantian distinction between analytic and synthetic Cubism. Berger did not reject this distinction, rather the way in which it severed technique from modes of temporality. Berger’s stress on the novelty of the temporality generated by multiple perspectives looked back to the

⁷⁵ Griselda Pollock, “Muscular Defenses,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 11, no. 2 (August 1, 2012): 128.

⁷⁶ David Cottington, *Cubism and Its Histories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 165–196.

views of some of the earliest critics of Cubism documented by Golding: Metzinger's discernment of Picasso's "free, mobile perspective," and those of Jacques Rivière, who drew different, conservative consequences from the ways in which Cubism's "several points of view," negated linear perspective. Above all, as signaled by the epigraphs of Berger's essay, he harked back to Apollinaire, who wrote of how, from 1907, Picasso and Braque "made every effort to represent several facets of figures and objects at once."⁷⁷ That Apollinaire emphasized such multiple perspectives because it was a technique he felt could be translated from painting to literature suggests a similar motivation in Berger's case. But if these poet-critics figured temporality and simultaneity in terms of Bergson's *durée*, Berger's understanding was less focused on the subject than on the objective temporality of history. Berger also did not deny what would be emphasized in the later structuralist interpretations of Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss: that after 1910, in Berger's words, Picasso increasingly drifted towards representation understood as a "sign referring to, but not imitating, its [an object's] appearance" (22). By refusing the kind of linear account still retained by Bois and Krauss, where Picasso's work teleologically culminates in the necessary discovery of the "notion of the sign as arbitrary," and the invention of an "art of the unmotivated sign" – as if this was somehow preordained – but instead by seeing the development of Cubism as discontinuous and unfulfilled, Berger's interpretation sidestepped the problematically deterministic assumptions of 1980s semiotic approaches to Cubism.⁷⁸ In Krauss's teleological scheme, that it was "impossible for Berger to conceive of the rupture in Picasso's art as coming in 1912, with the evidence of collage" is evidence of the classically modernist nature of his understanding of Cubism, one which refuses to see in

⁷⁷ Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton, eds., *A Cubism Reader: Documents and Criticism, 1906-1914* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 76; 257; 647.

⁷⁸ Yve-Alain Bois, "The Semiology of Cubism," in *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 175; Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Motivation of the Sign," in *Picasso and Braque: A Symposium* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 271.

collage the “structural condition of *mise-en-abyme*: a hall of mirrors in which the real – the bit of newspaper – becomes the ‘ground’ for a ‘figure’ that in turn becomes a figure of the ‘ground’.”⁷⁹ Krauss writes that the literary analogy of this technique occurs in Gide’s *The Counterfeiters*, with its collapsing of the distinction between frame narrative and journal. Unintentionally, she recalls the literary origins and motivations of Berger’s claim for the truth of the “visual dialectic” of Cubism understood as a multiplicity of perspectives in the frame narrative and journal form of *A Painter of Our Time*, where this multiplicity of perspectives is itself “the real.”

In an essay written the following year on “The Changing View of Man in the Portrait,” Berger presented this theory of historical discontinuity and multiple perspectives as a solution to “the crisis of the modern novel”: “What this involves, fundamentally, is a change in the mode of narration. It is scarcely any longer possible to tell a straight story sequentially unfolding in time. And this is because we are too aware of what is continually traversing the story-line laterally.” Rather than a novelistic event being a point on a straight line, “we are now aware of it...as the centre of a star of lines.”⁸⁰ David James has shown the importance of Berger’s interpretation of Cubism’s unfulfilled potential as a formal model for what he calls Michael Ondaatje’s “cubist imagination.”⁸¹ Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) takes its epigraph from *G.*: “Never again will a single story be told as though it’s the only one”; showing Berger’s theory of history as much as of narrative form was especially important for these postcolonial writers. It was this theory of history drawn from Cubism that Berger was to use in the novel he was now writing: *G.*

⁷⁹ Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Picasso Papers* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 217–8.

⁸⁰ John Berger, “The Changing View of Man in the Portrait,” in *Selected Essays and Articles: The Look of Things* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 40.

⁸¹ James, *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel*, 78–80.

G. concerns the life of its eponymous hero, Giovanni, later shortened to just “G.”: the heroic character of the historical novel embodying the spirit of the age dissolves into a cipher. But as with Janos in *Hungarian*, Giovanni is also the Italian version of John, so once more Berger sketches out a mongrel, auto/biographical textual space, in which the concerns of the author, the narrator as a character, and an eponymous hero can be intertwined. In advance publicity for *G.*, Berger described it as “a book about Don Juan in 1900.” “I do not know whether it will be eventually categorized as an essay, a novel, a treatise, or the description of a dream.”⁸² This early flagging of the importance of the oneiric would prove to be significant for the novel’s narrative structure. As Geoff Dyer and Tom Overton have shown, many passages from Berger’s criticism, particularly *Ways of Seeing*, are included pointedly verbatim in *G.*: a narrative insertion on “The Situation of Women,” for example.⁸³ But the recurring self-reflection on narrative form that occurs throughout the novel synthesizes these texts, and *G.* is an attempt to expand the novel as a genre by incorporating strands of Berger’s critical thinking, particularly those on Cubism which, as has been shown, originated in the act of writing a different fiction. *G.* is an episodic novel, focusing on moments throughout G.’s life: his birth in Livorno, his upbringing in *fin-de-siècle* England, his return in adulthood to Italy, the outbreak of the First World War, his move to Milan and then to Trieste. But it is also episodic on a smaller scale, the novel being made up of short paragraphs separated on the page by white spaces. The effect is one of distance, narration of a life from afar, rather than the narration from within of *A Painter of Our Time*. The effect is that of the “views seen through the train window,” the classic synecdoche of modernity in the nineteenth-century novel that Giovanni sees as a child: “distant, continuous, almost disembodied.”⁸⁴ It is the writing of a life which emphasizes uncertainty, and the distanced, elliptical

⁸² John Berger, *Selected Essays and Articles: The Look of Things* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 1.

⁸³ Dyer, *Ways of Telling: The Work of John Berger*, 108; Tom Overton, “1972,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 11, no. 2 (August 1, 2012): 157–8.

⁸⁴ John Berger, *G.* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 58. Further citations will be in the main body of the text.

narration is an attitude to historical fiction; again of Giovanni's childhood the narrator states: "What the boy says in reply I do not know. To pretend to know would be to schematize" (51). In recalling the "necessity of uncertainty" that marked Berger's break away from realism as an aesthetic and as political dogma, the narrator claims a positive value for the gaps and lacunae in his text, and their place within a modernist fictional narrative.

The central concern of the novel is the relationship of G., as a character and as a historiographical cipher, to different modes of temporality. Early in the text, the narrator states: "Time is measured not by numerals on a clock face but by the incidence of our apprehended possibilities" (50). And later on, he reflects: "Calendars and clocks are our inadequate inventions." This story is being written according to a temporality of "coincidences...intimations about those aspects of time which I have touched but never identified" (148). These coincidences are the alignments of G.'s life with moments of revolutionary potential in pre-war Italy. As a child, G. is caught up in the workers uprising in Milan of 1898, in which the mayor was killed and the army ordered to fire on the demonstrators. The uprising and the building of the barricade breaks the continuous present that "[e]very ruling minority needs to numb and, if possible, to kill the time-sense of those whom it exploits by proposing a continuous present" (72). In a manner analogous to Brechtian dramaturgy, these narrative self-reflections about novelistic time, the exposure of the structure of the novel to the reader, and the reticence about the accessibility of the past to historical fiction has a clear and obvious political and ethical import. The novel's politics are that of a spectral Marxism, "[t]he spectre of revolution" (77), returning again to Berger's *oeuvre*. The novel quotes from Giolitti on the consequences of the suppressing of the 1898 worker's uprising: "KARL MARX HAS BEEN RELEGATED TO THE ATTIC, Giolitti in 1911" (153). The novel stages one

more return of the spectre of Marxism, and in doing so aligns the novel with the more recent history of 1968. Here, however, revolution must be achieved through the form of the novel. The narrator rejects a linear plot for the multiplicity of perspectives of Cubism:

But I have little sense of unfolding time. The relations which I perceive between things – and these often include causal and historical relations – tend to form in my mind a complex synchronic pattern. I see fields where others see chapters. And so I am forced to use another method to try to place and define events. A method which searches for co-ordinates extensively in space, rather than consequentially in time. I write in the spirit of a geometrician (137).

The allusion to “synchronic patterns” shows the influence of structuralism in the form of the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose *Mythologiques* are referred to in the list of footnotes at the beginning of the novel. It is significant that Berger does not reference his own work quoted in the text, making a subtle textual point about the blurring of the border between criticism and creation through playing with the use of the footnote, as well as continuing the use of the footnote in modernist poetics, from Eliot to Nabokov. The “synchronic pattern” into which G. is plotted is a structural account of European history: the connectedness of the brutality of British Imperialism, the symbolic achievement of the first flight across the Alps, and the worker’s uprising in Milan. In doing so, it opens up a different mode of historical fiction, where the relationship of the individual to history is more open: “Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one” (113).

There is another mode of historical temporality which G. proposes, emerging from Berger’s statement that his novel might be the “description of a dream.” Telling the history of G.’s cousin Beatrice in South Africa, the narrator reflects: “There is a historical equivalent to the psychological process of repression into the unconscious. Certain

experiences cannot be formulated because they have occurred too soon” (104). In this allusive novel, this is a reference to the Freudian temporality of *Nachträglichkeit*, a difficult to translate term, which carries the sense of “afterwardness,” delayed action, but also retroactive activation. The concept was never explicitly worked out in Freud’s work, and its own delayed action has seen it taken up primarily in trauma theory.⁸⁵ However, Jacques Lacan drew early if glancing attention to the features of *Nachträglichkeit* particularly apposite to Berger’s allusion: that it is not a question of “biological memory,” but “of remembering, that is of history”; that it is a reordering of “past contingencies by conferring on them the sense of necessities to come, such as they are constituted by the scant freedom through which the subject makes them present”; and that its most developed exposition occurs in the case of the Wolf Man.⁸⁶ In this most literary of his case histories, Freud repeatedly conceptualizes the relationship of the dream to the primal scene in terms of a “nachträgliches Verständnis” (“[the] understanding of them was deferred”);⁸⁷ “eine nachträgliche zum Verständnis vordringende Bearbeitung der so empfangenen Eindrücke” (“a deferred revision of the impressions so received to penetrate the understanding”);⁸⁸ the dream-work as an active “nachträglichen Wirkung” (“deferred operation”) precipitating the “Aktivierung des Bildes, das nun dank der vorgeschrittenen intellektuellen Entwicklung verstanden wurden kann” (“[t]he activation of the picture, which, thanks to the advance in his intellectual development, he was now able to understand”).⁸⁹ In Berger’s formulation, “[c]ertain experiences cannot be formulated because they have occurred too soon”; certain events can only be understood

⁸⁵ See Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

⁸⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 213.

⁸⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Gesammelte Werke: Chronologisch Geordnet. Band 12: Werke Aus Den Jahren 1917-1920* (London: Imago, 1947), 64 n.4; *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 37–8 n.6.

⁸⁸ *GW*, 65; *SE XVII*, 38.

⁸⁹ *GW*, 144; *SE XVII*, 109.

in their delayed and deferred activation. But it is also a feature of Freud's account of *Nachträglichkeit* in this instance that its difficult temporality is described in terms of relations in a visual field. After an original "Aufsplitterung" ("splinter[ing] up") the "Szene wirkt nachträglich" ("[t]he effects of the scene were deferred"),⁹⁰ until the retrospective activation of the picture. And when Freud describes his own practice of writing the case, of "kleineren Brocken zusammensetzen" ("putt[ing] it together from even smaller fragments"),⁹¹ he reaches for a revealing visual analogue: "Diese sonst nicht schwierige Arbeit findet eine natürliche Grenze, wo es sich darum handelt, ein viel dimensionales Gebilde in die Ebene der Deskription zu bannen" ("This task, which is not difficult in other respects finds a natural limit when it is a question of forcing a structure which is itself in many dimensions on to the two-dimensional descriptive plane").⁹² To show *Nachträglichkeit* is impossible in linear narrative, and the closest model Freud conceives of is one of simultaneity, representing a multi-dimensional structure on a two-dimensional plane; an anticipation, one cannot help but notice, of painterly Cubism.

This is the attempted structure of Berger's novel, his writing in the "spirit of a geometrician," striving towards "co-ordinates extensively in space, rather than consequentially in time." In *G.* Berger attempts to expand this model of psychic temporality to historical temporality, just as *G.* the character is a cipher for history. And in this novel, a revolutionary modernism is the event that has occurred too soon. Back in 1956 Berger had already argued, as in the temporality of *Nachträglichkeit*, that Cubism was a moment which occurred too soon, that it was already a displacement and substitution: "*Because they did not see how to make a revolution in the streets, they made one on their canvases.*" *G.*

⁹⁰ *GW*, 71; *SE XVII*, 44.

⁹¹ *GW*, 103; *SE XVII*, 72.

⁹² *GW*, 103; *SE XVII*, 72.

does not attempt merely to revive the potential of Cubism as deferred action, but true to the logic of *Nachträglichkeit*, its self-reflexivity about its historiography of the early twentieth century indicates how this earlier displaced moment is only realized in its retrospective reconstruction. As in Berger's earlier writing, Cubism works as a synecdoche for an unfulfilled modernism more generally. George Steiner, who was on the committee with Elizabeth Bowen which awarded G. the Booker Prize in 1972, argued that the novel is "a highly literary – indeed precious – affair, with plainly recognisable roots in the tradition of modernist fiction. It directs us to Italo Svevo's *Confessions of Zeno* and Robert Musil's *Man without Qualities*."⁹³ In addition to these, and the "geometric writing" of Cubism, one of G.'s lovers, Camille, is a reader of Mallarmé, whose poems enclose G.'s love notes, and who is seduced by G.'s recitation of "Un Cygne." The novel ends with two allusions to Joyce. The first is the obvious epigraph: "Geneva. Paris. Bonnieux. 1965-1971." The second is the conclusion of the novel in Trieste in 1915, where G. is killed by the Irredentianist uprising against the Austro-Hungarian Empire. G. dies at the time when war forced Joyce to leave Trieste, ending when *Ulysses* was beginning. Through its literary allusions, self-conscious narrative experimentation and its mapping of a geometric Cubist writing onto the early twentieth century, the novel realizes a deferred, *nachträglich* aspect of modernism, suggesting its aborted potential is yet to be fulfilled. "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one" (113): this is the historiography which G. proposes. But it also might be Berger's historiography of modernism: not a single story, but always one of revision and reconstruction.

Berger's turn to the temporality of *Nachträglichkeit* to structure his historical fiction and to rethink the temporality of modernism in the early 1970s finds its own

⁹³ George Steiner, "Books," *The New Yorker*, January 27, 1973, 92.

deferred and delayed activation in contemporary concerns around the rewriting of the history of modernism in the twentieth century from the vantage point of the twentieth-first. In *The Return of the Real* (1996), Hal Foster took up the temporality of *Nachträglichkeit* “for modernist studies at the end of the century”; proposing, like Berger, that “history, particularly modernist history, is often conceived, secretly or otherwise, on the model of the individual subject, indeed *as a subject*.” Attempting to refute the thesis of Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984) that the postwar “neo-avant gardes” can only fail due to the incorporation and neutering of their institutional critique, Foster instead argued that “*historical and neo-avant-gardes are constituted in a similar way, as a continual process of protension and retension* [italics original],” and, echoing Berger’s terminology, that “the avant-garde work is never historically effective or fully significant in its historical moments.”⁹⁴ While Foster’s arguments concern the history of art, as Rebecca Beasley has written, assimilating the challenge of Bürger’s division between modernism and the avant-garde has also been a driving force in literary studies for the production of a diverse set of “new modernisms” and a return to speaking of the “modernist avant-garde.”⁹⁵ Prompted by this renewed attention to modernism as an avant-garde, Bürger has recently returned to his original theorization and Foster’s critique. While standing by his thesis of the assimilation of the “neo-avant-garde” into the institutions of the museum and the university, what Bürger does accept as now important is “the use of deferred action as a general category of reflection,” albeit one which dissociates *Nachträglichkeit* from its association with trauma and repetition. For Bürger, a less psychologizing model of *Nachträglichkeit* is “what Benjamin called a *constellation*...it cannot be thought of in terms of a model derived from a subject at all; rather the second event,

⁹⁴ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 28–9.

⁹⁵ Beasley, *Ezra Pound and the Visual Culture of Modernism*, 3.

which possesses its own context of emergence, illuminates the first [*italics original*].”⁹⁶ Divorcing the temporality of *Nachträglichkeit* from biological memory was Lacan’s point, and I would suggest it was Berger’s too, in dissolving his fictional character into history and structuring his own novel around historical moments which “occur too soon.” The continuing re-interpretation and production of modernism is telling evidence that it is a moment, as Berger wrote of Cubism, that is “defining desires which are still unmet.”⁹⁷

Conclusion

For Berger, however, *G.* marked a definite break with modernism. In the 1980s, he turned to a documentary, ethnographic mode in his trilogy *Into Their Labours* (1992), which drew much from his reflections upon photography, an interest which largely replaced attention to modernist or contemporary painting. His focus now, from 1972, was on “the meaning and enigma of visibility itself” and “the significance of seeing.”⁹⁸ Because of this shift to posit visibility and seeing as categories of analysis, Martin Jay has written that “[f]uture historians will, in fact, likely date the launch of visual culture studies as a seriously scholarly field of study to the publication of *Ways of Seeing*.”⁹⁹ But this, in a sense, was a study of seeing after aesthetics. Indeed, in a 1972 essay on Paul Strand, Berger wrote that “[t]he ideal of photography, aesthetics apart, is to seize an ‘historic’ moment,” and throughout Berger’s writings on photography in the 1970s, the “moment” is used repeatedly to theorize the temporality of different kinds of photography, in a way which supplants the “moment of cubism”. Photographs of “moments of agony – a terror, a wounding, a death, a cry of grief,” for example, trigger not just a sense of shock and discontinuity, but also a more complex anticipation of the

⁹⁶ Bürger, “Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde,” 710; 711.

⁹⁷ Berger, “The Moment of Cubism,” 32.

⁹⁸ John Berger, *About Looking* (London: Writers and Readers, 1980), 41.

⁹⁹ Martin Jay, “Ways of Seeing at Forty,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 11, no. 2 (August 2012): 135.

“discontinuous...experience of time” they record.¹⁰⁰ Not just a simple trauma, but a narrative structure of remembering anticipation and anticipating remembrance. In an essay dedicated to Susan Sontag, Berger wrote of how photography was transforming “the faculty of memory,” and in doing so, revealing how “[m]emory implies a certain act of redemption.” But again, if “[p]hotographs are relics of the past, traces of what has happened,” it is also “just possible that photography is the prophecy of a human memory yet to be socially and politically achieved.” “The task of an alternative photography,” Berger wrote in 1978, “is to incorporate photography into social and political memory, instead of using it as a substitute which encourages the atrophy of any memory.”¹⁰¹

These essays, collected in *About Looking* (1980), were part of a wider expansion of the theory and criticism of photography in the 1970s beyond the technical and often partisan writings of practising photographers. As W. G. Sebald recalled in 2001: “In the ‘70s there were very interesting things written about photography by Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, John Berger. I felt a direct rapport with things said in these essays.”¹⁰² Sebald owned a copy of *About Looking*, and it not difficult to see how Berger’s reflections upon the relationship between photography, temporality, and memory were taken up in Sebald’s own works. Berger’s collaborative works with Jean Mohr such as *A Fortunate Man* (1967) and *A Seventh Man* (1975), which incorporate photographs into discursive essayistic narratives, stand as Anglophone precursors to Sebald’s own genre-blurring works. Sebald also extended, although perhaps less consciously, Berger’s exploration of *Nachträglichkeit* as a mode of narration, particularly in *The Emigrants* (1993) and *Austerlitz* (2001). This appropriation of what one might term a Freudian narratology by these two writers, influenced by a theorizing of photography in relation to memory, brings out an

¹⁰⁰ Berger, *About Looking*, 47; 39.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 53–4; 57–8.

¹⁰² Kenneth Baker and W. G. Sebald, “Up Against Historical Amnesia, Interview with Kenneth Baker,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 7, 2001, sec. Sunday Review Section.

often overlooked line of continuation between the multiple perspectives of modernist fiction and the turn towards autobiographical, autofictional, and historiographical modes that increasingly defined fiction in the last decade of the twentieth century. Like Berger, Sebald turned away from an early preoccupation with modernist fictional technique, in his case with Kafka and Beckett, and for Sebald, as for Berger and the rest of the writers in the thesis, analogies with visual art were the means by which issues of narrative perspective were figured. But unlike Berger, Sebald did not attempt to counteract the “atrophy of any memory” by turning away from considering photography’s relationship to aesthetics. In Sebald’s work, the relationship between photography and aesthetics is what makes photography so important to his fiction, and it is to this work that the next chapter will now turn to trace Sebald’s explorations of memory and history at the end of the postwar period.

Chapter 5

W. G. Sebald

In a 1992 interview, W. G. Sebald declared: “I myself work like a painter who has to consider how big to make the frame. The painter’s craft has always fascinated me.” As so often is the case with Sebald, his understanding of what it means to “work like a painter” in the medium of prose fiction is expressed through a commentary on another writer:

I share Peter Handke’s view that time plays a central role in narrative literature. For fifteen years now Handke has tried relatively systematically to eliminate time from his texts and to give his prose the plasticity of a three-dimensional pictorial language. That is what grabs us when we visit a museum and see a painting from the seventeenth century. That is a snapshot for all eternity.¹

This is a sly piece of critical ventriloquism: Sebald’s own opinions expressed in an ostensible interpretation of Handke. Handke might be trying to eliminate time from narrative fiction, but that doesn’t mean Sebald thinks this is possible. In an essay written the previous year, Sebald wrote that Handke’s “The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire” (1980) was a “programmatischer Entwurf von der Sichtbarmachung einer schöneren Welt kraft allein des Wortes” (“programmatic design for the visualization of a more beautiful world by the power of language alone”).² That design drew on a vision of Cézanne’s late work which saw it as Beckett saw it: showing a world which stays “still for its phases”; a world as “material of a strictly peculiar order” existing apart from the

¹ W. G. Sebald and Piet de Moor, “Echoes from the Past: A Conversation with Piet de Moor,” in *Saturn’s Moons: W. G. Sebald - A Handbook*, ed. Jo Catling and Richard Hibbitt, trans. Reiner van Straten (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2011), 352.

² W. G. Sebald, “Jenseits der Grenze – Peter Handkes Erzählung Die Wiederholung,” in *Unheimliche Heimat: Essays zur österreichischen Literatur* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995), 163. My translation of this essay throughout.

“dynamic intrusions” of human time.³ But just as Beckett’s subsequent criticism and fiction was to return again and again to how language, in describing a visual image, could not help but place it within the “fuite des heures” (“the flight of the hours”), so too Sebald saw in Handke’s subsequent novel, *Repetition* (1986), an implicit admission that the lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire, the escape from time through the representation of landscape, could not be applied so easily to the medium of narrative fiction.

In *Repetition*, in contrast, the attempt to eliminate time takes place through narration as repetition and remembrance. Filip Kobal requires the passing of time to “den Erzähler in sich entdeckte” (“discover the narrator within him”): the writing of his story fulfills his wish to return to his past. Except that, even if “die Fragmente der Vorzeit wieder zu sinnvollen Mustern versammelt scheinen, befallen den Erzähler nie ganz zu beschwichtigende Zweifel” (“the ancient fragments seem to be gathered into a sensible pattern, the storyteller’s doubt is never fully assuaged”).⁴ Like Freud hesitantly writing his case history by “kleineren Brocken zusammensetzen“ (“putting it together from small fragments”), and Berger accepting the gaps in his knowledge of an uneven past already shot through with moments of anticipation and remembrance, Sebald sees the force of narrative fiction as the recurring doubt in its ability to provide a “snapshot for all eternity.” This doubt produces an orientation towards the future: doubt that eternity has been achieved is a refusal “die Möglichkeit der Erlösung nicht ausgehen lassende Licht” (“to let the possibility of redemption be extinguished”).⁵

For a writer who has been so extensively discussed in relation to photography, and whose use of photographic reproductions in what he called his “semi-documentary

³ Beckett, *Letters 1*, 222.

⁴ Sebald, “Jenseits der Grenze,” 176.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.

prose fiction” is one of the most original features of his work, this early claim to “work like a painter” opens up a different aspect of Sebald’s response to visual art.⁶ Carolin Duttlinger, J. J. Long, Anne Fuchs and Lise Patt are just some of the critics who have shown the ways in which photography is central to Sebald’s explorations of memory, trauma, the Holocaust, bureaucracy, and the destruction of the environment.⁷ But at the same time, Long has cautioned that attention to photography alone can induce an overtly “narrow frame of reference” for Sebald’s wider engagement with visual art and media.⁸ Unpicking this early claim to “work like a painter” can expand this frame of reference, as well as offer new light on Sebald’s engagement with photography, for as his comparison of a seventeenth-century painting with a “snapshot” shows, painting and photography could be used to illuminate each other – or to reveal their respective blind spots.

Fuchs has written that “in his early prose works, Sebald makes an epistemologically as well as aesthetically significant distinction between photography and fine art that deserves closer analysis,” but her argument that “works of fine art in Sebald’s prose often provide a therapeutic haven of contemplation, a counterpoint that enshrines moments of transcendence” risks simplifying both this distinction and the status of painting in Sebald’s work, with “fine art” being less a question of medium than of cultural value.⁹ Noting that Sebald’s interest in the history of art clusters around the Northern Renaissance, Verena Olejniczak Lobsien proposes that “Sebald’s painterly

⁶ Quoted in Ulrich von Bülow, “The Disappearance of the Author in the Work: Some Reflections on W. G. Sebald’s Nachlass in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach,” in *Saturn’s Moons: W. G. Sebald - A Handbook*, ed. Jo Catling and Richard Hibbitt (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2011), 259.

⁷ Carolin Duttlinger, “Traumatic Photographs: Remembrance and the Technical Media in W. G. Sebald’s Austerlitz,” in *W. G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, ed. J. J. Long and Anne Whitehead (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 155–71; J. J. Long, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), especially Chapter 2; Anne Fuchs, *Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte: zur Poetik der Erinnerung in W. G. Sebalds Prosa* (Köln: Böhlau, 2004); Lise Patt, “Searching for Sebald: What I Know for Sure,” in *Searching for Sebald: Photography After W. G. Sebald*, ed. Christel Dillbohner and Lise Patt (Los Angeles: The Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2007), 16–99.

⁸ Long, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity*, 67, n. 4.

⁹ Anne Fuchs, “W. G. Sebald’s Painters: The Function of Fine Art in His Prose Works,” *The Modern Language Review* 101, no. 1 (January 2006): 168.

interests are part of his larger epistemological concerns with the reliability of perception and the working of memory – issues that also arise in his use of photographs. Within this context, his fascination with early modern painting also highlights another aspect of his overarching concern with ‘how to see’: the problem of historical perspective together with that of ‘world views,’ especially the place they assign to death, pain and suffering.”¹⁰ Lobsien lays out a productive framework for understanding Sebald’s return to past forms of visual realism as being part of the same concerns with realism that motivated his use of photography. And she highlights how both media were used to think through the intertwined issues of “how to see”: perspective in fiction and perspectives upon history.

Above and beyond the direct debts to Berger’s writings on photography and memory, and, as shall be discussed below, what Sebald called the “critical meaning” of Beckett’s narrative technique, this use of visual art to articulate modes of narrative and to situate his writing historically within regimes of ways of seeing is what brings Sebald into line with the authors discussed so far in this thesis. Furthermore, because of Sebald’s long study not only of these authors, but of the broader currents of postwar literature they represented – Beckett, Handke and Bernhard’s exhaustion of one strand of modernist fiction, ending in Gaddis’s *Agapē Agape*; Berger and Sontag’s post-1968 essayistic cultural criticism – Sebald’s work is a self-conscious development and culmination of many strands of postwar fiction. In 1994, Andreas Huyssen wrote of “our *fin-de-siècle*” that the “major and puzzling contraction” of the 1990s across Britain, Europe and America was that the “waning of history and historical consciousness” was simultaneously accompanied by “a memory boom of unprecedented proportions.”¹¹ In seeing Sebald’s greatest value as exposing the ambivalences of this contraction, Huyssen

¹⁰ Verena Olejniczak Lobsien, “Transformations of Early Modernity in the Work of W. G. Sebald,” *Journal of European Studies* 41, no. 3–4 (December 2011): 433.

¹¹ Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Making Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London: Routledge, 1995).

shows how Sebald's work is representative of the turn to memory and history in the fiction of the second *fin-de-siècle*: Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992) and *Paradise* (1997); Graham Swift's *Last Orders* (1996); Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997).¹² In his time spent teaching creative writing at the University of East Anglia, Sebald revealed himself as just as knowledgeable, if often critical, of postwar Anglo-American fiction: Don DeLillo, Raymond Carver, Jim Crace and Ian McEwan all suffered Sebald's exacting close readings, with his recurring complaints being "inconsistencies of perspective" and that he could not "*see [italics original]*" what these writers were describing.¹³ In contrast, Sebald repeatedly praised, and described himself as using, what he called Thomas Bernhard's "periscopic form of narrative."¹⁴ That this is an odd way to describe Bernhard's singular development of the fictional monologue shows Sebald's sly ventriloquism in action once more; it also shows how important visual metaphors were in the critical language Sebald used to describe his own work.

The range of Sebald's commentaries on German, British, and American fiction is a reflection of the unique position Sebald carved out for himself between Germany and the Anglophone world. The differences in Sebald's Anglophone and German reception have been much noted; a number of German critics have observed, with a touch of pique, that Sebald's success was as much, if not more, a product of the late twentieth-century Anglophone literary field rather than that of his long departed Germany.¹⁵ Indeed, of the 50 or so interviews Sebald gave in his decade-long writing career, over half were in English, and he was far more forthcoming to Amazon.co.uk than to the

¹² Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 138–57.

¹³ Luke Williams, "A Watch on Each Wrist: Twelve Seminars with W. G. Sebald," in *Saturn's Moons: W. G. Sebald - A Handbook*, ed. Jo Catling and Richard Hibbitt (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2011), 147.

¹⁴ Silverblatt and Sebald, "A Poem of an Invisible Subject (interview) [6 December, 2001]," 83.

¹⁵ Scott Denham, "Die englischsprachige Sebald-Rezeption," in *W. G. Sebald: Politische Archäologie und melancholische Bastelei*, ed. Michael Niehaus and Claudia Öhlschläger (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2006), 259–68.

Süddeutsche Zeitung.¹⁶ Sebald's debts to German literary history are so obvious as to be undeniable, but equally undeniable, as Peter Boxall has argued, is the impact Sebald has had on late twentieth-century Anglophone literature as well as on its emerging theorizations of and interactions with a "world community of writers."¹⁷ Picking up on Sebald's own use of the term, Matthew Hart and Tania Lown-Hecht have argued that Sebald's "extraterritorial poetics" are the basis for his contemporary contributions to debates "centering on questions of cultural translation and the limits of nationalism."¹⁸ Sebald's success in the literary field of the 1990s shows a dynamic that has been recurring throughout this thesis's study of postwar fiction: the interplay between national and transnational positions that follows from an engagement with the less nationally-specific systems of visual art and culture.

Sebald's texts were composed in German, and will be studied as such here, but critics have been too quick to dismiss Sebald's role in his own translations. Based on a study of emerging archives, Sebald's claim in 2001 that he "intervened massively" and "literally rewrote" his English translations now seems more accurate than his professed modesty, where he compared himself, tellingly, with Beckett.¹⁹ Based a study of Sebald's manuscripts, Lynne L. Wolff has argued that Sebald's rewriting of a number of crucial passages of *Vertigo* means that "[f]rom this privileged perspective [of examination of the translation manuscripts] one soon realizes that it is less a question of Sebald 'correcting' Hulse's translations and more a question of Sebald rewriting his own, original German text because, as he sometimes admits in letters to Hulse, of the stylistic problems which

¹⁶ Richard Sheppard, "Primary Bibliography," in *Saturn's Moons: W. G. Sebald - A Handbook*, 490–95.

¹⁷ Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, 6; 81–3.

¹⁸ Matthew Hart and Tania Lown-Hecht, "The Extraterritorial Poetics of W. G. Sebald," *Modern Fiction Studies* 58, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 215.

¹⁹ Maya Jaggi, "Recovered Memories," *The Guardian*, September 22, 2001; W. G. Sebald, "Lost in Translation? Conversation with Jo Cook (Norwich 1999)," in *Saturn's Moons: W. G. Sebald - A Handbook*, ed. Jo Catling and Richard Hibbitt (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2011), 363.

he claimed to perceive there.”²⁰As Hulse has written, this rewriting extended to the intentional alteration of historical sources from the German to English versions, for example the letter to Conrad in *The Rings of Saturn*, thus making this process of translation part of Sebald’s wider explorations of authenticity and historical documentation.²¹ As shall be discussed below, the mutations of “vertigo” in its translations from French to English to German and back to English across *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants* are central to Sebald’s aesthetic incorporation of the photographic readymade. Thus Sebald’s English translations, alongside attention to his German originals, have a place in this chapter’s exploration of the work of art in Sebald’s fiction.

To elucidate what the “work of art” meant for Sebald the writer of fiction, however, requires first turning back to study the writings of Sebald the critic. They show that Sebald’s theory of art was drawn from his reading of the works of the Frankfurt School, above all those of Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin. It was from reading these theorists that the process of negation became central to Sebald’s aesthetics. Or rather, Sebald’s blending of aesthetics and ethics, for “aesthetics and ethics condition one another reciprocally.”²² Art, for Sebald, was defined in tension with what it negates: “in order to get at a truth value through writing, you have to falsify and lie. And that is one of the moral quandaries of the whole business.”²³ It was for this reason that Sebald, in his rare direct writings on visual art, placed painting and photography in necessary opposition to and dependence upon one another, and this opposition runs through Sebald’s first two works of prose, *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*. The focus of this chapter is

²⁰ Lynn L. Wolff, “The ‘solitary Mallard’: On Sebald and Translation,” *Journal of European Studies* 41, no. 3–4 (December 1, 2011): 328.

²¹ Michael Hulse, “Englishing Max,” in *Saturn’s Moons: W. G. Sebald - A Handbook*, ed. Jo Catling and Richard Hibbitt (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2011), 201–5.

²² Sebald and de Moor, “Echoes from the Past,” 354.

²³ W. G. Sebald, The Questionable Business of Writing [December 1999], interview by Toby Green, Online, accessed December 10, 2013, <http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/feature.html?ie=UTF8&docId=21586>.

on this earlier phase of Sebald's work, where the relationship between painting, photography and writing draws more directly on Sebald's framing of photography and painting in terms of aesthetic theory. One claim this chapter advances, taking up a suggestion from Richard Sheppard, is that there are two phases of Sebald's *oeuvre*: an earlier phase where photography and painting are associated through a faith in photographically mediated aesthetic techniques of "objective chance" and "coincidence," and a later phase where "all that a writer like himself could do was work incessantly, remember, mourn...in the uncomfortable awareness that his writings, even with the help of photographs, were partial, inexact, and ultimately incapable of doing justice to their subjects."²⁴ The key figure spanning and indeed generating this transition is Roland Barthes, with whom Sebald maintained a recurring dialogue over the development of his writing. To show this, this chapter will conclude by discussing how in its allusions to Barthes, *Austerlitz* oscillates between the work of art and the work of trauma, and what this oscillation means for Sebald's attempt to find a place for memory within the working through of postwar history.

Early Critical Writings

In his account of Sebald's early academic career, Richard Sheppard wryly reflects: "Nor can I help wondering how many of Max's [Sebald's] Anglophone admirers understand that a straight, albeit subterranean line runs from his early saturation in revisionist Marxism to the nostalgia-laden critique of the postmodern, 'hamburgerized world' (Max's phrase) that informs his literary work of the 1990s."²⁵ Like many of his generation, this revisionism was learned from the Frankfurt School; unlike many, Sebald

²⁴ Richard Sheppard, "'Dexter – Sinister': Some Observations on Decrypting the Morse Code in the Work of W. G. Sebald," *Journal of European Studies* 35, no. 4 (December 2005): 425.

²⁵ Richard Sheppard, "The Sternheim Years: W. G. Sebald's Lehrjahre and Theatralische Sendung 1963-75," in *Saturn's Moons: W. G. Sebald - A Handbook*, 85.

was bold enough to write to Adorno in person, criticizing him for his judgment on the playwright Carl Sternheim, the subject of Sebald's undergraduate *licence de mémoire* thesis, written at Fribourg University, and of his MA thesis written at Manchester University. Authors, Sebald insisted to Adorno, should be understood as "Symptom seiner Zeit" ("symptoms of their time"), an insistence which shows the pupil vulgarizing the lessons of the teacher in a desire to impress.²⁶ Such simplistic symptomatic reading was a tendency of Sebald's earliest criticism: in an essay on Alfred Döblin, the subject of his doctoral thesis written at the University of East Anglia from 1970 to 1974, Döblin's belief that only a messiah can redeem a bankrupt modernity, is exposed as one of the "pathologisches Falles" ("pathological cases") of the structural social diseases of German society already diagnosed by Benjamin, Horkheimer, Bloch, Mannheim, Marcuse and, of course, Adorno.²⁷ In one of his earliest academic reviews, written in English, Sebald nailed his critical flag to the Frankfurt School mast, complaining that the unfortunate book under review had been written "[a]s though Benjamin had never put pen to paper and shown how it might be done."²⁸ However, a complaint the following year that "Horkheimer, Adorno and Benjamin are still a far better choice than some of their proselytizing adepts" could be turned back on Sebald's own writings arising from his graduate work.²⁹ Nothing is more certain in Sebald's analyses than the terminal contradictions of the "spätbürgerlichen Zeit" ("late bourgeois era"); with these contradictions being exposed again and again, Sebald's interpretations of the works in question are often schematic and predictable.³⁰

²⁶ Reprinted in Marcel Atze and Franz Loquai, eds., *Sebald. Lektüren*. (Eggingen: Edition Isele, 2005), 12.

²⁷ W. G. Sebald, "Zum Thema Messianismus im Werk Döblins," *Neophilologus* 59, no. 3 (July 1975): 421.

²⁸ W. G. Sebald, "J. Schulte-Sasse: Literarische Wertung (Book Review)," *Journal of European Studies* 1, no. 3 (September 1971): 273.

²⁹ W. G. Sebald, "H. A. Glaser, P. Hahn et al.: Literaturwissenschaft und Sozialwissenschaften (Book Review)," *Journal of European Studies* 2, no. 1 (March 1972): 76.

³⁰ W. G. Sebald, "Mord an den Vätern: Bemerkungen zu einigen Drama der spätbürgerlichen Zeit," *Neophilologus* 60, no. 3 (July 1976): 432–41.

While this tendency to reduce the literary work and individual agency to the pathologies of social structure declined in Sebald's criticism over the course of the 1970s, the importance of the Frankfurt School remained. In the first of two essays on Kafka, written in English, Sebald attacked the conventional approaches of academic criticism, stating that the "smooth surface of Kafka's work" has retained its "integrity against the advances of criticism." In a passage that anticipates the "Dr. K" chapter of *Vertigo*, but which also repeats a passage that appears in Benjamin's 1934 essay "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death" and in the "Little History of Photography," Sebald figures this inaccessibility as "the infinitely somber gaze of the five year old boy who, dressed in a sailor suit and with a shiny black walking stick and a straw hat in his hand, was dragged into the gloomy exoticism of a photographer's studio in Prague. Critics have singularly failed to come to terms with this gaze."³¹ Here conventional criticism is disrupted by the kinds of techniques that would appear in his later work: a textual allusion to a textual description of an absent photograph enacts the inability to return Kafka's gaze.

The second essay also discusses the gaze, but here it is taken up as a model for Kafka's narrative technique in *The Castle*. According to Sebald, "*The Castle* comprises a number of visual and reflective reminiscences of the [Jewish] messianic tradition" and this attempt to "represent and analyze the messianic idea" takes place through the contrast between differing descriptions of the characters in the novel, from viewpoints that have different levels of knowledge of what is taking place; or what Mieke Bal has

³¹ W. G. Sebald, "The Undiscover'd Country: The Death Motif in Kafka's Castle," *Journal of European Studies* 2, no. 1 (March 1972): 22; Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1931-1934*, ed. Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 507-31; Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka," in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1931-1934*, ed. Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 794-820.

termed narrative focalizations.³² For Sebald, the possibility that K. might be the messiah is maintained by the restricted knowledge, or focalization, of the external narrator: “Like K., about whose looks and origin we never learn anything conclusive, the messiah is of uncertain provenance and his physiognomy is indistinct.” This is juxtaposed with embedded passages of narration focalized through K., most revealingly in the appearance of Barnabas, who first appears narrated from K.’s perspective as an “epiphany” that for a brief moment “encourages the hope that there may be a connection between the sordid real world and his better vision.” “It is therefore of great visual consequence,” Sebald continues, “that the hopeful manifestation at the beginning of the novel dissolves as Barnabas strips off his messenger’s garb”; as he is more and more described by the external narrator, rather than by K.’s vision of Barnabas as an angel. Yet K.’s misunderstandings show “precisely the distinction between vision and reality which Kafka’s novel critically implies by making K. and Barnabas dependent upon one another.”³³ This distinction is Sebald’s articulation of Dorrit Cohn’s classic formulation of the technique of *The Castle*, which resulted from Kafka’s late decision to change the narrating pronoun from “I” to “K.,” producing an external focalization. Thus for Cohn there is “third-person [narration] throughout” but without a “narrator who knows anything more than his protagonist.”³⁴ At the same time, there are passages that slip back into a narrated monologue of what K. is thinking, embedding a character focalization within the external focalization, producing an oscillation between K.’s “vision” of the messenger Barnabas and the more sordid “reality.” But whereas Cohn describes this as a technique of narrative embedding, or in terms of reported speech, Sebald

³² W. G. Sebald, “The Law of Ignominy: Authority, Messianism and Exile in *The Castle*,” in *On Kafka: Semi-Centenary Perspectives*, ed. Franz Kuna (London: Paul Elek, 1976), 46; Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Third Edition (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 145–64.

³³ Sebald, “The Law of Ignominy,” 46; 56; 57.

³⁴ Dorrit Cohn, “Castles and Anti-Castle, or Kafka and Robbe-Grillet,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 5, no. 1 (Autumn 1971): 25.

characteristically describes these differing narrative levels in visual terms, anticipating his comparison of the limited knowledge of his own character-narrators with the distorted view offered by a periscope.

Sebald concludes the essay stating: “Beckett’s *Molloy* contains a similar constellation of ‘agent’ and ‘messenger,’ of the narrator of the story and a certain Gaber whose memory is as rudimentary as that of Barnabas is phenomenal. The analogy, significant in many respects, cannot be pursued here.” In this analogy, Moran is “the agent, the figure corresponding to K.”³⁵ The passage Sebald quotes is where Moran reflects on his role within Youdi’s organization. Like Sebald, many critics have noted the obvious theological resonances of these names: Gaber the messenger as the Angel Gabriel, and Youdi as Yaweh or Jehovah but also a derogatory French term for “Jew.”³⁶ Sebald’s analogy, however, points to an important narratological difference between *The Castle* and *Molloy*. Moran, like K., has an encounter with a messenger, but *Molloy* is narrated through a first-person or character-narrator, through which the knowledge of the messenger is focalized, embedded within an externally focalized narration. This is a technique which is closer to Sebald’s own works, which always include a character-narrator, than the technique of *The Castle*. But if there is to be an analogy with *The Castle*, if there is to be a distinction between Moran’s “vision” of the messenger and some other “sordid reality,” then Moran’s “vision” must be embedded within a externally focalized narration, and how this happens is described elsewhere in Sebald’s criticism.

In Sebald’s dissertation on Döblin, Kafka and Beckett are again singled out as “exemplarisch moderner Autoren” (“exemplary modern authors”) on the basis of their

³⁵ Sebald, “The Law of Ignominy,” 57.

³⁶ Hill, *Beckett’s Fiction*, 98.

narrative technique.³⁷ This is in comparison with Döblin's technique, described through explicit comparison with visual art. The technique of Expressionist prose, Sebald writes, attempts "abstrakte Vorgänge zugänglich zu machen" ("to make abstract processes accessible"). Concrete things like sheets and eggs are abstracted to become symbols of different temporal processes, but this, Sebald writes, is "ein Problem, das dadurch noch intensiviert wird, daß die Literatur diskrepantes Material nicht wie die Malerei in die Zweidimensionalität einordnen und zumindest in einem räumlichen Bezug setzen kann" ("a problem which is thereby intensified, because unlike in painting, the discrepant material of literature cannot be arranged in two dimensions and at least placed in a spatial relationship"). Against Berger, then, but close to Freud's skepticism about finding a narrative form to represent *Nachträglichkeit*, Sebald replays the classically modernist polarization already outlined by Lessing: painting expresses spatial relationships of simultaneity, whereas literature is bound to the temporal. Döblin's superficial attempt to express alienation from history by imitating Expressionist painting inadvertently shows that the "tatsächliche Korrelat der Entfremdung in der Synchronizität und im Zerschneiden aller Wörter besteht" ("actual correlation of alienation consists in the synchronicity and destruction of all words"), as in the exemplary styles of Beckett and Kafka, which are identified "durch ein hohes Maß an sprachlicher und syntaktischer Logik und durch eine ausgesprochene Metaphernarmut" ("through a high level of linguistic and syntactical logic and through an extreme poverty of metaphor") (136). More than any other writer, according to Sebald, Beckett works with a technique articulating an "Ironie der berichtenden Instanz, . . . [und] die Ironie des Autors, der den Wunschträumen seiner Kreaturen mit Skepsis begegnet" ("the irony of the reported instance, . . . [and] the irony of the author, who encounters the wishes of his creatures with skepticism") (117). Beckett's repeated portrayal of a character-narrator's

³⁷ W. G. Sebald, *Der Mythos Der Zerstörung Im Werk Döblins* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1980), 136. My translation throughout; further citations in the main body of the text.

“mimetische Impulse” (“mimetic impulse”), the desire to identify with an object, only to ironically undermine this desire through a skeptical external narration, is the “kritische Sinn seiner Kunst” (“critical meaning of his art”) (116). Therefore, even when using an “I” or character-narrator, there is an important distinction to be maintained between that narration and the externally focalized narration that ironizes that narrator’s desire and knowledge, keeping open a gap between the “vision” of the narrator and a different “reality.”

As well as providing a means to conceptualize narrative technique, visual art served as a medium in which Sebald developed the understanding of aesthetics that would undergird his later works. Sebald, Eric L. Santner has written, may be “the modern master of a Benjaminian poetics,” but his understanding of aesthetics is more indebted to the work of Adorno.³⁸ Adorno’s theory of aesthetics is another of Sheppard’s “subterranean lines” which connect Sebald’s critical and creative work. By the time of his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Adorno had centered his definition of modern art, drawn from “a historically changing constellation of elements,” on the process of negation: “Art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fiber.”³⁹ This negation must be realized in artistic form, and the form must bear the traces of this process: “[w]henever artworks on their way towards concretion polemically eliminate the universal, whether as a genre, a type, an idiom, or a formula, the excluded is maintained in them through its negation; the state of affairs is constitutive of the modern.” This process of negation, a double movement of incorporating what is eliminated and eliminating what is incorporated, is how “the inner-aesthetic and the social interlock.”⁴⁰ In an element of his thought that Sebald drew on for

³⁸ Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), xix.

³⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 351; 272.

his discussion of Beckett's mimetic impulse, Adorno offered a quasi-anthropological definition of the origins of art in magical thinking, or the "mimetic comportment...[the] nonconceptual affinity of the subjectively produced with its unposited other, [which] defines art as a form of knowledge and to that extent as 'rational'." Art is privileged for Adorno because it unfolds what he earlier theorized as the dialectic of Enlightenment: "art is nevertheless the truth of society insofar as in its most authentic products the irrationality of the rational world order is expressed."⁴¹

In 2008, J. M. Coetzee asked whether history took a wrong turn for Sebald "with the triumph of Enlightenment reason and the enthronement of the idea of progress."⁴² Drawing heavily on the annotations in Sebald's library, Ben Hutchinson similarly argues that the pivotal moment in Sebald's understanding of history was not the Holocaust or the bombing of Germany, except insofar as they were the outcome of the modernity theorized by the Frankfurt School; he goes so far as to state that Sebald's work is an "ästhetische Fortsetzung" ("aesthetic continuation") of the Frankfurt School's criticism of progress outlined in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.⁴³ This negative dialectic of history, where "progress is reverting to regression," shaped Sebald's understanding of aesthetics, his theory of what art itself is.⁴⁴ In his copy of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Sebald sidelined that: "Die großen Künstler...sind jene, die den Stil als Härte gegen den chaotischen Ausdruck von Leiden, als negative Wahrheit, in ihr Werk aufnahmen" ("The great artists were...those who adopted style as a rigor to set against the chaotic expression of suffering, as a negative truth"). Sebald further sidelined how art surpasses reality "in jene Zügen, in denen die Diskrepanz erscheint, im notwendigen Scheitern der

⁴¹ Ibid., 53–4; 84.

⁴² J. M. Coetzee, "W. G. Sebald, *After Nature*," in *Inner Workings: Literary Essays 2000-2005* (London: Vintage, 2008), 147.

⁴³ Ben Hutchinson, *W. G. Sebald - Die Dialektische Imagination* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2009), 33.

⁴⁴ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noer, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xviii.

leidenschaftlichen Anstrengung zur Identität” (“in those traits in which the discrepancy emerges, in the necessary failure of the passionate striving for identity”).⁴⁵ As Hutchinson argues, this dialectical adopting or incorporating (both express the sense of “aufnehmen” in the above passage) in art of its negation, which anticipates a central element of Adorno’s theory of modernist art in *Aesthetic Theory*, defines the syntactical style of Sebald’s prose, with meandering sub-clauses and dramatic end of sentence reversals. It can also be extended to argue that Sebald’s work can only validate its claim to be art by incorporating that against which it is opposed. Only through this incorporation and negation can a work offer a “negative truth,” and that is all that art can offer in modernity. As Sebald wrote of Beckett’s weaving of the pathos of the mimetic impulse into the form of his fiction only to ironically deny it, this is “the critical meaning of his art.”

Sebald’s 1993 essay on the paintings of Jan Peter Tripp offers the clearest explication of the way in which this process of negation shapes Sebald’s understanding of the relationship between painting, photography, and the aesthetic. In the essay, a negatively dialectical relationship is set up between photography on the one hand, and painting as art on the other. Written after the composition of *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*, the essay can be read as a ventriloquized and retrospective reflection on the practice developed in those works, an afterword to be read as an introduction. Mary Jacobus has written that in this essay, “Sebald could be writing of his own work, with its melancholy accumulation of detail and its memorial testimony of crystallized things.”⁴⁶ What in particular is being ventriloquized is the move from forgetting to remembrance; the move,

⁴⁵ Quoted in Hutchinson, *W. G. Sebald - Die Dialektische Imagination*, 6; Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969), 138; 139; Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, 103.

⁴⁶ Mary Jacobus, *Romantic Things: A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 144.

she quotes, “‘into time recounted and into the time of culture.’ The time of culture is the time ‘after nature’.”⁴⁷ But the time of culture is the time of photography, and Jacobus emphasizes that here Sebald “interrogates the role of photography both as a form of forgetting or repression and as a recurrent haunting by historical trauma.”⁴⁸ Writing of Tripp and Sebald’s collaborative book *Unrecounted*, Jacobus writes that “[t]he negative in their title...suggests that only through the lens of negativity, or by means of an assumed unknowing blindness – ‘on the very brink of vacancy’ – do certain kinds of knowledge become available to us.”⁴⁹ Only by adopting the photographic “lens” can the blindness it induces be cured.

According to Sebald, Tripp does this with his photorealist style and copying of photographs; because in his work “the exact reproduction of reality achieves an almost unimaginable degree of precision, it is impossible to avoid the tiresome question of realism.”⁵⁰ On the one hand, Sebald rejects the assumptions of “those critics schooled in the traditions of modernism” for whom the possibility that “radically exposed artistic positions might nowadays be arrived at just as readily through representational as non-representational art, is...virtually inconceivable.”⁵¹ On the other, Tripp’s work intentionally engages with “the whiff of trickery and inconsequentiality, which...at least since the dawn of photography and the beginnings of the modernist era which it ushers in – came to be extended to representational painting as a whole.” The importance of Tripp’s painting “lies not in what one might assume to be the purely objective and affirmatory quality of its identical reproduction of reality (or the latter’s photographic

⁴⁷ Ibid., 48.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 130.

⁵⁰ W. G. Sebald, “As Day in Night...On the Paintings of Jan Peter Tripp,” in *A Place in the Country* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2013), 160.

⁵¹ Ibid., 160; 163.

image)...but rather in the far more subtle ways in which it deviates and differs from it.”⁵² This deviation is contrasted with a definition of photography Sebald takes from Susan Sontag, which was also taken up by Roland Barthes: “[t]he photographic image makes a tautology of reality.”⁵³ For Sontag, reality becomes a tautology in a photograph because “photographs do not explain; they acknowledge,” and all reality is acknowledged in the same way.⁵⁴ Taking up Sontag’s argument, Sebald writes:

What may be true of photography though, is not necessarily applicable to art. The latter depends on ambiguity, polyvalence, resonance, obfuscation and illumination, in short, the transcending of that which, according to an ineluctable law, has necessarily to be the case...Art deploys the deconstruction of outward appearances as a means of countering the obliteration, in an endless series of reproductions, of the visible world.

The fear that it threatens the “obliteration” of the visual world lies at the heart of Sebald’s critique of photography. Tripp’s response to this fear, however, is to transcend this danger through exploring it: “[a]ccordingly, Jan Peter Tripp’s paintings, too, have a consistently analytic quality rather than a synthesizing one.”⁵⁵ The aesthetic and thus ethical value of his work is that it exposes the cracks in the photographic reproduction of the world, whilst at the same time exposing the limitations of the power of painting. In Horkheimer and Adorno’s sense, Tripp’s art emerges “in those traits in which the discrepancy emerges, in the necessary failure of the passionate striving for identity.”

In a 1990 essay on the artist and writer Anita Albus, who practiced a similar style of photorealist painting, the ways in which photographic reproductions threatened to obliterate the world were explained by situating this process within Horkheimer and Adorno’s dialectic of Enlightenment. “Die sogenannte Vernunft” (“So-called reason”) is

⁵² Ibid., 163.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979), 111.

⁵⁵ Sebald, “As Day in Night,” 164.

a product of the “Entwicklung gebrachten Apperzeptionsfähigkeit, die es uns erlaubt, detailliertere, tiefere und buntere Bilder zu sehen als alle anderen auf der Oberfläche der Erde lebenden Tiere” (“development of an ability of apperception that enables us to see images that are more detailed, deeper, and coloured, in comparison to all other animals living on the surface of the earth”).⁵⁶ But this dominance of vision demotes the other senses, alienating the human species from nature. There is, Sebald states, “eine direkte Korrelation zwischen der Realisierung eines Bildes und der De-realisation der Wirklichkeit und zwischen der De-realisation der Wirklichkeit und ihrer Zerstörung. Ist die Verschiebung der Welt ins Simulacrum einmal soweit fortgeschritten, dass – wie heute schon deutlich spürbar – das Bild die Aura des natürlichen Vorbilds und dieses die Aura eines Artefakts annimmt” (“a direct correlation between the realisation of an image and the de-realisation of reality and between the de-realisation of reality and its destruction. The world has shifted into a simulacrum to the extent that – as today is clearly traceable – the image takes on the aura of the natural model and this assumes the aura of an artefact”). The agents of this destruction are “die Hersteller und Reproduzenten von Bildern jeder Art [die] machen sich in der Regel kein Gewissen aus ihrem Metier und sie tun es umso weniger, je fragloser sie sich der künstlichen Augen bedienen, welche die Technologie uns beigestellt hat“ (“the producers and reproducers of images of any kind [who] as a rule act without conscience in their metier, and they do so even less when they make use of the artificial eyes which technology has made available to us”). But Albus’s painting is able to offer “[d]er Abglanz der Erlösung” (“the reflection of redemption”) through her minute attention to detail, her close viewing and representation of the most minor things.⁵⁷ The balm for the “artificial eyes technology

⁵⁶ W. G. Sebald, “Kleine Vorrede zur Salzburger Ausstellung,” in *Anita Albus*, ed. Tugomir Luksic (Salzburg: Galerie Schloss Neuhaus, 1990), 6. My translation throughout.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

has given us” is not a rejection of photography, but rather an attentive gaze that sees what is overlooked in the photographic way of seeing.

Tripp and Albus are obscure artists, idiosyncratic choices for essays of art criticism which are evidently a chance for Sebald to expound his own ideas on aesthetics and photography. They were occasioned by personal friendship rather than by any engagement with the system of artistic production in Britain or Germany. But Sebald does not abstract these artists from the developments of postwar art history. “The pictures from the first three of four years of Tripp’s career,” Sebald writes, “still clearly show the influence of surrealism, of the Vienna school of fantastic realism, and of photorealism, still embedded in the polemical strategies of 1968.”⁵⁸ The polemical purpose of photorealism for the strategies of ’68 was explained in a 1975 essay by Michel Foucault on Gerard Fromanger, a leading representative of *figuration narrative*, a movement distinguished, according to Sarah Wilson, by its return to figuration to explore many of the same issues of signification and representation that occupied postwar French “theory.”⁵⁹ According to Foucault, the ways in which such paintings mimicked photographic style was a means of plugging painting into the mass media world of the “[t]ranshumance autonome de l’image qui circule jusqu’à nous selon les mêmes voies de désir que les personnages qui s’y montrent” (“the autonomous migration of the image which circulates towards us along the same paths of desire as the characters it depicts”).⁶⁰ In breaking down the strictures of modernism’s separation of the arts, and its taboo on visual figuration, in this remediation painting finds a new role, both to show the circulation of the image as distinct from its medium, and to capture shifting images as they pass through the systems of media. Hal Foster has made a similar claim for the work

⁵⁸ Sebald, “As Day in Night,” 157.

⁵⁹ Sarah Wilson, *The Visual World of French Theory: Figurations* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁶⁰ Michel Foucault, *Le désir est partout: Fromanger* (Paris: Galerie Jeanne Bucher, 1975), 10. My translation.

of Warhol, Richard Hamilton, and Gerhard Richter: “painting returned, in the most impressive examples of Pop, almost as a meta-art, able to assimilate some media effects and to reflect on others precisely because of its relative distance from them.”⁶¹ Writing of this return to “painting after painting,” Griselda Pollock has argued that “the possibility of painting as the aesthetic mode of thought” is a fundamental premise of such strategies.⁶² This claim for painting’s role after photography as a “meta-art” or “the aesthetic mode of thought” is advanced from very different premises in Albus’s *The Art of Arts: Rediscovering Painting*, a book owned by Sebald. Although lamenting the decline of visual realism, implicit in Albus’s argument that painting alone can explore the ways of seeing of science, art, and natural history is the theoretical possibility for painting to function, as Sebald claims of Tripp, as the “art of arts”: a stand in for the category of the aesthetic as such.⁶³

In these essays Sebald does not exclude photography from the sphere of the aesthetic; rather, its claim to aesthetic validation is not to be based, as for a theorist such as André Bazin, on its ontological status as a reproduction of reality. For Bazin, “[t]he aesthetic qualities of photography are to be sought in its power to lay bare the realities...[o]nly the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, all those piled up preconceptions...[is] able to present it in all its virginal purity.”⁶⁴ In contrast, in a 1997 interview Sebald symptomatically blurred the boundaries between photography’s ontological and epistemological status in a dynamic that is central to his works: “The photograph is the true document par excellence. People let themselves be

⁶¹ Hal Foster, *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha* (Princeton University Press, 2012), 6.

⁶² Griselda Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, Space and the Archive* (London: Routledge, 2007), 182; Griselda Pollock, “Aesthetic Wit(h)nessing in the Era of Trauma,” *Eur.America* 40, no. 4 (December 2010): 857.

⁶³ Anita Albus, *The Art of Arts: Rediscovering Painting*, trans. Michael Robertson (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 2001).

⁶⁴ André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (Summer 1960): 8.

convinced by a photograph.”⁶⁵ In the Tripp essay, art is defined as transcending the photographic tautology of that which, “according to an ineluctable law, has necessarily to be the case.” By defining a photographic reproduction as that which has “to be the case,” Sebald relates photography to the aesthetic on the grounds of agency and automatism. Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iverson have argued that much twentieth-century debate about photography’s relationship to aesthetics can be understood in terms of this pair of concepts. On the one hand, philosophers such as Roger Scruton have denied photography the status of an art form because its production lacks agency, and is a merely automatic reproduction. On the other hand, in the tradition of modernist and postmodernist aesthetics descending from Mallarmé and Surrealism, artists and theorists have “valued photography insofar as it might be thought to *bracket*, rather than exert, artistic agency and authorial control. This is manifested in these artists’ preference for unpretentious snapshot effects, documentary value, and deadpan antiaesthetic qualities, as well as in their use of photography for appropriating and recycling existing imagery.”⁶⁶ In this art historical narrative, developed by critics such as Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Jeff Wall, photography “entered the mainstream fine-art canon when artists turned to the medium to *exploit* those very features of its process that appear, from a philosophical point of view, to be in tension with its status as art...[t]hat is, many artists valued photography in all the respects in which it seemed to evade, rather than mimic, art with a capital *A*—hence photography’s standing as the pictorial equivalent of the readymade [*italics original*].”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Christian Scholz and W. G. Sebald, “‘But the Written Word Is Not a True Document’: A Conversation with W. G. Sebald on Literature and Photography,” in *Searching for Sebald: Photography After W. G. Sebald*, trans. Markus Zisselsberger (Los Angeles, CA: The Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2007), 106.

⁶⁶ Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iversen, “Introduction: Photography between Art History and Philosophy,” *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 4 (June 1, 2012): 686.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 687–8.

The photograph as a pictorial readymade was developed in practice by Ed Ruscha, Bernd and Hilla Becher, and above all by Gerhard Richter, to whom Sebald has been persuasively compared.⁶⁸ Discussing his turn to painting photographs, Richter explained his attraction to seeing a photograph as an “image which, deprived of all of the conventional criteria which I had till then associated with art, provided me with a new way of seeing.”⁶⁹ Buchloh, sharing Sontag and Sebald’s assumption of photography’s “tautological grip on reality” explains how Richter’s statement reinitiates “the concept of the readymade, transposed from the world of objects to the plane of perception and of object reification in photography.”⁷⁰ The non-aesthetic photograph, a readymade objectification of perception, space, and time, becomes the raw material for a different aesthetic practice. According to Jeff Wall, such a use of the photograph as an “anaesthetic” readymade was one of the predominant strategies through which artists since the 1960s renegotiated photography’s relationship to art, in a negatively dialectical relationship with earlier traditions of photographic practice, in which the notions of Pictorialism, auteurism, composition, and skill defined a different understanding of photography as an art form.⁷¹ Sebald’s work and reading shows little awareness of the tradition against which artists such as Wall and Richter were rebelling, but his own reflections on his use of photography are strikingly close to the theorizations and practices of the photographic readymade.

Sebald repeatedly emphasized the readymade, anti-aesthetic quality of the photographs he used:

⁶⁸ Patt, “Searching for Sebald: What I Know for Sure,” 38.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2000), 379.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 377; 379.

⁷¹ Jeff Wall, “‘Marks of Indifference’: Aspects of Photography In, or As, Contemporary Art,” in *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 143–68.

I use the camera as a kind of shorthand or *aide mémoire*. I don't tie this to any artistic ambitions at all. Most of the time my camera is something cheap...I don't want to integrate images of high photographic quality into my texts; they are rather documents of finding, something secondary. It is actually quite nice when this indistinctness somehow finds its way into the images.⁷²

In this explanation, the blurred and degraded quality of the photographs reproduced in his books signifies their status as a pictorial readymade. Of the many examples, one could point to the blurry photograph of the house where Max Ferber and Wittgenstein lived in Manchester in *The Emigrants* (167), or the clearly photocopied and barcoded plan of the Thereisenstadt ghetto in *Austerlitz* (328-9). As the page proofs were reset between editions, and especially from the German to English translation, a process Sebald oversaw, the photographs became further altered. While some critics have decried this as a move away from an authentic original layout, within the aesthetic framework of the readymade, this later stage of visual translation only further emphasizes the “secondary” and “documentary” status of image.⁷³ Therefore the “translations,” or rather the re-printings, contribute to an overall aesthetic strategy of using photographs as pictorial readymades.

In relation to his collecting of photographs, Sebald emphasized the “chance” made possible by the photograph as a material object, rather than a means of recording reality. “The photograph is meant to get lost somewhere in a box in the attic. It is a nomadic thing that only has a small chance to survive.”⁷⁴ His practice, he claimed, was “collecting them not systematically but randomly.”⁷⁵ To Renate Just, he linked the chance encounter with a photograph to the aimless journeys which structure his narratives:

⁷² Scholz and Sebald, “‘But the Written Word Is Not a True Document’: A Conversation with W. G. Sebald on Literature and Photography,” 106.

⁷³ Patt, “Searching for Sebald: What I Know for Sure,” 39–41.

⁷⁴ W. G. Sebald and Gordon Turner, “Introduction and Transcript of an Interview given by Max Sebald (Interviewer: Michaël Zeeman),” in *W. G. Sebald: History – Memory – Trauma*, ed. Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2006), 24.

⁷⁵ Maya Jaggi, “W. G. Sebald: The Last Interview,” *The Guardian*, December 21, 2001, sec. G2.

“Wenn man mal auf dem Weg ist . . . fällt einem das Material zu, dann spielt einem der Zufall das in die Hände” (“Sometimes, when one is on the way...one comes across the material, and then chance plays a role in dealing the hand”).⁷⁶ To Sigrid Löffler he described this as working in accord with Lévi-Strauss’s concept of *bricolage*: “Das ist eine Form von wilden Arbeiten, von vorrationalem Denken, wo man in zufällig akkumulierten Fundstücken so lange herumwühlt, bis sie irgendwie zusammenreimen” (“It is a form of savage work, of pre-rational thinking, where one roots around in randomly accumulated finds until they somehow come together”).⁷⁷ As Richard Sheppard has written, Sebald noted in his own copy of *The Savage Mind* a definition of *bricolage* that stated “[o]nce it materializes, the project will thus have inevitably shifted away from the original intention, an effect which the Surrealists called ‘objective chance’.”⁷⁸ Thus *bricolage* becomes an aesthetic strategy for working with photographs as objects rather than a means of recording or representation.

In these explanations, photographs are both produced and encountered through automatic and chance procedures, self-consciously part of a genealogy descending from Surrealism, Sebald’s version of a Situationist *dérive* through photographic archives. Considered in relation to his essays on Tripp and Albus, Sebald’s attitude towards photography and the aesthetic can be summarized following the logic of Adorno’s aesthetic theory, a central element in Sebald’s own theoretical *bricolage*. The medium of photography in itself, as a technology, is inimical to art: by presenting a tautological explanation of reality as itself, it is destructive of that reality, and it gives the simulacrum the “aura” of the true artwork. But it is precisely because of the way photography negates

⁷⁶Quoted in Renate Just, “Im Zeichen des Saturn. Ein Besuch bei W. G. Sebald,” in *W. G. Sebald*, ed. Franz Loquai (Eggingen: Edition Klaus Isele, 1997), 40 My translation.

⁷⁷ Sigrid Löffler, “»Wildes Denken«. Gespräch mit W. G. Sebald,” in *W. G. Sebald*, ed. Franz Loquai (Eggingen: Edition Klaus Isele, 1997), 136 My translation.

⁷⁸ Sheppard, “Dexter - Sinister,” 425.

reality and the aesthetic that it must be engaged with, de-familiarized, re-purposed, used as a pictorial readymade, seen as an object for producing a chance encounter. It is because it is not art that photography becomes necessary for art. Or, as Sebald writes: “The process of making a photographic image, which purports to be the real thing and isn’t anything like, has transformed our self-perception, our perception of each other, our notion of what is beautiful.”⁷⁹ Finally, in his essays on Tripp and Albus, Sebald homes in on the way their painting has responded to the photographic transformation of the aesthetic through the negation and incorporation of the photographic other, and this becomes a model for the practice he develops for the incorporation of photography into fiction.

In these critical writings, notes, and interviews, reflections on painting and photography provided the means by which Sebald conceptualized his relationship to modernist narrative technique, developed a set of critical terms to describe his practice including “*bricolage*,” “chance,” and the “secondary” status of the image, and these techniques were situated historically in relation to postwar visual art and theory: the Surrealist legacy of the “polemical strategies of 1968,” and Sontag’s critique of photography in the 1970s. But it would be disingenuous to draw too sharp a line between these critical reflections and Sebald’s fictional work: as mentioned above, these reflections largely came after the composition of *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants*. Nonetheless, Sebald’s critical writings provide a way into the work of art in his “semi-documentary prose fiction”; subjecting his criticism to immanent critique provides the means to interpret the generative tension in his fiction between painting and photography, and between art and its threatened negation. Clarifying the terms of this tension, however,

⁷⁹ Arthur Lubow, “Crossing Boundaries,” in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 163.

also makes it easier to see the change in Sebald's work, the shift that occurs from *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants* to *Austerlitz*, a shift that will be traced in the rest of this chapter.

Vertigo and The Emigrants

Before beginning his first prose work Sebald wrote the long poem *After Nature* (1988), whose three sections introduce many of the themes that will appear in his later work: the bombing of German cities in the Second World War (84); his childhood spent “on the northern edge of the Alps...without any idea of destruction” (86-7); allusion to family photographs (82); his time in Manchester (95); the Enlightenment classification of natural history (72); the “heathland / of Suffolk” (108).⁸⁰ The poem places these events, and Sebald's later works, in a history sweeping from the “winged vertebrates of prehistory / embedded in tablets of slate” (81), to “another age / measured by the ticking / of Geigers in the power station / at Sizewell” (108), a post-apocalyptic vision of the nuclear era conjured up with a quote from *King Lear*: “Is this / the promised end?” (108). Coursing through the poem are different scales of measuring time: the passage of glaciers, the formation of valleys, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, down to the story of his grandparents and a walk with his daughter. At the beginning of his literary *oeuvre*, *After Nature* is Sebald's attempt to historicize his own writing in timescales ranging from prehistory to the culmination of modernity in the postwar nuclear era.

The first third of the poem, however, refracts these oscillating timescales through the life of the painter Matthias Grünewald, and through extended ekphrastic descriptions of his work. The poem is the first instance of Sebald's exploration of painterly realism;

⁸⁰ W. G. Sebald, *After Nature*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Penguin, 2003). All further citations will be in the main body of the text.

Grünewald's Isenheim altar "was so fashioned that / real life could scarce have done other" (10), and it is from a description of Grünewald's technique that the poem's title derives: he painted in an attempt to catch "the last trace of light / flickering from beyond, after nature" (30). Here, painterly realism is bound up with the onset of technological modernity. Grünewald's technique, when painting the inmates at the Isenheim hospital, produces a description of evolution as "this sprouting, / perpetuation and proliferation / inside us also and through us and through / the machines sprung from our heads / all a single jumble" (27). Similarly, in the section on Steller, his pursuit of flora and fauna is bound up with the "art and skill / required for their description" (44). Visual realism, whose painterly mode anticipates its photographic successor, is the sign of existing "after nature": the true replication of the world occurs with Steller's discovery of "the difference / between nature and society" (73). Echoing Sebald's essay on Albus, it is the rational way of seeing which separates humankind from nature.

In an essay on Peter Weiss, written at the same time as *After Nature*, in 1985, the rational gaze is presented as also separating humanity from itself. Sebald links an "anatomical painting" by Weiss with Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson* (1632), anticipating the appearance of this picture in *The Rings of Saturn*. For Sebald, Rembrandt's painting "of the dissection of a hanged body in the interest of higher ideals is an unsettling comment on the particular kind of knowledge to which we owe progress." Weiss and Rembrandt have internalized Descartes's belief that one can "discover the secret of the human machine in the dissection of bodies": here the rational way of seeing is a technology which in turn technologizes the body.⁸¹ Both the poem and the essay allude to Altdorfer's painting *The Battle of Alexander* (1529) as an image of this "permanent state of destruction." Exemplified by the internalization of the rational gaze, the "extremist

⁸¹ W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction: With Essays on Alfred Andersch, Jean Améry and Peter Weiss*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), 182–3.

practice of art to which Weiss too subscribes, is ultimately equivalent to an attempt by the subject, horrified as he is by human life, to do away with himself through successive acts of destruction.” Weiss’s destruction of his own life in the writing of *The Aesthetics of Resistance* (1975-81) compromises that work’s “struggle against the ‘art of forgetting’...consisting in the constant transfer of recollection into written signs.”⁸² By linking the internalization of the rational gaze with the will to self-destruction, this essay recalls the understanding of the mimetic impulse expressed in Sebald’s comparison between Döblin and Beckett. But if Beckett’s strategy to counteract the gaze of the mimetic impulse was the ironizing narrating voice, here Sebald identifies another practice caught up in the same problem of identification: the transfer of recollection into written signs.

Vertigo opens with a contrast between recollection in written signs and a visually induced art of forgetting. Marie-Henri Beyle, not yet Stendhal, is more confident in his memory of Napoleon’s 1800 transalpine march when he sketches an image of it, rather than when he attempts a written recollection in words. But “[i]t was a severe disappointment, Beyle writes, when some years ago, looking through old papers, he came across an engraving entitled *Prospetto d’Ivrea* and was obliged to concede that his recollected picture of the town in the evening sun was nothing but a copy of that very engraving.”⁸³ Here the way in which photography replaces memory, as Sebald read in Berger’s *About Looking*, is given a prehistory in the technology of the engraving, following an argument laid out by Benjamin.⁸⁴ Yet if in the opening passage of *Vertigo* Beyle is writing at the age of 53, being born in 1783, he is thus writing in the year 1836: that is, around the time when Daguerre and Fox Talbot were consolidating Niépce’s invention

⁸² Ibid., 177; 184; 176.

⁸³ W. G. Sebald, *Vertigo*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: The Harvill Press, 1999), 8. All further citations will be in the main body of the text.

⁸⁴ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version.”

of photography. In a work where the coincidence of dates such as 1913 is so important, it is crucial to note the irony that Beyle's prophecy that engraving will destroy his memory takes place at the moment of the birth of photography. The narrative voice, to paraphrase Sebald on Beckett, further ironizes the wishes of its creatures, by pulling back into reported indirect speech in the next sentence: "For instance, he could no longer recall the wonderful Sistine Madonna he had seen in Dresden, try as he might, because Müller's engraving after it had become superimposed on his mind; the wretched pastels by Mengs in the same gallery, on the other hand, of which he had never set eyes on a copy, remained before him as clear as when he first saw them" (8). As Mark McCulloh points out, the English translation lacks the uncertainty created by the use of the subjunctive mood in reporting Beyle's indirect speech. "Es sei" becomes: "This was"; "Man sollte darum, so rät Beyle" becomes: "This being so, Beyle's advice is."⁸⁵ However, the sense of increasing distance is still preserved through syntactical order; and one can even read this loss of tense information as a further process of the deleterious effects of reproduction Beyle fears. Comparing the translation reminds us that printed texts are also copies: the replacement of the sketch by the reproduction is mirrored in the replacement of the handwritten recollection by printed text.

This opposition between the memory preserved by writing and that replaced by photography first entrenches and then undoes itself as the book unfolds. In "All'estero," the narrator visits the poet Ernst Herbeck. As they look down over the river Danube, the narrator remembers how the river used to be in the 1960s, but now "[a] dam has been built below the castle...and the sad sight of it now will soon extinguish the memory of what it once was" (42). This loss of memory is shown by the inclusion of not just a photograph of the dammed river, but before this, of the river before the dam was built.

⁸⁵ Mark McCulloh, "The Tandem Literary Oeuvres of W. G. Sebald," in *W. G. Sebald: History – Memory – Trauma*, ed. Scott D. Denham and Mark McCulloh (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2006), 14.

In the time of the text, the memory has already become a photograph. In contrast, when the narrator is travelling through the Alps, his view becomes “conjoined in my mind’s eye with a Tiepolo painting which I have often looked at for hours”; in this instance, art and landscape work together in a process of mutual interpretation and remembrance (51). Shortly after, the narrator relates of his “study of Pisanello, on whose account I had in fact decided to travel to Verona.” “It is many years now,” he states, “since the paintings of Pisanello instilled in me the desire to forfeit everything except my sense of vision.”

What appealed to me was not only the highly developed realism of his art, extraordinary for the time, but also the way in which he succeeded in creating the effect of the real, without suggesting a depth dimension, upon an essentially flat surface, in which every feature, the principals and extras alike, the birds in the sky, the green forest and every single leaf of it, are all granted an equal and undiminished right to exist (72-3).

The narrator’s desire to “forfeit everything except my sense of vision” in front of Pisanello’s realism becomes far more ambivalent when read in light of Sebald’s writing on Albus, where pure vision is equated with destructive rationality: again the subtle ways the externally focalized narrative ironizes the character-narrator is crucial to Sebald’s technique, and complicates the faith that the art of the past offers a therapeutic haven of redemption.

This English translation contains a significant difference from the original German, a comparison which must keep in mind the fact that the translation took place almost ten years after the German text was written. It opens: “Nicht allein die für die damalige Zeit ungeheuer hoch entwickelte Realismuskunst Pisanellos ist es, die mich anzieht, sondern die Art, wie es ihm gelingt, diese Kunst in einer mit der realistischen

Malweise eigentlich unvereinbaren Fläche aufgehen zu lassen.”⁸⁶ The description of achieving a realistic style of painting “realistischen Malweise” on an incompatible surface, is expanded to “succeeded in creating the effect of the real, without suggesting the depth dimension, upon an essentially flat surface.” Between the German composition of the text in the later 1980s, and its English translation almost ten years later, Sebald had used the phrase “the so-called *effet du réel*” to describe Tripp’s painting, and more significantly, to describe his own practice of embellishing historical events with invented “minor detail most of the time, to provide *l’effet du réel*.”⁸⁷ Although Sebald seems to have confused *l’effet de réel* (“reality effect”) and *l’effet du réel* (“the effect of the real”), the allusion is clearly to Barthes. The English translation retrospectively layers onto the German text an intervening shift towards a more complex attitude to realism, the translation becoming part of how Sebald described his texts in 2001 as being “written like palimpsests...written over and over again until I feel that a kind of metaphysical meaning can be read through the writing.”⁸⁸ Or perhaps the translation enacts a *nachträglich* realization, through the deferred practice of translation, that the boundaries between painterly and photographic realism, and thus their relationship to memory, are far more porous than the narrator of that text, and Sebald himself, initially believed.

A pivotal moment in *Vertigo* is the moment when, in Milan, the narrator, as he later remembers, “all of a sudden no longer had any knowledge of where I was,” and suffers a total “lapse of memory” (115). This occurs immediately after the narrator’s receipt of a new passport, reproduced in the book along with a struck-through photograph of Sebald himself. But his memory returns, now aided by photography,

⁸⁶ W. G. Sebald, *Schwindel. Gefühle*. (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1996), 88.

⁸⁷ Carole Angier and W. G. Sebald, “Carole Angier, Who Is W. G. Sebald (interview),” in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 72; Sebald, “As Day in Night,” 162.

⁸⁸ Baker and Sebald, “Up Against Historical Amnesia, Interview with Kenneth Baker.”

when a stranger agrees to take a photograph of the pizzeria he fled years before. When the narrator returns to W., a more invidious side to painting is revealed. The narrator notes the murals of the painter Hengge, whose fame and output “reached its peak in the 1930s,” still remain in the town (205). “For me,” the narrator continues, “there was something most unsettling about all of these Hengge pictures. One especially, on the Raiffeisen Bank, showing a tall reaper woman, sickle in hand, standing in front of a field at harvest time, always looked to me like a fearful battle scene, and frightened me so that whenever I passed, I had to avert my eyes” (206-7). The image, reproduced in the book, is an allegory which pushes to a blatant extreme the association of femininity with death, overlaying the feminine as Ceres, god of the harvest, with the image of the grim reaper. What is never explicitly stated, but which does not need to be stated, is that these were murals in service of Nazi ideology, aligning the gaze which produced the painting with the destruction of the Jews. Only now does the narrator realize that these murals were the only paintings he saw as a child; only now does he realize what it means that the murals still existed then and still exist now at the time of his return; they have spread over his village so that all the paths he once walked with his uncle “meant nothing to me now” (210). Hengge shows that art can be compromised in the service of ideology: “the example of Hengge the artist, and the questionable nature of painting as an enterprise in general, remained before me as a warning” (210).

The narrator’s reflection upon “the questionable nature of painting” occurs in the concluding section, “Il ritorno in patria,” when he himself is engaged in “the writing of my notes” that ostensibly form the basis of the passage being read. This is recounted as taking place in November 1987. Through one moment of prolepsis – these are notes which will form the basis of a later narrative – the return to W. is placed within a retrospectively framed narrative of a writer looking back on his notes. At the very end of

the German edition, this future is moment is dated “2013.” As a way of underlining the importance of the date 1913 in the rest of the book, it both looks back and anticipates a future moment of remembrance. In his copy of Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, which Sebald read in the mid-1980s, Sebald sidelined a passage describing the “longing to inhabit” which derives “from a kind of second sight which seems to bear me forward to a utopian time, or to carry me back to somewhere in myself: a double movement which Baudelaire celebrated in ‘Invitation au voyage’ and ‘La vie antérieure.’ Looking at these landscapes of predilection, it is as if *I were certain* of having been there or going there.” Barthes continues: “Now Freud says of the maternal body that ‘there is no other place of which one can say with so much certainty that one has already been there.’ Such then would be the essence of the landscape (chosen by desire): *heimlich*...[italics original].”⁸⁹ By dating the end of *Vertigo* as 2013, a date anticipated by the recurrence of 1913, the German edition suggests the wanderings and failed return home to W. are framed within an eventual utopian return to a maternal home in 2013: he does not know it, but the narrator is within a narrative that is certain he will end up there. But this was removed ten years later, suggesting a loss of faith in the intertwined hope of narrative anticipation, utopia, and maternity. Yet there is an anticipation of this impossibility of escaping to the future in the penultimate episode of *Vertigo*, when the narrator visits the National Gallery in London and sees a picture of Pisanello “lamentably imprisoned in a far too heavy Victorian frame” (257). The earlier encounter with the Pisanello painting in Italy, in its native landscape, is retrospectively shadowed by an encounter with a painting of the Virgin, the “Redeemer Child,” and St. George – the patron saint of England – imprisoned within a frame at once narrative, literal, and figurative: the frame of the painting’s historical reception. The narrator may have returned to England, his adopted

⁸⁹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1993), 40; Sebald’s annotations are recorded in Clive Scott, “Sebald’s Photographic Annotations,” in *Saturn’s Moons: W. G. Sebald - A Handbook*, ed. Jo Catling and Richard Hibbitt (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2011), 217–46.

home, but this imprisonment of a maternal utopia shows that he has not escaped from the “heavy” frame of history.

Across its German and English versions, *Vertigo* ends with a glimpse of a future moment which will frame the earlier events of the narrator’s quest to return home. More conspicuously than *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants* is structured as a series of frame narrations. In the first story, the narrator encounters Henry Selwyn, and the narrator recounts Selwyn’s telling of his life story. In the second, the narrator reports what Lucy Landau tells him about Paul Bereyer. In the third, after his initial journey, the narrator recounts what he has heard from Aunt Fini and Uncle Kasimir about great Uncle Ambros. The third story introduces a different kind of framed narrative – this time the narrator copies passages from Ambros’s diary, photographs of which are included in the book. The final story also frames a recounted narrative, from Max Ferber, and includes the transcription of a diary, this time belonging to Ferber’s mother, Luisa Lanzberg. These are all included within the most extensive story from and about the narrator, recounting his move to live in England in the 1960s, thus looping back to the text’s opening line: “At the end of September 1970.”⁹⁰ Each story gets longer as the sequence goes on, from roughly 35, 55, 120 to 140 pages in the German Fischer edition. Thus the structure is like an ever increasing series of boxes, a series of Russian dolls, or an expanding spiral which closes back on itself. Or it is like the frames which appear at the close of the text, the “salt-frames” (227) (“Salinengebäude”) of Bad Kissingen.⁹¹ Two large photographs illustrate the wooden frames supporting the slowly crystallizing twigs. In a 1998 interview, Sebald referred to this process as a metaphor for the production of literature. In the salt works, Sebald claimed

⁹⁰ W. G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Vintage, 2002), 3. All further citations will be in the main body of the text.

⁹¹ W. G. Sebald, *Die Ausgewanderten: Vier Lange Erzählungen* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2000), 341.

[w]hat takes place is a kind of metamorphosis: something living becomes dead or nearly dead, as Rousseau explains in a curious passage of his on vitrification. This is indeed analogous to what happens in writing: as you become imbued in your subject you become less alive. Works of literature, like the crystallized twigs, are the hardened remains of former lives.⁹²

In this elucidation of the metaphorical significance of the crystallized twigs, the life to which Sebald is referring is not that of any one of the “emigrants,” but that of the writer. Or rather, that of the author metamorphosed into a narrator. This does not result in what Maurice Blanchot and later Barthes would term the “death” of the self once it expresses itself in the impersonality of writing, for Sebald stresses the preservation of former lives, in his writing at least, lives to be encountered by future readers.⁹³ This poses the question: given that Sebald claimed that *The Emigrants* was not a novel, what narrative form ensures the preservation of these lives for the future?

In an interview, Sebald described *The Emigrants* as “a form of prose fiction...Every thing is related round various corners in a periscopic sort of way. In that sense it doesn’t conform to the patterns that standard fiction has established.”⁹⁴ Sebald repeatedly insisted his works were not really novels: “I don’t really call them anything in terms of genre, and I don’t consider them to be novels, not in the strict sense. They are some form of prose fiction.”⁹⁵ The “periscopic” form, then, carries a lot of weight in how Sebald positions his early books as distinct from the novel form. To James Wood, Sebald explained this technique in reference to Thomas Bernhard: “Everything that the narrator relates is mediated through sometimes one or two stages, which makes for quite

⁹² Sarah Kafatou and W. G. Sebald, “An Interview with W. G. Sebald, by Sara Kafatou,” *Harvard Review*, no. 15 (Fall 1998): 32.

⁹³ Maurice Blanchot, “Literature and the Right to Death,” in *The Work of Fire*, trans. Lydia Davis (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 300–344; Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142–48.

⁹⁴ Eleanor Wachtel and W. G. Sebald, “Ghost Hunter (interview),” in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 37.

⁹⁵ W. G. Sebald, *Books: Outside the Box*, interview by Malcom Jones, October 24, 2001, <http://www.newsweek.com/books-outside-box-153935>. Accessed 13 September 2013.

complicated syntactical labyrinthine structures and in one sense exonerates the narrator, because he never pretends that he knows more than is actually possible.”⁹⁶ But it is important to remember that what a narrator relates is not the entirety of the narrative text, or in Bal’s terms, that there is a difference between character-focalization and external focalization, and to remember what Sebald praised in Beckett: “the irony of the reported instance...[and] the irony of the author, who encounters the wishes of his creatures with skepticism.” The narrator may be exonerated in one sense, but it crucial to the aesthetic and ethical effect of Sebald’s fiction that the “periscopic” narration also encounters the narrator’s lack of knowledge and desire for exoneration with skepticism, negating the identification of the mimetic impulse. “Periscopic” conveys a sense of visual transmission otherwise impossible: lenses reflect images through space and time. One gains access to a view otherwise impossible through a process of mediation, a process that takes place through the reproduced images in *The Emigrants*. At times they are directly referred to, such as when Aunt Fini is leafing through a photo album and the text reads: “This is a photograph taken at that time” (75). But, of course, what one sees is not the photograph, but a reproduced image: a deflected transmission of the image. The photographic linking of past and future times and spaces has as its narrative counterpart Sebald’s periscopic technique of relating things otherwise kept separate.

While the technique of “periscopic narration” in *The Emigrants* gives the narrator mediated access to the pasts of Henry Selwyn, Paul Beyeryer, Uncle Ambros, and Max Ferber, the photographs that accompany this access become subject to skepticism, ironizing and complicating both this technique and the kind of return to the past it offers. In the final section, “Max Aurach” in German, “Max Ferber” in English, after passing through three sections where photographs are presented to authenticate the

⁹⁶ James Wood, “An Interview with W. G. Sebald,” *Brick: A Literary Journal* 58 (Winter 1998): 26.

periscopic narratives, Aurach/Ferber tells of his uncle telling him about how the Nazis forged a photograph of a book burning in 1933. “In other words, the photographic document published in the paper was a fake. And just as that document was a fake, said Uncle, as if his discovery were the one vital proof, so too everything else has been a fake, from the very start” (183-4). Photographs can be forgery, and ominously, they can be faked to show the destruction of written memory. A less obvious but more profound forgery, also contrasting visual and written memory, is Uncle Ambros’s diary. Towards the end of the third story, a new paragraph begins: “On the desk in front of me is the agenda book that belonged to Ambros, which Aunt Fini gave me on my winter visit to Cedar Glen West” (126). This is accompanied by a photograph of the diary, and as the narrator recounts what is written in the diary in subsequent pages, photographs of the diary’s cramped handwriting are reproduced. However, during a description of Istanbul the text breaks into an ellipsis where the diary reads “Schwindelgefühle” (131-2). *Schwindel. Gefühle.* was the German title of *Vertigo*, the diary thus alluding back to Sebald’s first work, but also bringing out the importance of one of the meanings of the verb “schwindel”: “to swindle.”

Sebald stressed the importance of this meaning in an interview in relation to his use of photographs to introduce a sense of “relativity” into his texts. His photographs, he claimed

act as a token of authenticity – but they can be deduced, forged or purloined. And of course that in turn throws up one of the central problems of fiction writing, which is that of legitimacy and the arrival at the truth on a crooked route. This is why ‘vertigo’ in German has a double meaning – *schwindel* in German means ‘swindle.’ What right do you have to write about any of these things? Have you been there, and felt these things for yourself?⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Sebald, *The Questionable Business of Writing* [December 1999].

Such modesty is in this instance disingenuous. In 1996 Sebald admitted to Carole Angier that the diary “is falsification. I wrote it.” Or rather, “Sebald wrote about half of it,” clarifies Angier. This involved, therefore, writing into the preexisting diary, altering and manipulating a historical document, to provide “*l’effet du reel*.”⁹⁸ In a manner almost worse than the Nazi photograph, the written record is destroyed, and the epistemological faith in the indexical status of the photograph is exploited: the existence of the photograph does not cause the reader to question the “periscopic” mediations of the narrator. But just like the Nazi photograph, where the clue that it is a fake is the contrast between the night-time sky and daylight of the lower half of the photograph, the forging of the diary can be noticed if one looks attentively at the diary writing and notices the missing word. What the diary demands, then, is the kind of careful attentive looking that Sebald claimed, in relation to Albus, was the way in which the aesthetic could counteract the deadened “eyes technology has given us.” These photographs are approached as readymades, reified objectifications of perception: ways of seeing naively faithful in the truth value of the photograph. They also present memory in the form of a reified readymade, a form of memory that must be forged in a “swindle” to produce another form of remembering. They are the negation whose incorporation produces Sebald’s aesthetic “reflection of redemption.”

These photographic “readymades” negate memory, the aesthetic and writing. *The Emigrants* concludes, however, with a different way in which visual art can provide a model for remembering and writing. The final section is the one where the “aesthetic swindle” becomes most obvious, as hinted by the different names for the final character in German and English: Aurach and Ferber. The life of Aurach was based on a combination of the lives of Sebald’s first landlord when he lived in Manchester, and the

⁹⁸ Angier and Sebald, “Carole Angier, Who Is W. G. Sebald (interview),” 72.

life of the English painter Frank Auerbach. The German edition contained a reproduction of a drawing by Auerbach, and a close up of Auerbach's eye, that were removed from the English edition at Auerbach's request.⁹⁹ Even without this change, Aurach/Ferber is a figure of fictionality. An attentive reader recognizing the reproduced drawing by Auerbach would quickly notice that the photograph reproduced of Aurach/Ferber skiing is not of the author of the drawing (it is in fact of Sebald's landlord). The "significant and improbable" title of the painting by Ferber that the narrator encounters in the Tate Gallery in November 1989 is "G.I. on her Blue Candlewick Cover" (177). Significant and improbable because it echoes the name of the narrator's Manchester landlady, "Gracie Irlam" and her "pink dressing gown" made of "candlewick" (152). Ferber also painted a "faceless portrait" with the title "Man With a Butterfly Net," a painting which "had taken more out of him than any previous painting, for when he started on it, after countless preliminary studies, he not only overlaid it time and again but also, whenever the canvas could no longer withstand the continual scratching-off and reapplication of paint, he destroyed it and burnt it several times" (174). At this stage, the reader will have encountered this man three times before, recognizing him as Nabokov, and the improbable interplay of chance and design in his appearance in all four stories signals the artifice of the book as a whole. In an interview, Sebald claimed that the idea to place Nabokov in all four stories "came to me when I was thinking of writing the story of that painter." When pressed on what Nabokov symbolized, he denied he had a single meaning; like the best symbols, he is "there to give you a sense that there must be something of significance here at that point, but what that is and what the significance is, is entirely a different matter."¹⁰⁰ Nabokov functions in *The Emigrants* like the purloined letter in Jacques Lacan's reading of Poe's story: he is a pure signifier, one which exists to point to the working of signification as such in the work. In

⁹⁹ Jaggi, "Recovered Memories."

¹⁰⁰ Wachtel and Sebald, "Ghost Hunter (interview)," 53.

his dream, Ferber remembers travelling through a *trompe l'oeil* door with a queen, to discover the room housing a miniature Temple of Solomon, and for the “first time in my life” he realizes “what a true work of art looks like” (176). Ferber, the painter, is associated with all those traits of chance, trickery, and swindling, that generated, for Sebald, an aesthetic mode of truth that escaped from the law of that which had to be the case.

At the conclusion of the book, Ferber’s mode of making becomes a model for the narrator’s own writing. The narrator describes “working on the account of Max Ferber given above” as “an arduous task”: “By far the greater part had been crossed out, discarded, or obliterated by additions. Even what I ultimately salvaged as a ‘final’ version seemed to me a thing of shreds and patches, utterly botched” (230-1). Earlier, the narrator describes Ferber’s method of working:

Since he applied the paint thickly, and then repeatedly scratched it off the canvas as his work proceeded, the floor was covered with a largely hardened and encrusted deposit of droppings, mixed with coal dust...He might reject as many as forty variants, or smudge them back into the paper and overdraw new attempts upon them; and if he then decided that the portrait was done, not so much because he was convinced that it was finished as through sheer exhaustion, an onlooker might well feel that it had evolved from a long lineage of grey, ancestral faces, rendered unto ash but still there, as ghostly presences, on the harried paper (161-2).

The narrator’s description of his own method so closely echoes his account of Ferber’s that at the concluding moment when the book as a whole is crystallized into being, it offers a summa of what Sebald means in this book to “work like a painter.” Both in accord and against the way in which a photograph offers instant access to past moments of space and time while disguising its mediations, Ferber’s painting and the narrator’s writing are processes where the past emerges gradually, through layers which are never erased. The search through which the past is recovered is preserved in the final work;

each failed attempt leaves its trace in the form of “shreds or patches,” or “ghostly presences.” These failures include the readymade images of photographic memory that are sedimented within the final book, incorporated by a process of aesthetic negation, whose deceptions are uncovered by making this negation and failure part of *The Emigrants*’ work of art.

Austerlitz and the return of Roland Barthes

Austerlitz marked a break with Sebald’s previous work in ways that can be too easily overlooked in synoptic accounts of his *oeuvre*. After completing *Rings of Saturn*, in 1996 Sebald went partially blind for a number of months, suffering a deeply rooted fear of blindness he had previously expressed in an interview: “Yes, the eyes are the most vulnerable part of a person or of an animal...I cannot even think about having a cataract operation. That feeling of *Blendung* [blinding], the fear of no longer being able to see, probably has something to do with the fear of castration.”¹⁰¹ In *Austerlitz*, the narrator goes temporarily blind in 1996, and undergoes a cataract operation.¹⁰² In a 1997 speech, individual blindness became a metonym for the wider blindness of Germany in 1960s towards the legacy of the Holocaust, a blindness which Sebald claims led him to permanently leave the country.¹⁰³ Without blurring the essential difference for Sebald between the author and his creature, it does seem clear that this decline in his own health brought an association between blindness, trauma and the Holocaust to the fore of his attention in a way that bears obvious import to *Austerlitz*.

¹⁰¹ Sheppard, “Dexter - Sinister,” 432; Sebald and de Moor, “Echoes from the Past,” 351–2.

¹⁰² W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Penguin, 2002), 46–7 All further citations in the main body of the text.

¹⁰³ Sheppard, “Dexter - Sinister,” 432.

Stylistically *Austerlitz* is distinct enough to make the three previous books seem more alike by contrast. Unlike his previous works, *Austerlitz* has one central protagonist, who is the main focus of the book, and for the first time a wholly fictional character. This protagonist drives a familiar quest-narrative plot, the search for his past. The unity of focus is reflected in another formal departure, the near absence of paragraphs. While Sebald continues his use of a “periscopic” structure, here it is simpler, in this case consisting of one received narrative at one remove. This has led many critics to describe *Austerlitz* as the book in which Sebald is closest to the traditional form and narrative structures of the novel, belying his own insistence that his works were not novels; indeed, Andreas Huyssen calls *Austerlitz* Sebald’s “first ‘real’ novel.”¹⁰⁴ As a consequence, the status of the photographs in *Austerlitz* differs in kind from the three previous works. Most obviously, in *Austerlitz* photography itself becomes for the first time an explicit thematic focus through Austerlitz’s role as a photographer. As John Zilcosky argues, because of this fictional device, most of the photographs are less disruptive to the flow of the narrative than those of the other books.¹⁰⁵ One might say that the implied author of many of the photographs is a character internal to the text, unlike the author, say, of the photographs of the dam in *Vertigo* or the narrator-author of the photographs of Ambros’s diary. As a result of this increased attention to photography, painting is for the first time absent in Sebald’s work as a counterpoint to photography, its role now supplanted by film.

One way of tracing the shift in Sebald’s attitude towards photography is in the annotations he made while composing *Austerlitz*. In the 1980s, Sebald had read and heavily annotated Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, Sontag’s *On Photography*, and Berger’s *About*

¹⁰⁴ Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 177 n.40.

¹⁰⁵ John Zilcosky, “Lost and Found: Disorientation, Nostalgia, and Holocaust Melodrama in Sebald’s *Austerlitz*,” *MLN* 121, no. 3 (2006): 687.

Looking: the three authors with whom he felt a “direct rapport.”¹⁰⁶ As has been seen, Sontag and Barthes were the writers Sebald drew on in his 1993 essay on Tripp, and Barthes’s “double movement” prefigured the utopia in *Vertigo*. But in 1999, Sebald read and annotated Clive Scott’s *The Spoken Image: Photography and Language* (1999). As Scott himself has documented, in a passage where Scott discusses how “people look upon their photographs as evidence, as the sources of their narrative (photobiography),” Sebald wrote: “Aber von Aust.[erlitz] gibt es keine Bilder” (“But there are no photographs of Aust.[erlitz].” Scott notices the contradiction that there are, in fact, three apparent photographs of Austerlitz: in the Stower Grange rugby team, as the Rose Queen’s page boy, and in front of the Antikos Bazar in Terezín. But he fails to notice that the photograph in Terezín, which in the text Austerlitz claims shows “my own faint shadow image,” is in fact of Sebald himself (277). Conversely, when Austerlitz is shown the photograph of himself as the page boy to the Rose Queen, he does not recognize himself, rather he remembers himself as a child seeing “the Rose Queen and the little boy” (259). As Margaret Olin has written, the Rose Queen photograph is caught up in a dense web of intertextual links with Hugo von Hoffmanstahl that are arguably the primary motivation for its appearance, rather than for confirming the fictional identity of Austerlitz.¹⁰⁷ The Rose Queen photograph was used as the author photograph in the German and English editions of the book, a reversal of Sebald posing as Austerlitz in the Terezín photograph, but leaving the status of the Stower Grange photograph, at least for the time being, indeterminate. Thus, it seems likely that there are no photographs of the fictional character Austerlitz, confirming Scott’s argument that these photographs work not in the service of autobiography or testimony, but that they are devices to explore the “facilitation of the transfer of subjectivity and narratorial position,” devices which serve

¹⁰⁶ Baker and Sebald, “Up Against Historical Amnesia, Interview with Kenneth Baker”; Information about all the following annotations is drawn from Scott, “Sebald’s Photographic Annotations.”

¹⁰⁷ Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 93.

to complicate identification, “preventing anyone laying hands on Austerlitz in the belief that they can take a quick route to knowledge, to transform the proper difficulties of memory into easy visual appropriation.”¹⁰⁸ These aesthetic strategies of manipulation depend on seeing the photograph as a pictorial readymade as well as an index or record of history: what they mean or forget can be changed by a nominating act; the memory does not haunt the artist, but rather is his medium. They produce a double movement of both identification and refused identification: between Sebald and his creature Austerlitz, between Austerlitz and his past, and between the reader-as-viewer and the characters of the book.

Sebald’s reading of Scott also led to a re-reading of Barthes. In his 1993 essay on Tripp, Sebald had referred to Barthes to explain his distinction between photography and the aesthetic: “Roland Barthes saw in the – now omnipresent – man with a camera an agent of death, and in photographs something like relics of life continually giving way to death. Where art differs from such a morbid affair is the fact that the proximity of life to death is its subject, not its obsession.”¹⁰⁹ This subtle but crucial difference is sharpened if it is recalled that while Barthes saw photographs continually giving way to death, Sebald stressed that his writing maintained a form of preservation: “the hardened remains of former lives.”¹¹⁰ Sebald’s use of Barthes to stage an opposition between art and photography accords with Nancy Shawcross’s argument that photography returns to Barthes’s interest in *Camera Lucida* because he approaches it as “the medium outside the domain of art.”¹¹¹ Barthes states at one point that he sees photography as “an emanation

¹⁰⁸ Scott, “Sebald’s Photographic Annotations,” 228.

¹⁰⁹ Sebald, “As Day in Night,” 164.

¹¹⁰ Kafatou and Sebald, “An Interview with W. G. Sebald, by Sarah Kafatou,” 32.

¹¹¹ Nancy M. Shawcross, *Roland Barthes on Photography: The Critical Tradition in Perspective* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 117.

of *past reality: a magic*, not an art [italics original].”¹¹² As Jean-Michel Rabaté has written, “[b]y stressing the ontological nature of the apparent mystery by which real past objects or people leave an ‘emanation’ as a visual trace of their presence in the world, rather than the authorial or ideological manipulations by which an operator transforms or frames a material that is still plastic or malleable, Barthes deprives photography of its productive transitivity,” so that it becomes the raw material for Barthes the writer of a utopian novel.¹¹³ Although Sebald had little faith in the ontological mystery of photography, he too saw it as something secondary, a readymade devoid of intention; in this reading, Barthes is imagining using photography in the way Sebald actually does. In his copy of *Camera Lucida*, which he read in the 1980s, Sebald annotated Barthes’s claim that the photograph is “this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life” and that “each photograph always contains this imperious sign of my future death.”¹¹⁴ What Barthes “reads” in the Winter Garden photograph of his mother is “my way of resolving Death...From now on I could do no more than await my total, undialectical death.” As Sebald underlines, the text ends with the confession: “I entered crazily into the spectacle, into the image, taking into my arms what is dead, what is going to die, as Nietzsche did...gone mad for Pity’s sake.”¹¹⁵ Against this identification with death in the image, or the image as death, producing an “undialectical death,” Sebald argues in his essay on Tripp that a mediation of and dis-identification with the photographic image is a way for art to preserve life for the future.

Sebald’s early reading of Barthes, however, was far more complex than simple opposition, as the accord between Barthes’s double movement and the vision of “2013”

¹¹² Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 88.

¹¹³ Jean-Michel Rabaté, “Introduction,” in *Writing the Image After Roland Barthes*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 8.

¹¹⁴ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 92; 97.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 72; 117.

in *Vertigo* shows. Barthes was also a hidden presence in *The Emigrants*. Again in *Camera Lucida*, Sebald sidelined the description of the distinct kind of *punctum* provided by historical photographs: “there is always a defeat of Time in them: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die.” This is even possible in photographs where there are no people, as in a 1850 photograph of the road to Jerusalem by August Salzman, and Sebald underlined: “At the limit, there is no need to represent a body in order for me to experience this vertigo of time defeated.”¹¹⁶ If the English translation of *Schwindel. Gefühle.* into *Vertigo* loses the sense of the aesthetic swindle that is Ambros’s diary, it gains the intertextual resonance with Barthes’s “vertigo” before the photograph of Jerusalem, for it is with such a feeling of vertigo in Jerusalem that Ambros’s story ends. In his hotel in Jerusalem, glancing out the window, Ambros writes that memory “makes one’s head heavy and giddy” (“macht einen schweren, schwindligen Kopf”) “as if one were not looking back down the receding perspectives of time but rather down on the earth from a great height” (145).¹¹⁷ For Barthes, this vertigo is triggered by the fact that the photograph is an “instance of ‘reality’” in contrast to “the elaborations of the text, whether fictional or poetic, which itself is never credible *down to the root* [italics original].”¹¹⁸ Sebald’s “vertigo,” however, pushes in the opposite direction: producing in the reader a dizziness mimicking that of Ambros when it is realized that the elaborations of *The Emigrants* involve the desire to make the fictional text more real than the photograph. Of course, the paradox is that the discovery that the diary is faked, written in Sebald’s own hand, is based on the very Barthesian faith that the photograph shows that the falsification “has-been”: rather than a testimony to Ambros’s life, the photograph of the diary becomes a testament to Sebald’s aesthetic swindle. It is also a testament to the complexity of Sebald’s inscription

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 96–7.

¹¹⁷ Sebald, *Die Ausgewanderten: Vier Lange Erzählungen*, 215.

¹¹⁸ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 97.

of Barthes within his own *oeuvre*. Barthes is less a simple influence, or opponent, than a figure who for Sebald demanded a sustained and multi-faceted engagement.

This engagement continued into *Austerlitz*. When reading *The Spoken Image*, Sebald annotated an extract from Barthes's "The Photographic Message," which emphasized an aspect of photography less stressed in *Camera Lucida*: "The trauma is a suspension of language, a blocking of meaning... Truly traumatic photographs are rare, for in photography the trauma is wholly dependent on the certainty that the scene 'really' happened: *the photographer had to be there* (the mythical definition of denotation) [italics original]."¹¹⁹ He also sidelined another passage from Barthes on the Winter Garden photograph in *Camera Lucida* reprinted by Scott: the only photograph which has "given me the splendor of her truth is precisely a lost, remote photograph, one which does not look 'like' her, the photograph of the child I never knew."¹²⁰ That Sebald was re-reading Barthes (albeit quoted in Scott's *The Spoken Image*) while composing *Austerlitz*, attending to his quest for a photograph of his mother, gives this reading even more importance in light of the fact that Austerlitz is also engaged on a quest for his mother, and her photograph. He first thinks he has found a photograph of her when Vera by chance finds a picture of two actors. Then he imagines the woman in the film shot in Theresienstadt is his mother, both "strange and familiar" (351). Finally, after searching through the Prague theatrical archives, Austerlitz comes across a photograph, reproduced in the book, that Vera confirms is of his mother. Austerlitz's quest is in part, then, a re-staging of Barthes's search for the one true photograph of his mother in the Winter Garden, one in which Austerlitz succeeds – or so it seems. Given that the Winter Garden photograph is not reproduced in *Camera Lucida*, there has been much critical discussion

¹¹⁹ Scott, "Sebald's Photographic Annotations," 223; Barthes quoted in Clive Scott, *The Spoken Image: Photography and Language* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 24.

¹²⁰ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 103.

of whether the photograph exists, and to what extent this matters for Barthes's wider theory of photography.¹²¹ The 2009 publication of Barthes's *Mourning Diary*, however, shows that the photograph of "maman as a little girl in the Winter Garden of Chennevières" does exist, and that Barthes placed a reproduction of the photograph "in front of me on my desk" a few months before beginning to write *Camera Lucida* as a "monument" to her memory.¹²² This autobiographical authenticity and sincerity, then, is crucial to the meaning of *Camera Lucida*, if complicating to an attempt to extract a wider theory from its pages. In challenging the reader to take up a naïve faith that the photograph exists, *Camera Lucida* assumes a pedagogical role in taking the reader beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion of Barthes's earlier criticism, and beyond mourning the past. This prepares a new, almost utopian reader for the new kind of novel prophesized, but never achieved, in his lectures on "The Preparation of the Novel" and in the plans for his *Vita Nova*.¹²³

For Austerlitz, however, the discovery of his mother's photograph does not complete the process of mourning, nor does it have the potential for founding the "new life" anticipated by Barthes. In the sequence of the discourse, Austerlitz gives away the photograph to the narrator as soon as it is discovered, in order to "search for traces of his father's movements, and to transport himself back to the time when he too had lived there" (354). This suggests not the completion of the work of mourning but the lapse into melancholia. The mother remains the lost object that, following Freud, is purposely

¹²¹ Diana Knight, *Barthes and Utopia: Space, Travel, Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 225–6; Derek Attridge, "Roland Barthes's Obtuse Sharp Meaning and the Responsibilities of Commentary," in *Writing the Image After Roland Barthes*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 86–7; Margaret Olin, "Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes's 'Mistaken' Identification," in *Photography Degree Zero: Reflections on Roland Barthes's Camera Lucida*, ed. Geoffrey Batchen (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2011), 225–6.

¹²² Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Notting Hill Editions, 2011), 220; 226; 234.

¹²³ Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France, 1978-1979 and 1979-1980* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes: Œuvres Complètes. Tome V: 1977-1980*, ed. Éric Marty (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002), 994–1004.

given away so that it will, perversely, continue to cast its “shadow” over the ego.¹²⁴ Siegfried Kracauer argued that up until his time, there was an “intimate relationship between melancholy and the photographic approach”: “melancholy as an inner disposition not only makes elegiac objects seem attractive: it favours self-estrangement, which on its part entails identification with all kinds of objects. The dejected individual is likely to lose himself in incidental configurations of his environment, absorbing them with a disinterested intensity no longer determined by previous preferences.”¹²⁵ Austerlitz ends the novel as an avatar of the photographic life, unable to love Marie, losing himself in the Bibliothèque Nationale and in the Jewish cemetery in Alderney. He becomes reduced to the photographs kept in his house in London: “I could stay there whenever I liked, he said, and study the black and white photographs which, one day, would be all that was left of his life” (408). This final phrase is grammatically ambiguous reported speech, of which it cannot be certain who is claiming this would be “all that is left of his life.” Austerlitz ends his life fully identifying with photographic images, but what this chapter has traced is how up until his final work, Sebald drew on the theories of Adorno, the dialectical opposition of painting and photography, and the work of Barthes, to realize a unique aesthetic form that explored the ethical dangers of this identification. This negative and dialectical process is what makes photography so central to Sebald’s work, a process that is for Sebald the “work of art.” If photographs are “something like relics of life continually giving way to death,” total identification with the photograph prevents the crystallization of the work of art which preserves the remains of former lives. The final and ongoing challenge of *Austerlitz* lies in the ambiguity of this final moment of reported speech: *Austerlitz* cannot be reduced to Austerlitz, nor the book as a

¹²⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology, and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), 249.

¹²⁵ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 17.

whole to its use of photographs. In the distance opened up between the desire of Austerlitz to end his life as his photographs, and what the narrator recounts, we would do well to remember that for Sebald, the exemplary modern authors were always those who treated the wishes of their creatures with skepticism.

Conclusion

What would it mean to adopt an attitude which maintains the possibility, however slight, of treating with irony and skepticism Austerlitz's inability to escape his past? Upon its posthumous publication in 2001, *Austerlitz* was an instant success across academic, Book Review, and Book-of-the Month Club critical spheres, in part because it took up one of the dominant literary paradigms of the 1990s: the figuring of history as a form of trauma. Especially after Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), African-American history was increasingly framed through trauma and melancholy in ways which intersected with existing literary critical discourses developed in response to the Holocaust, a parallel noted from the moment of *Beloved's* publication.¹²⁶ Pat Barker's *Regeneration* (1991) figured the traumatic event in British history as the First World War; in the work of John McGahern and Irish literature more generally the break was Independence and partition, moments figured as trauma in a wide variety of postcolonial literatures. In visual art, in 1998 Bracha L. Ettinger diagnosed: "In art today we are moving from phantasy to trauma...We are carrying, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, enormous traumatic weight."¹²⁷ As Griselda Pollock has observed, this turn to trauma was a "historically generated crisis in the relations between representation (our form of knowing) and that which having happened has none the less no immediate image or

¹²⁶ See Naomi Mandel, "I Made the Ink: Identity, Complicity, 60 Million and More," *Modern Fiction Studies* 48, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 581–613.

¹²⁷ Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 146–7.

concept to represent it.”¹²⁸ It was thus a question of history in a double sense: both a means to relate to the historical past, and a historically identifiable marker of a moment experiencing a wider breakdown in modes of aesthetic representation. As Sebald noted when reading Barthes, a wide body of criticism had also theorized photography along the model of trauma, or even as a form of trauma, leading many critics to interpret *Austerlitz* in these terms.¹²⁹ In engaging directly with the legacy of the Holocaust, the singular event most generative of traumatic models of history, Sebald’s work achieved its success by self-consciously attempting to encapsulate this moment of looking back at the end of the century.

But as Mary Jacobus has emphasized, Sebald “interrogates the role of photography both as a form of forgetting and repression and as a recurrent haunting by historical trauma.”¹³⁰ Her remarks serve as a reminder that the skepticism towards photography that this chapter has traced in Sebald’s work should also be adopted towards an interpretation which sees *Austerlitz* as a novel, as opposed to Austerlitz as a character, figuring history as a traumatic, unknowable, and ultimately inescapable event. Crucial to this is the difference between the author and his creature: some of Sebald’s harshest criticism of earlier German writers was reserved for those who, like Günter Grass, attempted to “mourn by identifying with the real victims” of the Holocaust: the Jews.¹³¹ But Sebald also explored the problem of identification with victims in the work of the German-Jewish Peter Weiss. By absorbing himself to the point of identification with the suffering of his parents, Weiss tragically did “away with himself through

¹²⁸ Pollock, “Aesthetic Wit(h)nessing in the Era of Trauma,” 835.

¹²⁹ Duttlinger, “Traumatic Photographs: Remembrance and the Technical Media in W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*”; Dora Osborne, *Traces of Trauma in W. G. Sebald and Christoph Ransmayr* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2013); Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

¹³⁰ Jacobus, *Romantic Things*, 56.

¹³¹ W. G. Sebald, “Constructs of Mourning: Günter Grass and Wolfgang Hildesheimer,” in *Campo Santo*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005), 107.

successive acts of destruction.”¹³² Dominick LaCapra has been one of the most probing critics of the turn to model aesthetic representations of remembering the Holocaust, such as Claude Lanzmann’s *Sboab* (1985), on the model of a “‘tragic’ identification or rather uncontrolled transference relation,” one which desires to provoke a repetition of trauma in the artist and viewer and thus identify this aesthetic experience with the suffering of the original victim.¹³³ This can be understood as a symptom of the anxiety of forgetfulness, an anxiety that Amy Hungerford has traced in postwar American literary responses to the Holocaust, where it has “become more important to ‘remember’ the Holocaust than simply to learn about it.”¹³⁴ What Sebald shows, however, is that it is not at all simple to learn about the past from another when the past is slipping from their memory. Charles Maier has argued that this anxiety that only identification can secure remembrance produces an ethico-political problem: “[t]he surfeit of memory is a sign not of historical confidence but a retreat from transformative politics. It testifies to the loss of a future orientation.”¹³⁵ The possibility of some future was central to Sebald’s understanding of literature, even if it was reduced to the fragile bare minimum of the preservation of “former lives” in literature “like crystalized twigs,” so that they can be read by readers to come. Austerlitz’s is such a former life, whose hardening preserves his story for the future readings of those who will not be like him.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued that a paranoid fear of forgetting underpins an identification with the past, producing, paradoxically, a temporal model which effaces historical difference, a model “characterized by a distinctly Oedipal regularity and repetitiveness: it happened to my father’s father, it happened to my father, it is

¹³² Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, 184.

¹³³ LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 101.

¹³⁴ Amy Hungerford, *The Holocaust of Texts: Genocide, Literature and Personification* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 155.

¹³⁵ Charles Maier, “‘A Surfeit of Memory’: Reflections on History, Melancholy and Denial,” *History & Memory* 5, no. 2 (1993): 150.

happening to me.”¹³⁶ Against Oedipus, a different mythical figure for how to relate to the past can be found in the pages of a text central to Sebald’s theory of art: the fate of Odysseus in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Oedipus’s struggle is to escape the inevitability of myth: “[e]very mythical figure is compelled to do the same thing over and over again. Each of them is constituted by repetition.” But this comes at the price of severance from nature. Odysseus’s cunning trick of binding himself to the mast to escape the lure of the Sirens does not “try to insist on the superiority of his knowledge” but “realizes that however he may consciously distance himself from nature, as a listener he remains under its spell.”¹³⁷ With this, Odysseus passes from nature’s song into civilization’s art, from myth into history. It is a passage repeated when Odysseus journeys through the Underworld, where the severance from mythical fate in the form of the Sirens is followed by a severance from the mythical past in the form of the image. Odysseus is tempted to return to the primeval world of the “image of the mother...powerless blind and speechless” and condemned to “mythic muteness.” But “[t]he Promised Land for Odysseus is not the archaic realm of images. Finally all the images reveal their true essences as shades in the world of the dead, an illusion. Having recognized them as dead he dismisses them with the lordly gesture of self-preservation, banishing them from the sacrifice which he reserves for those who grant him knowledge which benefits his life.” In lines written between and 1942 and 1944, art is seen to begin with the escape from the claims of the past, not from forgetting it, or acquiring a superior knowledge, but from realizing one can move forward only by looking back at a past from which one accepts one’s severance. “Only when subjectivity masters itself by recognizing the nullity of

¹³⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2003), 147.

¹³⁷ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, 45; 46.

images does it begin to share the hope which images vainly promise.”¹³⁸ One can only truly see an image when one accepts that it will not bring the past back to life.

Austerlitz ends not with the story of Austerlitz, and his fear that one day all that will be left of him will be his photographs, but with the narrator reading another book which Austerlitz passed on to him, one which relates to the past in a different way: *Hesbel's Kingdom* (1998) by Dan Jacobson. As the narrator reads: “The chasm into which no ray of light could penetrate was Jacobson’s image of the vanished past of his family and his people, which, as he knows, can never be brought up from those depths again” (414).¹³⁹ *Austerlitz* the novel ends, but the act of reading and remembering continues; the telling of stories goes on, but only with the recognition that with the passing of memory into history, these becomes stories that do not belong to the narrator. At the end of the twentieth century, *Austerlitz* makes achieving the work of history the task of the work of art; by re-inventing the art of the novel to do so, Sebald shows the kind of ending that allows the work of history to go on.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 59.

¹³⁹ Dan Jacobson, *Hesbel's Kingdom* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1998).

Chapter 6

Conclusion: Perspectives From The Present

In a 2002 essay on Gaddis, Jonathan Franzen described *The Recognitions* as “an ur-text of postwar fiction, both the granddaddy of difficulty and the first great cultural critique.” But this was damnation by very faint praise. For Franzen, Gaddis epitomized the destructive concern with the legacy of modernist difficulty in postwar fiction, its “notion of formal experimentation as an act of resistance,” a notion which Franzen wants once and for all to consign, along with his copies of Woolf and Beckett, to the dustbin of history. Equally toxic for postwar fiction has been another tendency epitomized by Gaddis, “the Fallacy of Art Historicism, a pedagogical convenience borrowed from the moneyed world of visual art, where a work’s value substantially depends on its novelty; as if fiction were as formally free as painting, as if what makes *The Great Gatsby* and *O Pioneers!* good novels were primarily their technical innovations.”¹ In an essay which sparked a lengthy “correction” from Ben Marcus, thus setting out the stakes of a debate about literary innovation in contemporary American fiction, dissociating fiction from the complications of the visual arts is part of Franzen’s wider belief in the fundamental incompatibility of literary culture with visual art and media.² As he solemnly declared in

¹ Franzen, “Mr. Difficult,” 103; 108.

² Ben Marcus, “Why Experimental Fiction Threatens To Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, And Life As We Know It: A Correction,” *Harper’s Magazine*, October 2005, 39–52; Seth Studer and Ichiro Takayoshi, “Franzen and the ‘Open-Minded but Essentially Untrained Fiction Reader,’” *Post45*, July 8, 2013, <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2013/07/franzen-and-the-open-minded-but-essentially-untrained-fiction-reader/>.

“The Reader in Exile” (1995): “A few months ago, I gave away my television set.” Franzen’s problem is not so much with popular as with visual culture, the “shift from a culture based on the printed word to a culture based on virtual images,” which leads to “the eclipse of the cultural authority that literature once possessed.”³ Ironically, as we have seen, that same anxiety coursed through not merely *The Recognitions*, but also Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* and *G.*, and Sebald’s own speculations on the visual “de-realising of reality.” What differentiated the work produced by these writers from the program outlined by Franzen for the twenty-first century is that they placed an engagement with postwar modernity’s visual culture at the heart of their literary work, and they did so by mediating this spectacle through the claims of the distinctly aesthetic work of art.

Severing literature from visual culture is also intended to sever literature from the fallacy of historicism: “[o]ur suburban, gasoline-dependent, TV-watching American present looks a lot more like 1952 than 1952 looked like 1902.”⁴ Ignoring the historical shifts that changes in the visual arts necessarily bring to light is a means to fantasize that nothing has changed between 1952 and 2002, and that the forms of the past still function for the present. But in this urge to purge the visual from his present, Franzen proved himself out of step with the literary audience of the new millennium. In spite of the concerted publicity campaign of which this essay formed a part (a campaign which was happy to use Oprah Winfrey’s television program for its own ends), the 2002 National Book Critics Circle Award was awarded not to *The Corrections*, as was widely expected, but posthumously to Sebald’s *Austerlitz*. As the previous chapter has shown, that work, and Sebald’s *oeuvre* more generally, achieved its forms and understanding of history by rising to the conceptual difficulties of “art historicism.” Franzen’s essay on Gaddis underlines what this thesis has been arguing throughout: that postwar writers were drawn to art

³ Jonathan Franzen, *How To Be Alone: Essays* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002), 164; 175; 178.

⁴ Franzen, “Mr. Difficult,” 108.

precisely because of its historicism, its ability to offer a means to think through how 1952 did not look like 1902, and to explore the complex and often contestatory relationships between the techniques and forms of fiction and visual art.

Although she never mentions him by name, Franzen's *The Corrections* undoubtedly typifies the kind of "lyrical realism" that Zadie Smith singled out in 2008 as representing one of "two directions" for the "future Anglophone novel." The other path is that represented by Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2005), "one of the greatest English novels of the past ten years." For Smith, however, "[t]hese aren't particularly healthy times" for the novel, because the "breed of lyrical realism has had the freedom of the highway for some time now, with most other exits blocked." Like Franzen, Smith recognizes that the challenge posed to realism by the "American metafiction" represented by "Barth, Barthelme, Pynchon, Gaddis, DeLillo [and] David Foster Wallace" was as much about politics as aesthetics; they have been dismissed as "misguided ideologists, the novelist equivalents of the socialists in Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*." "The received wisdom of literary history," she writes, "is that *Finnegans Wake* did not fundamentally disturb Realism's course as Duchamp's urinal disturbed Realism in the visual arts."⁵ With this comparison, Smith suggests a different mode of response not yet wholly taken up in fiction: to conceptual rather than the kinds of representative visual art that preoccupied the writers discussed in this thesis.

As Smith points out, through his involvement with the International Necronautical Society, this response is central to McCarthy's *Remainder*. Indeed, not only was *Remainder* first published and sold among the art world, having been rejected by "literary" publishers, it at times reads like the prospectus for a conceptual art work. As

⁵ Zadie Smith, "Two Directions for the Novel," in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), 93; 71; 73; 79.

the narrator declares, his “[f]orensic procedure is an art form, nothing less.”⁶ McCarthy’s reports for the International Necronautical Society, which in its re-staging of the bureaucratic social practices of the avant-garde is a conceptual art work in and of itself, document the rich list of artists, writers and theorists that lie behind *Remainder*. Melville and Blanchot, Proust and Heidegger, Nabokov and Conrad, and Derrida as interpreted by Simon Critchley, whose book *Very Little, Almost Nothing* (1997) is quoted in *Remainder*’s opening lines: “About the accident itself I can say very little. Almost nothing.”⁷ Equally important in the predecessors McCarthy constructs for himself are the conceptual and post-conceptual art projects of Stewart Home, one result of which was the best-selling novel collectively published by Luther Blisset, *Q* (1999).

McCarthy’s own projects with the I.N.S. are part of his larger investigations of the idea of an avant-garde, seen as a conceptual art work itself. “The avant-garde can’t be ignored,” he has stated, “it needs to be worked through – which is not the same as imitation.”⁸ For McCarthy, the historical avant-garde has truly become a part of history, and can now only be brought back to life in “necronautical” form. The icon of this historical avant-garde, who is worked through in *Remainder*, is Beckett. When the narrator and Naz hold auditions to find actors for their re-enactment, an actor arrives who had “prepared a passage to perform for us: some piece of modern theatre by Samuel Beckett. ‘We don’t want to hear that,’ I said. ‘We just want to chat for a while, fill you in on what you’ll need to do.’”⁹ In an interview, McCarthy has said that

⁶ Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (Richmond: Alma Books, 2006), 173.

⁷ Ibid., 3; Tom McCarthy, *Navigation Always Was A Difficult Art: General Secretary’s Report to the International Necronautical Society* (London: International Necronautical Society, 2002).

⁸ James Purdon, “Tom McCarthy: ‘To Ignore the Avant Garde Is Akin to Ignoring Darwin,’” *The Observer*, August 1, 2010, sec. The New Review.

⁹ McCarthy, *Remainder*, 110–1.

if you look at Beckett's work, it's all about these repetition loops, which are quite interesting, 'cause they're not exact repetition loops. Like in *Happy Days* she does the same thing every day – getting the lipstick and the gun out of her bag – but she's everyday saying: 'This is what I did yesterday. I took the thing out and I'm doing it again now,' which means it's not the same. Her constant reviewing of the past makes it constantly different.¹⁰

Beckett here is more than an influence, or the ideal last representative of the avant-garde. In this understanding, the forms of his work provide the means to inherit and move beyond it: the constant reviewing of the past makes it constantly different. But in adopting this understanding of Beckett's work, McCarthy consigns it to the past, suggesting, like Smith's invocation of Duchamp, that the task for contemporary fiction is to engage with a different sphere of art than the painting which so occupied Beckett's imagination. If, as Peter Osborne argues, "contemporary art is post-conceptual art," then Smith and McCarthy tentatively posit that one future of contemporary fiction might be "post-conceptual" fiction.¹¹

Other writers in the second decade of the new millennium have looked back to the literary engagements with visual art that have been the subject of this thesis. Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011) begins with the narrator Julius describing his aimless walks through New York city: "One night I simply went on and on, walking all the way down to Houston Street, a distance of some seven miles, and found myself in a state of disorienting fatigue, laboring to remain on my feet."¹² The use of the oddly formal reflexive pronoun to convey a sense of dissociation and passivity, mimicking the experience of the city upon the *flâneur*, is one of Sebald's characteristic stylistic tics, and thus it is not surprising that Cole has repeatedly referenced Sebald as an influence in

¹⁰ Tom McCarthy, *Existential Ground Zero*, accessed March 6, 2014, <http://gorse.ie/existential-ground-zero/>.

¹¹ Osborne, *Anywhere Or Not At All*, 3.

¹² Teju Cole, *Open City* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), 6.

interviews.¹³ Cole is a photographer, and trained as an art historian, specializing in the seventeenth-century Dutch realism that has emerged as a constant touchstone for the writers in this thesis for reflecting on the possibilities of realism. In his first publication, the novella *Every Day Is For The Thief* (2007), Cole included photographs in his textual narrative, further underlining his debt to Sebald. But he has also mentioned another important predecessor: John Berger. “[Berger’s] *Here Is Where We Meet* is actually one of my favorite books, it’s actually something that influenced me very strongly and I really love his writing.”¹⁴ In a review, Cole has praised the “mixture of anecdote, essay, politics, reverie and poetry that he [Berger] has been exploring for more than half a century,” and Berger’s mixture of writing, drawing, and philosophical reflection.¹⁵ The difference that makes Cole’s work more than a repetition of Berger’s, however, is its situating of this interaction between visual and verbal not in the spaces of British and European history, but in the wholly globalized and transnational world of Cole’s twenty-first century Black Atlantic. Globalization was a central theme of Berger’s later work, and his influence on writers such as Arundhati Roy and Michael Ondaatje as well as Cole makes him an important mediator between British writing and the emergent formation of world literature. But as we have seen, this turn to the effects of a globalizing modernity in Berger’s work was accompanied by a turn away from an engagement with visual art and the legacy of modernism. Perhaps, however, writers like Cole will restitch this torn seam in Berger’s expansive *oeuvre*.

The status of visual art in a globalizing world and a Sebaldian inclusion of photography in fiction are also features of Ben Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2012). The novel is the narration of a young, comically self-conscious American poet on a

¹³ Teju Cole, Teju Cole Interview - the long version, June 1, 2012, <http://www.listener.co.nz/culture/books/teju-cole-interview-the-long-version/>.

¹⁴ Teju Cole, Open City, September 19, 2013, <http://www.mahala.co.za/art/open-city/>.

¹⁵ Teju Cole, “Drawing,” *The New York Times*, December 2, 2011, sec. Sunday Book Review.

fellowship in Spain, whose journeys through the Prado and introduction to the world of contemporary art are peppered with anxiety about his lack of response to the art he encounters. At its heart, *Leaving the Atocha Station* is a traditionally American quest for authentic experience, an authenticity to be realized in a “profound experience of art.”¹⁶ As Tony Tanner has written, this quest for a naïve and authentic experience of wonder runs from Emerson through the canon of American literature.¹⁷ In works such as Hawthorne’s *Marble Faun* (1860), in James’s *Roderick Hudson* (1875), and across the *oeuvre* of Gertrude Stein, aesthetic experience becomes the site of this authenticity-granting wonder. But as Tanner has also argued, it was in *The Recognitions* that the aesthetic as the guarantor of authenticity first began to fray, and to dissipate further in Oedipa Maas’s confusions in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966).¹⁸ In Lerner’s novel, the reproductions of art works mirror the narrator’s fear that all of his aesthetic experiences are second-hand in comparison to those of the Europeans he encounters, and there is a related sense in the novel that the Spanish people he encounters are clichés of the sensual and passionate Mediterranean.

A novel which shows just how much Gaddis’s central theme of the artist in American society has been transformed in the twenty-first century comes, like *Remainder*, more from the art world than from traditional “literary” publishers. *Reena Spaulings* (2004) is a collectively written novel published by the Bernadette Corporation, a New York based I.N.S.-style conceptual art project who work with and on the strategies common to the twentieth-century avant-garde and the world of advertising. *Reena Spaulings* is a novel written “by images, about images, to be read by other images.”¹⁹ Reena, the novel’s

¹⁶ Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (London: Granta Books, 2013), 37.

¹⁷ Tony Tanner, *The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

¹⁸ Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970*, 393–400.

¹⁹ Bernadette Corporation, *Reena Spaulings* (New York; Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), [ii].

protagonist, undergoes a picaresque series of adventures through post-9/11 New York. She is plucked from her job as a museum security guard to become a model, meets Žižek and Karl Lagerfeld, quotes Hardt and Negri, and then plans on using her newfound success to screen a spectacular film called *Cinema of the Damned*. These events are as disjointed as Reena's collectively written personality, but that she coheres through narrative shows how Bernadette Corporation's exploration of collective subjectivity is realized in fictional form. For Reena, "[i]ndividuality makes you generic." Reena, the novel's non-character protagonist, who shares a name with an actual New York art gallery, is a successor to the split Wyatt/Stephen/Stephan of *The Recognitions*. Like the classic American heroine, she is on a quest for the experience of art, but faced with "art" as a dispersed, conceptual project, she as a character becomes just as dispersed and conceptual as her authors. Like her friend Jutta, she "has made her body an Artist [...] one that is also open, looking to be determined here from the outside, ready to re-write everything, to co-write, to be written on...feature for any Now...co-efficient of glamour...faceless avant-garde."²⁰

That it is impossible to know whether or not one of the members of Bernadette Corporation intended to allude to Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* (2001) is part of the formal challenge of collectivity the novel poses. It also shows how in DeLillo's series of explorations of artist figures, Lauren Hartke is the one who is most committed to the ideal of aesthetic autonomy as political resistance. She performs and uses a body that Reena and Jutta wish to make part of a "faceless avant-garde." Written before 9/11, the description of Lauren's hair as "terroristic" anticipates a theme DeLillo returned to the following year in the short story "Baader-Meinhof" (2002).²¹ In this brief story, DeLillo

²⁰ Ibid., 154–5.

²¹ Don DeLillo, *The Body Artist* (London: Picador, 2001), 103; Don DeLillo, "Baader-Meinhof," in *The Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories* (London: Picador, 2011), 105–19.

stages an encounter with Gerhard Richter's series of paintings *October 18, 1977*, to reflect on the relationships between the avant-garde, collectivity, terrorism and the politics of art; in short, to juxtapose the two legacies of modernism embodied by Lauren and Reena. The story also harks back to DeLillo's exploration of the possibilities of a literary avant-garde in the postwar society of the spectacle in *Mao II* (1991). As in *Remainder*, Beckett is the central icon of the possibility of an avant-garde, "the last writer to shape the way we think and see. After him, the major work involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings."²² But there is another, less well-known figure haunting *Mao II*: Gaddis. In 1988 Gaddis wrote to DeLillo to praise *Libra*, praise which DeLillo reciprocated in public, describing *The Recognitions* as a "revelation," and *JR* as one of the most "realistic" novels of postwar American life.²³ *Mao II*'s reclusive novelist Bill Gray shares "Bill" Gaddis's initials, and Gray's description of a book-in-progress as "a neutered near-human dragging through the house, humpbacked, hydrocephalic...[[l]ocked together in the forbidden room" alludes to Gaddis's *JR* (1975), where Gibbs describes his "work-in-progress" as an "invalid" whose "eyes follow you around the room."²⁴ In conjoining Beckett and Gaddis in a novel about the possibility of fiction in a society dominated by the image, DeLillo retrospectively brings out the shared significance of the work of art for both writers in their own achievement of this possibility.

These works of contemporary fiction show the continuation and vitality of the relationship between the novel and visual art that has been the concern of this thesis. They also show how the writers discussed in this thesis have become touchstones and influences for contemporary writers driven to engage in new ways with visual art and culture – or to disengage, as the case may be. Beckett, Gaddis, Berger and Sebald have

²² Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (London: Viking, 1991), 157.

²³ 19 July 1988, Gaddis, *Letters*, 451; DeLillo, "On William Gaddis."

²⁴ DeLillo, *Mao II*, 55; William Gaddis, *JR* (London: Penguin, 1993), 603.

become some of the predecessors that writers like McCarthy, Franzen, Cole and Lerner have constructed for themselves, and for their readers and critics, inscribing them into their personal histories. In doing so, however, they also inscribe them into literary history: these writers now belong to the past of our literary present. The works and public reflections of these writers emphasize what has been the central argument of this thesis: if we are now to understand the diverse and complex ways in which postwar writers responded to the visual arts, then they must be approached historically. But as this thesis has shown, the histories of art and their relationships to the present are multiple, non-simultaneous, and often generatively out of sync with the formal and institutional histories of literature. For these writers, thinking historically through art has been as much about linking past and present moments across time, as about slotting past and present into a linear continuum. Both such constellations and continuities can be traced in recent fiction, and both will no doubt continue to create different ways of conceptualizing its contemporaneity.

The perspective from the present provided by this brief survey of contemporary fiction also brings into focus the common themes that have been shown to run through the works of these postwar writers. In novels like *Remainder* and *Leaving the Atocha Station*, the strategies and realities of visual art are means to understand these writers' contemporary world. As we have seen, in Beckett and Berger's early art criticism, or in Gaddis's satires on Abstract Expressionism, the same desire to understand the present through an engagement with visual art motivated their writing. However, where they differ is in the constant juxtaposing of this art, and their own writing, with the art of the past, thus instinctively historicizing their own moment in relation to the longer history of visual art. Even for a writer like Sebald, who evinced little interest in the contemporary art of the 1980s and 1990s, the engagement with photography and realism in his work

was undertaken through a contrast with the origins of visual illusionism in Giotto, Pisanello, and Grünewald. For all the claims of the postwar “crisis of historicity” that postmodernism was meant to entail, the engagement of these writers with the history of art was a means to retain the perspective which enabled them to understand the historicity of their present.²⁵

This historical sense extended to concerns with the legacy of modernism. This has also been a recurring feature in these writers’ responses to visual art, from Beckett and Gaddis’s arguably still modernist attempt to interpret postwar abstraction, to Berger’s more fully retrospective understanding of the moment of Cubism. David James and Urmila Seshagiri have taken up Tom McCarthy’s statement that “[t]he task for contemporary fiction is to deal with the legacies of modernism,” an echo of a similar claim by Laura Marcus, to argue that modernism is best understood through a return to the “logic of periodization.” In their view, “[w]ithout a temporally bounded and formally precise understanding of what modernism does and means in any cultural moment, the ability to make other aesthetic and historical claims about its contemporary reactivation suffers.²⁶ One strand of this thesis has shown the emergence, through responses to modernist visual art, of this sense of modernism as something past, whether in the form of Picasso’s Cubism, or Surrealist techniques of chance. This thesis has also shown how this response is part of its own argument for applying the logic of periodization to the postwar period in literary history. By showing how visual art was a means by which postwar writers historicized their present, this thesis has shown the inseparability of art and history in the poetics of postwar fiction, and their centrality to the interpretation of that fiction.

²⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 25.

²⁶ James and Seshagiri, “Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution,” 88; Marcus, “The Legacies of Modernism.”

In 2012, the art critic Boris Groys presented an exhibition of the photographs and postcards collected by the philosopher and bureaucrat Alexandre Kojève. Kojève's collection of more than five thousand photographs, ten thousand postcards, a one thousand page manuscript, and an erotic cabinet, had lain untouched in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris since his death in 1968. The photographs were taken during Kojève's travels through Europe and Asia while working for the then European Community. They almost invariably depict historical monuments and buildings, taken from the same frontal perspective, rarely with any signs of human presence. The photographs attempt to match the style of tourist postcards, dissolving the individual gaze and act of selection into the conventions of mass cultural tourism. For Groys, this vast collection of images was a continuation of Kojève's philosophy of the end of history by visual means. What distinguished Kojève's reinterpretation of Hegel after the war was his claim that the end of history was now being realized in practice, in the institutions of the European Community, and Kojève's own role as one of its leading bureaucrats. The production and collection of these images are part of the same process of the end of history taking practical, objective form.

The images document monuments of the time before the end of history, presented in a post-historical, timeless collection. They themselves are also a post-historical monument to the end of art, ironically created by the nephew of Kandinsky, for Kojève had never intended them to be publicly exhibited. Only Groys's curatorial act transformed them into a very contemporary conceptual work of art. Without this intervention, Kojève's collection and unpublished writings would have remained in the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale as testimony to the end of history, the end of art, and to the relationship between the two kinds of endings. They were still hidden when another collector, Jacques Austerlitz, visited the library in the final years of the twentieth

century. Austerlitz's collecting suffered from the forgetfulness that for Kojève defined the post-historical subject after the Second World War. In Sebald's novel, however, the writing of fiction as a work of art provides a historical perspective on Austerlitz, the subject cut adrift from history, and on his collection of photographic images. This thesis has not tried to be a fiction, and it has not presumed to signal the end of the "end of history." But it has aspired to achieve historical knowledge of the relationship between postwar literature and visual art in its own more modest way.

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