Wandering in Contemporary Literature: A Narrative Theory of Cognition

Hillel E. Broder

Graduate Center, City University of New York

Recommended Citation
http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/751
WANDERING IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE:
A NARRATIVE THEORY OF COGNITION

by

HILLEL BRODER

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2016
WANDERING IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE:

A NARRATIVE THEORY OF COGNITION

by

HILLEL BRODER

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English to satisfy the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Dr. Peter Hitchcock

________________________

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Dr. Mario DiGangi

________________________

Date

Executive Officer

Dr. Peter Hitchcock

Dr. Nico Israel

Dr. Jason Tougaw

Dr. Alan Vardy

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

WANDERING IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE:
A NARRATIVE THEORY OF COGNITION

By
Hillel Broder

Adviser: Peter Hitchcock

This study offers a theory of wandering cognition as an animating feature of western literature, in general, and of contemporary literature, in particular. Unlike existing theories of peripatetic bodies and minds in fiction that focus primarily on political critiques, cultural practices, or pleasures of digression, this theory of wandering offers an aesthetic philosophy and ethical critique of representing cognition, memory, and narrative identity that finds affinities in the political, phenomenological, and ethical thought of Walter Benjamin, Emmanuel Levinas, and Giorgio Agamben.

Unlike existing cognitive theories of literature that apply cognitive theory to literary study (or vice versa), this study develops an aesthetic and phenomenological theory of consciousness that emerges from within the representation of perception, attentiveness, and memory in literatures of wandering minds. Wandering generates narrative identity apart from conventional and normative narrativity, a narrative consciousness that accounts for the cognitive motion (and blindspots) in remembering selves and that illuminates cognitive mimeses of amnesic, episodic, and disabled consciousness.
Finally, while this study focuses primarily on the contemporary literary experiments of wandering in the works of Kazuo Ishiguro, W.G. Sebald, Ben Lerner, and Maud Casey, it has a wider reach in its retrospective and prospective rethinking of the function of peripatetic fiction. Wandering is built into the narrative motion and aesthetic technique of narrated and remembering identities in the early Romantic autobiography of Rousseau, Wordsworth, and De Quincey; and wandering underlies the conscious identities narrated absent memory in the emerging genre of the amnesic memoir.
Preface

This project considers the question of narrativity as an ethical one, and the innovation in representing non-narrativist minds as a critical adjustment for representing consciousness. In particular, this study examines narrative minds that either wander in form or whose deficiency in memory make normative autobiography impossible.

Representation of such embodied “wandering” holds affinities with alternate narrative, cognitive, and even philosophical theories of cognition. Instead of applying cognitive models to literary texts, however, I follow Lisa Zunshine’s call for discovering cognitive models within literary texts. Ultimately, I look for the aesthetic underpinnings in the contemporary literatures of W.G. Sebald, Kazuo Ishiguro, Ben Lerner, Maud Casey, and others, and I foreground these texts’ particular innovations and departures for representing wandering bodies and minds as salvaging an ethics for the representation of the subject’s cognition.

What emerges is a study of memory experiments grounded in the history of narrative theory and gesturing towards a contemporary ethics for representing cognition. For even as I examine how these works inherit certain forms of autobiography, confession, and walking memoir from the inception of the novel, Romantic autobiography, and the Enlightenment, I question the ethics of aligning the narrative subject with generic and normative forms of narrativity. I discover that the aesthetic experiments in memory, in these contemporary works of diasporic wandering, were in fact recoveries of a narrative identity apart from the normative tradition but built into confessional works by Rousseau, Wordsworth, De Quincey, and even later by modernist Gertrude Stein. In so doing, I argue that the aforementioned contemporary authors under consideration in my dissertation foreground the texture of perception, historical
multiplicity, and even multiple subjectivities—thus recovering, in turn, narrative identities apart from normative cognitive selves.

The implications for this argument are important for thinking through a Kafkan genealogy of experimentally wandering fictions in the twentieth century, and far reaching both in terms of contemporary philosophy and contemporary memoir. Levinas’s “errancy”, Agamben’s “infancy”, Jost-Frey’s “interruption”, and even Jameson’s “schizophrenia” all assume narrating selves apart from structured narrativity. Contemporary studies and memoir of amnesia, too, assume a certain language of disability in their normative forms. As I argue in the conclusion of my dissertation, surveying the possibility for narration, in such genres of memoir, demonstrates again the recovery of subjectivity apart from narrative identity: a neurodiverse cognition in fiction.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been possible without a countless number of people in my life from whom I have benefited and with whom I have shared these years of study, research, and writing. I will do my best to recount here those most immediately relevant to this project; however, so many countless others, I’m sure, have impacted this project in slight and dramatic ways.

First, my most immediate thanks to everyone at the CUNY Graduate Center for their support and guidance during the dissertation process: to my supervisor Professor Peter Hitchcock for taking on my project and constant emails, and for giving of his time, scholarship, and profound wisdom—I regret now never having taken a class with you. To my committee, Professors Nico Israel, Professor Jason Tougay and Professor Alan Vardy: Professor Israel, you were the first course that I took at the Graduate Center in the Fall of 2010, you introduced me to and ignited my love for Sebald, and you have guided me since both through independent study and through the Oral Examination process. Thank you for everything. To Professor Vardy, thank you for your wit, insight, and thoughts about the Romantics—that all proved quite useful in the dissertation, in the end. And to Professor Jason Tougay: I daresay that I owe all of my academic achievements and interests to your seminar on consciousness and literary experimentation, not to mention your constant guidance towards professionalization within and beyond the field. My first two publications came directly from both that seminar and your guidance. Thank you for your thoughtful, thorough, and immediate support on so many occasions, and thank you for believing in my project. You are truly a teacher’s teacher.
As an important backdrop to my research, thanks to all of the professors, staff, and graduate students at the Graduate Center. A special thank you Professor Mario DiGangi, the Executive Officer of the English Department, and Ms. Nancy Silverman, the Assistant Program Officer: Professor DiGangi, it was an honor to assist your research in 2012-2013, and Nancy, you have been a constant beacon at the Graduate Center—thank you for all of your direction throughout the years.

I must express my appreciation as well to everyone at Queens College (CUNY), where I completed my M.A., especially Professor Jeffrey Cassvan. Professor Cassvan, your passion for Kafka and Benjamin was contagious—here I am, still writing and rewriting my thesis more than five years later! Our time spent together over the course of two seminars, an independent study, and a thesis was formative for my years to follow; your enthusiasm and encouragement for me to attend the Graduate Center, your alma mater, was likewise contagious. Thank you for your passion, wit, and humor.

And to dip further back into my educational history: I am grateful to have met and studied under Professor Elizabeth Stewart at Yeshiva University as an undergraduate. Professor Stewart, you were my first introduction to Benjamin and Kafka. Thank you.

And even further back: I am grateful to all of the great educators and rabbis of the Yeshiva of Greater Washington, who taught me radical patience and uncompromising integrity when grappling with a text and tradition close to one’s heart. You’ve inspired a lifetime commitment to and love of learning, and you’ve made an eternal student out of me—thank you.

Over the years and along the way, I have forged many friendships in various English departments. First, thank you to the administration, faculty, and English departments at SAR
High School, Yeshiva University High School for Boys, and Fordham College at Fordham University. In particular, thank you to SAR for partially sponsoring my 2013 trip to the “Ethics and Alterity” Conference in Montpellier, as well as sponsoring the two NeMLA conferences in Toronto and Hartford.

And when I think of my nine years as a high school and college teacher, I think of my students—yours are the texts with which I’ve spent the most time throughout my graduate years. Thank you for sharing them with me, and thank you for creating your foundational memories with me as a background character. I am humbled to have been a small part of your formative young adult years.

I have been so blessed with two of the most wonderful parents. Indeed, this entire dissertation, let alone most of my schooling, would not have happened without their encouragement and support. To my parents, Fran and Alan Broder, Mom and Abba: you’ve modeled dignity, consistency, and righteousness, and you’ve taught me the value of hard work and discipline. For those enduring lessons and many, many more, I am forever grateful. Thank you, Mom and Abba, for everything that you’ve done and continue to do for Eva, our kids, and me.

I have been blessed with a wonderful extended family, and I have been particularly fortunate, too, to develop close relationships as an adult with my grandparents and even my great-grandmother. To Nana (of blessed memory), Grandma, Pops, Bubby, and Zayde (of blessed memory), thank you for modeling and inspiring greatness in everything you do. And to my brothers and sister, Noam, Moshe, and Batsheva, thank you for all of the good times and good talks over the years—we’ve evolved from child friends to adult friends, and it’s wonderful.
And of course, I am proud that I can finally join the club of doctors in the family! As well as to all of my in-laws, and especially my parents-in-law, Anne Fenton and Bob Light: you’ve modeled integrity in your religious practice, excellence in your achievements, and professionalism in your particular fields. I am privileged to call you all my family.

And finally, the people whom I call home: first, to my children, Moshe, Rebecca, and Aaron, you make it all seem worth it—you put a smile on my face every day, and I am honored to be called your father. Somehow, you make time for me even when I can’t find the time. May you continue to teach me the best of everything about love and life.

And acharon acharon chaviv—the dearest, in closing—I am most grateful for the boundless patience and encouragement of my partner and friend, Eva, who has made everything impossible seem just within reach. Somehow, Eva, you made all of our busy days and evenings—our three graduate programs, three (plus) children, and nine years of full-time teaching—a pleasure and a great adventure. And somehow, you were able to find time for my work to happen while you managed everything else over summers and school breaks. I can’t thank you enough for all that you’ve given to make this dream a reality; perhaps I’ll be able to repay your kindnesses one day! Eva, I’m sure the best is still ahead—but I’m grateful, too, for all that we’ve shared so far.

***

In recognition of this great convergence of people, history, and opportunity, all enlivened and sustained for this very moment: with humility I am grateful—Baruch she’hechiyanu v’kiyimanu la’zman ha’ze.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated
In loving memory of my great-aunt

Professor Billie Ehrenberg

(1939-1984)

A respected scholar at this very same
Department of English at
The Graduate Center, CUNY;

A popular teacher at
Borough of Manhattan Community College, CUNY;

A beloved daughter,
Sister,
Aunt,
Great-aunt.

May this dissertation recall its readers
To Billie’s love of literature
And passion for life.
# Table of Contents

Introduction: Towards a Theory of Wandering ................................................................. 1
  Overview ............................................................................................................................... 1
  Wandering About Walks: Some Assumptions ................................................................. 4
  Wandering With(out) Structure ....................................................................................... 8
  Wandering Consciousness ............................................................................................... 16
  Wandering Phenomenology ............................................................................................. 21
  Wandering Aesthetics ........................................................................................................ 24

Chapter 1: Wandering About Narrativity ......................................................................... 35
  Memory and Narrativity: A Brief History of the Modern Self ........................................ 36
  Reading Romantic Autobiography for Wandering ....................................................... 51
  Modernist Autobiography: Inheriting Wandering Form ............................................... 61

Chapter 2: Memory’s Wandering Ethics—A Postmodernist Ontology ......................... 71
  Postmodern Memory: A Critical History ........................................................................ 73
  10:04. and a Postmodern Ethics of Memory .................................................................... 78
  Wandering Attentiveness and the Construction of Ontological Multiplicity ................ 88
  Amnesia and Multiple Selves ........................................................................................... 92

Chapter 3: Wandering With Sebald—History’s Collection and Cognition .................... 101
  Sebald’s Non-Form .......................................................................................................... 102
  Rings Around Memory .................................................................................................... 105
  Melancholic Gaze in Space-Time ................................................................................... 109
  Creaturely Mourning: The Subject-as-Object .............................................................. 125

Chapter 4: Amnesic Fictions: Narrating Beyond Memory .............................................. 131
  Theory of Mind, Empathy, and Cognitive Cultural Studies ............................................. 134
  Modernism and Cognitive Experiment: Amnesia and the Limits of Theory of Mind .... 138
  Reading Ryder: Aesthetics and Cognition ....................................................................... 141
  Of Fugues, Flaneurs, and Fictions .................................................................................. 155
  Ethics of Narration: Reading the Amnesic ..................................................................... 158

Conclusion: Amnesic Memoir and Mimetic Experiment ................................................ 168

Works Cited ....................................................................................................................... 185
Caminante, son tus huellas el camino y nada más;
caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.
Al andar se hace camino, y al volver la vista atrás se ve la senda que nunca se ha de volver a pisar.
Caminante, no hay camino, sino estelas en la mar.

--Antonio Machado, from “Proverbios y cantares” in Campos de Castilla, 1912
Introduction: Towards a Theory of Wandering

Overview

This dissertation is a study of wandering minds in contemporary literature. It is not necessarily an inquiry into walking practices, environmental psychology, colonial and post-colonial studies, or embodied cognition, though it does acknowledge, at the very onset, that wandering minds often perform as part of embodied wandering, are subject to colonialisit forces, and are frequently stimulated and limited by the cognizance of embedded spaces. In what follows, however, I suggest that wandering is far more central to an ethical critique of the aesthetics of fictional minds than either a super-category of walking literatures, an intervention in post-colonial studies, or a sub-category of digressive fictions, though it certainly includes the histories of assorted fictions and theoretical insights into generic form.

Though primarily a theory of narrative minds, at its core, this project is driven by an ethical argument. What are the consequences of assuming normative narrative structure for representing the motion of minds? What is lost to history through typical practices of remembering? How might identity be narrated within multiple iterations of memory, or without memory at all? Reading wandering in narrative fiction—and reading to discover such wandering—generates its own critique of normative theories of cognition, memory, and narrativity, and in so doing, recovers the narrated subject’s fragmentation and incoherence—and vulnerability, attentiveness, and presence. As I will argue, noticing wandering demands an attentiveness in otherwise normative teleological texts and context. Wandering may underlie the

---

1 See, for example, Nico Israel’s excellent Outlandish: Writing Between Exile and Diaspora (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2000) that offers both a critical introduction to the varied uses and discourses of exile in modernist theory and fiction, diaspora in cultural studies, and the political and rhetorical space between the two—between the individual, home-oriented experience of exile and cultural refashioning experience of diaspora—generated by his study.
aesthetic perception or ethical imperative within phenomenological perception—even as it is lost to a continuous and ordered history. Indeed, the return to one’s work “as if nothing has occurred”, Kafka reminds us, is a myth recounted in countless stories, even if it hasn’t occurred in any of them.\(^2\) Such fragmentary wandering of both narrative and reader consciousness occurs in all texts, even if such interruptions are consciously elided to accommodate temporalized narrative coherence.

As a narratological critique, too, this study subverts the hegemonic history of aesthetics and narrativity of autobiography and the modern novel. As such, this study is far more an inquiry into the relation between narrative aesthetics and cognition than it is an excursus through the politics of power or critical history of cognitive psychology. Indeed, instead of invoking political or psychological models for representing the complexities of narrative cognition, this study attempts an inductive model of cognition through a philosophical and literary inquiry into the parameters of and possibilities for narrated wandering. Situated beyond any particular walking practice or model of consciousness, in other words, this study clarifies how wandering operates within a number of fictional mind models, encompassing those of both normative and non-normative cognition.

In writing an argument of a narrative theory of cognition, I follow Lisa Zunshine, who has cited Raymond Williams’ original project of cultural studies as necessarily cognitive\(^3\), as well as the work of other pioneers in the recently established field of cognitive cultural studies, including Ellen Spolsky, Mark Turner, and Alan Richardson. However, unlike the reigning trend

---

\(^2\) For this citation, as well as many other aphorisms interested in the lacunae of consciousness and memory, see Franz Kafka, “Reflections on Sin, Pain, Hope, and the True Way,” *The Basic Kafka* (New York: Shocken Books, 1979), 236–41.

\(^3\) Williams writes in *The Long Revolution* that his project explores the relationship between the “evolution of the human brain [and] the particular interpretation carried by particular cultures.” (18), cited in Lisa Zunshine, “What is Cognitive Cultural Studies?” (3)
of such literary studies that adopt cognitive models (and vice versa), my project offers a newfound contribution to the burgeoning field of cognitive cultural studies—a cognitive model that enters into a complementary and critical relation with reigning research in cognitive and phenomenological studies but that emerges from within narratology and literary aesthetics. Indeed, following Alan Palmer’s thesis in *Fictional Minds* that narrative theory has always been interested in the construction, figuring, and cognition of fictional minds in their socially embedded contexts⁴, I argue for readings of wandering bodies that demonstrate, by way of mobilized performance, a poetics of cognition and memory.

Ultimately, I clarify the tenuous relationship between identity, narrative, cognition, memory, and consciousness through the diverse fields of contemporary scholarship regarding narrativity and narrativity’s relation to representations of memory and cognition. Wandering narrative, in other words, problematizes traditional focalization and narrative subjectivity. Wanderers lose track, as it were, of their own stories, and so doing, operate in contradistinction with normative, diachronic, and even conventionally autobiographical narrativity. Furthermore, I highlight how embodied fictions of walking and non-embodied fictions of movement perform as a critique of normative cognition and consciousness in their abruptly interruptive and even amnesic modes. What remains instead is a narrative consciousness articulated through a distinct poetics of wandering.

The goal of this introduction is to arrive at a definition of wandering that both acknowledges diverse disciplinary possibilities but surpasses these categories though an extended argument of wandering as a phenomenology of perception (Emmanuel Levinas) and its subsequently generated attentiveness (Walter Benjamin) and place in postmodern culture

---

⁴ For further reading, see Alan Palmer, *Fictional Minds* (Lincoln, NB: U. of Nebraska Press, 2008).
(Frederic Jameson). But first a productive digression—through a history of walking—to arrive at the practice of wandering.

Wandering About Walks: Some Assumptions

Indeed, broadly defined, “wandering” invokes divergent histories and discourses: the ambulatory contexts that saturate canonical narrative, fiction, and autobiography; the pleasures of dilatory and digressive narrative; and even subversive narrative “form” and deconstructionist philosophy that denies both telos and narrative arcs. If first loosely defined as a form of walking, “wandering” connotes a long and complex history of fictional travelogue, epic, pilgrimage, and exile, and within varied cultural, historical, and narrative genealogies.

Perhaps the earliest instance of both literature in English and a mobilized narrative, Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales presents a pilgrimage as a pretense for a slice of medieval archetypes and personalities, along with—and through—their competing tales. Ostensibly, the “Hoste” of the Southwerk Inn initiates the story-telling contest of the Tales in order “to shorte with oure weye” (791-792). Stories thus pass the time of the “viage” to Canterbury, but they are also means to “pleye”, to entertain—and as is well known, become the sole focus of Tales, with their fragmentary and asymptotic reach from Southwerk towards Canterbury. Certainly, each individual story of the Tales presents ample material for sociological, political, and even narrative theorists. A far more subtle feature to the Tales’ narratological success is their method of communication: they are framed within an ambulatory context and told by multiple subjects who interact with one another and their shifting, ambient environments. Thus, the richness of the tales emerges from the implicit and explicit relations between the characters’ ordering and reactions: the Knight is parodied by the Miller, who is mocked by the Reeve. Further, the
characters’ choices are influenced, too, by natural and social environments: for example, the penultimate tale by the Manciple is preceded by the Manciple’s cursing of the drunken Cook—in his tale, the Manciple concludes with the recommendation that one always “kepe wel thy tongue” (IX, 319). Likewise, the Parson’s tale is preceded by an admonition of the Host to hasten, as the “sonne wole adoun” (X, 70); in response to the sun’s descent, the Parson offers a doctrinal treatise of the “fruyt of penanunce” (X, 1076), with a recommendation, among many others, to purchase such “blisful regne” with “reste by travaille.” (1080) As the ultimate tale, the melancholic setting of twilight prompts both the Host and the Parson to close the collection of Tales on a somber note, one that expresses travel as both travail, its etymological source, and as a form of spiritual sojourn that is also a sort of restful serenity.

The labor, or travail, of travel is both philologically originary and essential to its proliferation of discourses and expressions. It is, too, the occasion and necessary context for realizing the travel narrative as such. Nearly half a millennium later, Henry David Thoreau expressed a similar philological sensitivity to the art of walking, though with an etymological focus on the root of the word “saunter”:

I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks, who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering; which word is beautifully derived “from idle people who roved about the country, in the middle ages, and asked charity, under pretence of going à la sainte terre”—to the holy land, till the children exclaimed, “There goes a sainte-terrer”, a saunterer—a holy-lander. They who never go to the holy land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds, but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean. Some, however, would derive the word from sans terre, without land or a home, which,
therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere. For this is the secret of successful sauntering. He who sits still in a house all the time may be the greatest vagrant of all, but the Saunterer, in the good sense, is no more vagrant than the meandering river, which is all the while sedulously seeking the shortest course to the sea. But I prefer the first, which indeed is the most probable derivation. For every walk is a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer this holy land from the hands of the Infidels. (1)

Here, “sauntering” is founded philologically on either a teleological pilgrimage towards the sainte terre, the holy land, or the sans terre—the exiled one without land. Though Thoreau adapts his first, “most probable derivation” of sauntering as a modern form of conquest—thus salvaging a noble pretense for the idling vagrant, he seems to suggest that such a Naturalist impulse to saunter as a type of “art” or “genius” is sourced in the impulse to recover a sense of belonging, even if displaced and “at home everywhere.” Thoreau’s complex history imagines his artfully sauntering geniuses to be both goal-driven and aimless, and so he conflates his purposeless idling with a mission-driven practice.

As just two examples, Chaucer and Thoreau speak for the long history of cultures founded upon animated and mobilized bodies that narrate in embedded contexts. From the ancient myths of Homer to the medieval tales of Chaucer; from the autobiographical and landscaped wonder of Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Whitman, to the urban and fragmented cosmopolitanism of Baudelaire, Benjamin, Joyce, and Woolf; and, through the contemporary and post-colonial exiles of Kazuo Ishiguro and W.G. Sebald, fictional narrative seems to have always emerged from imaginarily embodied movement. Such movement plays varying functions—as plot animation, structure for narrated experience, or occasion for a narrator’s mind—and
occupies overlapping genres, too: Heroes embark and return from quests; pilgrims, ancient, medieval or modern, voyage abroad; young men depart home to come of age; Romantic autobiographers roam country-sides to recollect life experiences; wandering flaneurs observe populated and deserted urban sites; post-colonial exiles mourn the ruins of history through their boundary-less and/or restricted movement.

Studies of such narrative movement—really, of narrative walking—note the critical place that such diverse forms of embodied ambulation holds in Western civilization. And indeed, with the recent publication and popular reception of Rebecca Solnit’s *Wanderlust*, as well as the very recent *A Philosophy of Walking* by Frederic Gros, readers are encouraged to notice the affinities between their own lives’ embodied and embedded narratives and those mobilized, fictional lives shaped by their imaginary settings. Solnit states this purpose of her study as clearly as possible in the words quoted above—walking, in her study, is the nexus of mind, body, and world—and the site of fictional and human consciousness and narrative. Gros, perhaps less clearly, offers various dispositions and characteristics (e.g. solitude, eternity, freedom) that various walking practices generate through their particular application or broad cultural history. Certainly Solnit’s, Gros’s and others’ works attempt comprehensive, inter-disciplinary, and cultural surveys of the varied forms of recorded—fictional or historical—walking. Yet even such studies ramble in their archival collection and cataloguing, ordering and organizing far more than proposing any sort of clearly unifying cognitive and/or narrative theory to this trans-historical and -cultural phenomenon. This study, therefore, is not principally concerned with walking

---

5 “Walking shares with making and working that crucial element of engagement of the body and the mind with the world, of knowing the world through the body and the body through the world,” writes Rebecca Solnit in *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2000), 29.
forms and practices in the history of fiction, though it does acknowledge that such walking is the typical site for an inquiry into wandering.

**Wandering With(out) Structure**

If an inquiry into wandering is inclusive of but abstracted from walking, then, we might look for precedent in the study of digression as a comparable narrative form and as representative of narrative minds. Digression, for Ross Chambers, the great theoretician of “loiterature,” what he terms digressive narrative, is at once a definitive feature of normative narrative—it is the means by which an author distances an end from its beginning by avoiding the shortest path of one from the other—and it is the underlying characteristic of writerly pleasure for readers, as Barthes might have it⁷, through the dilatory practices of deferred endings. The reader’s desire for resolution is held at bay, in other words, through the pleasure of extending such a desire (Chambers 20). However, such a theory of digression assumes a narrative beginning and end. It assumes a site of origin from which a subsequent text digresses, even as it offers a theory of supplementarity that exemplifies what he calls the “etcetera principle,” which states that

whereas contextuality is a condition of all discourse, no context is ever the whole context: there is consequently no message that does not admit of there being a second or other message, and indeed, by continued application of the rule, a third, fourth, and fifth, to infinity. (85-86)

---

⁷ See, for example, Roland Barthes in *S/Z*: “the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (5). Writerly readers are thus challenged to engage, even participate, in a text’s tensions.
As an infinite series of supplemental contexts, then, digression as a narrative method critiques the totalizing impulse of normative narrative structures. Even as the physical text in the reader’s hand is bound by the finitude of its material start and end, its compositional digression resists closure. “Etcetra,” Chambers claims, signifies the closing that forecloses closure—it confers “formal exhaustiveness” even as it is a “marker of a lack.” (86) Still, however, even in the most digressive texts, Chambers reads a continuum of shared experience with unidirectional narrative, in that digression offers a break, or diversion from its normative context, even as it retains the coherence of the normative context’s structure.

This becomes clear in his extended reading of Nicholson Baker’s *The Mezzanine*, a text that enacts such multi-contextual, readerly digression as its controlling principle and form, in which an escalator ride offers the occasion for a novel-length thought experiment. Chambers reads Baker’s work as both an “exploded” and “clogged” narrative, one that “obstruct[s] the unidirectionality of narrative,” opening it as a result to “the unlimited potentialities of textual multidirectionality, such that, through unlooked-for seepage-points, it can move, at any moment, in any number of possible directions.” (118) He cites another of Baker’s work, *U and I*, as the source of such a theory:

> The only thing I *like* are the clogs...I wanted my first novel to be a veritable infarct of narrative cloggers; the trick being to feel your way through each by blowing it up until its obtrusiveness finally revealed not blank mass but unlooked-for seepage-points of passage. (73)

In Chambers’ reading of Baker’s work itself, the explosion of “clogged narrative” is “simulated on the page by a riot of footnotes that divide the reader’s attention...one can’t quite decide
whether to continue following the text...or to plunge into a luxuriant note.” (73) Thus, with the simultaneous blockage of directionality, infinitely unique reading paths are enacted by each reader as she follows a particular combination of seepage-points.

Chambers is right to read Baker’s work as a pleasurable read, one in which the pleasures of digression are figured from within the corporate world in his book-length digressions along an escalator ride, itself a digression from and an element within the corporate sphere. He concludes that Baker’s subject “for a time...has left the constraining environment of the ‘usual channels,’ but now he is returning to them, duly refreshed.” (153) Essentially, for Chambers, digression’s pleasures are realized through an absolute autonomy, nearly akin to a flanerie, of readerly or authorial distance: on the one hand, dilatoriness tends towards dilation, towards a desire for totality and absolute comprehension (13); on the other, digression, too, enacts critical distance in its differed and even ironic difference (11-15)⁸. His final call to his reader to choose not to conclude, “to try not to decide” and instead to “repair, like Benjamin’s flaneur, to the marketplace” (292) smacks of privileged autonomy. It prefers to resist closure, but it assumes that there’s a choice to do so. Thus far is a theory of digression—and, primarily, as a narrative pleasure enacted by writers and demanded of readers.

But how might we read a text that digresses from its very beginning, or a subject unaware of his own digression? What if, in other words, there is no proper beginning or end in such a digressive text or mind—and so the digression is always already active, as the very method of narration, from its inception? Narration in media res is a common trope, in literary performance, but digressing in media res, however, pushes the logic of digression to an absolute extreme.

---

⁸ Chambers invokes Derridean difference as deferring and dilatory; he references digressive criticisms of Gayatri Spivak and Meaghan Morris as deliberate performances of digressive criticism.
What are the limits of digression, in other words, and how might we think, read, and identify wandering as a form of digression that not only assumes supplementarity, in its unfolding, and not only demands an explosion—and seepage—in the face of unidirectionality, but that exists apart from directionality to begin with?

Digression has been amply theorized in the history of western literature, wandering, however, has not. There are likely several reasons to render such a distinction in terms of critical terms and reception. As noted above, readings of digressive literatures, still admit to a telos and still admit, often, to a sort of resolution—novels end, heroes return from the Bakhtinian adventure-time that is still a hiatus from historical time. Subsequently, digressive literatures are positioned in relation to traditional literatures as a type of ethical reformation and modern sensibility from within the canon: they “undermine restrictive moral codes, social conventions and modes of thought to reveal the more transient, elusive realm of human consciousness.” (Grohman and Wells 6) Even in their revolutionary or instructional stance, however, in their most basic, structural mode, digressive narratives are positioned as dialectically engaged with the history of traditional literary form, “represent[ing] an attempt to break away from a literary tradition” or “renew[ing] the form of the novel from within.” (ibid.) While critical, such revolutionary modes still retain the essential binaries of historical genre and literary form: they acknowledge their sites of origin and retain the generic relations and teleological tropes.

Instead of a structural or aesthetic theory of digressive narrative, in what follows, I offer a theory of wandering narrative minds, both in structured wandering and in wandering structures that underlie the most normative narrative forms. Unlike their digressive cousins, texts that

---

inhere wandering as the overriding narrative structure do not necessitate a formal engagement with traditional or modernizing ethics, aesthetics, or narrative form. Wandering figures need not be seeking an ending to their journeys, a resolution to their digressions, or an alternative to a hegemonic ideology. Wandering narratives need not resolve in an easily abstracted or in a highly obtuse monomyth—in an absolute text of wandering, there is no departure from home, and there is no return home. Further, if narrative wandering is not embodied, but occurs either in the voice of a narrator or in the mind of a character, it pursues its own logic and associations, often interrupting itself, restarting, or leaving avenues of thought unexplored. Wandering bodies, therefore, might not be easily assimilated to discourses of exile and redemption, nor will wandering minds be easily admitted to generic structures of narrative.

This sort of wandering finds an easy partner in methodologies of postmodernism; Mark C. Turner writes, for example, “deconstructive criticism...[is] forever wavering and wandering.” Such deconstructive thought that “calls into question the coherence, integrity, and intelligibility of [the] network of oppositions,” in other words,

will, of necessity, be unsettled and unsettling. Repeatedly slipping through the holes in the system within which it must, nevertheless, be registered, such thought is perpetually transitory and forever nomadic. It is neither simply this nor that, here nor there, inside nor outside. (ibid.)

Wandering operates apart from narrative’s sequences and normative contexts, in other words. For a post-structuralist, wandering is not only a form—it is an orientation of reading a structured always-already digression that is elemental to the critique of historical progress, teleology, and even narrativity. Jacques Derrida suggests as much when he writes “We must begin wherever we
If we begin wherever we are—with the wherever initiating us, in turn, and conversely, ending without completion: without a center, without a controlling purpose, without the bracketing form of a beginning, middle, and end, then narrative, history, and theology must be thought otherwise. Structures of living, even of movement, take the shape of the formless error—that of wandering. To err, to wander unceasingly—not as a temporary exile or a digressive indulgence, but as an always already drifter, as an errancy to which a fall or origin is never juxtaposed—is at once a negation of purposeful subjectivity and an affirmation of playful becoming. Wandering, in this manner, assumes Gilles Deleuze’s paradox of “pure becoming,” in which “insofar as it eludes the present, becoming does not tolerate the separation or the distinction of the before and after, or of past and future. It pertains to the essence of becoming to pull in both directions at once.” (1) Becoming every which way, in other words, eludes a conventional narrative sequence.

This sort of wandering, in its dynamism and teleological suspension, I should add, if transplanted from a theory of cognition in narrative and activated in Marxist theories of materialism, is comparable to Peter Hitchcock’s ambivalence regarding dialectical materialism, in which he prefers oscillation as both productively tense and progress-free for materialist theory and objects of that theory. For Adorno, Hitchcock argues, “homeostasis in art” is the “pause in oscillation...the mean in its corollary of movement.” (5) It is the oscillated movement at a standstill, much as Benjamin’s critique of historicity is realized as dialectics at a standstill.

With the assumption of wandering as a temporal paradox for the cognizing subject of pure becoming, as a structure and method that operates apart from coherent narrative structures, I

---

assume as well that the instantiation of such wandering minds perform and are generated by their embedded and embodied sites. The representation of such bare cognition rarely happens in a vacuum, in other words: embodied consciousness is generated by its spatial contexts. While also not the focus of this dissertation project, this study acknowledges, by way of introduction, the complexity of assessing situated and embodied cognition, as well as the necessary admission to the presence of such cognition as the site of wandering. Indeed, contributing insights offered by fields as varied as environmental studies and philosophy of mind are generally assumed and necessary for a study preoccupied with aesthetic limits of narrative form and mind. Take, for example, Michel de Certeau’s reflections on “Walking in the City”: for de Certeau, the “ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins...they are walkers, Wandersmanner, whose bodies follow the thick and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it.” (93) Manipulated by the presences and absences of structured spaces, the walkers of the city are blinded to both the embrace and necessary dependence of their inscriptions upon the city’s layout and architecture. For de Certeau, every story is necessarily a travel story, inasmuch as every story is inscribed through embedded bodies manipulated by their environments, inscribing an unintelligible wander.

Others have suggested that post-colonial narrative, in particular, is especially demanding in its primacy placed on space in the contemporary political sphere and the subject’s tense relation with its own narrativity and embedded object-world-space. Sara Upstone recently reminds us\(^{11}\) that for Foucault, writing in 1967, “the present epoch will be above all else the epoch of space.” (22) Later, Upstone argues that the “cementing of the colonial space—and in particular of the colonial city”, for the colonized subject, in writing

---

\(^{11}\) See “Writing the Post-Colonial Space: Ben Okri’s Magical City and the Subversion of Imperialism” Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas 2.2 (2004)
has lead to a subversive re-imagining of space within the post-colonial nation. The post-colonial author does not accept absolute space as a reality: rather, he or she reveals the sense of an overwritten chaos...In this way, the anti-colonial response to the colonial space has centred not simply on attempting to overlay a new space of its own in what would itself be an imperializing exercise. The real radicalism of such a response lies in that the post-colonial author not only rejects the colonial model but also engages with the chaos that underlies its construction in order to re-vision a new space with the possibilities for resistance and survival. (164)

In Upstone’s reading, the post-colonial author resists spaces designed for colonial practices, through not just overlaying “a new space” but by engaging with the underlying chaos at work beneath the colonial space’s construction. While her study and its application is highly useful in theory, her emphasis, both in theory and practice is on the resistance to form that inheres within post-colonial cities and landscapes. This study, on the other hand, focuses on the subject’s narrative and embodied cognition within the colonial space. Upstone will be useful, then, in our study of the subject’s cognizing of colonial spaces through the practices of both physical and perceptual wandering.

Indeed, as I continue the introduction, I signal an even more fundamental shift towards an understanding of narrative wandering: wandering is not only structured formally in opposition to the temporality of both conventional and digressive narrative minds; instead, wandering inhabits the dimension of materiality, of space, existing apart from temporality altogether. In so doing, I follow Fredric Jameson’s suggestion that the postmodern era “now inhabit[s] the synchronic rather than the diachronic,” dominated by space rather than time. (15) Wandering, then, denies
conventional diachronicity in its resistance to conventional narrativity and in its occupation of embedded spaces as the site of its narration.

Thus far has been a review of certain assumptions regarding structures and sites of wandering. At its most elemental, wandering performs the disruptive and foregrounds the creative material by focusing on the motion of all fictional mind. To discuss the mind as such, this dissertation continues with a series of principles underlying its argument in the fields of cognition and neuroscience, with a lengthy focus on the phenomenology and ethics of wandering as expressed in both lived experience and fictional minds.

**Wandering Consciousness**

First, this dissertation assumes models of cognition and consciousness that are inter-subjective and inter-objective and beyond (or preceding) the Cartesian dualities of mind and body. Indeed, if wandering occurs not only in embedded sites but in embodied minds, then cognition, and representation of such cognition, must necessarily be situated as such. Esther Thelen’s recent definition of an “embodied cognition” offers useful language for such a paradigm:

To say that cognition is embodied means that it arises from bodily interactions with the world. From this point of view, cognition depends on the kinds of experiences that come from having a body with particular perceptual and motor capacities that are inseparably linked and that together form the matrix within which memory, emotion, language, and all other aspects of life are meshed. The contemporary notion of embodied cognition stands in contrast to the prevailing cognitivist stance which sees the mind as a device to manipulate symbols and is thus concerned with the formal rules and processes by which the symbols appropriately represent the world. (xx)
As opposed to the traditional theories of cognition, in which the mind is abstracted from the body, an embodied cognition adopts the principles of phenomenology. Embodied cognition embraces the subject’s “perceptual and motor capacities” as forming the “matrix within which memory” and all other aspects of human cognition are “meshed;” the body, in other words, is the site of the mind’s articulation. The mind, therefore, does not exist as a discrete entity from the body and its embedded environment. Instead, cognition itself emerges from the body’s embedded nature and its relation to the brain, a single contributor to an emerging consciousness.

If cognition is necessarily embodied, then it emerges as well in its interactions, in its cognizing of the ambient world. Alva Noe, a philosopher of mind, posits such a theory of consciousness, one that is necessarily inter-subjective and that inter-weaves the experiencing subject and its embedded world. Noe defines consciousness as the real and imagined movement of a subject in his embedded world:

Consciousness isn’t something that happens inside us: it is something that we do, actively, in our dynamic interaction with the world around us. The brain—that particular body organ—is certainly critical to understanding how we work. I would not wish to deny that. But if we want to understand how the brain contributes to consciousness, we need to look at the brain’s job in relation to the larger nonbrain body and the environment in which we find ourselves. I urge that it is a body- and world-involving conception of ourselves that the best new science as well as philosophy should lead us to endorse. (24)

In an extended, popular philosophy of consciousness that suggests how we “are not our brains”, Noe shows how consciousness emerges, on all sentient and creaturely levels, through an elaborate dance between an organism, its neural network, self-concept, and embedded
environment. In reading a wandering mind as both necessarily embodied and embedded, then, we must take into account how such wandering is constructed, in its narration, by its real and imagined cognizing of its ambient world.

For Antonio Damasio, the neuroscience of such a theory of embodied consciousness suggests the constructed nature of autobiographical consciousness—the imaginary of discrete identity—and the possibility for other, more fundamental representations of consciousness preceding autobiography. In other words, in his attempt at a nuanced account of the “birth of consciousness” (1999, 168) in both its fundamental and autobiographical stages, he offers a language for us to think about wandering representations of mind apart from narrative identities.

To generate a sense “of self in the act of knowing” (ibid.) Damasio argues, “our organisms internally construct and internally exhibit a specific kind of wordless knowledge—that our organism has been changed by an object—and when such knowledge occurs along with the salient internal exhibit of an object.” (169) Through its embedded relation with the object world, then, the simplest forms of consciousness in all salient beings are first generated in a knowledge of the self in such a relation. Such knowledge first arises in the form of a primordial “feeling”, Damasio hypothesizes, as

Core consciousness occurs when the brain’s representation device generates an imaged, nonverbal account of how the organism’s own state is affected by the organism’s processing of an object, and when this process enhances the image of the causative object, thus placing it saliently in a spatial and temporal context. (ibid.)

Thus, an image of the organism-object relation is generated—the “source of the sense of self in the act of knowing”, which in turn shades and embeds the object within a certain context and
with a certain feeling. Beyond this transient “core self” that apprehends itself in the act of knowing the object world, complex organisms with “vast memory capacities” can properly categorize those memories of experiences of self-knowledge and organize—and reorganize—those experiences, thus developing an autobiographical identity as a historical self. Crucially, however, in Damasio’s neuro-cognitive framework, the “autobiographical self requires the mechanism of core consciousness so that activation of its memories can generate core consciousness.” (175) In other words, core consciousness underlies the generation of the memories that are collated through the extended memory and patterning of the autobiographical self.

Damasio is useful in that he offers a method for thinking through the varieties of narrated consciousness. And his model is doubly laudable for its convergence with philosophies of mind and phenomenologies of cognition. Recent scholars have harnessed the language of philosophy and merged it with recent, neuroscientific research to suggest a more nuanced phenomenology of cognition, one that adapts earlier philosophical critiques of Cartesian dualism towards reimagining possibilities for human cognition and narrative identity. Shaun Gallagher and Francisco Varela12 have demonstrated the deep historical, methodological, and research parallels between both fields. They, too, point to those who have resisted such a study (e.g. Daniel Dennett13) and demonstrate that well before it was formed as a discipline, phenomenologists (e.g. Maurice Merleau-Ponty14) were generating useful inquiries into the field of cognitive science.15

Such recent research into and theories of cognition as embodied and consciousness and embedded reference a much longer, critical history of phenomenology’s method in the twentieth century. Martin Heidegger’s transcendent subjectivity, scholars note, is greatly indebted to Edmund Husserl’s transcendent phenomenology, in that the material of human experience—phenomenology’s methodological site—becomes the means by which human existence derives a knowledge of itself as such. Later in the 20th Century, phenomenology itself resurfaced as a critique of some of the more extreme forms of existentialist subjectivity. Emmanuel Levinas’s first book *De l’existence a l’existant* (*Existence and Existents*) posits an explicit reversal of Heidegger’s movement from metaphysics of beings to Being (Sein, existence) by reclaiming the precedence of others’—beings’—phenomenal existence prior to the statement of the subject’s ontology that existence makes possible.

Levinas’s entire oeuvre, it may be said, is a critique of Heidegger’s existentialism and the potentially violent political, social, and ethical fallout of such extreme theories of existence. For Levinas, it is not enough to exist as “being” or as “being-in-the-world”—as a subjectivity or as part of a whole via inter-subjectivity; instead, Levinas foregrounds a phenomenology that is also an inter-phenomenology: a paradoxical phenomenology that is, too, an epistemology, a

15 And since 2002, there has been a journal—*Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, of which Gallagher is a co-editor—dedicated to the possible conference between the two fields.

16 While not all later existentialists were phenomenologists, Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927) is a foundational existentialist work of the early 20th Century that cites Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological method for precedence. Husserl privileges the subject’s perceptions and intuitions; Heidegger adapts such transcendental phenomenology for his theories of transcendental subjectivity. For further reading on this topic, see Steven Galt Crowell, *Husserl, Heidegger, and the Space of Meaning: Paths toward Transcendental Phenomenology* (Northwestern University Press, 2001).

17 Historically, it would be an understatement to stress how Levinas, a Jewish prisoner of the second world war, read Heidegger’s existentialism as making an extreme, fascist subjectivity possible at the expense of other beings. For more on Levinas’s historical relation to Heidegger, the strain of militarism that Levinas detects in Heidegger’s early existential thought, and the corrective, ethical phenomenology that Levinas presents, see Adriaan T. Peperzak’s critical preface to *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings* ed. Peperzak, Critchley, and Bernasconi (Bloomington, Indiana UP: 1996)
“recognition without prior cognition” [reconnaissance sans préalable connaissance].

Taken as a phenomenology that acknowledges, by way of critique, a certain language of existentialism, Levinas’s new cognitive science casts cognition as a “sensibility” that “marks the subjective character of the subject…an Urimpression [primal impression] that is the individuation of the subject.”

Wandering Phenomenology

In what follows, I channel Levinas’s thinking for defining a theory of narrated wandering. If such primordial pre-cognition is the base of Levinas’s phenomenological method, a method by which subjectivity is realized through the cognition of—and concurrent ethical relation to—the Other, the structural “form” of such cognizing, Levinas suggests elsewhere, is that of errancy: “in a home open to the Other—hospitality...is the very opposite of a root. It indicates disengagement, a wandering [errance] which has made it possible, which is not a less with respect to installation, but the surplus of the relationship with the Other.” (1969, 172) Such errancy—or wandering—is figured as a form of “separation” that refuses “to close itself up in its own egoism;” instead, it is an errancy from the home toward the Other, as “the possibility for the home to open to the Other is as essential to the essence of the home as closed doors and windows.” (173) Indeed, for Levinas, a theory of wandering is best articulated as both phenomenological experience of aesthetics and as an ethical orientation towards the Other—phenomenological sensibility, in other words, as an interruptive presence.

---

19 Again, I only became aware of this source by studying Sohn’s excellent research and analysis; he cites this text on p. 58 of his dissertation. The citation for the original source: Emmanuel Lévinas, “Reflections on Phenomenological ‘Technique,’” in Discovering Existence with Husserl, trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 97.
Elsewhere, he clarifies the phenomenology of such errancy—the consciousness that gets lost and wanders about in a pocket of timeless awareness:

The movement of art consists in leaving the level of perception so as to reinstate sensation, in detaching the quality from this object of reference. Instead of arriving at the object, the intention gets lost [s ’egare] in the sensation itself, and it is this wandering about [egarement] in sensation in aesthesia, that produces the aesthetic effect. (1988, 53)

Robin Durie\textsuperscript{20} has demonstrated how Levinas’s distinctive use of wandering here is informed by his Bergsonian influence—his interest in perception as a temporalized phenomenology of wandering, Durie shows, has much to do with Bergson’s theories of memory and consciousness as the extended duration of a singular moment in consciousness. While this Bergsonian strand justifies Levinas’s unique temporal sense—one that participates in time as becoming (much as Deleuze’s becoming) apart from the becoming’s temporal sense, it is worth noting, for our purposes, the paradigm for aesthetic perception that Levinas offers performs as errancy and wandering. For Levinas, when the mind experiences heightened perception, it is, in fact, wandering; when the mind finds itself outside of normative temporalization, it is wandering.

Moreover, the wandering underpinning aesthetic experience has distinct ethical relevance in its absolute mobility. For Levinas, either philosophy is produced as a “waiting preferred to action, indifference with regard to others”—a reference to Heidegger’s \textit{Warten}—or as the structured digression of “Ulysses, whose adventure in the world was only a return to his native land—a complacency in the Same, an unrecognition of the Other.” Disengagement connotes immobility, and digression implies a structured complicity and complacency in an orientation,

even if digressive and mobilized, towards the Same. In contrast, a useful model for engagement with the Other is that of “a departure with no return”, a departure that is, too, a wandering inasmuch as it loses “absolute orientation if it sought recompense in the immediacy of its triumph.” This is a movement “radically conceived”, one from the “Same toward the Other which never returns to the Same.” (1996, 48-49) For Levinas, then, wandering might be conceived as the phenomenological ground of aesthetic perception, and wandering, too, as the deconstructed form of orientation, an ethical orientation that is disoriented in origin, context, and telos. Mobilized, embedded narrative minds express such heightened presence in their act of wandering—and in their movement towards facing the Other.

Elsewhere, Levinas positions such errancy, such wandering, as the very distinction between Maurice Blanchot and Martin Heidegger in relation to a philosophy of aesthetic truth. For both, art does not lead “to a world behind the real one” (1997, 137); however, for Heidegger, the light of truth conditions all human wanderings, whereas for Blanchot, the work of wandering uncovers an untruth, a darkness. For Heidegger, in other words, wandering discloses primordial light; for Blanchot, errancy is the “poetic quest for the unreal” (136). Blanchot, in fact, sees this form of wandering as founded in the “limit experience”, the gift of the Jews to western culture and civilization, epitomized in the primordial wandering Jew, Abraham:

…would not this errancy rather signify a new relation with ‘truth’? Doesn’t this nomadic movement (wherein is inscribed the idea of division and separation) affirm itself not as the eternal privation of a sojourn, but rather as an authentic manner of residing, or a residence that does not bind us to the determination of a place to settling close to reality forever and already founded, sure, and permanent? As though the sedentary state were
necessarily the aim of every action! As though truth itself were necessarily sedentary.

(127)

Undoing an original conception of truth as static and discernibly structured, Blanchot suggests, much as Thoreau before him, that the presence of absence, the truth of exile, is realized in its very motion, in its lack of permanence, and in its sheer structurelessness, its residence in errancy. As boundless forms of origin-less becoming, aesthetic, theological, and even cognitive theories of wandering are at once irreducible and entirely apprehensible through their networks of traces.

Wandering Aesthetics

If phenomenology is the method by which the embodied cognition of wandering is best understood, then the mimetic material of such episodic cognition, I argue in what follows, is best represented through the philosophical and literary aesthetics of the gesture and the fragment. The realization, in the aesthetic form of the gesture, of pure, purposeless action entirely expressing its own mediation, resonates with Levinas’s inquiry into a wandering aesthetic perception and the core consciousness of an embodied and pre-autobiographical cognition. Such an aesthetic of perception, too, is necessarily fragmentary in its isolated and interrupted nature.

In assessing the representation of wandering minds, then, I will seek to use the language of both the gesture and the fragment. For a brief introduction of the two philosophical figures, however, I build on Levinas’s errancy with theories by Giorgio Agamben and Walter Benjamin in their reading of the gesture underlying language, and I look to Hans Jost-Frey in his reading of the fragment in narrative, language, and philosophy. I conclude by suggesting that the “cognitive mapping” that Frederic Jameson theorizes, as an aesthetic ideology and strategy of
postmodernism in late capital, bears a striking resemblance to the aesthetic of gesture theorized by Benjamin.

Giorgio Agamben has recently written that we might think of the gesture as a third kind of action otherwise than “doing” and “praxis”, beyond or preceding means and end:

…if doing is a means in sight of an end and praxis is an end without means, gesture breaks the false alternative between ends and means that paralyses morality and presents means which, as such, are removed from the sphere of mediation without thereby becoming ends. (Infancy 155)

Gesture thus communicates nothing other than its “display of mediation” or “being-in-language” that underlies all communication. This pure mediality as a performative gesture is essentially cinematic, Agamben argues, but in truth, he owes this insight to Walter Benjamin (as Samuel Weber has argued21), who noted the theatrical gesture that underlies all of Franz Kafka’s fictions in his extended essay on Kafka.22 Arguably, too, Agamben is departing from Adorno’s cinematic reading of silent film as gesture, the last trace of communication’s failures in modernity; for Adorno, gesture is only an “interruptive shock” within the destruction of experience and powers of expression within language, realized as a momentary rupture through an otherwise whole failure. Such gestures serve entirely as markers of “alienation and horror.” (Weber 302)

Benjamin and Agamben, on the other hand, identify singular gestures in narrative—and

---

linguistic gesture, more abstractly, underlying language—as the very ground of communication itself.\(^\text{23}\)

Regarding Benjamin’s reading of Kafka’s gesture: Werner Hamacher\(^\text{24}\) astutely notes how Benjamin elaborates upon what he terms the opacity, or “cloudy spot” in Kafka’s fiction in terms of the theatrical gesture, another central theme to the Kafka essay. In Benjamin’s words, “Kafka could grasp some things always only in gesture. And this gesture, which he did not understand, forms the cloudy spot of the parables. From this gesture arises Kafka’s fiction.” (“Franz Kafka” 808) For Benjamin, the theatrical literary gesture manifests as a cloudy spot; it disallows exemplary narrative that mediates instruction; remaining “opaque to doctrine” (Hamacher 298), in this analysis, lies at the heart of Kafka’s fictive interests in an embedded, enigmatic cloudiness that forbids both the reader and its protagonist access to the emperor’s authorial signature of signification.\(^\text{25}\) But the gesture does not only forbid explication; it makes possible an attentiveness to the texture of language and linguistic minds, and in so doing, it clarifies both the arbitrariness and playfulness underlying linguistic composition and linguistic representation of fictional minds.

\(^\text{23}\) For an extension of this argument, see Alastair Morgan, “‘A Figure of Annihilated Human Existence’: Agamben and Adorno on Gesture” Law Critique (2009) 20: 299–307


\(^\text{25}\) An explicit reference to the opening of Benjamin’s essay in which he recounts a Kafkan story of kafkan parable entitled “Potemkin”, an original spin on a mythical folk-parable that performatively mimics Kafka’s tone and parabolic style. The story is told of a certain Emperor Potemkin who suffers from bouts of depression during which he is entirely unavailable to perform his services of signing official documents, much to the chagrin of his councilors of state. A lowly clerk, Shuvalkin, suggests that he be permitted access to the Emperor’s bedroom; with nothing to lose, Shuvalkin is allowed access by the councilors to the Emperor’s inner-most chambers. Shuvalkin strides with confidence to the bedside of Potemkin; while he finds the Emperor’s response to his intrusion a nebulously “vacant stare” (794), he presses a pen into the latter’s hand and places the documents on his knees. In his catatonic state, Potemkin signs each document in sequence, and Shuvalkin returns triumphantly to the anteroom. The story ends with a surprising discovery by the councilors: the documents were each signed one after the other as follows: “Shuvalkin…Shuvalkin…Shuvalkin…” (795). In the near-exegesis that immediately follows this introduction, Benjamin states, anticipating Kafka: “The enigma which beclouds this story is Kafka’s enigma” (795).
This quality of attentiveness carries with it a certain ethical valence in that it notices what has been elided: the distorted, contingent elements. Benjamin makes this clear in a materialist theology that he reads in Kafka—and which resonates with Benjamin’s weak historical messianism in his “On the Concept of History”—by linking Kafka’s own, personal “prayer” to that of the little boy in a hunchback folksong:

So ends the folksong. In his depths, Kafka touches ground which neither “mythical divination” nor “existential theology” supplied him with. It is the ground of folk tradition, German as well as Jewish. Even if Kafka did not pray—and this we do not know—he still possessed in the highest degree what Malebranche called “the natural prayer of the soul”: attentiveness. And in this attentiveness he included all creatures, as saints include them in their prayers. (“Franz Kafka” 812)

Here, Benjamin attributes sainthood to Kafka; regardless of Kafka’s actual praying practices, his inclusion of those distorted figures lost to oblivion in his writing, his preoccupation towards a total awareness of the “hunched backs” in his texts, be they actual figural distortions in his characters or literary lacunae in his texts—that is, gestures or cloudy spots—is unmatched by ordinary men. This quality of attentiveness to the problematic loci that Kafka brings to his writing and reveals in his characters is akin to “the natural prayer of the soul”, which is, in profound simplicity, the contemplative exercise of attentive noticing. For Benjamin, only a child can be attentive in such a critical manner; for Kafka, reading for and writing as gesture can

---

generate such attentiveness, from which, in turn, might emerge a certain critical patience that
might, in turn, might allow for even more playfulness in reading:

There is no need to leave the house. Stay at your table and listen. Don’t even
listen, just wait. Don’t even wait, be completely quiet and alone. The world will
offer itself to you to be unmasked; it can’t do otherwise; in raptures it will writhe
before you. (Blue 98)²⁷

For Benjamin, Kafka writes in gestures to compel patience by foregrounding
attentiveness. If we read wandering narratives as foregrounding gesture, then, we are reading for
the minority figures, the distorted hunchbacks, that are often left by the wayside in history’s
meta-narratives. But gesture need not be structured as such within a narrative; for Benjamin (and,
arguably, for Kafka), the gesture of language’s communicability underlies language’s failures of
communication. To extend the argument to wandering: one need not have a wandering narrative
to read for wandering or as a wanderer.

If wandering lies at the very base, as the texture of language, as a gesture beneath
signification, then the playfulness in such a language resonates with Hamacher’s reading of
Kafka’s name-play²⁸, as a “naming” language:

²⁷ Of course, knowingly or unknowingly, Kafka echoes the Tao Te Ching here:
Therefore the Master / acts without doing anything / and teaches without saying anything. / Things arise
and she lets them come; / things disappear and she lets them go. / She has but doesn’t possess, / acts but
doesn’t expect. / When her work is done, she forgets it. / That is why it lasts forever. (2)

²⁸ See p. 308-312 of Hamacher’s Premises; Kafka’s Hebrew name was “Anschel”; he writes in an equally
popularized diary entry: “In Hebrew my name is Anschel, like my mother’s maternal grandfather…” (T, 318; D, I:
197) Kafka plays with the names of his characters, too: “Georg has the same number of letters as Franz. In
Bendemann, ‘mann’ is only an amplification of ‘Bende’ intended to provide for all the as yet unknown possibilities
in the story. But Bende has exactly all the same number of letters as Kafka, and the vowel ‘e’ is repeated in the same
places as the vowel ‘a’ in Kafka”” (T, 492; D, I: 279).
In Kafka’s staging of his name, a certain trait makes itself known that marks every name in its singularity: the name does not belong to a system of language that communicates something but to the markings in this system whose only function is to secure communicability itself. These markings do not “say” anything, they mark. In this sense, they are the places most resistant to meaning in any system generally disposed towards meaning (313).

Thus, the name, in Hamacher’s analysis, is freed of its signifying function; it instead is pure “communicability”, while not communicating anything at all. This function-less aspect of language, according to Hamacher, gestures towards another possibility for language: “suspended into a mere gesture of naming”, “the name holds on to the possibility of another praxis of language and understanding—a praxis no longer given over to the representational function of identification.” (317) In his argument, then, Hamacher explicitly links the theoretical gesture, in Benjamin’s reading of Kafka, to Kafka’s theory of language as a form of playfulness, exemplified in his “naming” language.

Though Hamacher doesn’t cite him, Benjamin too theorized about an alternative, gestural language of naming in his early essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” (1916). For the name, according to Benjamin, presents pre-modern precedent for post-modern linguistics and revolutionary materialisms:

All nature, insofar as it communicates itself, communicates itself in language, and so finally in man. Hence, he is the lord of nature and can give names to things. Only through the linguistic being of things can he get beyond himself and attain knowledge of them—
in the name. God’s creation is completed when things receive their names from man, from whom in name language alone speaks (“On Language” 65).

What emerges from Benjamin’s theory of language as naming is that it is not only its own prayer to God; but language, in its purest sense is always pre-Fall; it always retains its “naming” aspect: that is, its arbitrary nature that disrupts sign and signified, leaving the linguistic being alone with the linguistic equivalent of the visual semblance, the gesture of language, or, in Benjamin’s words, language’s very form of communicability, beneath its purposeful communication. Thus, for Agamben to suggest that a human being’s “being in language” is “pure gesturality” (Infancy 156) is to cite Walter Benjamin without quotation marks.29

For Levinas, then, embodied cognition occurs before recognition as wandering; for Benjamin, gestural writing—and reading—generates a certain attentiveness to the texture of language itself. For both, the isolated, atemporal cognizance is a moment that drifts, inasmuch as it operates aside from an origin, context, or telos. Emerging apart from history, then, such a figure of gesture necessarily wanders in its articulation—and offers a useful language for thinking through wandering as such.

If a fictional mind might be animated by gestures in its form, as Benjamin showed Kafka’s fiction to be, then to be built by gestures is to narrate—to cognize, to experience—fragmentarily. In his book length treatise on fragmentary narrative, experience, and the very possibility of closure, Hans Jost-Frey echoes Kafka’s sentiment of waiting—without expectation—as a radical patience of sorts:

29 Putting it this way reframes Agamben’s thought plagiarism as a Benjaminian ideal designated and performed in The Arcades Project (Harvard U. Press: 1999), p. 458: “This work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage” [N1, 10].
The fragment does not belong to expectation, because it does not expect to be completed. The fragment is waiting. What makes the fragment fragmentary is the fact that its incompleteness does not create any expectation, but starts one waiting, far from any object of expectation. (58)

The fragmentary experience is one of waiting without expectation. The fragmentary state from which this experience emerges from the breaks “inside the possible” world in which we inscribe our limits:

We move mostly inside the possible, do what we can, build for ourselves a world in which we can live. But there are breaks, break-ins in this order, states of the outer limit that are, however, unfulfilled, that one cannot get beyond though everything urges beyond them. I call them fragmentary states. They are the everyday experience of the impossible. (31)

If fragments are not delimited by the whole/incomplete binary, but simply by what is possible and not yet possible, then they are worthy analogues to reading in gestures that both are contained by and exceed their contexts through a radical form of decontextualization.

Finally, I close this introduction by folding the reading of the gesture and the fragment—as the materials and figures of a narrated wandering—into a broader history of postmodernism. Certainly, these figures of narrative in the postmodern era, Fredric Jameson has shown, foreground its spatialized and synchronic nature, but this crisis in temporal organization and historicity might be best thought through Lacan’s description of the schizophrenic. On the one hand, normative monadic, egoic, subjective experience is of
a twofold proposition: first, that personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal
unification of past and future with one’s present; and second, that such active temporal
unification is itself a function of language, or better still of the sentence, as it moves
along its hermeneutic circle through time. (25-26)

However, the schizophrenic experiences a “breakdown in the signifying chain,” the “past,
present, and future of the sentence,” thus foreclosing the continuity of a past, present, and future
of the “biographical experience of psychic life.” (ibid.) The schizophrenic is reduced to a bare
experience solely of “pure material signifiers” in a “series of pure and unrelated presents in
time.” (ibid.) Echoing Agamben’s reading of the gesture as a form of pure mediation, and
echoing Benjamin’s notion of the decontextualized gesture, Jameson suggests that a certain
aesthetic emerges, as a result, that is both euphoric and dissociated, when describing a particular
instance of its textuality:

...breakdown of temporality suddenly releases this present of time from all the activities
and internationalities that might focus it and make it a space of praxis; thereby isolated,
that present suddenly engulfs the subject undescrivable vividness, a materiality of
perception properly overwhelming, which effectively dramatizes the power of the
material—or better still, the literal—signifier in isolation. This present of the world or
material signifier comes before the subject with heightened intensity, bearing a
mysterious change of affect, here described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of
reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, a high,
an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity. (26-27)
This “joyous intensity,” in Jameson’s read of fragmentary and atemporal texts, “becomes generalized as a cultural style” of postmodernism beyond Lacan’s iteration of schizophrenia (28) that does not unify in its perception but that brings a heightened tension to differentiated elements through a paradoxical experience of form. Jameson terms it a “difference” that “relates” and describes such difference as a “positive conception of relationship”, one in which “vivid perception of radical difference is in and of itself a new mode of grasping what used to be called relationship” as a form of “collage” (30). For Levinas, Benjamin, and Jost-Frey, perception carries certain non-normative weights in relation to a temporal sense of narrative form when articulated through the figure of the fragment or the gesture. For Jameson, a resistance to Late Capital’s “decentered global network” (37) is the subject’s constructed perception through such schizophrenic aesthetics.

Thus far, then, I’ve narrowed and deepened the definitional focus of “wandering” as a generic category for aesthetic expression that incorporates cognitive, phenomenological, and narrative components. Wandering is a mode of becoming in narrative that exists apart from predetermined arcs; it is, too, the ethical site of aesthetic perception that might be conceived, in its isolated form, as a fragmentary gesture. As a dissertation on wandering within fictional minds, this dissertation argues for a wide scope of applicability for its theory of narrative cognition, but in practice, it demonstrates a cognition within texts that exemplify wandering minds in certain limit cases within particularly illustrative contemporary fictions. In other words, it admits that wandering is both central to diverse representations of cognition inasmuch as it is a form of narrated perception.

However, the overlaying of normative narrative structures and subjective narrativity often obscure the underlying wandering inhering within normative categories of cognition, memory,
and Theory of Mind. Thus, this dissertation examines experiments in narrative cognition not only for their own sake, but to show how limit cases foreground the wandering underlying cognition. In so doing, it groups the fragmented and episodic perception of the amnesiac with the overwhelming recollection of the archivist; and it weaves the discourses together of both the privileged, invisible presence of the *flaneur* and the dissociated, mindlessness of the *fugeur*. In allowing for both attentiveness and blindspots, for both recollection and dissolution, it argues that wandering is the heart of the coin about which these variously opposed types are minted. With an understanding that the poetics of wandering exists in a perceptual space within the breakdown of temporality that approximates both fragmentary consciousness and the gestural attentiveness generated by such fragmentation, we might be able to rethink the possibilities for narrative consciousness when represented beyond the normative scale, as will become apparent in the study of various texts in this dissertation’s study, as well as in the aestheticization of wandering within the motions and episodic recall and identity of autobiographical consciousness.

Indeed, though I examine, as the bulk of this study, the wandering operating within the dreamy amnesiacs and post-historical cosmopolitans and pilgrims in the contemporary and postmodern fictions of Kazuo Ishiguro, W.G Sebald, Maud Casey, Ben Lerner, and others, I start by arguing that wandering underpins representations of narrativity from the inception of modern autobiography and novelization. In so doing, I suggest an even more ambitious consideration for thinking through wandering as not only a structured form of interruption, but as a form of interruption underlying the fabric of so-called normative cognition.
Chapter 1: Wandering About Narrativity

To start with Romantic autobiography is to arrive at the origin of normative narrativity—that is, a cognitive and interpretive orientation towards life events that seeks narrative closure and identity within generically recognizable forms and types\(^30\)—and the origin of narrating cognition in an aesthetic form. The two elements, narrativity and cognition, are related, of course, in terms of the construction of narrativity as sourced in the motion and layering of perception and recollection onto an autobiographical narrative identity. However, as I show, the inception of narrativity generated at once a totalizing impulse towards narrativity in the face of discontinuous elements of narration characterized aesthetically as structural and episodic wandering.

Birthed out of the Enlightenment, the aestheticization of narrative cognition in the form of normative narrativity was spawned by bourgeoisie predilections for apprehending and narrating cognition and have extended through the form of the canonical novel, a genre that has perpetuated a hegemony of hetero-normativity, colonialist ideology, and cultural amnesia not only in content, but in their very form. Yet, as Terry Eagleton has argued, bourgeoisie aesthetics are at once the extension of Enlightenment rationality onto the life of the body and “cognition itself caught in the act.” (331) In other words, aesthetics are at once supplements of mastery, driven by bourgeoisie claims to assimilate the Natural through a form of the Imaginary, and, as supplements, they reveal the very cognition underlying all bourgeois intellection as, itself, of the Imaginary. Thus, for Eagleton, “sensation and intuition” even as an aestheticized ideology

\(^{30}\) See Galen Strawson’s definitions in his critical contribution to field: “Against Narrativity”, *Ratio* 17(4), 2004.
overwhelm “what they are meant to subserve”—the rationalist narcissism of the bourgeois—for “the body has its reasons, of which the mind knows little or nothing.” (337)

In what follows, I amplify Eagleton’s lead regarding the constructedness and aesthetic ideologies in fictional and non-fictional texts of normative narrativity by locating a subversive aesthetics of wandering minds that operates apart from narrativized subjectivity—and, as I will show, at the very inception of narrative autobiography. Not only will I review how narrativity itself is a tenuous standard in the history of ideas by examining its assorted and often conflicting philosophical, literary, and cognitive constructions and genealogies, but I will show how narrativity undoes itself through the distinct aesthetics of wandering in the critical reception of narrativity in literary studies, in general, and in the field of Romantic autobiography, in particular—the foundation of modern autobiography, novelization, and narrativity.

**Memory and Narrativity: A Brief History of the Modern Self**

Twentieth Century philosophers and literary critics such as Ian Watt, Frances Ferguson, Paul Ricoeur and others initiated a dominant and enduring inquiry around the emergence of autobiography and the early novel in relation to its cultural milieu; while their methods differ, all argued that the novel as a generic form, narrative autobiography as such, and the impulse for fictional narrativity emerge from a complex network of effects of the Enlightenment upon conceptions of various discourses about the self. Ferguson writes, for example, that John Locke identified “the importance of memory for anchoring a sense of individual continuity over time.” (509) Similarly, Ricouer points to Locke as the first philosopher to equate “identity, self, and memory” (97), thus turning the discourse around the self as developmental and towards a coherent, unified, and temporalized self. Watt’s theories have endured as some of the strongest in
relating emerging fictions to greater economic individualism and socio-political independence of the period\textsuperscript{31}. Others, such as Anne Whitehead, have pointed to David Hume’s account of a remembering self as building on Locke’s, with the argument that unknowable past selves are as fictional or as imaginary as true fictions (59-63)\textsuperscript{32}. And more recently, Elizabeth Barnes, Joseph Fichtelberg, and others have shown how early modern revolutions and colonial movements across centuries and continents have generated sympathetic cultures and communities in early America and Britain. Such sites of early fictions, through risky and instructive narrative discourse, realized a critical progenitor of modern narrative fiction\textsuperscript{33}.

With Romantic autobiography’s production of remembering selves, the subsequent emergence of novelistic fiction, and the contemporary critique of novelistic function, formation, and self-production, the modern conception of narrative selves perform a normalized diachronicity and generic form. Of course, as historians of ritualized memory and modern selves have shown, the far more historical shift from myth to history—that is, the movement from experience of a cultural, collective present to a diachronic and historical past, present, and future—made possible early forms of cultural literacy and far more historical (as opposed to mythical) forms of collective memory\textsuperscript{34}.


\textsuperscript{33} See, for example, Elizabeth Barnes, \textit{States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel} (Columbia UP, 1997); See also Joseph Fichtelberg, \textit{Risk Culture: Performance and Danger in Early America} (U of Michigan Press, 2010).

\textsuperscript{34} See, for example, Jack Goody and Ian Watt, “The Consequences of Literacy” in J.R. Goody (ed.) \textit{Literacy in Traditional Societies} (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1968), pp. 27-68. And of course, see the distinction between pre-modern and modern conceptions of memory in relation to cultural myth and cultural history in the now paramount study by Y.H. Yerushalmi, \textit{Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory} (Seattle and London: U. of Washington Press, 1996). While such a shift is not the subject of our discussion (or of the present study), it does stand as a critical precursor to the present distinction between pre- and post-Enlightenment conceptions of the self.
What occurred with the advent of the Enlightenment rationalism, secularism, and individuated selves, however, was an innovation not only in historicized memory, but in the function and relation of the individuating self to memory. Thus, as critics have noted, memory within narrative seemed to have shifted functions from reproducing to representing, thus foregrounding the essentially constitutive and creative forces underlying the generation of narrative identity. John Frow called this modern form of memory, as realized in the emergence of early narrative selves of the eighteenth century and subsequent period of Romanticism, distinctly textual, as “memory is no longer a recovery or repetition of physical traces, but a construction of the past under conditions determined by the present.” (208) As an inscribed text, memory is no longer a receptacle of lived experience, but a creative function and related production that constructs imaginary—and narrative—relations between past and present selves. Thus, while discourses of “truth”, “authenticity”, and “non-fiction” surrounding memoir—and breaks between fictional and non-fictional texts—often subdue the presentist nature of memory by imagining a linear history in memory’s function, the origin of modern autobiography and the early novel in the eighteenth century belies a discontinuous and creative relationship with remembered pasts.

Even in response to the novel’s current, sometimes multiple forms, many have reclaimed utopian Victorian arguments for generating such sympathetic communities through narrativized, empathic engagement, without noting their historical reappropriation of narrow subjectivity. Martha Nussbaum’s public advocacy35 for the humanities has come under criticism in its nearly utilitarian claims for literature within a productive society. While Nussbaum argues for a positivist rehabilitation of literary study in order to broaden perspective, develop sensibilities,

---

cultivate empathy, and even inspire altruism, some have critiqued the affective and even cognitive potential for literature to generate empathy—Suzanne Keen’s work is most vocal in this regard\textsuperscript{36}—and others have noted the ethical dangers in offering literary models of redemptive life-scripts—a hazard that is deceptive in its intentions and complicit with reinforcing power structures\textsuperscript{37}. More obviously, recent scholars of the genre, such as Leigh Gilmore, have noted the ambivalences of the autobiographical gesture “of looking back to look forward” (34) in that such methods of self-conception generated and reinforce cultures of surveillance and self-monitoring that emerge in consonance with discourses of autobiography. Famously, Foucault theorized about such self-discipline in his study of the Panopticon as a primary architectural expression of a widely practiced urbanized and modern self-monitoring in the eighteenth century\textsuperscript{38}, a relevant critique through the twenty-first century’s scandals of online and airborne surveillance.

Since its inception, then, fictional narrative and narrativity—that is, the normative impulse for and project of story-telling, both fictional and otherwise—have become staples of modern cultural discourses about fictional and autobiographical narrative, and are often laden with positive, normative, and even ethical values. Narrativity, too, has come to both underlie normative human existence and is normatively considered a positive and healthy contributor to

\textsuperscript{36} See Suzanne Keen, \textit{Empathy and the Novel} (New York: Oxford UP, 2007). In her introduction, Keen writes, “I do not assume from the outset that empathy for fictional characters necessarily translates into…’nicer’ human behavior” (xxv).

\textsuperscript{37} This insight is generated by Anne Whitehead’s study of Kazuo Ishiguro’s \textit{Never Let Me Go} in her article “Writing with Care: Kazuo Ishiguro’s \textit{Never Let Me Go}” \textit{Contemporary Literature} 52.1 (2011), 55-83. It is worth noting here how Whitehead writes of the Romantic myth of literature’s redemptive potential as an empathic hazard as follows: “Ishiguro indicates that both literature and care work can paradoxically function to uphold social inequalities, by producing consoling (but false) fictions of legitimacy and meaning. The apparently innocuous activities of reading and care work—how can they be harmful, when both aim at the improvement of either our own or others’ lives?—although not ‘bad’ in or of themselves, can nevertheless provide distractions and diversions from activist agendas…” (73)

human psychology. Narrativity encourages cohesion and singularity—multiple events are plotted, selectively, to generate a subjectivity. Fragmentation, either in identity or events recollected, is usually termed “experimental” for its complication of focalization and narrated memory—and is typically situated in opposition to conventional narrativity.

The reception of conventional narrativity—in both fictional plots and narrated lives—by conventional narrative theorists takes on anthropological and mythological valences. Within studies of narratology, David Herman has argued that such a relation between text and life is culturally symbiotic and fairly complex. Herman suggests in his work that recognizable genres of life-scripts and literary texts enter into a complex reciprocal relationship: story-telling genres are determined by literary production, on the one hand, and literary production mirrors received cultural scripts (106-113). Both generative sources innovate, critique, and mirror one another in a sustained reciprocity. While such a thesis makes possible more original forms of narrativity for self-identity than those typological genres proposed by Zeno Vendler, still the predilection for narrativity as a means of self-conception remains. In a similar, though evolutionary vein, Blakey Vermeule has argued that the popularity of certain genres and character types over others speaks to certain desires for survival that transcend lived mortality through imagined and reflected omniscience.

Very recently, however, philosophers of mind and critical theorists have questioned the alleged inherency of narrativity and/or its supposedly positive value for the individual and even

---

40 For an excellent introduction to the history of narrativity within narratology, see David Herman, Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative (Lincon: U. of Nebraska Press, 2004)
42 See Blakey Vermeule, Why Do We Care About Literary Characters? Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2010.
the collective self by an analysis of its contributing components and its necessity for self-conception. Whereas Kim Atkins and others have argued that “narrative identity and moral responsibility” must go hand in hand: to be a person, in other words, demands a narrative self-conception (363); and whereas others, including Charles Guignon, have read Heidegger’s call for authenticity as one distinctly narrative-bound in that it is “authentically futural to the extent that it clear-sightedly faces up to the inevitable truth of its own finitude and lives each moment as an integral component of the overall story it is shaping in its actions” (89), famously, Galen Strawson has stirred significant controversy by suggesting that possessing a diachronic and/or autobiographical memory is not sufficient for narrative selfhood (430).

Strawson’s philosophical model for narrativity, and its accompanying critique famously titled “Against Narrativity,” might be thought to correspond with comparable models in fields as diverse—though likewise concerned with questions of definitions of the self—as cognitive psychology and neuroscience. For Strawson, the generation of the narrative self is realized through a positive relation to memory and preference for a continuously temporal form. Even if Strawson’s definition of normative narrative is too narrow—indeed, Matti Hyvarinen argues that Strawson’s argument is somewhat of a straw-man, in that it projects “conventionality and coherence seeking upon narrativity”, a 19th Century convention of narrative realism—such a statement is crucial for various critical studies of the relation between narrative and the self, as it

---

43 Strawson’s article has been cited in nearly every subsequent conversation about narrativity and narrative identity. With regards to the possibility of a narrativity for a non-Diachronic self—and a general disputation of Strawsen’s alleged straw-man categories of narrativity as a diachronic self telling its own story, see Matti Hyvarinen, “‘Against Narrativity’ Reconsidered” in Rossholm Göran, Johansson Christere ed. Disputable Core Concepts of Narrative Theory. Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang, 327-346. Strawson’s elements of critique are of value to our introduction of the relation between narrative and identity, even if a significant portion of this dissertation explores forms of narrative that do not cohere with Strawson’s narrow—and straw-man—postulate.
relativizes, by way of critical inquiry into the supposedly essential components of narrativity, both the necessity for and the ethical value to narrativity.\textsuperscript{44} 

In his analysis, Strawson identifies four tendencies for contributing varying degrees of narrativity: an episodic or diachronic outlook; a form-fitting tendency; a story-telling tendency; and a revising tendency. Using his own self as an extreme example of a negation of each category—and as an implicit critique of the universality of the model and the ethical need for its pursuit, Strawson writes

I have a past, like any human being, and I know perfectly well that I have a past. I have a respectable amount of factual knowledge about it, and I also remember some of my past experiences ‘from the inside’, as philosophers say. And yet I have absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form. Absolutely none. Nor do I have any great or special interest in my past. Nor do I have a great deal of concern for my future. (433)

To engage in the productive work of constructing a narrative, for Strawson, is to adapt a diachronic perspective—an awareness of one’s self as “something that was there in the past and will be there in the future” (430), as opposed to what he calls an episodic\textsuperscript{45} perspective of the self, one that is absolutely discontinuous among past, present, and future selves. Even with an

\textsuperscript{44} Strawson argues that narrativity may be figured either (or both) as descriptive or normative. According to the descriptive “psychological” thesis, “one may think that we are indeed deeply Narrative in our thinking,” and even if one does not subscribe to the normative, ethical thesis that “conceiving of one’s life as a narrative is a good thing.” (430) Some fields assume the psychological thesis but remain silent about ethical implications; others assume value for narrativity, and uncritically so; others valorize narrativity without necessitating its psychological need. While Strawson’s manifesto is targeted at the popular and usually positive rhetoric around a normative, ethical narrativity (he cites the ethical demand for a narrative self as postulated by Oliver Sacks, Daniel Dennet, and others), his analysis demonstrates that conceptions of a temporal self and proclivities for form underlie the fully realized narrative self.

\textsuperscript{45} This use of the “episodic” stands in stark contrast to Endel Tulving’s use of the term in relation to episodic memory, a memory system constituted, in part, by wholeness, continuity, and awareness of a reflecting and recollecting self across various temporalities.
episodic temporality of the self, however, one can still construct narrative through a certain form-fitting tendency that reflects coherence, unity, or basic patterning (441). Story-telling is a type of form-fitting, but it attempts to align with “some recognized narrative genre.” (442) Finally, the capacity for revision is another sort of fabrication, one that varies in each self’s iteration of narrativity and a factor that should not be confused with autobiographical memory’s nearly universal movement of construction and reconstruction. Instead, revision, even unconscious, has more to do with the self’s capacity and proclivity for active form-finding and story-telling—a drive that may have more to do with self-preservation in the face of a challenging, unconventional, or even uninteresting self-narrative (445). Strawson’s thesis, methodology, and strong critical reception is a single theoretical site within a single field to examine critically narrative, narrative identities, and narrativity. To temper his thesis about a narrative identity that is, too, a narrative belief, one critical retort by Hyvarinen advocates for a crucial distinction, absent in Strawson’s thesis, between “being able to tell about one’s life and having a sense of one’s life as a narrative” (328).

In drawing a distinction between speaking of a narrative and identifying with that narrative, Hyvarinen’s fine critique of Strawson echoes Tony Fisher’s careful reading of Heidegger’s *Dasein*, in which Fisher considers the possibility of narrativity for *Dasein* by making a compelling case for *Dasein’s* narratability apart from a necessary narrativity. Acknowledging that most read Heidegger as rejecting *Dasein’s* capacity as a “finished self, integrated whole, or complete identity,” Fisher suggests a third manner to read Heidegger that is distinctly phenemonological and attuned to an episodic consciousness, one that does not possess narrativity but that is freed from—and bound to—the existential demand for

---

46 Fisher cites, in this regard, Taylor Carman’s *Heidegger’s analytic, interpretation, discourse, and authenticity in being and time*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 266.
narratability: within each iteration of episodic consciousness, Dasein’s limits of existential Being-in-the-World—from thrownness to projection, in Heidegger’s temporality—must respond to the existentialist question: “what person ought I be?” (43) Thus, Heidegger’s insistence that “Dasein is precisely not to be interpreted in the differentiation of a particular existence” is retained—existentiality is Dasein’s primary characteristic. But its existence, in Heidegger’s boundedness, retains a certain moral sensibility in its incessant response, in Fisher’s reading, of narratability.

At the very least, then, Strawson’s conceptions of narrativity are useful for their critical eye to its contributing elements. Comparable models in parallel fields investigating the nature of autobiographical selfhood invoke comparable requirements for narrativity. For example, cognitive neuroscientist Stanley B. Klein’s suggests that “to experience memory as autobiographical self-knowledge,” the following three components are necessary, at a minimum, as normative capabilities:

1. a capacity for self-reflection…to know about my own knowing…

2. A sense of personal agency, personal ownership…

3. The ability to think about time as an unfolding of personal happenings centered about the self. (2004, 461)

Such capacities make possible the transformation of discrete, episodic memory into autobiographical narrative. As they are “jointly sufficient for autobiographical memorial experience,” impairments in each of these registers generates a “taxonomy of amnesiac disorders” (460) with varying potentials for autobiographical recollection.

And take another model for the narrative-based autobiographical self, this time from Antonio Damasio who offers an evolutionary neuro-scientific hypothesis of the emerging self
through varying stages of consciousness. First, Damasio distinguishes between a first stage of a “proto self,” a state of consciousness that generates “primordial feelings” and “consists of a gathering of images that describe relatively stable aspects of the body and generate spontaneous feelings of the body,” (2010, 180) and a “core self”, which emerges “from establishing a relationship between the organism (as represented by the proto-self) and any part of the brain that represents an object-to-be-known.” (181) This core self is engaged in a sort of “narrative sequence”, albeit momentarily, that is constructed through the creative relation between the felt subject and perceived object. Finally, the third state of consciousness is one that Damasio terms the “autobiographical self”, a temporalized form or narrative-self, as it allows “multiple objects, previously recorded as lived experience or as anticipated future, to interact with the proto-self and produce an abundance of core pulses.” (ibid.) This speculation regarding a structured series of core pulses, then, emerge to coalesce into a “coherent pattern” that remains continuous and inter-related over a temporalized sequence—an aesthetics of autobiographical consciousness.

Such cognitive neuro-scientific approaches are only some of the many possible routes for inquiring more profoundly into the epistemology of narrative identity; to survey the vast disciplinary fields concerned with categories and functions of narrativity would be overwhelming. However, at the very least, what is common to all theories of narrative identities is the diachronic and generic forms they adapt, sourced originarily in the Enlightenment’s theories of memory and popularized—and modeled—through the proliferation of early autobiography and fiction.

Ultimately, for Damasio as for Klein and Strawson, such narrativity is realized through coherence, temporality, and the relation of the subject to the object-world, with an awareness of itself as such (if not a relation of the subject to itself as experiencing the object-world). And even
Further, it should be noted, such a cognitive model reflects the Enlightenment philosophies of the (evolving) conception of self: all suggest that a normative narrative identity is articulated through a certain diachronic imaginary of self and memory. Underlying all of these models, however, is the critical insight regarding the possibility for self-conception beneath narrativity—and, perhaps, without autobiographical memory.

When thinking through the possibilities for narrativity and narrative identity in disabled selves, for example, cognitive psychologists are concerned primarily with mental representations of the self and its disabled capacity for memory, and the contours of such representations in both normative and non-normative forms of narrativity. Endel Tulving has shown that pathologies of memory in amnesics do not necessarily affect self-conceptions of personality.\(^{47}\) Klein and others refined Tulving’s thinking, in earlier research, that episodic amnesia did not affect self-conceptions and dispositions realized through semantic memory; and in more recent research, they showed that semantic trait self-knowledge may very well function independently of factual semantic and episodic memory.\(^{48}\) In one particular study, Klein and Moshe Lax showed that character trait resilience persisted even beyond significant memory loss in amnesics—demonstrating an independent system of trait self-knowledge (e.g. “I react this way, because I am stubborn”).\(^{49}\) In a slightly more popular vein, Paul Eakin’s *Living Autobiographically* makes a similar case for the cultured rule-governance of a continuous self-conception, and the


\(^{49}\) See Stanley Klein and Moshe Lax, *The Unanticipated Resilience of Trait Self-Knowledge in the Face of Neural Damage* *Memory* 18 (2010), 918-948.
persistence of a self-conception—in a form of narrative identity—in the person of his father, a victim of Alzheimer’s, absent of episodic and semantic memory, though persistent through an abstract vehicular conception of “will.” And in a very recent study, echoing Eakin’s devastating memoir, Nina Strohminger and Shaun Nichols showed that the perception of identity (by a third party) in individuals affected by neuro-degeneration is influenced by the degree of perceived presence of a moral faculty far beyond the retention of semantic or episodic memory. In thinking about literary performances of consciousness apart from conventional narrative identities, I will draw on such studies to argue for narratable consciousness apart from narrativity.

Critics have noted, too, that such persistence of an identity theory apart from memory is a certain departure from Locke’s original construction of the self as one who must necessarily possess conscious memory of the past in order to construct a continuous history. Without conscious memory of the past, for Locke, such a self cannot be held responsible for the present: “whatever past actions [the mind] cannot…appropriate to that present self by consciousness, it can no more be concerned in, than if they had never been there.” Present research, however, seems to suggest that—contrary to reigning models of narrative selves—consciousness of the self exceeds memory, an insight that possesses radical implications for the figuring of boundaries between normative and so-called disabled cognition.

And present research in narrative theory, as well as critical theory in literary studies for much of the twentieth century, has questioned conventional narrativity and narrative form as an inherently necessary, politically just, or even ethically sound. Gerald Prince famously wrote that “further study of narrativity constitutes perhaps the most significant task of narratology today.”\(^{53}\) While “narrativity” has not been easily defined\(^{54}\) and has come to mean, for narrative theorists, degrees or kinds of narrative characteristics in a text or discourse\(^{55}\), Brian McHale follows a critical path for discerning a “weak narrativity” in postmodern texts and lyric poetry, arguing for a narrative sense of degree, as opposed to kind (165), and evoking the possibility for reading “narrative coherence while at the same time withholding commitment to it and undermining confidence in it.” (ibid.)

While McHale’s argument is only interested in discerning a narrative theory for a generic type and a narrative theory for narrativity, more generally, others take McHale’s terminology and use it for disciplinary or ethical ends. Pekka Tammi, for example, worries that the nuanced criticism around narrativity within both cognitive and literary fields makes sweeping appropriations or ambitious transvaluations from one to the other “actually harmful.” (21) She

---


\(^{54}\) See, for example, Meir Sternberg, “Narrativity: From Objectivist to Functional Paradigm” *Poetics Today* 31:3 (2010), pp. 508-659. Sternberg’s first three pages are dedicated to the diverse invocations, definitions, and contexts to which the term “narrativity” has been assigned in the history of narrative criticism. See also the comprehensive collection to theories of narrativity in discourse and narratological theory: *Theorizing Narrativity* ed. John Pier, et. Al (Walter de Gruyter: Berlin, 2008). Stories, John Pier writes, have the dual components of both “being narrative” and “possessing narrativity”, a definitional and theoretical challenge to which Gerald Prince has responded in his categories of narrativehood (an extensional category among a class of entity) and narrativeness (an intensional category designating a quality of a single entity). (8). See Gerald Prince, “Narrativehood, Narrativeness, Narrativity, Narratability”, ibid. pp. 19-29

\(^{55}\) See also the definition provided by *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, Ed. James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 548: “the formal and contextual qualities distinguishing narrative from non-narrative, or marking the degree of narrativeness in a discourse; the rhetorical principles underpinning the production or interpretation of narrative; the specific kinds of artifice inherent in the process of narrative representation.” While somewhat self-definitional, this reference attempts to echo the move of identifying literariness within literature popularized by 20th Century literary theorists.
cites Mark Turner, for example, who in his work *The Literary Mind* argues that the human mind not only constructs narrative, but constructs literary narrative, and is engaged, therefore, in the “construction of fiction.” (ibid.) She invokes Alan Palmer, too, who in his *Fictional Minds*, suggests as well that “we are all novelists” in our “scripted life-plans.” (21) In response to both Turner and Palmer, Tammi argues that privileging sequence, progression, and causality as the “natural” or “realist” method of story-telling undermines history as it is lived—without morals, certainly, and without coherence and continuity—and obfuscates the brokenness of individuated history, as in the instance, for example, of terminal illness narratives that demand but can’t achieve healing (27-28).

Instead of appropriation, Tammi engages in a theory of life-text reciprocity, akin to David Herman’s dialectical relation of the two (106-113), with the conclusion that normative, lived narrativity is often critiqued from within literary fiction in a weak form, citing McHale. In her reading of Chekhov, for example, she suggests that the narrator in “A Boring Story” demonstrates through a “‘weak’ narrative design” that life as narrated “involves indeterminacy and oscillation between boring routine, repetition, and singularities.” (37) Much like Tammi, Herman has posited that form-breaking is as critical to narrative identity as form-fitting. Ultimately, Tammi concludes that literature’s innovative effects hinge on a present but “weak” narrativity, one that acknowledges how “life is not shaped by a narrative...or not only a narrative,” but whose suggestion is to adopt and subtly alter or deconstruct such narrativity from within traditional and recognizable generic forms (ibid.).

And renowned narrative theorist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan makes a similar argument regarding illness—and this time, on ethical grounds. She demonstrates that the “paucity of fragmented narratives” in illness memoir speaks to the narrative coherence sought by those in
fragmented conditions; she worries that such closure-seeking, in its “implied redemptive or therapeutic role of telling and writing,” overwhelms the minority voices who express illness “without epiphanies and [through] writing that does not overcome chaos.” (24) For Rimmon-Kenan, making space for fragmented and chaotic illness narratives is driven by an “ethical commitment” to lay bare “the ill subject’s vulnerability” and suggest the “limitations, even the hubris, of the better-structured narratives” of the illness genre. (22)

I follow Rimmon-Kenan, Tammi, McHale, and Herman in the twofold argument that lived experience does not necessarily possess a literary form, nor do fictional lives necessarily possess an inherent narrativity. While such critics sense the political, ethical and social problematics of normative narrativity aestheticized by the Enlightenment, critical theorists in cultural and post-colonial studies have demonstrated how insidiously present such narrativity operates within and subsequently reifies a swath of hegemonic discourses; indeed, the social sciences and humanities have long worked towards exposing the lack of difference—enforced through cultural amnesia—in various textual, ethical, and narratological media. Of course, for critical theorists of modernity, amnesia is the reigning force in a culture of reification; Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer famously proclaimed “all reification is a forgetting.”56 This is a theme that is later assumed by Andreas Huyssen in his work on memory and the archive, where he writes that “Without memory, without reading the traces of the past, there can be no recognition of difference (Adorno called it non-identity), no tolerance for the rich complexities and instabilities of personal and cultural, political and national identities.”57

56 Axel Honneth reads Adorno and Horkheimer’s famous remark that “all reification is a forgetting” (Dialectic of Enlightenment, p. 230) as follows: “It is this element of forgetting, of amnesia, that I would like to establish as the cornerstone for a redefinition of the concept of reification.” (Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008, p. 57)
Reading Romantic Autobiography for Wandering

Modern critiques of narrativity abound in both contemporary narrative theory and literary and cultural studies, recovering the lost, suppressed memories of stories told and lives represented otherwise. In turning back, however, to the very inception of modern narrativity in the form of Romantic autobiography, I demonstrate that wandering present in such narratives—both in body and mind as well as in deliberate narrative structure—makes possible its own critique of normative narrativity through the performance of cognizing selves apart from narrativity. In suggesting such a reading not only of wandering but for wandering—of reading within autobiography for moments of wandering—I offer a counter-reading to the hegemonic discourse around stable, diachronic, autobiographical selves.

The Enlightenment, as noted above, is the philosophical precursor to the emerging discourse around a distinctly continuous and creative conception of the narrative self. Locke, on the one hand, projects continuity of the self through diachronicity; Hume, on the other, postulates the necessarily creative work of memory and levels memory with the imaginary faculty. What emerges subsequently is the early form of modern autobiography, memoir, and narrative, first by the hand of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 18th Century, and then by the subsequent history of Romanticism, represented here in the work of William Wordsworth and Thomas de Quincey. In what follows, I review this early history of narrative identity told in autobiographical prose and poetry, noting the prominent contextual and structural feature to this project of wandering both in body and in mind, and the dynamic relation between memory and narrative within such structures of wandering.\(^{58}\) I conclude that wandering, as represented in Romantic and modernist...
autobiography, is figured prominently as a deep cognitive structure and a significant precursor—
both structural and aesthetic—to contemporary fictions of wandering.\(^\text{59}\)

Rousseau initiates his retrospective *Confessions* (1770, 1781),\(^\text{60}\) a work that begins in its life-long memoir in the year of his birth, 1712, with the humble quip: “Simply myself,” (1) an ambitious claim to both a profoundly simple and idiosyncratically singular and accurate self-portrait that attempts, according to traditional criticism, the expression of an “inner truth”\(^\text{61}\)—a novel and even groundbreaking fusion of subjectivity and narrativity. He then proceeds with confidence that he will present this very work, *The Confessions*, as a representation of his very being, with an admission to its blindspots, erasures, and general forgetfulness. As he imagines himself in an afterlife, handing this written work to “my Sovereign Judge”, he projects the following proclamation:

Here is what I have done, and if by chance I have used some immaterial embellishment it has been only to fill a void due to a defect of memory. I may have taken for fact what was no more than probability, but I have never put down as true what I knew to be false. I

---

\(^{59}\) An excellent history of the wanderer in Romantic German literature exists, and while the genealogy that I construct here is focused around certain aesthetic questions, a comprehensive survey of the figure of the wanderer in various Romanticisms is far too ambitious of a project for the present. One need only start with Caspar David Friedrich’s now iconic painting, *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*, to acknowledge that the figure of Romanticism, however imagined, is originally that of the wanderer. However, for an excellent history of the Romantic wanderer in the German Romantic tradition, see Andrew Cusack, *The Wanderer in Nineteenth-Century German Literature: Intellectual History and Cultural Criticism*. Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture. (Rochester: Camden House, 2008). Cusack does a fantastic job exploring the poetics of aimlessness (as opposed to teleological processes and purposes) in the history of the *Urbildungsroman*. Within the varied contexts of his study, Cusack shows that wandering has been figured as a performance of historical analysis, as an exploration of infinity, as a process of political and social instability, and as an innovative form of recreation.\(^\text{60}\)

\(^{60}\) The work was completed in 1770 but only published posthumously in 1781.

\(^{61}\) See, for example, Jean Starobinski’s *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction* Trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1988), 188.
have displayed myself as I was, as vile and despicable when my behavior was such, as good, generous, and noble when I was so. (1)

From the start, Rousseau’s life confessions include a formal confession about their contents’ flawed nature, a problematic that Rousseau himself attributes to a “defect of memory” or a creative tendency to include probabilities instead of fact. It is an apology as much for his depraved “vile and despicable” self in the memoir as for his inaccuracy in its record. His is an apology, too, for memory as such, and the possibility for an authentic account in its narration.62

Given his reflexivity and self-consciousness regarding the comprehensibility of his narrative, it is noteworthy that Rousseau finds great joy in recounting his extensive travels by foot. Indeed, he laments that what he regrets the most, throughout his life, is “that I did not keep diaries of my travels.” (157) For, he claims, never did he exist “so vividly, experience so much” as when he took journeys “alone and on foot.” What he enjoyed the most about these wanderings were their overall aimlessness—that is, “the absence of everything that makes me feel my dependence, of everything that recalls me to my situation.” (158)

This sort of wandering, he suggests in a following clause, offers true creative agency, as it allows him to combine and re-combine the bare materials of the object-world and of his subject-memory—at his own will: “all these serve to free my spirit, to lend me a greater boldness to my thinking, to throw me so to speak, in the vastness of things, so that I can combine

---

62 Rousseau has great precedent for the admission of failed memory, in the literary history of the confession, from the founder of the genre, St. Augustine. For Augustine, only what can be recalled or remembered must be confessed; that which was part of Augustine’s “savage days” of extreme youth are exempted: in his words “it is lost in the darkness of my forgetfulness” (10). Yet, with the confession of his consciously recalled sins, Augustine claims a forgiveness of “evil and nefarious deeds” (32)—and in doing so, by recalling his sins to memory, his “soul feels no fear from the recollection” (32). See Saint Augustine, “Book I”, Confessions Trans. Hendry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), pp. 10-32 Huntington Williams notes such precedent in his book-length study of Romantic autobiography; he argues, however, that Rousseau only follows Augustine “in form” (183). See his Rousseau and Romantic Autobiography, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983).
them, select them, and make them mine as I will.” (158) Through his peripatetic wanderings, his acts of discovery—of self and other—in his travels rehearse the very routes of his own writing and recollection of experience—or at least idealized as such. Frederic Gros, in his *Philosophy of Walking*, has characterized Rousseau’s propensity for walking—sometimes aimlessly—as a form of self-discovery by way of dissolution, “losing yourself the better to hear your heart, to feel the first man palpitating within you,” (76) discovering a “walking man” as “natural man, one not disfigured by culture, education, art: man as he would have been before books or salons, before society or paid labor.” (73)

There is a sense that Rousseau wants to discover all and tell all in his *Confessions* without selectivity and reimagining—a popular reading of Rousseau’s confidence exemplified by Frederic Gros in a typical gloss of Rousseau’s Idealism. There is also a complementary and complicating sense that his fear of not telling “everything” (170) has much more to do with his own experience of the medium of narration, and less to do with the supposedly bare, objective materials of memory and the world. His *Confessions*, in that sense, are quite selective in their intuitive “choice” of subject matter and exposition—what is most important, as a critical sense in his countryside wandering, is that he should not “foresee that I should have ideas. They arrive when they please, not when it suits me.” (158) A remembered childhood anecdote allegorizes such a dynamic in its cognitive performance: Rousseau recounts a “childish notion” (230) that prompted the tossing of an apple at a tree at close proximity in order to glean an omen of his own salvation. Such playfulness regarding the construction of a future performs this very notion of an artificial and creative construction of memory. Of course, for Frances Ferguson and other readers of the Romantics, the definition of ‘romantic memory’ is “seeing a past that one didn’t experience at the time of its occurrence.” (533) While Rousseau is clearly generating memory in
the passages cited above and in what follows, I add the notion that such cognitive leaps are brought into an embodied relation with his journeying—and usually aimless—mobility.

Indeed, towards the very end of his life, Rousseau foregrounds the critical practice of walking as the structuring means for generative imagination and thoughtful discovery in his final book-length memoir *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782). Though the stated goal of this record, as Rousseau writes is to “describe my habitual state of mind,” he affirms that he “could think of no simpler or surer way of carrying out my plan than to keep a faithful record of my solitary walks and the reveries that occupy them, when I give free reign to my thoughts and let my ideas follow their natural course, unrestricted and unconfirmed.” (35) Thus, unlike his *Confessions*’ greater philosophy of memory within the context of walking, *Reveries* realizes a greater philosophy of walking within the structures of thinking. His reveries, much as his narrative identity of the *Confessions*, are diversely focused or scattered, depending on the nature of quietude, flux, or interruption as he proceeds on his walks.

Just as Rousseau sets the stage to insure his own salvation, he carefully rewrites (or, one could say, writes for the first time) his own life’s story through means of wandering about a conventional temporality. As he puts it, wandering provokes the possibility for bare experience, and bare experience catalyzes the later formation of memory in a present recollection. Wandering is thus figured as a form of collection of experience; memory’s activity is figured as a collation of that experience. Such collation requires a persistence of activity, even mobility: travel’s pleasures stem from the immersion within the “vastness of things,” a state of being that spurs the work of memory “to combine them, select them, and make them mine as I will.” *Confessions* and *Reveries* thus acknowledge the construction of memory retrospectively through a means and method that is distinctly spurred by traveling bodies and mobile and nimble minds.
Rousseau’s system of recollection is selective in that it does not contain everything he may have perceived or felt, but it is organic in his insistence that his ideas and experiences that are worthy of recollection originate in an unknown place within his own mind. In some sense, wandering forward, this is the very dialectic with which Wordsworth seems to struggle: how does one make sense of the selves in prior temporalities from one’s own, present mind? Rousseau’s affirmation of such a possibility—with its awareness of a complicity in utilizing the imagination—demonstrates his own method of resolution: the collection of present experience takes place beneath consciousness, but the recollection of experience is still both retrospective and strongly subjective. Like Hume before him and Wordsworth and De Quincey after him, Rousseau noticed that memory only occurs in the active site of the present’s circuitous motion and is not shaped by a self that is continuously static from past to present.

Written within a similar philosophical tradition but in a very different literary mode, William Wordsworth’s notion of the wandering mind, as manifest in his autobiographical texts, appears at moments of meditation on the nature of memory as well as in moments of recollection of experience while, too, reflecting on his thoughts gleaned from his own walking practice. Unable to locate experience in what was once-inspiring poetry, he offers a controlling metaphor for recalling the memory of an experience of being enthralled by poetry as that of an empty

---

63 In relation to such wandering, I would be amiss if I were not to mention one contemporaneous Romantic, John Thelwall—a influence upon Wordsworth’s who has been marginalized, historically, in the study of the period—and his book-length essay on The Peripatetic (1793). In his diverse reveries in which he finds occasions for poetic, philosophical, and political reflections, Thelwall interrupts his thoughts, in the voice of his narrator, Sylvanus Theophrastus, to apologize to the reader for his digressive mode: “Dear Reader, If, in the foregoing digressions, I should appear, according to thy better judgment, to have wandered too far from the point, thou wilt be kind enough to remember, that, as I am only a foot traveler, the bye path to the right and left is always open to me as the turnpike road…(105) Here, Thelwall clearly foregrounds his character’s contemplative practice with his practice of embodied traveling, noting how his cognitive processes are spurred by his walking practice. While Thelwall has received his historical due as an important Romantic, his philosophy of the embodied walk as cognitive performance reads as a prototype for Wordsworth’s. For a book-length study, see the recent John Thelwall’s ‘The Peripatetic’ Ed. Judith Thompson (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2001)
“theatre / fresh emptied of spectators” (574-575), a site through which Wordsworth generates his own poetry that contains within it certain memorable experiences that paradoxically acknowledge the impossibility for capturing experience. And while the poetry in *The Prelude* is certainly autobiographical, the moments that seek to instruct us about or convey particular memorable experiences resist narrative coherency and tend towards—and even center themselves in—narrative fragmentariness and structural wandering. Instead, Wordsworth seems to suggest that his experience of moving towards achieving a lofty experience is disappointed upon noticing the absence of a recognizable experience, and so in his poetic recollection, he wanders about such a narrative blindspot, drifting through an act of signification that might be better characterized as one of non-correspondence—wandering among signs absent signification and narrative articulation of experience.

In this light, consider the passage in *Book Sixth* in which Wordsworth describes his passing through the Alps, an illuminating but demystifying experience. When he first beholds the summit of Mont Blanc, Wordsworth records that the group had “To have a soulless image on the eye / Which had usurped upon a living thought.” (454-455) Here, Wordsworth first mourns a loss of an imaginative capacity: now that he beholds an objective and deadened “image” of the peak, he could no longer enjoy “a living thought”—dynamic and ever-changing imaginary thoughts of its varying possibilities. As a loss of imagination that is almost immediately “reconcil’d” (461) by the beauty of the vista, its movement prefigures the discovery of a greater absence to follow. He recollects a “far different dejection” (491) experienced upon ascending and crossing the Alps. In fact, the discovery that he had “crossed the Alps” (524) unknowingly (he and his crew had questioned and then followed a “peasant” (513), and had, by chance, arrived at and passed their destination) acts as an important poetic trope for experience and
recollection of experience more generally. For Wordsworth, in this passage, discovers that the myth of achieving such an experience is always-already undermined—in fact, it is precisely in the eluding of such narrative production that allows for a direct experience with “the invisible world” (536) of his own cognition. In other words, by bracketing the expectation of any experience Wordsworth realizes directly his imagination; all experience becomes non-progressive, and therefore fragmentary. With this realization, there is no beginning, middle, or end, to the story—the “climax”, as it were, never happens. Such ambulatory wandering, realized both in body and mind, generates for Wordsworth a certain blindness to normative experience, much as Hume and Rousseau acknowledged before him, and as fellow Romantic and lifelong friend Thomas De Quincey acknowledges after him. Such blindness is an aesthetic product of an active mind seeking the site of experience in recollection—and it is an important narrative feature to which we will return in considering later in this study the contemporary narratives of wandering.

Blindness by structural cognitive interposition recurs, too, in De Quincey’s opium-infected mind meandering and peripatetic movements through the streets of London in his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821). For example, De Quincey’s meditation on his misplacement of his childhood friend Anne, as he wanders the streets of London, is haunted by the possibility of her simultaneous proximity and distance; he writes how “if she lived, doubtless we must have been sometimes in search of each other, at the very same moment, through the mighty labyrinths of London; perhaps even within a few feet of each other…” (34) An echo of this non-encounter is heard in De Quincey’s acknowledgment while approaching Eton, that while he approached the Heath, he and the “accursed murderer” who had both been roaming free that night “might at every instant be unconsciously approaching each other through the
darkness.” (29) Again, the possibility of meeting another, of being confronted by an unexpected figure—spectral or real—is both part of the deeply associative narrative structure of the *Confessions* and part of De Quincey’s own fears and torturous mind-scapes.

Such veiled blindness to a telos—that is, the dwelling within an “interspace” (ibid.) or time-space suspended in time, is in fact deeply desired in the *Confessions*; De Quincey writes that “I wished in my blindness” (35), that is, he realizes retrospectively how he preferred a certain opacity and lack of closure. The pleasure of interposition, of labyrinthine walking—of what Walter Benjamin calls the schooled loss of one’s way in a city as in a forest (*Berlin* 53)—requires a certain intention and purposefulness and seems to anticipate the privileged flanerie of Benjamin’s strolls at the turn of the Twentieth Century. Perhaps it is principally expressed, in my reading of the *Confessions*, in one of De Quincey’s pleasures in which he partakes while affected by opium: that of the music of the stage, the orchestra, and of the voices of and at the opera. These pleasures are the materials of signifiers, to cite Jameson’s characterization of postmodernism, in that their form exceeds their function: the language of operatic music is language relegated to the non-functional realm of art; and their content is unknown and their languages are foreign to him. De Quincey’s preferred participation in such pleasures while on opium is itself a commentary on the nature of his philosophical reveries: he luxuriates in those (non)spaces, (non)times, and (non)languages that exist as nakedly wrested from their usual contexts.

---

64 Of course, one is reminded by such a formulation of Levinas’s errancy—the site of aesthetic perception. See my discussion of Levinas in Chapter 1.
66 To consider these pleasures even further: it is significant that De Quincey enjoys the chatter of the Italian women at the Opera for the musicality of their language: he claims not to comprehend the signification of their language, but he does enjoy the form of the language—in and of itself. Similar to Stein’s ear for the rhythm in all languages, De Quincey contextualizes this aural pleasure with the statement that “a succession of musical sounds is to me like a collection of Arabic characters: I can attach no ideas to them.” (45) Thus, music functions for De Quincey as an
Through the ambient musicality of the opera, its orchestra, and even its inhabitants, De Quincey suggests that he can weave a whole re-collection of his past life—not through an act of memory, but through an alternative mode of surface textures in the music itself: Luxuriating in these melodies, De Quincey comes to discover a singular truth about memory, confession, and of course, autobiography:

It is sufficient to say, that a chorus, etc. of elaborate harmony, displayed before me, as in a piece of arras work, the whole of my past life—not, as if recalled by an act of memory, but as if present and incarnated in the music: no longer painful to dwell upon: but the detail of its incidents removed, or blended in some hazy abstraction; and its passions exalted, spiritualized, and sublimed. [italics mine] (45-46)

Within a nearly synesthetic conflation of the aural and visual, De Quincey imagines his past life as taking place in a non-representative, but visualized and textured surface of music. When he experiences this viscerally and immediately, he notes that it is “no longer painful to dwell upon” because “the detail of its incident [is] removed, or blended in some hazy abstraction.” Such recollection does not bring with it pain, as it does not contain the prior emotional explanations or previous interpretations ascribed to given events. Instead, the memory experienced here is non-narratological inasmuch as it is non-verbal: it is “displayed,” as it were, visually, and the purely visual, that is, the gesture, cannot contain within it explication. Afterlives of reading these Benthinian cloudy spots are left for the critic, instead.

---

artistic mode that defies representation or signification. Similarly, De Quincey recalls the intervals during the Operatic performance as offering a similar musical pleasure: “I had all around me, in the intervals of the performance, the music of the Italian language talked by Italian women: for the gallery was usually crowded with Italians: and I listened with a pleasure...for the less you understand of a language, the more sensible you are to the melody or harshness of its sounds.” (46)
In sum, then, De Quincey desires a form of being that is itself blind to its context—that is, it is inherently fragmentary in its disavowal to narrative sequencing; and he desires a form of recollection that is blind to localized context or interpretation—a form of remembering best embodied by the textures of music or untainted images. As a theoretician and practitioner of autobiography, then, De Quincey intuits the generic problematic later articulated by modernists such as Gertrude Stein and Walter Benjamin: how does one write a story or narrative within or about a history that is necessarily fragmentary? The answer, as De Quincey articulates in the *Confessions*, is to construct his life and memory blindingly and therefore fragmentarily—without context and sequence, and without inherent interpretation. In other words, to do so by embracing a cognitive, embodied, and narratological structure of wandering that generates distinctly decontextualized, and yet sensory textures of memory.

**Modernist Autobiography: Inheriting Wandering Form**

While DeQuincey, as well as Wordsworth and Rousseau, don’t ventriloquize their autobiographical voices into a third-person form of radical exteriority, I will close this chapter by suggesting that modern autobiography, in the experimental form and theoretical concerns of Gertrude Stein’s *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, foregrounds the motions of wandering and fragmentation nascent in its Romantic progenitors. Like De Quincey, Stein’s text does not represent mimetically but instead mimics the visible—and luxuriates within—the rhythms of its own textual world. Furthermore, to meet the formal challenges of the autobiography as necessarily fragmentary, her text performs a roving narrative voice that feigns a radical exteriority to the autobiographical subject and her milieu. Finally, much as Wordsworth and Rousseau before her suggested, the work of memory is itself one fraught with blindspots and saturated with its present preferences to such a degree, in Stein’s work, that memory itself
unfolds as a sort of fragmentary becoming, denying certain closure, as well as exposing these sites of incoherence as both counter-narratives to conventional narrativity and new avenues of literary and self reproduction.

Stein’s text not only falters in the face of, but flaunts the traditional expectations of the genre of autobiography as possessing a narrative voice that is continuous, coherent, and faithful to the story of its author’s life. One need not look very far to discern Stein’s intentions in so doing. In Toklas’s parroted voice, Stein is described during the summer of 1912 as gradually shifting her style from a focus on interiority—”the insides of people, their character and what went on inside them” to an absolute exteriority—”a desire to express the rhythm of the visible world,” (119) echoing De Quincey’s earlier propensity for the textures of the visible. According to Toklas, Stein “was, [and] always is, tormented by the problem of the external and the internal”, that is the problem of expressing an impossibly unknowable subjectivity. It is for this reason that Stein proclaims that “the human being essentially is not paintable.” (ibid.) Thus, while Toklas concludes that Stein has always “made her chief study people and therefore the never ending series of portraits,” (ibid.) “never ending” offers an over-determined gloss to the barrage of literary portraits produced by Stein in her lifetime, an important thematic of fragmentary non-closure.

Similarly, in his discussion of Stein’s grammar study “Sentences and Paragraphs,” Steven Meyer sees a certain move towards an experimental grammar that played with fragmentariness in what he calls Stein’s innovative “paragraphing” (102); this preference for the fragment in textual composition and portraiture is emphasized early in her study when she famously proclaims that “A sentence is not emotional a paragraph is” (1931, 25) and proceeds to contend that a paragraph is traditionally determined by the succession of sentences that creates a certain rhythm—or
exudes a certain emotion: “[O]ne sentence coming after another sentence makes a succession and the succession if it has a beginning a middle and an ending as a paragraph has does form create and limit an emotion.” (23) Instead of a traditional paragraph that generates an emotion as one that necessarily contains a progression of sentences, a paragraph no longer requires “the ‘internal balancing’ of individual sentences.” (Meyer 102) By differentiating between the rhythm of succession and the syntax of progression—”do not forget that...succeeding one thing succeeding another thing is succeeding and having a beginning a middle and an ending is entirely another thing” (1931, 32)—Stein is able to craft the non-progressive paragraph, that is, the paragraph that maintains rhythm, but is entirely self-contained and non-progressive.

In so doing, she anticipates Jameson’s study of schizophrenic “reading” in the postmodern age as an affect of “intensities” in both the “breakdown of the signifying chain” and the bare experience of “pure material signifiers.” Much like Jameson, Stein’s work is not only grammatical or cognitive, but it speaks to the breakdown of biographical experience that can no longer be narrated from the inside, as it were, of signification. What remains is Jamesonian collage of external intensities.

As a mode of writing that is itself fragmentary inasmuch as it is without ends—or beginnings, for that matter—Stein’s autobiographical composition is at once fragmentary self-portraiture and a study of modernist aesthetics, extending to the art objects that saturate the work. While Stein “has a horror of people” who value the unbreakable in art, she finds in Cezanne’s work a wholeness in its strangely unfinished sense, with a frame as the sole indicator of completion (1990, 34), a trope that foreshadows the fragmentary modernism narrated and performed in an interaction between Stein and Picasso. Indeed, the curious history of Picasso’s portrait of Stein is recorded as follows: Stein had posed for the portrait “ninety times,” (45) but
dissatisfied with Stein’s head as represented in the portrait, Picasso had “painted out the whole head.” (53) (“I can’t see you any longer when I look, he said irritably” (25).) And then, upon returning to Paris from Spain, “painted the head in without having seen Gertrude Stein again.” (57) Neither could remember what “the head looked like” after he had painted it out, but both were “content” with the final version. Upon Stein’s arrival, Picasso’s first, harsh reaction was to protest her departure from his portrait; his second and softened response was “mais, quand meme tout y est, all the same it is all there.” (ibid.)

This particularly nebulous anecdotal record of Picasso’s spoken resolution allows for a re-thinking of much of Picasso’s and Stein’s body of portraiture, as well as a greater theory of modernism predicated on both fragmentation and hermeneutical possibility. The referent to the final “there” in “it is all there” is left as unspecific and over-determined: it might refer to Stein’s affected face, to the perceived comparative defect in Picasso’s portrait of Stein’s present look, or to an unknown conceptual abstraction that was imagined as lacking. While the ultimate referent is, in the end, unknowable, I suggest that the problem and resolution here posed by Picasso reflects a greater thematic concern to the writing of autobiography. How does one create a faithful self-portrait that remains temporally bound, or closed to its own futurity? In other words, if haircuts can change, so can modes of thinking, personality characteristics, and ways of being. Picasso’s response to this fundamental problem to the genre of portraiture is two-fold. On the one hand, “it is all there” means that Stein’s portrait exists in-and-of-itself—it marks a particular temporality that departed from its objective source in the moment of its composition; yet it is all there as it faithfully commemorates that terminal temporality. On the other hand, “all there” stands as a statement of inclusion; as opposed to delineating terminal and differentiated
temporalities, “all there” connotes certain omnipresence, or a sense that all potential futurities lie latent in the portrait.

To interrogate the first reading further: “all there” means that the work is complete even without context and even without temporal closure, that is, subjective narrative coherence to an outside, objective source or setting. In this sense, it is a fragment, and it is a masterpiece. Hans-Jost Frey writes of the theoretical fragment—literary or otherwise—that “the fragment has meaning when it can be brought into a context within which it fulfills a task. But the fragment is what it is precisely because there is no context for it.” (25) He has likewise written that without futurity for the fragment, “incompletion does not create any expectation, but starts one waiting far from any object of expectation.” (58) Thus, to be truly fragmentary is to exist apart from whole-ness and without context; it is also to engage an aesthetics of waiting that is, too, a wandering within an axis of spatiality.

Further, in Stein’s own reading of the fragment’s non-temporality, in its waiting that is a wandering in its non-becoming, she discerns the potential for a masterwork. In her 1936 lecture “What are master-pieces, and why are there so few of them?”, Stein claims that master-pieces exist because they came to be as something that is an end in itself and in that respect it is opposed to the business of living which is relation and necessity. That is what a master-piece is not although it may easily be what a master-piece talks about. It is another one of the curious difficulties a master-piece has that is to begin and end, because actually a master-piece does not do that it does not begin and end if it did it would be of necessity and in relation and that is just what a master-piece is not. (308)

In other words, master-pieces do not exist in relation to anything other than themselves, nor do they contain a particular sort of internal narrative coherence—a beginning and an ending, or a temporality in realizing contextual closure. In a word, master-pieces operate like Frey’s conception of the fragment: they are fragmentary, and without reason. In Frey’s words, “Understanding the fragment means: understanding its incompleteness…when the fragment
contains in itself the reason why it is unfinished, it stops being a fragment.” (25) Thus, Picasso’s indecipherable satisfaction with his portrait is intentionally inexplicable: the fragment cannot be understood narratively or in context; it simply is. Or, it is simply “all there”.

To return to the second gloss of Picasso’s resolution: “all there” connotes a certain inclusiveness of the potentiality of his portrait. In other words, his portrait allows for the objective departure in Stein’s new hair-dress because it anticipates multiplicity in its state of potentiality. This, I suggest is the very substance of wandering: movement uninterested in progression, a foregrounding of bare potentiality without the foreclosure of a master-narrative—the product of other forces—seeking closure.

This opening towards nothing, this wandering forth and about, carries with it a certain ethical grounding. Giorgio Agamben, in writing on “the point of departure for any discourse on ethics,” establishes the discourse with the negative foundation that “there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny, that humans must enact and realize.” (Community 43) The flipside, what is made possible, in other words, is an “ethical experience (which, as such, cannot be a task or a subjective decision) is the experience of being (one’s own) potentiality, of being (one’s own) possibility—exposing, that is, in every form one’s own amorphousness and in ever act one’s own inactuality.” (44) In other words, the ethical experience is to both admit the fragmentation of subjectivity and to make possible one’s singular potentiality. Narrativity, in its demand for destiny, tasks, and subjective decisions, undermines the base of this ethical imperative.

In this sense, Picasso’s portrait acts as an essential base or blueprint from which disparate futures or histories might be traced. Not only Picasso’s visual portrait of Stein, but Stein’s literary and oblique self-portrait achieve this radical hermeneutic potentiality through their
distinctly modernist insistence on non-representation in their portraiture of exterior rhythms, gestures, and surfaces.

Stein makes space for such an experience of potentiality in a reflexive note, via Toklas, about her visual capacity for anticipating and finalizing artistic representation. Toklas tells us that Stein “never knows how a thing is going to look until it is done”; in fact, “she cannot draw anything.” (76) Of course, Stein is quite equipped to draw—she does so all through her anatomical sketches in Medical school. Instead, what Stein indicates here regarding her inability to draw is related to a deeper anxiety regarding the act of whole and complete representation as a form of mastery, when she states just a few sentences later that “she felt no relation between the object and the piece of paper.” (ibid.)

As shown earlier, words were equally arbitrary signifiers for Stein. In terms of their signification, we might apply the very same terms with which Stein refused visual representation: she saw no connection between the word or signifier on the page and a supposedly fixed signified. The use of writing—and here, again, Stein anticipates Jameson’s schizophrenic aesthetic perception, though in the form of intentional creation—was within the linguistic and non-pictoral space of the sentence: the realm of syntax, rhythm, and internal poetic play. The performance of writing, in other words, wanders forth and about in Stein’s unfolding process.

Similar to Stein’s later critique of the progressive paragraph mentioned earlier in terms of her refusal to sequence progressive sentences, Stein was solely interested in internal coherence and relation within syntactical structures—be they sentences or paragraphs. This interest in

67 Admittedly, the same critique could apply to the stability and implicit sequencing within particular words composed of roots, suffixes, etc. However, Stein herself later writes about herself that “the use of fabricated words offended her, it was an escape into imitative emotionalism” (119). Thus, the realm of her experimentation was minimally syntactical on the level of the sentence.
linguistic rhythm instead of signification stems from an inherent ear for the musicality in language apart from the communication achieved by language—echoing De Quincey’s opium-fueled reveries. This is expressed well through Toklas’s eyes upon her first getting to know Gertrude Stein in Paris:

When I first knew Gertrude Stein in Paris I was surprised never to see a french book on her table, although there were always plenty of english ones, there were even no french newspapers. But do you never read french, I as well as many other people asked her. No, she replied, you see I feel with my eyes and it does not make any difference to me what language I hear, I don’t hear a language, I hear tones of voice and rhythms, but with my eyes I see words and sentences and there is for me only one language and that is english. (70)

While her final comment regarding her singular use of the English language requires further explication, I would like to first focus on her insistence that she does not hear a particular language; her aural sense is universal in that it hears only “tones of voice and rhythms”. This claim, of course, is not entirely literal; of course, Stein communicated verbally and aurally with those around her. Instead, I take this claim as a suggestion towards a new sense of language’s underlying “communicability” apart from its signification, a suggestion Walter Benjamin has made in his early essay “On Language as such and On the Language of Man” (1916).

In his explication of Benjamin’s theory of communicability, Gasche writes “Beyond the Cratylian alternatives of understanding the word either as a means to designate things different from it or as expressing immediately the essence of things themselves, communicability refers to the speech act in the word.” (67) Thus, the “speech act”, the gesture of speaking itself—as Benjamin reads Kafka’s opacity—that underlies all languages; it is this communicability, then, this cadence within which Stein’s aurality exists, that language can continue to perform an artistic function. Of interest to us is this gestural sense: as in Benjamin’s reading of Kafka’s fiction, these gestures are cloudy in the sense that they are impossible to properly contain or
explicate; yet, in their eternal interpretability, they manage to generate a potentiality unfounded in ordinary language. To relate, then, the metaphors of the linguistic to the visual, or the spoken to the textual, one might relate the aforementioned sense of “communicability” underlying language to the “gesture” underlying the visual. Both forms refuse to signify, but both express—or foreground—a certain rhythm latent within all language or all visual representation.

Stein’s use for English then is when it is radically decontextualized, when it becomes irrelevant to everyone besides herself:

One of the things that I have liked all these years is to be surrounded by people who know no English. It has left me more intensely alone with my eyes and my English. I do not know if it would have been possible to have English be so all in all[emphasis mine] to me otherwise…I like living with so very many people and being all alone with English and myself. (70)

Instead of being a language that communicates the mundane—or that communicates at all—English remains for Stein a self-contained poetic palate within which she can experiment (127). Thus, Stein avoids the modernist questions of linguistic signification by alienating her own language from its speakers, by making it, in some sense, a linguistic material. Further, and of interest to our inquiry regarding the fragmentary nature of Stein’s language and greater project of self-portraiture, Stein describes the isolation of English as allowing a personal sense of English become “so all in all to me”. Of course, such language recalls the very same words with which Stein uses elsewhere to denote a master-piece and with which Picasso comforts himself upon noting the stylistic distinction between the hairstyle of his portrait-Stein and of the living Stein. In other words, to decontextualize the English language, to render it self-contained, Stein had to imagine “her” English as an entirely irrelevant form of communication. Thus, Stein’s English language could stand as a medium (as it were) for the expression of literary masterpieces. And to follow Picasso’s comment (“it is all there”) mentioned above, such linguistic expression is
entirely exclusive in that it does not promise an obvious narrative coherence; it is inclusive, however, it that it enacts a verbal gesture a la Kafka: it allows for an eternal read-ability and interpretability by insisting on both familiar language and interpretive opacity.

To reflect more broadly on Stein’s autobiographical text, then: the nature of her presentation performs a radical exteriority: it insists on her life-story told from the “outside”, as it were, by the voice of Alice B. Toklas. This exteriority is necessary, Stein maintains, for the direct translation of self onto paper is impossible, given the nature of writing: writing does not strive to represent, but rather mimic the rhythms of the world, as perceived from the outside. Further, the rhythmic nature of Stein’s text must be both self-contained and must mimic the world it reflects: within the nature of its unique composition—its digressions, repetitions, and irresolutions—her autobiographical text strives to capture the rhythm of particular places, moments, and times in which Stein (and Toklas) was present. Finally, this sort of composition, as Stein might say, strives to achieve what is both master-piece and fragment: as an autobiography told from the “outside”, as a wandering narrative that revels in the textures of language but denies closure, it insists on the impossibility of interpretation and narrativization; in a sense, it strives to achieve what a documentary film might capture—sans narrator.
Chapter 2: Memory’s Wandering Ethics—A Postmodernist Ontology

As a byproduct of waiting and non-closure in the original form of modern narrative, Romantic autobiography, memory, and even perception itself, are left to wander. With such wandering taken to its logical conclusion, normative, transparent, or essentialist self-conception, in the genre of Modernist autobiography, is subsequently called into question. The last chapter established that in an ethical sense, wandering narrative cognition is the human experience of lived and even narrated non-closure, and a pre-requisite for such radical waiting—and its accompanying potentiality—is its absolution of destiny. I use the term destiny purposefully: Giorgio Agamben has opined that destiny forecloses a certain ethics:

The fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize. This is the only reason why something like an ethics can exist, because it is clear that if humans were or had to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible—there would be only tasks to be done. (Community 43)

“Wandering,” as I’ve attempted to define it and explore it, does not demand an absence of memory and capacity for recall—it only requires that the poetics of recollection admit a weakened or non-essential relationship with the subject’s narrative identity. The previous chapter’s critique of narrativity and subsequent distinction between the capacity for encoding memories and structuring those memories into a generic form retains the ethics of memory in an anti-narrativist state. Within such a wandering mind, memory’s function and poetics contributes to but are not assimilated by a masterplot of narrative identity. Without exclusive narrative closure, memory’s fragmentary materials anticipate multiple futures and partake in multiple
histories, retaining a necessary relevance by constantly reordering their relationality within the subject’s cognition and for the subject’s narrative identity.

In the next two chapters, I explore contemporary fictions by contemporary authors W.G. Sebald and Ben Lerner that are at once embodied performances of cognitive wandering and that enact, in their very composition, a resistance to narrativity in the form of a wandering memory. I have chosen these fictions for their generic transgressions: they are at once structured as autobiographical narratives, episodic tales that mimic narrative form and that claim authorial experience, and they are as well fictional constructions and elaborations, both in generically experimental form and content. Both particular works discussed, Lerner’s *10:04* (2014) and Sebald’s *Rings of Saturn* (1998), are easily categorized as postmodern in their blurring of generic categories (fiction/non-fiction), reflexive and non-linear structures, theoretical concerns regarding history’s end, and general periodization. As such, they both engage the tradition of autobiography and highlight its salient features and characteristics through certain intentional artifice. What emerges in my reading is a subversive and distinctly postmodernist aesthetics of wandering that foregrounds an ethical orientation to personal memory and collective history. Such an aesthetics and ethics, too, will be sufficiently abstracted to allow for cross-generic application.

Finally, in this chapter, I follow Brian McHale in focusing and limiting my use of “postmodern” in this context to signify post-cognitive (as opposed to cognitive) and therefore ontological (as opposed to epistemological). For McHale, the “dominant”—a term McHale borrows from the Russian Formalists to indicate foregrounded characteristics, as opposed to

---

historical opposition or sequence (6)—in postmodernist fiction is the interest in interrogating possible selves and possible worlds that the narrative inhabits. Articulating the possibilities and limits of such an ontology becomes the formal narrative concern in content and form in postmodernist fiction: narratives make possible multiple selves and multiple narrative worlds through various characteristic techniques, including repetition and multiplicity.

While such compositional strategies are certainly present in both works, the animating impulse behind their “dominant” presence is the motion of memory apart from narrativity, thus structuring a subjectivity of varying histories through a distinctly fragmentary understanding of the objects of memory and through a distinctly perpetual understanding of memory’s recollection. While for McHale, modernist works interrogate the limits and possibilities of knowledge as their “dominant,” these postmodernist works, in my reading, acknowledge epistemological limits but foreground concerns of subject and world in following memory’s motions. In the focus on memory’s poetics in this chapter, then, a wandering mind narrates diverse modes of being. In other words, with memory unfixed and subjectivity never destined or realized, the work of memory becomes the ontological catalyst for the reproduction and articulation of selves and worlds.

Postmodern Memory: A Critical History

As a study of memory, then, I begin by assuming that a theory of memory serves as the method by which these postmodernist fictions arrive at multiple selves and worlds. McHale, too, would agree that cognition need not disappear in an ontological text; indeed, the cognitive causes might simply foreground the postcognitive effects, as is the case in our texts. Thus, in acknowledging memory as the stimulus for ontological effects, I begin with acknowledging the history of
philosophy of memory in order to arrive at a modernist and epistemological ground upon which these works are based.

Memory, Anne Whitehead notes in her introduction to the subject, quoting Mieke Bal, is a “traveling concept,” one that travels through and between disciplines, histories, and geographies.69 The “art of memory,” from the ancient Greeks and Romans through the present day took on assorted metaphors that carried assorted valences: Plato’s wax tablet for memory inscription; Roman “place systems” for imprinting memory on imaginary pages; Augustinian mysticism that combines both Platonic Idealism and “place systems”; medieval visual and textual mnemonics; Renaissance “memory theaters” for visual mnemonics and recall; and modern conceptions of displaced memory in books, archives, and digital clouds.

Yet despite its long history, memory’s figurative conception has generally been one of either personal or collective storage and recall from storage—repetition in mind, in other words, of past stored events thus indicating successful recollection—a popular conception that has received a sustained critique by Romantics, Moderns, and contemporary theorists. As I noted in the previous chapter, Romantics represented memory as a form of reconstruction, not reproduction, even as they acknowledged memory’s stored source. And moderns did away altogether with memory’s construction on epistemological grounds, even as they acknowledged its more profound storehouse—the unconscious. For Proust and Freud, for example, memory’s place and effects are well beyond conscious reach, if at all ever accessible; for Proust, the practice of immersive recollection is involuntary and unexpected, “unstring[ing] subjectivity,”

“subvert[ing] consciousness,” and “confront[ing] us with the incomprehensible.” For Freud, the work of psychoanalysis makes certain symptoms of memory’s effects “modified or removed,” but the “underlying cause of the symptom, the unconscious memory itself, cannot be fully eliminated” or even fully apprehended on a conscious level. In other words, in Richard Terdiman’s reading of Freud, although the unconscious provides “output” to the rest of psyche, it is itself “inaccessible to input, moderation, modulation, or diminunation.” (284) Terdiman is also right to note that Freud and Proust share common characteristics in memory’s impenetrable depth and unanticipated rupture, though for Proust, of course, recollection takes on a far more pleasant connotation.

Even for these modernists, however, past memories are stored in a latent, if unknowable unconscious, lurking in the shadows to eventually overwhelm and even traumatize the present. As thinkers that maintained the Romantics’ intuition of both “too little and too much” memory (14), they modulated memory’s overwhelming effects with a healthy dose of repression and forgetting, much as Nietzsche argued before them regarding the “disease of too much memory.” And as Anne Whitehead, Richard Terdiman, and Susan Radstone have argued, these theorists of “too much memory” play a crucial role in anticipating the memory crises of the late-modern Twentieth Century in their “prolonged and intense fascination with the power of the past over the present,” (Whitehead 100) a “deepening” concern of nineteenth and early twentieth-

---


72 See Terdiman, 200: “[d]espite Proust’s effort to mould our understanding of it in salvationist directions, the phenomenon Proust narrates as involuntary memory uncannily recalls the description in Freud of the pathologies of traumatic injury and involuntary neurotic reminiscence.”

73 Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” in Daniel Breazale (ed.), *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 84, qtd. in Whitehead, 86. On a related note, one should note as well his recommendations regarding memory’s balances: “the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture.” (1997, 63)
century philosophy that emerges, according to Radstone, from “ambivalent relations to community, tradition, and the past” sourced partially in the traumas of the twentieth-century, including the centrality of the Holocaust to “memory’s resonances in contemporary culture.” (6)

Following Freud and Proust, contemporary philosophers of memory and contemporary researchers converge on the moment of recollection as the event of memory, even as they take divergent approaches to memory’s source for such recollection. For Daniel Schacter and other contemporary memory researchers, “memory” is not a particular object or experience to be recalled in any holistic sense, but an event in a present act of encoding and recollection, during which a past “engram”—or encoded fragment from the past stored by the subject—supplements present reflection in the form of recollection.74 Ulric Neisser put it this way: as opposed to the popular “reappearance hypothesis” in which copies of experience are restaged in the subject’s mind, memory should be thought of the fragmentary work of a paleontologist—“out of a few stored bone chips...we remember a dinosaur.” (285) In other words, each engram is not characterized as a fully stored and retrievable memory imprinted upon the mind; it presents instead as an always already encoded ruin or fragment that complements the present subject’s present cognition. Shachter explains, too, how the theory of the engram—attributed to pioneer cognitive psychologist and researcher Endel Tulving—is sourced in “connectionist” or “neural network models” that are built on the “principle that the brain stores engrams by increasing the strength of connections between different neurons that participate in encoding an experience.” The “specific pattern of brain activity constitutes an engram”; when a “retrieval cue” induces another pattern of activity in the brain, “if this pattern is similar enough to a previously encoded pattern, remembering will occur.” The “memory” that is activated, however, is not simply an

74 See Daniel Shachter, Searching for Memory (Basic Books: New York, 1997)
activated engram; rather, “it is a unique pattern that emerges from the pooled contributions of the cue and the engram.” (71) This is how Endel Tulving and others account for memory distortions and even false memories: due to the “constructive role of retrieval information,” engrams may, in fact, construct, echo, or invoke false correspondences between present and past memories. (1983, 181)

As an unfolding and varied event, memory is cued by an environmental or cognitive stimulus, a corresponding impulse to an already encoded engram. Thus, in the remembering act, a constellation between the stimulating cue, the subjective, recollecting self, and the engram constitute the present experience of recollection. Such research confirms both Romantic models of creative recollection and modern epistemologies of memory’s fragmentation. Even Shachter acknowledges that the confluence of all contributing elements for the unique memory act smacks of Proust’s *memorie involontaire*. In Shachter’s words:

...for the rememberer, the engram (stored fragment of an episode) and the memory (the subjective experience of recollecting a past event) are not the same thing. The stored fragments contribute to the conscious experience of remembering, but they are only part of it. Another important component is the retrieval cue itself. Although it is often assumed that a retrieval cue merely arouses or activates a memory that is slumbering in the recesses of the brain, I have hinted at an alternative: the cue combines with the engram to yield a new, emergent entity—the recollective experience of the rememberer—that differs from either of its constituents. This idea was intimated in some of Proust’s writings, in which memories emerge from comparing and combining a present sensation with a past one, much as stereoscopic vision emerges from combining information from the two eyes. (70)
Given that memory as event occurs in the mind of the present subject, then, encoding and remembering are nearly inseparable, if not identical, functions. To encode a memory, in other words, for Shachter, is to remember it for the first time. Furthermore, the strength of a memory lies in the complexity of its encoding, as the strength of each subsequent recall is determined by all previous acts of remembering.

10:04 and a Postmodern Ethics of Memory

Ben Lerner’s very recent 10:04 assumes Shachter’s denial of a storehouse of memory, even as it is both a chronicle of collective experience in the form of art objects, city life, and self-consciousness itself, in the form of reflexive and even failed writing processes. Somewhere between Proust and Shachter, Lerner’s work adopts a process of memory that mimics past fragments even as it recollects, often involuntarily, in the present tense; it constellates engrams, encoding the past through present cues and resurrecting lost histories through a recollection of multiplicity that wanders through varying histories.

Importantly, this work represents a critical bridge between cognitive theories and narrative representation in its performance of a cognitive model of memory. It is a work not only about history’s objects and processes but about possible subjectivities and the nature of a subject’s constructed history, interrogating as well conventional narrativity in generic form and in subjective cognition. And most of all, it is a work of amplified wandering both in body and mind. Lerner’s protagonist “the author” drifts both in immediate perception—he suffers from a disabled proprioception, an inability to generate a nearly Jamesonian cognitive map onto his own

---

body, let alone his social sphere—as well as in the work of memory as it relates to the construction of a narrative history of multiplicity.

Lerner’s work starts with a startling aphorism of theological materialism as its epigraph—a tribute to the power of recollection but to the distinction, too, between recreation and creation in the processes of memory:

The Hassidim tell a story about the world to come that says that everything there will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too we will wear there. Everything will be as it is now, just a little different. (i)

Both “the world to come” and the concluding sentence of this adage recur throughout the work, and in contexts of materialist history. The world to come, as the reader learns, is the fully realized history of a living subject or material object as it is liberated from the processes of memory and history at history’s end. As a theology of memory, this final, absolute recollection is the process of memory—even cognition—arrested, at a standstill.

While Lerner claims he discovered this parable in Giorgio Agamben’s *The Coming Community* as attributed to Walter Benjamin,76 in truth, it is sourced in Walter Benjamin’s essay on Franz Kafka, a point to which I will return later this chapter. Most importantly, it is quite obvious that Lerner has studied Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History,” a short series of aphorisms about history’s end and a “weak” materialist messianism possible for redeeming

---

76 He writes, in his Acknowledgments to the work: “I first encountered the text I use as an epigraph in Georgio [sic] Agamben’s *The Coming Community*, translated from the Italian by Michael Hardt. It is typically attributed to Walter Benjamin.” (244)
history’s lost materials and narratives. Indeed, not only does Lerner include a full-page image\textsuperscript{77} of Paul Klee’s “Angelus Novus” (25) that Benjamin claims as the angel of history\textsuperscript{78} but at a moment of personal historical crisis, he cites Benjamin directly (though without quotation marks, a Benjaminian trope, too!) when imagining how a personal past history—once a fact, now found to be a lie—might also be included in the archive of a personal history as a past that “happened but never occurred.” (109) In imagining a response to a co-worker at the Park Slope co-op for whom such a discovery has affected her own personal history, the protagonist dreams, conflating both the work’s epigraph and Benjamin, as follows:

> If there had been a way to say it without it sounding like presumptuous co-op nonsense, I would have wanted to tell her that discovering you are not identical with yourself even in the most disturbing and painful way still contains the glimmer, however refracted, of the world to come, \textbf{where everything is the same but a little different because the past will be citable in all its moments}, including those that from our present present happened but never occurred. (109)

The world to come, in this context as in all others in this work, signifies a future present liberated from time itself in which all pasts are citable, because the subject is no longer partaking of history’s temporality. “Everything is the same but a little different,” as objects still exist in history or memory, but in the form of a revolutionary historicity—history remembering all possible pasts, even those lost to history’s master narratives and plots. Here, Lerner knowingly cites Benjamin’s third aphorism in his series “On the Concept of History” regarding the revolutionary and even messianic potential for a historical materialism:

\textsuperscript{77} Lerner, 25
The chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accord with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history. Of course only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments...[emphasis mine] (390)

As fully citable, a redeemed history “brushes history against the grain” (392) of transmitted historicism, which conforms to authority and genre. Historicism, which “rightly culminates in universal history” is progress and plot driven; materialist historiography, Benjamin’s method for redeeming history, is based on a constructive principle that arrests history by arresting the process of thinking about history, a theory of cognition in its very articulation:

Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad. The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. (396)79

For Benjamin, historical materialism is the apprehension of a “historical object” arrested when “thinking suddenly comes to a stop.” With the cessation of cognition, then, the articulation of oppressed and suppressed pasts are articulated in a nearly “messianic” manner. Thus, Benjamin offers a cognitive theory of history that is driven by a certain ethical-political poetics for memory

79 Editors Eiland and Jennings note that “oppressed past” in Zohn’s translation translates “underdruckte Vergangenheit,” which also suggests “suppressed past.” (Ibid., fn. 27, p. 400)
itself; his “weak messianic power” (390) is a theology constructed out of historical materialism’s language (389).

Perhaps most important for our reading of Lerner’s text, in such a calculus, is the strength of the historical materialist’s cognitive function: through memory arrested at a standstill, history’s suppressed pasts can emerge—and revolt. Here, memory and history are not interchangeable, but they are inter-dependent and dependent, too, upon the gaze and arrested procession—progression—of the historical materialist’s thought processes. Reading Lerner’s work with this backdrop is to acknowledge both the underlying theory and overlying thematics of arrested cognition as a device for narrating subjective memory and collective history.

Looking at the work’s loose structure, one starts with the enigmatic title, 10:04, which acknowledges the centrality of art objects as contingent upon subjective cognizance and historical valuation and devaluation. In particular, the title references the precise time that Lerner’s protagonist had hoped to view, both in real time and in the art piece, The Clock, a 24-hour “montage of thousands of scenes” from movies and TV “edited together to be shown in real time,” each scene indicating “the time with a shot of a timepiece or its mention in dialogue.” This film, directed by Christian Marclay and shown around the clock at Lincoln Square in July of 2012 for 20 days,80 attempted to synchronize “time in and outside of the film” (52), according to Lerner’s narrator. This alignment, he continues, signifies the possibility for a collapse of “fictional time into real time,” suggesting as well the recovery of possibility in the remembered past:

as I made and unmade a variety of overlapping narratives out of its found footage, I felt acutely how many different days could be built out of a day, felt more possibility than determinism, the utopian glimmer of fiction. (54)

_The Clock_ in its very performance critiques narrative or generic representations of lived experience. In aligning itself with lived time, in other words, it undoes the erasure of lost time condensed in a normative film narrative. On another level, _The Clock_ performs Benjamin’s attention to lost time in its unforgiving focus on each moment, suggesting recovered potentiality—”how many different days could be built of out of a day”—as a utopian glimmer. Its structured focus, in other words, is not a critique of generic narrativity, but an unforgiving attentiveness to multiplicity by presenting a collage of a disjointed (non)narrative and discontinuous selves.

10:04, in particular, carries with it certain temporal ambivalences whose reference is central to the work’s thematics. As the titular example, the time of 10:04 is the moment when “the lightning strike[s] the courthouse clock tower in _Back to the Future_, allowing Marty to return to 1985” (52), the particular time by which Lerner’s protagonist had hoped to arrive—and subsequently failed to witness, as “Alex couldn’t get a train back from her mother’s in time.” (ibid.) As not only a missed opportunity but a particular failure, this comment, inserted in parentheses, demands commentary for its reference to—and source for—the work’s title. 10:04 is missed by both the narrator and his companion, Alex, because of a failure of her return, even as 10:04 is a moment of return to the future, when, we are told at the book’s end (when the film is projected by both characters during the work’s second storm), “white people would have invented, not appropriated” rock and roll, as Marty had taught Chuck Berry how to play the musical form. Even at this later juncture, however, when the author protagonist had “spent a few
minutes describing this ideological mechanism to Alex,” his words fall into a past that had happened, but not entered history—he had failed to realized that she had fallen asleep beforehand (230). 10:04, then, signifies a return to a future in its reference to the film *Back to the Future*, but the work, *10:04*, in its inclusion of all pasts, even those that don’t enter history, denies that this return alters the past that now has an unrealized future in its failure to enter history. *Back to the Future*, in other words, attempts a poetics of closure, while other art works in Lerner’s text, such as Marclay’s *The Clock*; Donald Judd’s “Aluminum Boxes” in the desert of Marfa, Texas; Alena’s fictional “Institute for Totaled Art” (131), a project collecting totaled masterpieces; and even Jules Bastian-Lepage’s *Joan of Arc*, housed at the Met, operate as ekphrastic correspondences, even references to Lerner’s work, both in terms of their multiple subjects and histories and in terms of their generic resistances.

The tension between closure and non-closure is striking in this work, and lies as a productive site for memory’s work both in outward perception and self-conception. In Lerner’s protagonist’s words, his book is “written on the very edge of fiction” (237), “neither fiction nor nonfiction but a flickering between them.” His work, in other words, attempts to align itself with life as experienced, much as Marclay’s *The Clock* constructs a lived time in cinematic observation, but with adapting Agamben’s and Benjamin’s orientations towards history’s pasts’ multiplicity, and by acknowledging, too, epistemologies of memory put forth both in literary history and cognitive psychology. On the other hand, another book, this one produced in collaboration between Lerner’s protagonist and his third grade illegal immigrant tutee, Roberto, about the palentological error regarding the history of the apatosaurus, is titled *To the Future*, assuming certain closure in its research regarding errors in past palentological history. Indeed, as a work that the protagonist hopes “might help bring us closure,” it both affirms a flawed
paleontology and denies the possibility for keeping open unexplored pasts. Lerner’s eponymous character’s book, on the other hand, is a non-book, it is an abandoned past itself, chronicling process and retaining various histories, leaving its ending open, full of possibility. In the protagonist’s words: “Abandoning the book about forging my archive left me feeling as though I actually possessed one, as though I were protecting my past from the exposure of publication.” (212)

The ekphrastic art works saturating Lerner’s text, too, are art-works that anticipate or include various histories—or, in their very material afterlives, exclude themselves from a particular history in their irrelevance and abandonment. In fact, early on, Lerner’s protagonist contrasts *Back to the Future* with Joan of Arc’s gesture towards the future: both involve dissolution, but the latter’s gesture admits presence towards a future, while the former forbids the past’s presence:

Joan appears to stagger toward the viewer, reaching her left arm out, maybe for support, in the swoon of being called. Instead of grasping branches or leaves, her hand, which is carefully positioned on the sight line of one of the other angels, seems to dissolve...Standing there that afternoon with Alex, I was reminded of the photograph Marty carries in *Back to the Future*, crucial movie of my youth: as Marty’s time-traveling disrupts the pre-history of his family, he and his siblings begin to fade from the snapshot. Only here it’s a presence, not an absence, that eats away at her hand: she’s being pulled into the future. (9)

Fading a past discounts the past’s presence; fading into a future offers a certain afterlife for the present, constructing a history for a future’s past. This becomes clear in the perception of Judd’s
box structures in the Marfa desert, inspiring Lerner’s protagonist to wonder if their function, one shifting by its varied perceptions—”set in time, changing quickly because the light was changing, the dry grasses going gold in it” (179)—has a future that has not yet been realized in their “terrible patience” (223) (as he later recalls then it), much as structures like Stonehenge, “clearly built by humans but inscrutable in human terms, as if the installation were waiting to be visited by an alien or god.” (180)

The flipside of Judd’s pre-historical art is work collected by the protagonist’s friend, Alena, for her “Institute for Totaled Art,” a collection of valuable works paid off by an insurance company and “legally declared to have ‘zero value.”“ (129) No longer bound by market valuation, these post-historical works can be touched (“Why aren’t you touching anything, Alena asked” (132)) and even joyfully destroyed. Indeed, while holding the pieces of a freshly shattered Jeff Koons balloon dog sculpture, his protagonist celebrates: “It was wonderful to see an icon of art world commercialism an valorized stupidity shattered.” (131) Ultimately, the apprehension of such decommissioned and decommodified work is a taste of the world to come. While studying an unframed and ostensibly undamaged work by Henri Cartier-Bresson, he remarks:

It had transitioned from being a repository of immense financial value to being declared of zero value without undergoing what was to me any perceptible material transformation—it was the same, only totally different. (133)

Here, we are reminded of Picasso’s remarks made to Stein regarding her portrait’s divergence from her lived self: “It is all there,” Picasso claimed, even as the art work entered its own material history. While Picasso’s work has its own commodity history, the sense that a work of art can be altered by its framing is shared in both texts.
As a work of art that is not only an object of art but the articulation of a self, then, Lerner’s text references these ekphrastic objects to write himself differently, to push the limits of his textual self—”the tension between biological and textual mortality” (55)—beyond a singularity by including all possible selves and worlds within his fiction. In Lerner’s work, in other words, “It is all there.” As an ontological, postcognitive work, Lerner does not grapple with the choice among many selves and worlds—he chooses, instead, to include all of them. His is a work that echoes Deleuze’s problematic regarding time’s invisibility, and to which Deleuze offered the “crystal-image” to make time thinkable as contemporaneous layers in the present:

What constitutes the crystal-image is the most fundamental operation of time: since the past is constituted not after the present that it was but at the same time, time has to split itself in two at each moment as present and past, which differ from each other in nature, or, what amounts to the same thing, it has to split the present in two heterogenous directions, one of which is launched towards the future while the other falls into the past. (1989, 81)

Lerner’s work follows Deleuze’s Bergsonian insights: time here emerges as a contemporaneous and layered experience of multiplicity in the present. Most importantly, however, time is not an interiority for Deleuze, as Keith Ansell-Pearson shows; instead, “it is the interiority in which we move, live, and change.” (165) Correspondingly, in Lerner’s work, the narrator protagonist seems to cycle easily through multiple temporalities, invoking them as the medium in which he resides.
Wandering Attentiveness and the Construction of Ontological Multiplicity

The inclusion of all possible generic worlds, including those of fiction, non-fiction, and failure, demands the sort of patience a wandering consciousness generates in its attentiveness. As a work chronicling the failure of extending his short story into a novel-length work, his is a fiction in its imaginary feat and non-fiction in its history and production of failure, of non-event, positioning its narrating self beyond its absented story. Such generic inclusiveness, too, in a performative narrative of wandering of physical walks through the city of New York embodies the movements and jaunts across space and time through remembered pasts.

As a backdrop to the wandering recollection of the protagonist’s mind, New York itself expresses a catalog of participating, competing, and even interrupting voices in its recorded, textual, and even visual languages. In a narrated sequence that brilliantly captures not only dialogue between two subjects but the participating language of the embedded environment, Lerner’s “author” shows how the city’s contributing voices disrupt one another, generating instead an incoherent material history realized through an attending, wandering perception: in one ambulatory sequence, a “passing ambulance” throws “red lights”; a train interrupts with “stand clear of the closing doors”; “Get tested for HIV today” a poster instructs on the D train; “Shine bright like a diamond” Rihanna sang through the earbuds of a fellow rider (31). While the narrator claims to write as a “would-be Whitman” and cites Whitman’s attention to and love for the city’s unified organism (4), such sequences chronicle more than they do synthesize. They seem to invoke the wandering that Levinas characterizes as a form of aesthetic perception—an egarement that drifts and collects, in its decontextualized attention, between continuous contexts of narrative moments.
And not only are voices from the present staged and dramatized in the wandering perception of the city, but voices of the past converge in the spaces of the present, foregounding an overdetermined historical material for its various temporalities. While attending to the very ground of material space, wandering perception makes possible a certain attentiveness to lost time. Here, in the short story written by Lerner for *The New Yorker* (a fiction that has entered the space of the real and that is embedded, too, as the heart of his book-length fiction), Lerner’s third-person narrative describes such an event as the culmination of physical wandering:

Eventually he turned from the river and wandered back through Brooklyn Heights. On a small cobblestone street that dead-ended unexpectedly, some conspiracy of brickwork and chill air and gaslight gave him the momentary sense of having traveled back in time, or of distinct times overlaid, temporalities interleaved. No: it was as if the little flame in the gas lamp he paused before were burning at once in the present and in various pasts, in 2012 but also in 1912 or 1883, as if it were one flame flickering simultaneously in each of those times, connecting them. He felt that anyone who had ever paused before the lamp as he was pausing was briefly coeval with him, that they were all watching the same turbulent point in their respective present tenses. Then he imagined his narrator standing before it, imagined that the gaslight cut across worlds and not just years, that the author and the narrator, while they couldn’t face each other, could intuit each other’s presence by facing the same light, a kind of correspondence. (67)

As a vignette from a short story about an author imagining a hypothetical narrator, this passage lies at the nexus of narratological and cognitive convergence. First, the short story’s author character imagines his nonexistent narrator as standing before a site in which multiple histories have emerged. Not only do material histories materialize from a sustained, patient, and
wandering mind, but fictional histories of material character, too: as a narrator himself for an author that is, too, a narrator of a work authored by Lerner, both author and narrator do converge in a sort of imaginary correspondence, even if the apprehension of the street itself is fictionalized. As a correspondence of pasts across time, the story’s author (narrator) discovers—and recovers—the fragments of suppressed pasts in a present time, allowing the material of history, when arrested, to speak its assorted histories.

Most interestingly, as a cognitive theory of memory that is, too, a theory of ontological postmodernism, Lerner’s text ensures the radical inclusion of that which might be otherwise entirely occluded from history. Here, again, I reference my reading of Kafka’s gesture—as that of wandering. Benjamin writes that Kafka’s foregrounding of the cloudy spot in his parables as gesture is not an epistemological problematic but an ontological multiplicity. And while Lerner’s text cites Agamben’s work for its epigraph, acknowledging, in passing, the epigraph’s source in Benjamin’s text, I would like to call attention to this context, at this juncture, as particularly gestural. Indeed, in his reading of the gesture in Kafka, Benjamin writes that “the messiah” will “not wish to change the world by force but will merely make a slight adjustment to it.” (“Franz Kafka” 811) In reading distortions and in noticing “little hunchbacks” who ask a “dear child” to “pray for the little hunchback too,” Benjamin attributes to Kafka the sort of prayer that “Malebranche called ‘the natural prayer of the soul’: attentiveness.” (812) This attentiveness, in Benjamin’s reading of Kafka, is to the neglected subjects, the form of distortion, or hunching, “which things assume in oblivion,” typified by Odradek in Kafka’s story, “Cares of a Family Man.” (810) Occupying an attic (and the staircase,

---

81 See the introduction of this dissertation, in which I offer a full treatment of Benjamin’s reading of Kafka’s gestures as the aesthetic correlate to wandering.
82 Nursery rhyme quoted in “Franz Kafka,” 811.
corridors, and halls), Odradek is both discarded and indeterminate\(^{83}\), signifying both pre-history and post-history—exiting history, in other words, to be staged again.

The post-history of unrealized pasts is realized, in Lerner’s text, through its very performance of a wandering memory, an attentiveness, in other worlds, to a world to come. Indeed, in recovering pasts for the “present present” (109) as the narrator terms it, is the recovery of various pasts that never occurred (in history or memory), even if they happened (in a past present). This is both in terms of past objects and retracted narratives whose futures were never realized and in terms of experiences that never entered history’s memory to begin with. The former of the two was referenced previously and recurs throughout the work in the form of the subplot of the fraudulent past. In the case of the protagonist’s co-op friend, her self-discovery as a non-Arab, when informed by her mother of her true biological father, causes her skin “to fade” (104) from its ethnic color, invoking in its historical re-writing the possibilities for fading as erasure, in the case of Back to the Future, and fading as possibility, in the case of Joan of Arc.

The protagonist author likewise imagines a fraudulent correspondence as the very foundation of his book project, but instead writes his current book, thus absenting this imagined history, but including its absence through the trace of a wish (212). And he is told a tale of a friend’s father who cared for a lover that had posed, for years, as terminally ill (124-5). Later in the novel, the same friend’s father’s wife suffers from cancer, but the “embodied memory” of the prior fraud, in his life, interrupts his absolute belief in its veracity, causing him to suspect “that she could be faking”, on the one hand, or that on the other hand, to reconsider his original relationship’s lie as, in fact, true: “And by the way, then I find myself thinking...What if she lied about lying in order to release me?” (205) In each instance, a past whose future undoes its place

\(^{83}\) Indeterminacy is a critical lens through which Agamben reads the post-historical “halo” as retaining its fragmentation, its irreperable state, on the one hand, and its eternal potentiality as such, on the other.
in narrative history becomes both a fiction and an isolated history arrested in time and memory; when arrested, however, it is reopened to its bare potentiality—and reconsidered for possessing multiple histories. In an objective (and somewhat whimsical) manner, the consumption of “astronaut ice cream,” “a food from the future of the past, taken to space only once on Apollo 7, 1968,” typifies the sort of material afterlife that an object enjoys, in Lerner’s work, when arrested in an unrealized history.

Amnesia and Multiple Selves

When taken to its extreme, however, such arrested moments are isolated not only from history, but from autobiographical memory—that is, they exist not as an engram recalled and reconstructed, but as a discontinuous event that remains isolated and irretrievable. In Lerner’s embedded New Yorker short story, “The Golden Vanity,” such a discontinuity is suggested by the author protagonist as a form of amnesia, of absolute memory loss—and the loss, here, is to history—when he faces a dilemma regarding a wisdom tooth extraction and its associated experience’s abstention from memory. The author worries that while the experience of the extraction will be unable to be recalled at a later point, the experiencing self of the extraction will be fully aware of the painful process—and the amnesia will isolate and arrest this experiencing self within its particular history, as a “trauma cast out of time, experienced continuously, if unconsciously, instead of as a discrete event.” He continues:

If I take the drug, it’s like dividing myself into two people...It’s a fork in the road: the person who experienced the procedure and the person who didn’t. It’s like leaving a version of myself alone with the pain, abandoning him. (64)

84 This point anticipates the amnesiac wandering as the subject of the final two chapters in this dissertation.
As an ontological postmodernist fiction, Lerner’s work represents just this—multiple selves abandoned, and in flux, just as Kafka’s Odradek is left to wallow in oblivion. Yet, his companion Liza retorts, both off-handedly mocking and profoundly debunking his concern: “You already have amnesia. We have this conversation every day.” (ibid.) While amnesia properly foregrounds multiple selves excluded from history, the binary of amnesia/non-amnesia is a false one in terms of such an ontology of multiplicity, in which various selves are expressed and lived over the course of various pasts. Without a plot or conflict, Lerner’s tale adopts Benjamin’s philosophy of historical materialism for the living and narrating subject in the form of perception and recollection, on the one hand, and perception and amnesia, on the other—recalling and forgetting as an ontological multiplicity.

As I’ve discussed, Lerner’s subject wanders through his various pasts—both real (in the fictional world) and imagined, both unrealized and realized. Ironically, this wandering is made possible through a certain form of non-historical perception, characterized through the disabled mapping of proprioception, an atypical perception that is typified by an octopus, in Lerner’s work, and its inability “to determine the position of its body in the current.” (6) Confusing his own body with that of an octopus that he had just consumed, Lerner momentarily shifts the third person description onto the first person of his own body, continuing the aforementioned sentence with the phrase “particularly my arms,” before returning to a more clinical description of octopus proprioception failure:

...and the privileging of flexibility over proprioceptive inputs means it lacks stereognosis, the capacity to form a mental image of the overall shape of what I touch: it can detect local texture variations, but cannot integrate that information into a larger picture, cannot
read the realistic fiction the world appears to be. What I mean is that my parts were coming to possess a terrible neurological autonomy not only spatial but temporal...

Cast out of time and similar to the multiple selves of a disrupted amnesiac consciousness, Lerner’s inability to map his reality confounds both spatial and temporal coherence. Here, Lerner’s weakened mapping straddles the opacity and joyous intensity that Jameson reads in Lacan’s schizophrenia as a postmodern affect:

First breakdown of temporality suddenly releases this present of time form all the activities and intentionalities that might focus it and make it a space of praxis; thereby isolated, that present suddenly engulfs the subject with undescrivable vividness...This present of the world...here described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, a high. (26-27)

Lerner’s narrator, in perceiving subjects and objects whose irrelevant nature and non-futurity take on particular value beyond their contexts or commodity value, has both negative and positive reactions in representing and reacting to such cognizance. While working as a volunteer with Roberto on his dinosaur project, the narrator hears Roberto’s nightmarish dream and then describes a corresponding but embodied sensation in the same terms:

An increasingly frequent vertiginous sensation like a transient but thorough agnosia in which the object in my hand, this time a green pair of safety scissors, ceases to be a familiar tool and becomes an alien artifact, thereby estranging the hand itself, a condition brought on by the intuition of spatial and temporal collapse or, paradoxically, an overwhelming sense of its sudden integration, as when a Ugandan warlord appears via
YouTube in an undocumented Salvadorean child’s Brooklyn-based dream of a future wrecked by dramatically changing weather patterns and imperial juridical system that dooms him to statelessness; Roberto, like me, tended to figure the global apocalyptically. (14)

For the subject, agnosia—a failure to process sensory input—is narrated in terms of a child’s dream, alternately fragmented from subjective consciousness, estranging a body and its cognitive map, and then integrated entirely through a radical collapse of space and time. Jameson’s affective register of both poles, in schizophrenic experience, of both anxiety and of “a high,” is similarly narrated during an episode of drug use while a resident writer in Malfa, focusing the use as both dissociated and euphoric. Absolutely shattered in this altered experience, Lerner’s protagonist collapses space and time to the point of dissolution, becoming a “relation,” and then nothing at all, holding onto the “terror at my personality’s dissolution.” Out of sheer desperation, he lights a cigarette, hoping for a sharp reminder of the familiar embodiment that he had cast off, but only to discover that he “had no sense of the arm or lips as mine, had no proprioception.” (186) Euphoric and/or horrific, the narrating subject undergoes shuffled constellations that bring certain subjectivity to a standstill, liberating the subject from a narrative subjectivity, if not turning any subjectivity into absolute objectivity.

In a comparable but far more euphoric conclusion, the fullness of identity with an experience approximates the amnesiac narrative that the author character of “The Golden Vanity” experiences during his euphoric ride home from the dentist, celebrating and mourning the passing of his amnesiac self’s perception for its non-place in autobiographical memory:
I won’t remember this. This is the most beautiful view of the city I have ever seen, the most perfect experience of touch and speed...and I won’t remember it; the drugs will erase it. And then, glowing with the aura of imminent disappearance, it really was the most beautiful view, experience...That he would form no memory of what he observed and could not record it in any language lent it a fullness, made it briefly identical to itself, and he was deeply moved to think this experience of presence depended upon its obliteration. (81)

While he later concludes, upon recounting the memory after the drugs had worn off, “I remember it, which means it never happened,” (ibid.) the protagonist’s fictional character belies its author’s compositional—and self-compositional—truism: to include all pasts, all selves, as they occurred, even if they never were encoded within autobiographical memory.

Liberating a mundane object from its history and cognizing the object as a work of art, on the other hand, plays out in this work in far more controlled ways, if only because the liberation is observed by a narrating subject, though the perception of such liberation is narrated in similar terms of an altered consciousness. One particularly extended example of such liberation takes the form of instant coffee on a grocery shelf, one of a few remaining objects in a history that anticipates a hurricane of apocalyptic proportions. With an imagined collapse of institutions, the author cognizes the coffee’s various participating economies, liberating it from its bare commodity value. The affective register of seeing the world differently in both expecting its end and arresting its progress—and attending to its profane elements—approximates feeling “stoned,” recalling the drug use referenced above and the euphoria as an identifying characteristic of Jameson’s postmodern affect:
I want to say I felt stoned, did say so to Alex, who laughed and said, “Me too,” but what I meant was that the approaching storm was estranging the routine of shopping just enough to make viscerally aware for both the miracle and insanity of the mundane economy. (19)

Here, the schizophrenic duality of both high/anxiety is inflected in the object world’s participating economy—and its horizon of liberation from said economy. Indeed, after reflecting on the various participating economies of the instant coffee, the author continues:

It was as if the social relations that produced the object in my hand began to glow within it as they were threatened, stirred inside their packaging, lending it a certain aura—the majesty and murderous stupidity of that organization of time and place and fuel and labor becoming visible in the commodity itself now that planes were grounded and the highways were starting to close.

Thus, with the conditions of its production slowed and estranged, the coffee becomes less of a commodity and more of a ruin or even an aestheticized art object, entering its projected post-history and stirring its observer into an altered mind state. For Theodor Adorno, who theorized about authentic art, “the shock aroused” by the art object in which “recipients lose their footing” (1997, 244) is “a feature of genuine aesthetic experience,” (147) in Brian O’Connor’s reading, a “self-forgetting” that is, too, a “dereification.” Here, too, Lerner’s protagonist is stirred by the potential liberation of the object from its reified, commodity value. And even when this future turns out to be a past that happened but never occurred—the hurricane never hits, and so this past, in anticipating an apocalyptic future, never comes to pass—he wonders about the shared sensation between himself and the coffee. Dismissing “apocalypse” and “utopia” as insufficient,
he decides that the feeling, of such shared liberation, is “a fullness indistinguishable from being emptied” (133)—an irreparable state at history’s end.

Recalling the amnesiac self’s perception, by definition, does not leave it to a past discontinuity; recalling the past and unrealized future of a material object unfolds its bare possibility. However, as narrated, the amnesiac’s experience of the aura as imminent disappearance, and the potentially liberated coffee’s “certain aura” that fades echoes Benjamin’s sense of the aura regarding the art object’s commoditization through distance in history and space, and it anticipates the halo at history’s end that the unchangeable object of history retains. For Benjamin, in his essay on the same topic, “what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art if the latter’s aura,” as “the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced art from the sphere of tradition” (“Technology” 254). In this sense, the auras in Lerner’s text reinscribe the absolute singularity of the subject’s experience or the object’s instantiation. However, in writing the aura into a text about not only of passing value but of coming value, of value of the world to come, Lerner references Agamben’s conception of the “irreparable” as redemptive in a negative theology of sorts—expressed in the image of an aura-like “halo”:

Redemption is not an event in which what was profane becomes sacred and what was lost is found again. Redemption is, on the contrary, the irreparable loss of the lost, the definitive profanity of the profane. But, precisely for this reason, they now reach their end—the advent of a limit. (Community 101)

The coffee, in other words, realizes its full profanity. In so doing, it is redeemed. However, such redemption forbids closure—it is not a transformation of profane to sacred, but a deepened
articulation of its own being. Not unlike Stein’s “unbreakable” fragment, the “irreparable” is broken, but beyond repair. In its freedom from mastery and control, it has no essence to be preserved or historical destiny to be maintained.

In his continued philosophy of a political theology of redemption, Agamben offers a second twist on the status of the redeemed and irreparable historical material as redeemed by reading it through Saint Thomas’s treatise on halos:

One can think of the halo, in this sense, as a zone in which possibility and reality, potentiality and actuality, become indistinguishable. The being that has reached its end, that has consumed all of its possibilities, thus receives as a gift a supplemental possibility...The imperceptible trembling of the finite that makes its limits indeterminate and allows it to blend, to make itself whatever, is the tiny displacement that every thing must accomplish in the messianic world. (ibid.)

As a gift that comes after the fact, then, the halo allows the subject to return, from a state of completion, to a state of indeterminacy, to hover, even beyond history’s end, between potentiality and actuality. The gift, in other words, is the liberation from closure itself—and an affirmation, in other words, of the ethical (and if you like, materially theological) necessity for wandering as a cognitive base and ethical orientation.

In thinking then about the messianic end, the post-historical liberation of the historical object, while redemptive, forbids closure—or at least not in a narrative sense—and encourages, even at history’s irreparable standstill a certain indeterminacy, a waiting, that approximates a phenomenology of wandering. In Lerner’s narrative, then, the work’s conclusion regarding its nature and in its address to its readers fulfills Agamben’s imperatives. Once again, at the advent
of a super-storm, time seems to come to an end and multiple histories emerge through an altered perception. Remembering “bustling uptown neighborhoods...let alone Brooklyn...was like trying to recall a different epoch.” As the sensation of time collapses, a certain equidistance from all memories overcomes the narrator, with physical absences—the twin towers (237)—and historical absences—“the fireworks celebrating the completion of the bridge exploded above us in 1883” (239) taking their places alongside the invisible present. Even bare perception of social relations seems to collapse in the narrator’s mind—“in the absence of streetlights and established order there was a long moment in which I couldn’t tell if they were begging or threatening to rob us, making a demand”—losing a “social proprioception,” an ability to read social relations. As a perception that can’t distinguish between histories and memories with the possible future of history’s end, it wanders throughout them all as the narrator’s body wanders through an arrested city; at the tale’s end, even the cabs shuttle between “multiple worlds.” (237) In projecting towards the very end of history—and book—he repeats: “everything will be as it had been.” (239)
Chapter 3: Wandering With Sebald—History’s Collection and Cognition

Formally speaking, Hari Kunzru writes in a review of *10:04*, Ben Lerner’s work “belongs to an emerging genre, the novel after Sebald” for its dissolution of plot and character “held together by occasional photographs and a subjectivity that hovers close to (but is never quite identical with) the subjectivity of the writer.”\(^{85}\) For its use of photography and semi-autobiographical narrator, Lerner certainly follows in Sebald’s footsteps. However, of not only stylistic but thematic inheritance, Lerner’s preoccupation with narrating historicity itself through a postmodernist cognition is borne out of Sebald’s *oeuvre*. For both Sebald and Lerner, the past becomes citable in all its moments through the animated cognition of such patient waiting and cognized wandering.

For both authors, *wandering* through the materials of memory and history forbids certain closure. However, for Lerner, the emphasis falls on wandering through the divergences in memory, which makes possible various *subjective* histories, whereas for Sebald, the wandering narrator not only reimagines human history, but the pilgrim-as-wanderer uncovers the natural history that wanders through human history, recovering not only memory’s but history’s shared material and movement between the social and the human. For Lerner, writing a contemporary cosmopolitan memoir of possible histories by reinscribing possible pasts and futures redeems his sense of history, and for Sebald, a countryside English pilgrimage is an opportunity for recollection that undoes diachronic history by reading relations among history’s spaces and materials, rather than its sequences and temporalities.

\(^{86}\) Notably, the recent film made about Sebald’s life, work, and death highlighted both the affect of patience and what it might mean to write after Sebald. See *Patience (After Sebald)* Dir. Grant Gee. Soda Pictures, 2011. DVD.
As a work of wandering, then, Sebald’s work is not only lyrically stylized, like Lerner after him, but it is a poetics of history itself remembered. At once anti-narrativist and utterly concerned with cognizing and recalling history’s dissolutions, as Kathy Behrendt has suggested, Sebald focuses entirely on history’s material well beyond the subjective experience of such recollection. With an emphasis on history over subjectivity, then, Sebald’s concern shuttles between the poles of mourning and melancholy while attending to the dissolution of history’s very materials and their place within and without history. In this chapter, I continue to explore the ethics of a remembering subject articulating, recollecting, and rethinking history’s very materiality; while a language of the subjective, affective registers of mourning and melancholy is harnessed for this argument, this chapter’s focus is angled less towards an ontological multiplicity, as was the case for Lerner’s narrator, and more towards an ethics of the recalled object as realized in the subject’s cognitive motion of wandering.

Sebald’s Non-Form

To start, I assume, like J.J. Long, that Sebald’s work is, structurally speaking, not only digressive but always already digressive. As an inheritor and binder of Romantic tropes of autobiography and travel-narratives, Sebald’s innovative prose fiction, as Sebald himself has termed it, has tested the patience of popular and even scholarly audiences. Geoffrey Dyer notes, for example, in reading Sebald’s Rings of Saturn that the reader is forced to attend with “patience-straining

---

87 See Kathy Behrendt’s “Scraping Down the Past: Memory and Amnesia in W. G. Sebald’s Anti-Narrative,” *Philosophy and Literature* 34.2 (October 2010): 394-408.
89 Sebald repeatedly termed his genre-less work of travelogue, autobiography, and lyrical history as “prose fiction” in interviews. See, for example, “Ghost Hunter: An Interview with Eleanor Wachtel” in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald* ed. Lyne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 37-62.
diligence” that proceeds “in tandem with the narrator’s weary tramping.” Mark McCulloh’s summary of the criticism leveled at Sebald’s elusive narration is equally blunt: McCulloh notes how “Sebald has been criticized for offering the reader little in the way of plot,” while the narrative movement that is generated in Sebald is principally “associative and digressive,” and primarily “generated by travel.” (2003, 14) Indeed, while the long tradition of digression, in the history of literature, celebrates the pleasures of digression for their escapist privilege, in Sebald’s work, digression is the rule, not the exception. In Long’s words, “digression is all-pervasive and as such cannot be seen as something that delays arrival at or wanders from the point of the narrative, but must rather be seen as the point.” (203) As such, critics Peter Arnds and Claudia Albes, ascribe a Deluzian rhizome to its inescapable and non-centered structure and flattened and shallow roots; Nico Israel alters the structural image of the rhizome by reading the thematic and narratological tension between repetition and progression in Sebald’s work as distinctly that of the spiral.

As works of radicalized digression, indeed, of wandering, Sebald’s work attends to history’s losses with a brutal and unforgiving eye. Such absolute attention to “destruction” overwhelms his works’ narrators; “even where the evidence does not fully support such narratives,” Carolyn Duttlinger has argued, the narrator discovers “preexisting patterns” of “persecution” and “death.” (109) While I will take issue with such an extreme and somewhat

---

92 J.J. Long paraphrases Albes’s position as follows: “The Rings of Saturn is a decentred text, not only in the sense that the narrator’s spatio-temporal co-ordinates are repeatedly decentred by the chronotopes of other stories, but also in the sense that the dense network of meanings that accrues around each signifier turns the text into a rhizomatic structure from which there is no escape, and within which there is no hierarchy.” in Long, 194. For his reference, see Albes, Claudia. 2002. ‘Die Erkundung der Leere. Anmerkungen zu W. G. Sebalds”englischer Wallfahrt” Die Ringe des Saturn’, Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft, 46: 290-1.
limiting reading of Sebald, I agree with Eluned Summers-Bremner who has noted that Sebald’s work of “history’s losses” does not enable its reader to “imaginatively incorporate those losses and go forward intact and unchanged” (306). Indeed, Sebald’s work is far more interested in the material of historical memory than in crafting and tracking a narrative catharsis of any sort.

Summers-Bremner is correct, at least in a formal sense: Sebald’s nearly genre-less oeuvre of deeply exilic prose and poetic memoir, travelogue, and associative biography and autobiography eludes a neat narrative-driven catharsis in its sometimes literal and always cognitive peripatetic wanderings and loosely spiraling associations that, in multiple registers, invoke personal and collective memories. Further, Sebald’s inter-weaving throughout his work of an oblique photographic montage only seems to enforce the narrator’s—and reader’s—deep fixation on ‘history’s losses’: the photographs themselves read like the very artifacts of history’s losses, as they retain profound residual flaws, are always without source and caption, and frequently and awkwardly interrupt textual syntax.

94 The work of weaving is an important metaphor in Sebald’s work, as I will discuss later in terms of silk’s material history. In relating the project of writing to weaving in Sebald’s vision of spiraling repetition—a figure that both repeats and progresses—Nico Israel writes the following: “Yet while silk weaving (like writing) can never entirely be extricated from the all-too-human cruelties of resource extraction and inequitable distribution, the very fact of spiral silk spinning, its cultivation by humans, and its appearance in fabrics of use and beauty bears witness in the text to a different mode of apprehension than that of the grid, even if most weaving must follow the weft and the warp of the loom.” (221) In a less imagistic and more inter-textual vein, Silke Horstkotte has argued that three interdiscursive aspects of Sebald’s image-text—intertextual, intermediol, and intericonic—undermine the notion of textual ‘authenticity,’ or semiotic transparency, in “Photo-Text Topographies: Photography and the Representation of Space in W.G. Sebald and Monika Maron,” Poetics Today 29.1 (Spring 2008), 49-78.

95 In what is perhaps the first essay on Sebald’s image-text layout, Noam Elcott writes that beyond, or ‘more than text or image alone, their rapport in layout dictates the ambivalent position of photography in Sebald’s oeuvre.’ Noam Elcott, “Tattered Snapshots and Castaway Tongues: An Essay at Layout and Translation with W.G. Sebald,” The Germanic Review 79.3 (2004), 205.
Rings Around Memory

As his most obviously digressive text, Sebald’s Rings of Saturn: An English Pilgrimage [Die Ringe des Saturn: Eine englische Wallfahrt] (1995, 1998) digresses not only narratologically but cognitively and ontologically, as well—the text itself, Long notes, “re-literalizes the dead metaphor contained in the word ‘digression’ in its interest in ‘a stepping aside’, the Latin ‘dis-grandi.’” (194) The work is both an aimless wandering, and a goal-directed pilgrimage, as suggested in its misleading sub-title alone, and paradigmatic, in his oeuvre, as concerned with the cognizance of historical multiplicity and historicity—a thematic apparent from the work’s saturnine title connoting astrological melancholy.

The work is ostensibly a travelogue of Sebald’s 1992 walking tour of the bare Suffolk County countryside of East Anglia, currently one of England’s least populated counties but historically laden with traces of England’s imperial past. On his tour, Sebald encounters crumbling seaports and medieval ruins, occasions for extensive and tangential meditations that are both profoundly personal and broadly historical. Ultimately, the “paralyzing horror” Sebald experiences “when confronted with the traces of destruction” likely forces a mental breakdown, for he recounts, at the very beginning of his text, that “Perhaps it was because of this that, a year to the day after I began my tour, I was taken into hospital in Norwich in a state of almost total immobility.” (3) It is only a year after his discharge from the Norwich hospital that Sebald assembles his notes and begins to compose his work, and so his travelogue is not only written in retrospect, but it is told with a narrative voice that associates both the past and present

97 Strangely, Sebald is killed in a car accident in the very same town of Norwich, only 9 years later.
grammatical tenses, thus adding an additional layer of remembered associations and narrative complexity.  

As a work that performs memory in its composition, then, it straddles modernity’s (dis)junction, vacillating between the memory recollected in the present and history left for the past—in Pierre Nora’s terminology, the lieux de mémoire, or “hybrid places,” that “without commemorative vigilance” of a remembering in the present, “history would soon sweep them away.”  

Modernity’s trauma, then, is Sebald’s own, even as he attempts a commemorative resistance—a firm ethical stance—in the face of history’s assimilating force through an active form of non-narrativity, wandering about history’s ruins and materials beyond history’s temporality. Writing as well at the end of the twentieth century, Sebald anticipates Andreas Huyssen’s insights into the social function of the museum—and the accompanying “museal gaze”—as a preserving function for the subject in the face of the “everyday present” generated by accelerated modernization and informational hyperspace.  

For Sebald, history’s ruins, even when absented of their memorializing status and significance, must be cognized as a gesture and model for the poetics, cognition, and ethics of memory at the century’s end.

In a roving account of history’s ruins, then, Sebald’s work is, ostensibly, a work of mourning. However, as a hybrid site of cognition that is both a fixed melancholy in its non-narrativity and active in its mindful tracing through history’s materials, Sebald seems to recall—and wander between—two of Freud’s categories for commemorating loss. In his Mourning and Melancholia, Freud defines melancholy as the failure of the subject’s ego to transfer his libidinal

---

98 I use the word “narrative” here to denote the telling itself; on the possibilities for narrativist and non-narrativist readings of Sebald, see Kathy Behrendt’s “Scraping Down the Past: Memory and Amnesia in W. G. Sebald’s Anti-Narrative,” Philosophy and Literature 34.2 (October 2010): 394-408.


100 See Andreas Huyssen, Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia (New York: Routledge, 1994).
attachment from the lost object to a new and present object. The productive work of mourning, for Freud, is the successful transfer, investment, and establishment of ego-attachments; the melancholic subject, however, retains his fixated gaze on the absent libidinal object that is, too, the subject’s absent ego.101

Where Freud outlined the psychoanalytic model of normative mourning and non-normative melancholy, philosophers of the twentieth century encountered certain impasses in the ethics of mourning articulated—impasses that Sebald seems to have undertaken. In the personal and historical work of mourning, considered by Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, speaking definitively about the implications of the deceased’s life-work and memory, appropriating the deceased’s life-work and memory for personal or political purposes, or embodying the deceased’s life work and memory violates the essential human rights of the deceased—namely, the inalterability and impenetrability of the deceased’s memory, narrative, and work. Yet, to leave silent the work of memorializing altogether is to abandon the ethical vision of the material historicist; as Walter Benjamin reproaches us in his final manifesto “On the Concept of History,”

The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that even the dead [emphasis his] will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious. (“History” 391)

Writing at the end of and about a century in which loss of life has been compounded by not only a loss of memory, but a loss of ruins memorializing memory that is, life lost to history altogether, Sebald’s project strives to speak of the dead, at the very least. Each time we suffer loss, Derrida writes, we must recognize “our friend to be gone forever, irremediably absent […]

for it would be unfaithful to delude oneself into believing that the other living *in us* is living *in himself.*” (21) The post-structuralist critique of mourning walks a fine line: to mourn another is to mourn the loss of one’s own apprehension of that other—nothing more: to mourn another is to speak *for* the dead. Still, something must be said, even if a failed gesture: In the wake of Paul de Man’s death, Derrida writes how “speaking is impossible”, but “so too would be silence or absence or a refusal.” (5)

Michel Foucault’s preface to his never-written *Lives of Infamous Men* acts as a certain model for resolving Derrida’s problematic and Benjamin’s alternate historicity in Foucault’s discussion of the limits of and possibilities for speaking for and about the deceased’s body and memory. In laying out his initial impulse for constructing his project, Foucault states that “for a long time” he thought of presenting his study of fragment-lives touched by power “in a systematic order, with a few rudiments of explanation, and in such a way that it would exhibit a minimum of historical significance” (280). He decided against this systematic method of ordering and organizing, and instead “resolved simply to assemble a certain number of texts, for the intensity they seem to [...] have” (ibid.). In stating his project as such—namely, as an assemblage of certain texts without explanation of historical contextualization and signification, Foucault touches upon notions of historicity that tend more towards the constellational or relational potential for historical fragments than their actual systematic ordering and organizing. He presents verbal “gestures” (282) to demonstrate how discourses of power both condemn and immortalize the fragment lives of his study, gestures that forbid representation and portraiture, but bear witness to the intersection of power and the individual’s very real fate. In writing about the apparatus of writing that recorded these fragment-lives, Foucault offers a new model for memorializing, for speaking of the dead, and for articulating a rights of the deceased: he
maintains editorial and imaginary distance, but seeks relationality of the fragment-lives—in the greatest possible number of ways—with other textual (historical, cultural, literary) discourses. In Foucault’s words, this memorializing work seeks to present “fragments of discourse trailing the fragments of a reality they are a part of.” (ibid.) Assuming Derrida’s impulse to mourn, even if mourning is a failed gesture, while adapting Benjamin’s model of historicity along with Foucault’s notion of conjuring fragment-lives, we can move towards Sebald’s method of representing the ruins of history.

**Melancholic Gaze in Space-Time**

Unlike either extreme of transference or fixity, of speaking for or maintaining silence, Sebald’s unique iteration of visual melancholy, of a narrative cognition of history’s dissolution, and recreation—in short, of history’s incessant motion and activity—allows for a middle ground, perhaps a hybrid, of both melancholy and mourning, of a silence and a saying. Sebald’s ironic “English pilgrimage” admits various aesthetic and phenomenological ambivalences through his generic violations and hybridities, as well as his embodied and performative rambles through his personal and collective memory. An ethical outcome of Sebald’s active melancholy, I show, realizes the mourned object’s necessarily creative reconstitution. Throughout my reading of Sebald’s image-text, I note his implementation of conceptual motifs in the perspectival and formal choices in these visual elements. Of central importance to my visual analysis is the inclusion of the shadow, the phenomenon of mirroring, the choice of a creaturely perspective, and the relation of distinctly formal elements amongst thematically related images. By closely reading these imagistic features and their relations, I further my argument regarding the uniquely visual and relational nature of the paradoxically transformative fixity that Sebald’s text
demands. In the end, I suggest that such attentiveness admits to the radical alterity of the remembered object through a narrative of highly spatialized wandering objectivity, even as it observes the object’s temporally finite bounds in its dissolution and the subject’s cessation through an interrupted and, finally, fragmented cognition.

To secure certain perspectival terms unique to reading Sebald’s *Rings of Saturn*, then, we must first address how Sebald situates the melancholic gaze within a spatio-temporal framework. Beaches, in Sebald, stand as useful figures for exploring the way in which spatial awareness trumps temporal awareness, for beaches are the desolate landscapes that, in their marginal locus, wash the world clean of generations of history and civilization. The fishermen, for Sebald, who occupy the beaches of Lowestoft on England’s northeastern shore “just want to be in a place where they have the world behind them, and nothing before them but emptiness” (52). With their occupation of the eroding shore that brought ruin to the once thriving medieval seaports and strongholds, the fishermen not only stand as the melancholic model, fixated upon the emptiness of the sea, but as a possible portal to what Sebald later terms an “eternity” (59).

The eternity, here, is not metaphysical or ethical—it is, instead, the positively recurring valence given to the melancholic gaze, one that allows for the dissolution and recreation of the materially oceanic world. Mark McCulloh writes how in Sebald’s work, paradoxically “it is transience itself that seems a necessary part of the sensation of timelessness afforded by intense and immediate aesthetic experience.” (“Destruction” 404) In this sense, Sebald’s “eternity” is not

---

102 I should note that my comments engage peripherally the great tradition of photography criticism, from the celebration of photographic Realism by the Victorians to the lamentation and cultural critique of such Realism by Baudelaire and, later, the Modernists. Ultimately, I wish to harness Marius de Zayas’s general distinction regarding the truth value of art and photography that ‘Art presents to us what we may call the emotional or intellectual truth; photography the material truth.’ See Marius de Zayas’s “Photography,” *Camera Work*, 43 (June 1913): 38, and Walter Benjamin’s particular thoughts regarding caption-less photography: ‘captions…understand the photography which turns all the relations of life into literature, and without which all photographic construction must remain bound in coincidences.’ See Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” trans. Howard Eiland, *et. al., Selected Writings 1931-1934* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007) 507-530.
boundless time, inclusive of multiple histories, as Lerner foregrounds it in 10:04, but of boundless *space* in which multiple times have occurred, dissolved, and been reconstituted; it is this acute spatial awareness that then foregrounds the transience of the present history. Gilles Deleuze writes of a similar “world time,” a “fundamental state of time” that exceeds the “pointlessness of an evocation of the past” (*Cinema 2* 114) through an articulation of “the becoming impossible of evocation” in Orson Welles’s cinema. In illustrating both temporal forms, he explains “But there is no confusion in this; these are two different states of time, time as perpetual crisis and, at a deeper level, time as primary matter, immense and terrifying, like universal becoming.” (115)

Sebald’s use of photography here performs this distinct attentiveness to a timeless space, or a time constituted as a universal becoming, in the autochthonic, Deluzian sense. Observe the photograph interjected into the text on page 51 of *Rings*; the coastline fades into the distance, the beach seems to absorb the minute tents of what Sebald terms ‘the last stragglers of some nomadic people,’ and the sea’s horizon seems to meet abruptly with the sky’s haze. The photograph is paradigmatic for much of Sebald’s work: it is blurred, shadowy, and even opaque at points. The dreamily surreal aesthetic effect of material space here greatly outweighs any interest in photographic realism.103

---

103 In this sense the photographic gaze, in Sebald’s work, is surreal, and in this sense, it follows the example of the great Surrealist and Archivist, Walter Benjamin. Susan Sontag calls Benjamin photography’s most original and important critic, partially because Benjamin’s great project of literary criticism that was to consist entirely of quotations (See his *Das Passagen-Werk*, for example) reads like the ideal photographer’s activity: it implies a claim to invisibility, a disdain for message-mongering, and an interest in retaining the inherent specificity of the photographed object—the particular and deeply historically contingent “that has been,” as Barthes terms it in his great work on photography, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010) 77. Certainly Sebald’s photography is quite Benjaminian in this regard. However, of even more related interest to our inquiry is Benjamin’s conception of the aura and its relation to photography. In both the essay titled “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version” trans. Howard Eiland, *et. al.*, *Selected Writings Vol. 3, 1935-1938* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007) 101-33, as well as in his essay titled “Little History of Photography,” trans. Howard Eiland, *et. al.*, *Selected Writings 1931-1934* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007) 507-30, Benjamin suggests that it is through the inherently modern possibility for reproducibility that photography liberates its imagistic medium from the fetishistic aura of distance and history. In a way, photography does not age the same way
The photographic gaze, then, foregrounds spatial eternity or material presence, despite the transformation of the subject of the gaze in material form. In what follows, I suggest that it is the particular motif of the “shadow” that haunts both Sebald’s textual narrative and photographic gaze as a certain correlation to this temporal transience but material fixity. Tracing a particular motif in Sebald’s work is particularly daunting in that his writing echoes, spirals, and spawns its own inter- and intra-textual web, so it may be most useful to examine the first occurrence of the shadow in Sebald’s imagistic text and outline possible relations to this first encounter. Ultimately, the shadow in and of the image stands as both a visual indicator for a determined mortality—a “deadness” already present in the living or relevant subject, a visible trace, perhaps—as well as an indicator of future material, textual, or even hermeneutic afterlives. Attending to the shadow’s presence in the subject passing into history, then, is an ethical orientation that sustains the departing subject’s material alterity in content or memory, even as its form shifts—and wanders—towards dissolution. In short, it is an ethics of ruins, of speaking of the ruin—the remains of the dead, broadly figured—that sustains the ruin’s history apart from memory.

I suggested in my introduction that wandering, articulated through the aesthetic form of gesture, in Benjamin’s reading of Kafka, generated a comparable form of attentiveness to the shadowy distortions, foregrounding the very edge of perception and ontological being. Of course, many have noted Sebald’s keen interest in citing Kafka explicitly—or without paintings might; in Sontag’s formulation, photography is “aesthetically indestructible” because it is more akin to architecture that looks even better “tarnished, stained, or cracked.” See Susan Sontag, On Photography (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1977) 79.

104 I should note that such a generalized formulation regarding the “vision” or gaze of the photograph was coined by Paul Valery in his 1939 talk ‘Centenary of Photography,’ Occasions: Collected Works in English of Paul Valery, Vol 11, trans. Roger Shattuck and Frederick Brown (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970) 158-67, when he identified photographic vision as the way in which man’s “seeing” begins to change—as well as its accompanying effects on art and literature.
quotations, as it were. By drawing our attention to what Benjamin terms the textually gestural—that is, the formative moment between, or within, the content of narration—Sebald foregrounds, and brings to consciousness, the critical importance of this moment of interruption.

Of particular interest to us, in thinking about Benjamin’s materialist theology, is Benjamin’s theorizing of melancholy in comparable terms to Sebald’s literary performance. As Caroline Duttlinger has shown, Benjamin theorized melancholy as necessarily static and mobile (110). Not only does the melancholic have an “inclination for long journeys,” Duttlinger reminds us, but in such journeys, the melancholic tends to focus in “on particular objects with specific persistence.” (110) With such persistence, Benjamin suggests that melancholic attentiveness paradoxically rescues such objects, “dissociated from their everyday context,” from pervading indifference and oblivion (ibid.). Such a secular, humanistic ethic, then, allows the re-collection of the lacuna that had been elided through a fixed perception, which paradoxically, in an active mode, wanders about.

In thinking, then, about the shadow as a fissure missed through inattention, the reader of Rings of Saturn is astounded by the attention Sebald pays to shadow-like manifestations in various physical and historical figurations. Consider the “blotches” that appear on Michael Parkinson’s face after he is found dead (6); the “scarlet and purple blotches” that mottle the “plaster-colored faces” of a number of family portraits found in the abandoned Somerleyton Manor (36); the “scarlet blotches” on the face of the waitress serving Sebald at the once-famous but now-deserted Albion hotel (43); and the “redness on the throat” (275) after the omni-present silkworm’s last skin sloughing. In fact, it is this final blotching of the silkworm’s that offers some signification to these recurring echoes: the silkworm’s blotch anticipates or “heralds the

---

105 Indeed, at least two of the courses listed on Sebald’s faculty page at University of East Anglia at the time of his death were in Kafka’s literature
onset of metamorphosis” (275) that it will soon undergo. This brief, naturalist gloss acts as the key to the meta-function this motif serves: the shadowy decay inherent in all of these dead or dying subjects also indicates the emerging—and already present—realization of the dying subject’s material transmigration.106

The shadow is articulated as a site of ethical discovery in cultural history—forward-shadowing, as it were, the aestheticized ethical impulse that Benjamin noted in both the melancholic and in Kafka’s work. Through multiple degrees of association—first Sebald seeks Thomas Browne’s skull, then he briefly recounts Browne’s biography—he culminates his associations with speculating about the likelihood of Browne’s presence at the dissection of the criminal that inspired Rembrandt’s canonical painting An Anatomy Lesson. In his consideration of the painting, Sebald writes

And yet it is debatable whether anyone ever really saw that body, since the art of anatomy, then in its infancy, was not least a way of making the reprobate body invisible [...] Though the body is open to contemplation, it is, in a sense, excluded [...] it is with him, the victim, and not the Guild that gave Rembrandt his commission, that the painter identifies. His gaze alone is free of Cartesian rigidity. He alone sees that greenish annihilated body, and he alone sees the shadow in the half-open mouth and over the dead man’s eyes. (13-17)

The inclusion of the shadow in this painting is significant, for it is the shadow to which Rembrandt (and Sebald—and Sebald’s reader) bear witness. The stylistic method by which the

---

106 In a way, such a naturalist motif echoes the remarks of the progenitor of modern photography, Louis Jacques Mendes Daguerre, made in 1839 regarding the Daguerreotype: “the Daguerreotype is not merely an instrument which serves to draw Nature; on the contrary it is a chemical and physical process which gives her the process to reproduce herself.” See L.M.J Daguerre: The History of the Diorama and the Daguerreotype by Helmut and Alison Gernsheim (London: Secker and Warburg, 1956). Even in the photograph’s inception, it was seen as a material emerging from the Natural to speak of and about itself.
painting is included performs Sebald’s very objective: literally, the image interrupts the textual narrative between pages 13 and 16, and it does so without caption and without syntactic explanation. While Sebald’s theorizing and performance of invoking readerly attentiveness is preoccupied with properly ‘seeing’ what others choose not to—neglected, criminalized, or marginalized bodies—what is critical here is the awareness of the shadow that Rembrandt memorializes and that he (and Sebald) alone see; for in a related passage describing Sir Thomas Browne’s idea of mortality, Sebald writes

> On every new thing there lies already the shadow of annihilation. For the history of every individual, of every social order, indeed of the whole world, does not describe an ever-widening, more and more wonderful arc, but rather a course which, once the meridian is reached, leads without fail into the darkness (23-24)

The mark of the shadow, then, is not only the spatialized eternity or the onset of transmigration, but the very mark of contingency—not only of mortality, but of materiality. The shadow, in other words, signifies the wandering underlying history’s material process, a characteristic of the contingent object of history. With a certain ethic here of attentiveness to the subject’s objectivity in Rembrandt’s painting, of particulars irreducible to the whole, such a heightened awareness of pervasive fragmentation, even within the always-present ‘shadow of annihilation’ in ‘every new thing’ is quite refreshing. Remember: only Sebald’s Rembrandt ‘alone sees’ the shadow; he alone sees the marginalized body.

Sebald’s reading and central placement of Sir Thomas Browne’s project, as initially demonstrated above, continues to offer a useful language for Sebald’s own work of historical cognizance. Through considering Browne’s thoughts regarding objects’ material afterlives in both *Urn Burial*, Browne’s “part-archaeological and part-metaphysical treatise” (11), and, later,
while forging a path towards discovering and resurrecting Browne’s very own skull, Sebald introduces the possibility of an end to his own historical associations and wanderings:

Curiously enough, Browne himself, in his famous part-archaeological and part-metaphysical treatise, *Urn Burial*, offers the most fitting commentary on the subsequent odyssey of his own skull when he writes that to be gnaw’d out of our graves is a tragical abomination. But, he adds, who is to know the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried? (11)

Browne’s project defines Sebald’s project, then: Browne’s very own archaeological archiving of found objects both critiques itself in its future-looking anxieties of forced resurrection and informs Sebald’s own project of re-discovering Browne’s material remains. In considering the past histories and present afterlives of unearthed objects, however, much is at stake: “For Browne, things of this kind, unspoiled by the passage of time, are symbols of the indestructibility of the human soul assured by scripture, which the physician, firm though he may be in his Christian faith, perhaps secretly doubts.” (26) Thus, through documenting the miraculously preserved afterlives of these material objects—including, according to Browne’s account, “the circumcision knives of Joshua” (26)—Browne secretly hopes to be saved from oblivion in a similarly material rediscovery by a future archivist. Yet, as Browne notes in the passage cited above—to be “gnaw’d out of our graves” is “a tragical abomination”, and so while he hopes for resurrection, he fears (and is perhaps too aware) that the material resurrection—”the fate of his bones”—will entail a certain violence that even he will be unable to undo.
Even while alive, Browne is already fixated on his own loss of ego, in Freud’s terms; in Sebald’s terms, Browne acknowledges that “the heaviest stone that melancholy can throw at a man is to tell him he is at the end of his nature” (26) so he scrutinizes that which escaped annihilation for any sign of the mysterious capacity for transmigration he has so often observed in caterpillars and moths. That purple piece of silk he refers to, then, in the urn of Patroclus—what does it mean?” (26)

“What does it mean?” stands as a hermeneutics of ontological selves and worlds, a historical inquiry into bare, natural material, and it is a question that will continue to guide Sebald through his associative and peripatetic wanderings as the very cognition of transmigration. As a question that is never resolved in any sense throughout Sebald’s work, “What does it mean?” instead acts as a bridge between the historical material’s past form and its future incarnation. Thus, the world is certainly a stage, in Sebald’s reading of Browne, and the possibility for the recurrence of a particular object—natural or otherwise—in a later history enacting a different role, points squarely to Browne’s crisis: on the one hand, materials undergo a certain violence in resurrection, on the other, as long as humanity asks “what does it mean”—that is, as long as people continue to read ruins, the material world will be reconstituted. This form of resurrection as a recollection of past materials through the work of memory has been theorized by Jacques Derrida, as well. Termed the “afterness of memory” (159) in Gerhard Richter’s commentary,

107 As Eluned Summers-Bremner has noted, not only is Sebald’s fictional voice unsure of the meaning of what is unearthed, but the readerly experience of Sebald’s circuitous mind-meanderings is disorienting in its narrative confusion. She writes that “It is this opening up of the reading experience to the peculiar lostness of the wanderer through alien landscapes, where we don’t know which signs may turn out to be significant, heralding food and shelter, that disables us from the easy narrativity that makes fictions of the past and makes us, as readers, uninvolved observers. The effect of suspended narration, the flatness and iterability of the events described, adds to this spatial uncertainty a difficulty in registering narrative progress as a series of events in time, while narrative portentousness somehow increases. To read Sebald is to lodge temporarily in the experience of exile where life turns around an unknown absence.” (306)
Derrida writes that resurrection, “which is always the formal element of ‘truth,’ a recurrent difference between a present and presence, does not resuscitate a past which had been present; it engages the future.” (Memoires 58)

Various material histories respond obliquely to Sebald’s and Browne’s question in their unfolding presence in Rings. Nico Israel has shown that silk, in particular, saturates the work in its “connection among spirals, catastrophe, and resurrection.” (219) Not only does the silkworm act as the central motif for material resurrection, but it serves a particular purpose in Sebald’s imagination: For Sebald, the recurrence of the silkworm and its prized cocoon strands throughout diverse historical epochs is a doubly effective metaphor for the bare materials that are used to drive civilizations both in their material base and in their material metamorphoses. Nearly every “part” (the book is divided into parts, not chapters) of the history that Rings of Saturn records addresses the usage of silk by various historical figures and bodies: silk is used to hang both criminals and suicides and is used for cloth of mourning shrouds; silkworm cultivation is used by various Chinese, French, English, and German governments at various points in ancient and modern history to fuel economies. Silk is gendered according to the national ethos: in the German Reich, it adopts a masculine valence in its promise of national self-sufficiency and usage for aerial defense (293); in 18th Century Germany it promises “social improvement of the fair sex” (290) in fostering work for women unaccustomed to hard labor. Ultimately, silk is the material that answers Sebald’s initial overture: “What does it mean?” It means inasmuch as it signifies itself, that is, the possibility for eternal recurrence and material rebirth for multiple selves and worlds.

As a nearly melancholic model for the work of mourning, then, Sebald’s text suggests a different sort of what we might imagine as loose fixity, as a mournful, or active, wandering
melancholy. The peculiar nature of this re-staging of the same historical material—be it of a silkworm, photograph, or otherwise—is highlighted in Sebald’s meta-question: “What manner of theatre is it, in which we are at once playwright, actor, stage manager, scene painter and audience?” (80) While Thomas Browne’s knowledge of certain death is counter-balanced with “his belief in the day of resurrection, when, as in a theatre, the last revolutions are ended and the actors appear once more on the stage, to complete and make up the catastrophe of this great piece.” (24), Sebald’s awareness of the utter impossibility of Browne’s spiritual theology is apparent in his problematizing question: what sort of theater is it where the audience and performers are one and the same? For of what significance is this re-staging if there is still absent the distinct consciousness of both performers and observers? In a silent universe, who is aware of such radical drama?

Yet Sebald seems to be quite aware of—not only in inquiry, but in response to—the complications Browne’s spiritualism raises, for as he wanders through the English countryside, he chronicles the ruins he encounters—be they medieval towns, Victorian manors, or abandoned beach towns—with a certain resignation and acceptance of their irretrievable ruin and passage into oblivion. An overlying perspectival awareness is fostered in which Sebald comes to see history from an atemporal vantage point—but cannot make sense of its chaotic clutter. While reflecting on his viewing of the Waterloo Panorama—a domed rotunda that is framed by a mural of the battle at Waterloo—Sebald is prompted again to think of the outlying panoply as “a deserted stage”, and this time, as a stage of history:
This then, I thought, as I looked round about me, is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was. (125)

Unable to make sense of the great ruin of history, Sebald echoes Walter Benjamin’s renown angel of history who “sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.” (“History” 392) Yet, unlike Benjamin’s angel, Sebald’s narrator might not know “how it was” but might still appreciate how ruins “cast us forward in time,” as Brian Dillon puts it—for in a certain historical paradox, “the ruin, despite its state of decay, somehow outlives us.” (11)

Occupying and embodying ruin, Sebald discovers decadence, decay, and an accumulation of inchoate images in his interpersonal interaction with the members of the Ashburys, a family that occupies a small country house at the foot of the Slieve Bloom Mountains in Ireland and with whom Sebald recalls his interactions many years ago. Upon being instructed to check with the now-deserted Ashbury bed and breakfast, both Sebald and his hosts partake of a ghostly dance, in which the greeter, Catherine, “looked right through” him, and she herself “walks in silence,” “barefoot,” vanishing into “the darkness of the background” (209). Not only are the Ashburys physical embodiments of ruinage and relics of time past, but Sebald’s integration into the family is paradoxically traumatic and tempting. At first, he records that

108 For more on Sebald and Benjamin, see, for example, Eric Santner’s On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald. (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 2006); David Kaufmann’s “Angels Visit the Scene of Disgrace: Melancholy and Trauma from Sebald to Benjamin and Back” (Cultural Critique. 70. (Fall 2008): 94-119); and James Chandler’s “About Loss: W.G. Sebald’s Romantic Art of Memory” (The South Atlantic Quarterly 102.1 (Winter 2003): 235-262).
whenever I rested on the that bed over the next few days, my consciousness began to
dissolve at the edges, so that at times I could hardly have said how I had got there or
indeed where I was. Repeatedly I felt as if I were lying in a traumatic fever in some kind
of field hospital. (210)

Thus fully disassociated, Sebald repeatedly feels as if he “was left in a house that had been
looted of everything” (ibid.) Upon departing, Mrs. Ashbury confesses to Sebald as follows:

Unfortunately I am a completely impractical person, caught up in the endless trains of
thought. All of us are fantasists, ill-equipped for life, the children as much as myself. It
seems to me sometimes that we never get used to being on this earth and life is just one
great, ongoing, incomprehensible blunder. (220)

Aware of living in a state of ruin, of post-history, of transitory time between being and oblivion,
Mrs. Ashbury echoes a retrospectival awareness that Benjamin’s angel senses in the great
“catastrophe” of the “single event” of history—the catastrophe of so-called historical progress.
Yet, Sebald is drawn to this state; and he himself confesses that

When Mrs. Ashbury had finished her story, I felt that its significance for me lay in an
unspoken invitation to stay there with them and share in a life that was becoming more
innocent with every day that passed. The fact that I did not do so was a…[sic] failure that
still sometimes seems like a shadow crossing my soul. (220)

Here, Sebald sees a certain attraction in partaking in a state of ruin. This particular form of
melancholy, of fading into an isolated life “more innocent with every day” is tempting for Sebald
in that it no longer engages with the progress of the world; it allows the erosion of the world to
overtake the Ashburys being in its accumulated ruin. Susan Stewart described this descent into oblivion akin to the erasure of the souvenir, the final token of memory from memory itself, as a “reunion with the mother with no corresponding regeneration of the symbolic.” (41) This desired “innocence,” therefore, is not an ethical state, but an innocence of body politics—an innocence of increasingly moving towards baring oneself and embracing oblivion. Finally, as a “shadow,” Sebald’s desire to participate in this family’s trajectory towards oblivion triggers the sudden return of an embodied awareness of mortality, a wandering towards dissolution.

The Photographic Gaze: Text and Memory as Photograph

Interestingly, in his penultimate interaction with the family, Sebald enjoys a slideshow of “mute images of the past” that recalls the years before the Ashburys haunted their present living space. Much as the silkworm both acts within Sebald’s disjointed narrative and offers a theoretical lens for reading Sebald’s text, the slideshow’s description offers a meta-text for reading Sebald’s unexplained usage of uncaptioned pictures throughout his text—even to interrupt sentences, at times. Certainly the “shock of discontinuity,” as John Berger notes, between “the moment recorded and the present moment” (86) is experienced by Sebald in his viewing and our viewing of Sebald’s photography—many of the sites photographed no longer exist, or exist only in ruins. Enacting photography is similarly traumatic, in that “most memories or momentos seem to confirm, prophetically, the later discontinuity created by the absence or death.” (87)

Regarding the technology of the photography, Barthes writes in a similar vein in his Camera Lucida how its bare and immediate testimony of what once was, is in fact, sheer ‘madness,’ as he calls it, for
Until this day no representation could assure me of the past of a thing except by intermediaries; but with the Photograph, my certainty is immediate: no one in the world can undeceive me. The Photograph then becomes a bizarre medium, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: [...] on the one hand ‘it is not there,’ on the other ‘but it has indeed been.’ (115)

What is reassuring, then, about Sebald’s project of what is not only photography but is, somehow, a distinctly textual photography, is that it retains the image of what has “indeed been.” Barthes writes earlier, interestingly enough, that “photography has something to do with resurrection” (82)—not because the subjects of photography recur, but because the photograph repeats mechanically that which is existentially irretrievable. It happened, as Lerner’s protagonist might say, even if it never occurred—and that is enough for an inclusion within history. For Sebald’s project of melancholy, however, the photographic fixation on the loss of self is itself a mechanical gesture that promises future recall for the material object, apart from the irretrievable temporality. Reading in space, rather than time, is the eternal recurrence—and resurrection—of the photography.

With this ethical orientation towards the use of photography in Sebald’s work, his text might be termed hybrid photographic-text: text, photograph, photograph of photograph, even art image—all are constituted within as the theoretical photograph that retains this strange material essence that Barthes imagines. Perhaps it is the strangely archival nature of the images in Sebald’s text that foregrounds the entire text’s tacit photographic agenda. In this regard, it may be useful to cite Benjamin’s own quotation archive:

---

109 See Barthes, where a fuller exposition of such mechanical resurrection is explored (4). Siegfried Kracauer’s conception of photography differs wildly from Barthes’. For Kracauer, photography operates against memory in that it fixes a particular image in history. A memory image, on the other hand, “is loosened from any single moment of remembering.” For more, see Esther Leslie, “Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin” in Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates (New York, NY: Fordham UP, 2010), 126.
The past has left images of itself in literary texts, images comparable to those which are imprinted by light on a photosensitive plate. The future alone possesses developers active enough to scan such surfaces perfectly. Many pages in Marivaux or Rousseau contain a mysterious meaning which the first readers of these texts could not fully have deciphered. (‘Convolute N’ 482)

Photographs (invoked here as a metaphor for text) anticipate “mysterious meanings” that were very possibly indecipherable to their original viewers. In this regard, it should also be recalled that Benjamin’s ideal form of archival pastiche, as embodied in his unpublished Das Passegenwerk, is that which speaks structurally through a work that consists entirely of quotations, all of whose relations, constellations, and after-lives are constantly in a process of interpretation and realization. Benjamin thus preserves the unknown alterity, the “shadow” of history, in such a work of literary fragmentation, even as its reading and (re)collection demands a certain and distinctly fresh relationality both among its texts and between its self and reader. Esther Leslie, in reading Benjamin’s use of photography in his memoirs of Berlin, suggests a similar belatedness to the photography’s forward-looking use of memory:

The camera’s undiscriminating eye absorbs more than is consciously perceived and records it all for later examination. In similar fashion, memory develops belatedly into understanding, just as a photograph snatches an image from time and presents it to the world again only after a process of development. (128)

Of course, in reference to both the belatedness and futurity of memory’s realization, one need only quote Benjamin’s famous aphorism regarding the jetzt-zeit—or now time—the “now of recognizability” that forms the constellation of the past and present at a standstill and into which
the past is blasted and in which “things adopt their true—surrealistic—face.” (“Convolute N” 464)

Creaturely Mourning: The Subject-as-Object

Whereas Summers-Bremner, Judith Ryan,110 and others see despair in Sebald’s melancholic gaze and a clear departure from Benjamin’s redemptive vision of history, I suggest that Sebald’s melancholic gaze has not been properly theorized.111 If his literary fiction wavers between the hope of recurrence and the despair of oblivion, one should remember that the transmigration Sebald proposes is of the peculiar form of theater he bemoans—the theater in which one is both audience and actor. This awareness of one’s bodily affinity with what Eric Santner calls “the creaturely” (xiii) is that non-dualistic awareness of one’s own self as material-in-the-world. Ultimately, such an awareness allows for an ethical mourning of Sebald’s own narratological self, in that it allows for the subtle shifts in this text that transform the narrator from gazing reader to object-to-be-read, or receiver of the gaze.112

111 Some have developed critical theories about Sebald’s use of photography that refuse to theorize positively about his overwhelming ambivalence. See, for example, Silke Horstkotte’s “Photo-Text Topographies: Photography and the Representation of Space in W.G. Sebald and Monika Maron,” Poetics Today 29.1 (Spring 2008), 57: “The space between photography and text in Sebald’s works may be said to function as a gap or fissure in representation, causing the three spatial distinctions to overlap: represented space and the space of representation blend into the extratextual space of the reader, who becomes responsible for an interpretive integration of photography and text. On the one hand, Sebald’s presentation and placement of photographs is always suggestive of a meaning that negates the relegating of the photographic image to a subordinate position; but on the other hand, the lack of direct textual commentary leaves that meaning ambiguous.”
112 Similar to my argument about a non-mourning, non-melancholic, but transformative melancholy, a “loose self,” Kathy Behrendt argues that Sebald’s work traces a middle-ground between both narrativist and non-narrativist schools: “Sebald’s work exemplifies narrative skepticism while conveying a profound sense of the importance of memory. This cuts through the false dichotomy that places concern for memory on the side of the narrativists and treats the anti-narrativist as free to reject or downplay memory’s significance. The implications for the narrative debate about selves are several. One is that the evident importance of memory to narrativism is no assurance that those who value the importance of memory will embrace the narrative outlook. Sebald offers a stark alternative to this outlook—one in which the past and one’s personal connection to it make closure, completeness, and self-unity remote, even inappropriate, aspirations. But conversely, the anti-narrativist needn’t feel compelled to advocate the unimportance of memory in order to sustain her position. There is a host of reasons for believing that a deep and compelling interest in the past is not merely the jurisdiction of the narrativist.” (407)
Certainly such awareness brings its own deep subjective confusion; it is an ethics of the subject, in other words, that attends to the objectivity always already present within the subject itself. In fact, in Sebald’s wandering through Orfordness, an abandoned English island, he is “frightened almost to death” in what is objectively a humbling visual exchange with the “creaturely” embodied in a hare:

In that very fraction of a second when its paralyzed state turned into panic and flight, its fear cut right through me. I still see what occurred in that one tremulous instant with an undiminished clarity. I see the edge of the grey tarmac and every individual blade of grass, I see the hare leaping out of its hiding place, with its ears laid back and a curiously human expression that was rigid with terror and strangely divided; and in its eyes, turning to look back as it fled and almost popping out of its head with fright, I see myself, become one with it. (235)

Sebald’s revelation here seems to be a reversal of how Agamben reads Heidegger’s “Dasein;” in Agamben’s words, “Dasein is simply an animal that has learned to become bored; it has awakened from its own captivation to its own captivation. This awakening of the living being to its own being-captivated, this anxious and resolute opening to a not-open, is the human” (*The Open* 70). However, the bare animality imagined by Sebald in his rupturing exchange with the hare, is a disruptive force in that it undoes his own humanity—it does, in some sense, anticipate his own death.

That such a breakthrough in experiencing the creaturely, the non-human, the objective world appears in terms that suggest mirroring is significant for Sebald, and arguably, is neatly supplemented in a relation of photographic images dispersed throughout his text. Observe the “colorless patch of sky framed in the window” (4), a gridded aperture from his psychiatric ward,
alongside the image of a solitary Chinese quail fenced and enclosed (37). Here, arguably, the quail’s experience is both observed and internalized in Sebald’s own; no relation links the two images other than that of readerly association and distinct visual perspective and emphasis: the quail might see outward what Sebald sees within; and such an association is invoked through both the choice of disconcerting perspective and in the graphic emphasis of netting in both pictures—a visual pattern that evokes, for Nico Israel, mapping as a sort of self-imprisonment in modernity,¹¹³ and in my reading of their correspondence, a simultaneous entrapment and porousness. In this context, a critical intertext that Sebald invokes regarding such an ambivalent creaturely perspective is Kafka’s Gregor Samsa, the “Ungeziefer,” or unspecified vermin of The Metamorphosis; while leaning against the glass, Sebald

[...] Could not help thinking of the scene in which poor Gregor Samsa, his little legs trembling, climbs the armchair and looks out of his room, no longer remembering (so Kafka’s narrative goes) the sense of liberation that gazing out of the window had formerly given him. (5)

Assuming such a creaturely perspective, then, threatens to undermine the very awareness of subjectivity or self-consciousness—to look outward, as a human, is to be transformed into a creature. Wandering, when taken this far, leads to an awareness of the self as an Other.

The photographic gaze, that is, the gaze aware of the shadow, aware of the eternally material, and aware of a dissolution into the creaturely is really an enactment of mirroring (between the human and the creaturely, between the subject and the object, between presence and absence) and resistance to mirroring—a creative, stylized association that is both narcissistic

¹¹³ In reading the window image as a form of mapping, the foil of spiraling (and the subject of his work), Israel writes: “Its grid effectively reduces the Suffolk expanses to a sign of imprisonment, recalling the modern latitudinal and longitudinal mapping of the globe that eventually abetted the earth’s conquering. Here the gestures of mapping and conquering extends, from the perspective of the bedridden narrator, to the sky.” (212)
and delusional that stands as an animating feature in Sebald’s text. It is a gaze that is entirely melancholic, and entirely that of the creative, in other words. In his Stanzas, Giorgio Agamben explicates fully the affinity between these two faculties by pivoting his analysis on the phantasmic nature of the melancholic: the melancholic must imagine a loss that never occurs, and in doing so, the melancholic creates that which never was. Agamben writes, while elaborating upon Aristotle’s theory of the melancholic-as-artist\textsuperscript{114}, that

The traditional association of melancholy with artistic activity finds its justification precisely in the exacerbated phantasmatic practice that constitutes their common trait [...] the imaginary loss that so obsessively occupies the melancholic tendency has no real object, because its funereal strategy is directed to the impossible capture of the phantasm. The lost object is but the appearance that desire creates for its own courting of the phantasm, and the introjections of the libido is only one of the facets of a process in which what is real loses its reality so that what is unreal may become real. (25)

The imagination, in this sense, creates loss in order to capture and recreate. This creative faculty persists under the melancholic’s gaze, and it is the work of the wandering mind and peripatetic narrator of Rings that symbolically ceases its associative spirals through the cessation of mirroring, in the non-closure, the fragmentary ending, of the book’s end.

For as the work comes to a close, Sebald recalls the customary act of mourning, as practiced by his patron saint Sir Thomas Browne, as a covering of all mirrors and landscapes, so that the soul will not be distracted in its movement towards an afterlife. Sebald writes:

And Sir Thomas Browne, who was the son of a silk merchant and may well have had an eye for these things, remarks in a passage of the Pseudodoxia Epidemica that I can no longer find that in the Holland of his time it was customary, in a home where there had

\textsuperscript{114} See, for example, Aristotle’s Problemata XXX.1 953a, 10-14
been a death, to drape black mourning ribbons over all the mirrors and all canvasses depicting landscapes or people or the fruits of the field, so that the soul, as it left the body, would not be distracted on its final journey, either by a reflection of itself or by a last glimpse of the land now being lost forever. (296)

Mirroring here is the associative, productive work of a ‘loose’ melancholy, it is the seductive self-gaze that is at once fixated upon the oceanic ruin and reading Thomas Browne’s skull into its afterlife; and so to cover mirrors, then, is to at once silence the soul and cease its attachments: doing so releases the experience of narrative as spoken and embodied to become object or text-to-be-read. What remains is a productive indeterminacy.

Saturn carries certain melancholic connotations in historical and etymological registers, but the rings of Saturn, as Sebald makes us aware in his encyclopedic epigraph to his work, are transformed and re-constituted materials:

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

In Sebald’s poetics, then, the rings of Saturn are themselves the realization of a transformative possibility for imaginary wandering even in—and perhaps because of—their relation to the fixed, saturnine, melancholic gaze. Form’s transience—and drifting mobility—is a fact of being in the world, but the ethical stance of the subject that honors, recognizes, and attends to its subtle alterity indicated in the shadow both anticipates and follows an object’s transmigration, its passing through and on, its mobile pilgrimage into the next material incarnation. Despite its oceanic form, then, the material world’s procession of becoming is both celebrated and mourned through Sebald’s melancholically photographic gaze. However, in the absence of a subject’s
ethical orientation—in the absence of an ethical subject—memory’s creative recollection becomes lost to history.

With this conclusion, Sebald’s *Rings of Saturn* achieves a work of self-mourning that transcends its melancholic (self)-gaze by offering *itself* as historical object or text to the reader in its own cessation of mirroring and associating. The reader, then, makes sense of the text’s own traumatic melancholy by experiencing it anew—recreating it with each read—and ceasing this search for meaning amongst the historical catastrophe only with the abrupt and traumatic end, or death of the text. The readerly experience of the text, therefore, re-enacts Sebald’s own quest, and it concludes without any resolution other than absorption of the readerly experience back into the creaturely objectivity, in Being, or what Rilke calls “the Open” in his “Eighth Elegy” (the inspiration for Santner’s book title): [“Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreatur / das Offene”]

“With all its eyes the natural world looks out / into the Open.” (1-2) The reader is thus reclaimed by the object-world, much as Sebald’s narrator is reclaimed by the object-world in his simultaneous cessation—from wandering—as narrator and through a (wandering) transmigration into being as text-object.
Chapter 4: Amnesic Fictions: Narrating Beyond Memory

Lerner’s work, as I’ve shown, explores the cognitive base of memory as an ontological multiplicity; Sebald’s work, while less interested in multiplying subjectivities, acknowledges the weight of history’s burden as cognized by the remembering subject. Both works figure memory, and the capacity to remember, as a central presence to the poetics of wandering. Even when memory refuses to contribute to a subject’s narrativity or autobiographical identity, the narrating subject’s basic capacity for recollection and remembered association is assumed by both authors, and as I’ve shown, in the form of wandering.

Absent the capacity to remember, however, what are strategies of narrating and representing experience? Is it possible, in other words, to imagine a narrating identity without a situated memory? It is possible for an amnesic to write a work of memory—a memoir—absent the capacity for recollection and the associated identity with an autobiographical past? As the flipside to Lerner and Sebald, this chapter is not concerned with wandering through too much memory, or wandering within memory—instead, it reads wandering as the very base of perception in amnesic narrators and narration.

Without autobiographical context or even the capacity for recollection, narrative techniques of wandering perception experiment with cognitive mimesis in first or third person forms. As I’ll show, amnesia and amnesic narratives can take varied forms in both fiction and memoir, and so no particular model will be the focus of this chapter’s study. In the case of Kazuo Ishiguro’s The Unconsoled (1995), Ryder, the work’s first-person narrator, exists in a perpetual state of present-tense perception, with only a vague sense of autobiography and purpose as he wanders the streets of a dreamy Central European city. In Maud Casey’s The Man Who Walked Away, Albert Dadas, a historical fugueur, is described by an omniscient third-person narrator as
wandering dissociatively—departing home and arriving elsewhere without an identifiable memory of his travels. And in David Stuart MacLean’s *The Answer to the Riddle is Me*, a work addressed in this dissertation’s conclusion, MacLean begins his amnesic memoir on a train platform in India and without a sense of autobiographical identity. Without insight into memory loss, without insight into the lack of autobiographical context, without the ability to recall lived experience, and without the ability to recollect autobiography, each work adopts various strategies for narrating cognition and representing identity aside for and apart from the normative narrativity and memory that typically constitute subjectivity.

In particular, I discuss how the works’ narrative techniques require any of the following: experimental first person narration in which a character narrates perception absent memory; third person narration describing a character’s fugue states; and first person recollection—a sort of first person/third person hybrid—of estranged perception. In each instance, the narrator must circumvent conventional techniques for narrativity based on recollection and capacity for recall, and in each instance, I show, such narrators offer critiques, in their very performances, through an aestheticized, narratological, and cognitive form of wandering.

In reading these experiments in narratorial consciousness, I focus on the theory and articulation of narrating consciousness beyond the normative limits of intentionality, or Theory of Mind (ToM) and the relation between the literary gesture, as theorized by Benjamin, and disabled narratorial consciousness. With a focus on certain sequences in which discontinuous consciousness overshadows diachronic awareness to such a degree that the singular gesture is the only perceptible experience to be narrated, I suggest that these works challenge the conventionally teleological narrative consciousness of travel narratives through their foreclosure of context. However, I show that such a cognitive problematic has been sufficiently explored
with regards to inquiries into empathy and Theory of Mind with regards to autism, and I suggest that a comparable disability is narrated here, as Theory of Mind demands an awareness and judgment of contextual normativity.

For Levinas, as shown in the introduction to this dissertation, embodied cognition occurs before recognition; for Benjamin, gestural writing—and reading—generates a certain attentiveness. Both phenomenological choices, I’ve shown in my readings of the Romantics, Lerner, and Sebald, carry certain non-normative weights in relation to conventional narrativity, and both are burdened with a significant aesthetic and ethic of attentiveness to the motion of perception and the isolated, perceived gesture. In the genealogy of the wandering narrator, then, we may acknowledge both the form and content of his embodied and cognitive mode: he is preoccupied by gestures in his pre-recognition cognition; in his recollection, he circles about the blindspots of his memory, both frustrated and liberated by the nearly existentialist capacity to make his life anew, unhindered by the structuring, normative forms of autobiographical narrativity.

With the understanding that the poetics of wandering exists in a perceptual space that approximates both consciousness at-a-standstill and the attentiveness generated by the gesture, we can rethink the possibilities for narrative consciousness when represented beyond the normative scale. In particular, in what follows, I suggest that we rethink the limits of narratable consciousness in the absence of memory, a normative Theory of Mind, and a normative capacity for narrativity—and to start, in the narrative of an amnesic wanderer in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled*, an important inheritor of Sebald’s fiction and technique.\(^{115}\) I follow my reading of

---

\(^{115}\) Ishiguro received his master’s degree in creative fiction from the University of East Anglia in 1980, where W.G. Sebald had already been teaching in the English department for 10 years. While Sebald only first began publishing
Ishiguro’s amnesic—a narrator whose memory does not extend beyond the immediate moment—with a reading of Maud Casey’s *The Man Who Walked Away*, a far more pathologized fictionalization of such a dissociated amnesia. I conclude the chapter—and this study—with a few notes about the present interest in amnesic memoir and the associated aesthetic, social, and political challenges and opportunities in this emerging sub-genre.

To start, then: The first section of this chapter employs a phenomenological, cognitive, and aesthetic framework for thinking through impasses in normative cognition represented in the absence of Theory of Mind in Kazuo Ishiguro’s text of a wandering body and mind, *The Unconsoled* (1995). The aesthetic theory of the gesture, as articulated by Walter Benjamin, in his reading of Kafka, is shown as the aesthetic correlate and absolute nexus to a decontextualized moment of perception that is, too, an embodied form of episodic consciousness. This culminating theory of the gesture, in particular, offers a useful lens for reading the embodied, episodically amnesic wandering undertaken by Ishiguro’s narrator Ryder. By reading Benjamin’s reading of Kafka alongside select passages of Ishiguro’s work, I show that contrary to Lisa Zunshine’s position that normative bounds of empathy—a Theory of Mind—are necessary for representing narrative consciousness, Ishiguro’s text, by way of the structural underpinnings of wandering, allow for the mimesis of an arguably non-normative form of consciousness.

**Theory of Mind, Empathy, and Cognitive Cultural Studies**

In his study “Facial Expression Theory from Romanticism to the Present,” Alan Richardson reminds us that “successful social communication” would be greatly impoverished if “we did not have a reasonably reliable and speedy, and therefore largely unconscious, cognitive mechanism

---

in the late 1980’s, and while there’s no record of any correspondence or interaction between the two thinkers, it’s quite difficult to imagine that the two thinkers had not interacted and read one another’s work.
for gauging the emotions and intentions of others through reading their faces.” (65) This innately sympathetic capacity for “mind-reading”—that is, for interpreting others’ facial expressions as indicative of internal states of mind—is historically termed “Theory of Mind” (ToM) by cognitive psychologists, philosophers, and primatologists.116

Notably, discussion of ToM has mostly revolved around the question of successful or failed empathy, with autism as the standard for such cognitive failure. In 1985, Simon Baron-Cohen conducted a critical study that “strongly support[ed] the hypothesis that autistic children as a group fail to employ a theory of mind.” (“Autistic Child” 43) The experiment’s procedures challenged the children’s capacity to identify the beliefs held by another. In the experiment, the children witnessed a puppet show in which a marble was first placed by one puppet, Sally, into her own basket. Following Sally’s exit, another puppet, Anne, transferred the marble from Sally’s basket into her own. Then the children were asked the “Belief Question”: “Where will Sally look for her marble [upon returning]?” If the children pointed to the previous location of the marble, then they passed the Belief Question; if they pointed to the marble’s current location, they failed the question, “by not taking into account the doll’s belief” (41). Ultimately, Baron-Cohen concluded that such a failure demonstrated “a cognitive deficit that is largely independent of general intellectual level and has the potential to explain both lack of pretend play and social impairment by virtue of a circumscribed cognitive failure” (44). In his later and more thorough study of the subject, Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and a Theory of Mind, Baron-Cohen highlights the necessary and effortless nature of such normative mind-reading: theory of mind, he writes, is the act of “attributing mental states to a complex system (such as a human being)” (Mindblindness 21); the failure to properly imagine another’s cognitive mechanisms is a failure,

116 For further theorization regarding the evolutionary, psychological, and philosophical theories for ToM, see Peter Carruthers and Peter K. Smith, eds., Theories of Theories of Mind (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
for Baron-Cohen and others—including Gloria Origgi, Dan Sperber,117 and Ann Jurecic118—to be properly empathic.

Just as the work of reading human behavior and expression primarily depends on the internal operations of empathy, Alan Palmer suggests that the work of reading fictive texts likewise succeeds to the degree of empathic imaginary generated in its reader, for “narrative is, in essence, the description of fictional mental functioning. . . . Readers enter the storyworlds of novels primarily by attempting to follow the workings of the fictional minds contained in them.” (“Storyworlds” 177) It is for this reason that Palmer thinks it particularly useful to consider the various theoretical frameworks of cognitive psychology in literary analysis, for all readers “have to be cognitivists. Otherwise, we would not be able to read at all” (ibid.).

Certainly, much recent work has been done in bringing the humanities into conversation with cognitive psychology. Lisa Zunshine, editor of the recent collection of such a hybridity titled Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies (2010), recounts how “the membership in the MLA official discussion group on cognitive approaches to literature has grown from 250 in 1999, the year It was organized, to more than 1,750 in 2010.” (“Introduction” 1) But Zunshine herself, a founder of and pioneering scholar in the field of cognitive studies, notes the necessarily reciprocal relationship between the two fields. While scholars such as Palmer successfully map cognitive readings onto literary texts, illuminating structural complexity and psychological profundity within the text’s construction, Zunshine wonders if it is when “writers of fiction experiment with our mind-reading ability, and perhaps even push it further, that the insights

offered by cognitive scientists become particularly pertinent.” (“Theory of Mind” 203) She continues:

Is it possible that literary narrative trains our capacity for mind reading and also tests its limits? How do different cultural-historical milieus encourage different literary exploration of this capacity? How do different genres? Speculative and tentative as the answers to these questions are at this point, they mark the possibility of a genuine interaction between cognitive psychology and literary studies, with both fields having much to offer to each other [my emphasis]. (ibid.)

The burgeoning field of cognitive literary analysis, then, should turn towards experimental literariness and its accompanying history of critical scholarship. As Zunshine notes, the long history of literary experiment enjoys both replicating normative cognition and challenging those very norms by testing their limits and even speculating what might lie beyond their bounds. Ultimately, such a project would place literary structures and aesthetics in an active, reciprocal relation with cognitive studies.

As a paradigm for literary experiment, there may be no better place to look than early twentieth-century modernism and its long literary genealogy across the twentieth century. For, while certain literatures before the twentieth century were often cast as reflecting both the social and the cognitive norms of their contemporaneous settings, literary modernism was interested, self-consciously, to “make it new,” as Ezra Pound put it in 1934. Modernism’s identifying features, in broad strokes, were to subvert and reimagine the aesthetics of conventional forms, methods, and styles prevalent in the existing arts and literatures.119

119 See, for example, Peter Childs’s excellent introduction to the field for a thorough treatment of the shift in aesthetics across disciplines: Modernism (New York: Routledge, 2000).
As an extended application of the interdisciplinarity between modernist aesthetics and cognitive psychology, then, I would like to examine particular expressionist aesthetics within *The Unconsoled*, with an eye for the work of Ishiguro’s literary and aesthetic progenitor, Franz Kafka. Select passages by both authors, I argue, demonstrate aesthetically the limits of normative ToM by experimenting with non-normative methods of narration. In so doing, I also want to challenge some of Zunshine’s assumptions regarding the application of ToM to literary study, with the hope of discovering new methods of reading apart and aside from those performed by normative cognition. Ultimately, however, I want to channel Zunshine’s assertion that the history of literary experiment and its accompanying scholarship might generate unique and useful models of narrative cognition, the very purpose of this dissertation, more generally.

**Modernism and Cognitive Experiment: Amnesia and the Limits of Theory of Mind**

Ishiguro’s body of work has been invariably misunderstood as solely concerned with memory’s functions and movements, oftentimes besetting his work with a certain ontology—amnesia, dream-space—of which his readers (but never his characters) are solely aware. Michiko Kakutani, writing in the *New York Times*, describes *The Unconsoled*, for example, as “Alice on a visit to Wonderland: he finds himself going in and out of strange little doors that apparently lead him in circles.”¹²⁰ Others, like Barry Lewis, have suggested that his characters are beset with an “inexplicable amnesia,” (104) one, Natalie Reitano’s reading, that they can “barely acknowledge” (361). Eluding a simple diagnosis in its fictional manifestation, other writers have puzzled over the complexity of Ryder’s amnesic presentation. Rebecca Walkowicz writes, for example, that

---

Ryder’s problem is not his inability to face the past in figurations so much as his inability to acknowledge that the past, always figured, cannot be faced. Ryder cannot see, as all of Ishiguro’s protagonists cannot, that one takes responsibility for the past only by acknowledging its loss: the attempt to deny this loss, and thereby to deny that there is any betrayal of self or community…[is] the worst evasion of all. (1050)

Walkowicz thus frames the question of forgetfulness as one of evasion—denying the loss of a past is to live, in her reading of Ishiguro, in a solipsistic “floating world.” Others read the amnesic consciousness of Ryder as far less nefarious. Barry Lewis famously frames Ryder’s consciousness as occupying a dream-space, though perhaps not his own—he concludes uncertainly “Whose dream it is, is not clear.” A. Harris Fairbanks responds with an ontological read of such a dreamspace, the literalization of which becomes the ground of the characters’ logic:

The answer I would propose to Lewis’s question is that Ryder is not living in anyone’s dream but in a dreamworld, one that has no ulterior reality behind it, a world in which events happen to a given subject ego in the ways that they happen in dreams and which that ego registers in ways typical of dreaming rather than waking life. (605)

Ishiguro himself has characterized his novels’ work as occupying the logic of a dreamspace, aligning himself with the ontological category of Fairbanks’ most recent argument regarding the narrator’s lack of insight and others’ projected forgetfulness, too. In an essay of mine (parts of which are featured in this dissertation), I assume that at least the partial amnesic consciousness of Ishiguro’s narrator generates a disabled form of consciousness.121

---

Still, regardless of its ontological characterization, his work is always deeply contextualized within sites of movement and through mobility. Like Sebald’s itinerant narrators, the narrators of nearly all of Ishiguro’s work are, for their entire narrative scopes, errant and mobile, circling cities (*The Unconsoled, When We Were Orphans*) and shuttling across country-sides (*Never Let Me Go, Remains of the Day, The Buried Giant*). In his other works (*A Floating Artist, A View of Pale Hills*) such movement is far less embodied, but as engaging and sometimes as difficult to trace. However, it goes without saying that even the superficial concerns of the two modernists under consideration possess distinct affinities. In her reading of *The Unconsoled*, Reitano opens with the admission that “among the initial reviews” of the work, “few failed to point out the novel’s stylistic evocation of Kafka.” (361) Reitano is certainly correct in her general assertion that Ishiguro’s text mimics Kafka’s work in its surreal, dreamlike quality that insists on a nearly mundane realism in its depiction of private failure within the public sphere.\(^{122}\) Others, more recently, have explored more systematic parallels between the text, with Robert Lemon’s comprehensive chapter on the Kafkaesque and the Kafkan (an important distinction) parallels in Ishiguro as a leading study.\(^{123}\)

However, I intend to go beyond the relatively cursory parallels between Ishiguro’s and Kafka’s dizzying plots, character compositions, and disorienting ambience and suggest that Ishiguro’s uniquely Kafkan genealogy lies in the formal mode of the two authors’ correlating aesthetic and cognitive structures. It is apparent from the very start that Ryder, the confident but

---

\(^{122}\) A brief perusal of reviews contemporaneous with the book’s release evince this to be the case. Michiko Kakutani, for example, see Ryder, Ishiguro’s amnesic pianist protagonist, and his misadventures as “sometimes” sounding “like a Kafka character, caught up in a mysterious and vaguely sinister plot that surpasses his understanding,” while “at other moments” sounding “more like Alice on a visit to Wonderland: he finds himself going in and out of strange little doors that apparently lead him in circles, and he meets an assortment of curious people who draw him into a series of intrigues that threaten to distract him from his appointed rounds.”

unreliable narrator of *The Unconsoled*, occupies a sort of amnesic dream-space: he is aware of his own self and surroundings but seems to wander in and out of—to ride—an anchoring stream of long-term memory. His orientation is driven mostly by tangents, and he fails utterly to project himself onto a greater narrative. Most of all, he seems to lack certain insight into his condition, a typical characteristic of a dreamer’s state of mind. Indeed, in an interview, Ishiguro himself has argued that the novel’s mindscape replicates the insight into its own condition that a dreaming mind lacks, and in this sense, the surreal consciousness represented is closest to that of a dreamer.

**Reading Ryder: Aesthetics and Cognition**

For the purposes of this chapter, however, I draw attention to the microcosmic phenomenology of character by looking at the uncanny, telescopic moments or “double takes” that Ryder reports, as well as the highly theatrical and often disturbing gestures that Ryder witnesses; in so doing, I demonstrate that Ishiguro inherits and adapts Kafka’s troubled relationship with character, as read by Benjamin. In this sense, both Kafka’s narrators and Ishiguro’s Ryder perform a particular form of non-normative reading that challenges theories of reading that employ ToM as their base. Zunshine glosses ToM as the cognitive tool that enables normative, or “proper,” reading. What follows, then, are particular readings that demonstrate both Ryder’s failure to read—as well as the Kafkan precedents to such failures—and the resulting focused attentiveness generated by such a failure of ToM. Such decontextualized, arrested, or “disabled” forms of reading, I will suggest, are enabled by a concurrent focus on the gestural and an absence of contextualized ToM, which subsequently allows for the cultivation of a particularly elusive form of attentiveness within a wandering mind.
But to enjoy such readings, or readings of the failure of reading, one must have the proper narrative context. Admittedly, a summary of beginnings and ends in *The Unconsoled* demonstrates its quotidian and seemingly unexceptional story line—only in the experience of reading Ishiguro’s work does one appreciate his formal innovation and Kafkan invocation and is one properly challenged as a reader; on the surface, then, the tale is simple enough. Ryder, an amnesic pianist arrives in an unnamed Central European town to perform a much-anticipated recital. Over the course of three days, he encounters various other characters, including Sophia, a woman who relates to him as a girlfriend, and Boris, Sophia’s son, who relates to him as a son (Ryder, of course, aside from a vague sense of recognition and slight déjà vu, seems to be unaware of the depth of their mutual—and true familial—relationships). Sophia’s father, Gustav, is Ryder’s porter at the hotel, and Gustav becomes quite involved in interweaving Ryder’s life with Sophia’s and Boris’s. Hoffman, the manager of the hotel, oversees Ryder’s care and his affairs, and Hoffman’s son, an aspiring pianist and disappointment to his parents, relates his failures and hopes to Ryder. Finally, Leo Brodsky, the town’s orchestra conductor, drunkard, and provincial beacon of hope and inspiration, bares his heart to Ryder when his dog dies and when he is rejected by Miss Collins, the town’s foundational therapist.

Over the course of his stay, Ryder flits from one scene to the next, from one character cluster to the next, all the while missing unknown appointments and meetings, seemingly obeying no structured schedule, often improperly dressed, and usually neglecting the objective of his visit: to inspire the town with his artistic talent and complete the work Brodsky fails to fulfill. Ryder’s amnesia seems to keep his conscience absolved to the very end of the novel, even as he unknowingly interferes in others’ lives: his missive is perpetually interrupted by his attempts to fulfill a favor or need to those around him, but he is unaware of a “grand narrative” or larger
sense of purpose. His amnesia allows him to steadily engage with a perpetual present at the expense of a lost past or expectant future; for, even when he misses the culminating recital at the very end of the novel, he consoles himself later that day by riding a bus around the circuit of the city with a buttery croissant in hand, the memory of his final and most important missed appointment, his musical denouement, dissolving as rapidly as the melting butter.

One need only follow Ryder, or read even a few lines of Ishiguro’s restrained but nearly explosive prose, to sense the uncanny nature of Ryder’s narratorial consciousness—as well as Ishiguro’s distinct Kafkan register. Take an early moment in the novel during which Ryder, strangely enough, visits a local movie theater on a late night, having followed the advice of his hotel manager, Hoffman. Having spent much of his time in the theater chatting with those surrounding him, observing raucous card games, and, in general (and along with most of the audience), missing the feature presentation of 2001: A Space Odyssey, Ryder follows Karl Pedersen, a local townsperson, out of the theater:

Pedersen got to his feet and I watched his crouched figure edging down the row muttering apologies. On reaching the aisle, he straightened and gestured to me. Weary though I was, there seemed nothing for it but to join him, and I too rose and began to make my way towards the aisle. As I did so, I noticed that an almost festive mood was pervading the cinema. Everywhere people were exchanging jokes and little remarks as they watched the film, and no one seemed to mind at all my pushing past. On the contrary, people seemed to tuck their legs to one side or jump to a standing position with eagerness. A few people even rolled right back in their seats, feet stuck up in the air, squealing with delight as they did so.

(102)
Certainly, such a passage reads like many from Kafka’s oeuvre. Here, a familiar social space is figured so that it becomes increasingly unfamiliar, strangely bizarre, slightly comical, borderline disturbing, and even slightly grotesque. Figures are crouched, weary, and compelled by forces unseen; and all throughout, gesture informs—indeed, mediates—human interaction. I chose the passage above because it demonstrates both features under discussion: the telescopic, focused “double take” and the subsequent attentiveness to the theatrical gesture. For the first time—and only while exiting the theater—Ryder notices the “festive mood pervading the cinema.” While he had supposed that the theatergoers had been taking in the film, he only notices now that, in fact, nobody seems quite as engaged in watching the film as he had originally supposed. This realization brings with it a further focus that is at once illuminative and highly opaque: the theatergoers are so joyous that, while some carelessly move out of the way and others eagerly move to a standing position to allow Ryder to pass, a few roll back in their seats in an embryonic position, “feet stuck up in the air” and “squealing with delight.” The telescopic focus on this particularly absurd gesture decontextualizes the characters (actors) from their setting (scene), creating a highly unfamiliar moment for both Ryder and his reader, not only because of its absurdity, but also because of its focused isolation. By generating such a distinctive narrative consciousness in Ryder and his sympathetic, and now highly attentive, reader, Ishiguro both mimics Kafka and highlights the reigning project of his work: a singular, decontextualized attentiveness that threatens, as Benjamin writes, “to break out into wider areas,” in the minds of normative readers in which such an awareness is, typically, elided. The aesthetic of the gestural—both expressionist and textual—becomes most apparent here as the aesthetic correlate to cognitive amnesia, and, arguably, as a marker of the absence of the interpretive domains that accompany Zunshine’s normative ToM.
Precedent for such simultaneous narratorial and readerly “double takes” extends across the genealogy of modernist fiction, and is well founded in some of Kafka’s most memorable narrators. Take, for example, Georg Bendemann, the condemned protagonist of Kafka’s early breakthrough work “The Judgment.” At the start of his tale, Bendemann writes confidently to a friend in St. Petersburg about his upcoming marriage and his ailing father. It is only as the narrative progresses, with Georg’s father’s poignant challenges to his narrative confidence, that the reader realizes—along with Georg—that Georg may very well not have remembered everything correctly. In fact, we realize, he may have imagined the friend and the marriage prospect, and he may have misapprehended his father’s current state. Georg’s first double take follows his undressing of his father: at first, Georg “resolutely made up his mind to take his father along into his future household. On closer inspection, it looked almost as if the care his father would receive there might come too late.” (9) Here, the narrative telescoping is evinced in the initial assumption becoming deeply complicated by a second consideration: “on closer inspection.” Georg, a once-confident narrator, undermines not only his own confidence, but also the reader’s faith in the possibility of a coherent and seamless narrative. Another example: take the Country Doctor’s inspection of his unnamed patient, a young boy, and his amorphous wound in Kafka’s “Country Doctor.” At first the doctor narrates that “I am somehow ready to admit that, under certain conditions, the boy might really be sick.” Then, “now I discover: yes, the boy is sick.” Then, “thus from a distance. Close up, further complications are apparent. Who can look at that without giving a low whistle?” (63) Again, the double-take formula of “on first looking . . . upon further/closer inspection” follows through: the telescoping toward what was previously misread, unseen, or unacknowledged unveils something close to the Freudian uncanny—anxieties originally repressed by the conscious mind reemerge with full force—and in this
register the vaginal connotations of the boy’s wound, it should be noted, are highly Freudian.\textsuperscript{124}

But perhaps it is Kafka’s terse text “Give It Up!” that most typifies this amplification of disorientation through its rapid movement and focus of attention:

It was very early in the morning, the streets clean and deserted, I was on my way home to the station. As I compared the tower clock with my watch I realized that it was much later than I had thought and that I had to hurry; the shock of this discovery made me feel uncertain of the way, I wasn’t very well acquainted with the town as yet; fortunately, there was a policeman at hand, I ran to him and breathlessly asked him the way. He smiled and said: “You asking me the way?” “Yes,” I said, “since I can’t find it myself.” “Give it up! Give it up!” said he, and turned with a sudden jerk, like someone who wants to be alone with his laughter.

(157-8)

Kafka’s parable almost reads like a condensed version of \textit{The Unconsoled}; it is only as the supposedly confident narrator moves forward temporally that he experiences the extreme disjunction between his own sense of time and orientation in space and that of the world around him. Unlike Kafka’s narrating voice, however, Ryder does not need to be told to “give it up”—he’s already resigned from seeking an origin, a home, or anything familiar; in fact, he’s already “given up” before he’s even started. As Reitano so beautifully writes in her reading of \textit{The Unconsoled}, “ground is never ‘recovered’, only ‘lost’, deliberately, in order to begin again without beginning” (371). In some sense, Ryder, imagining himself as an outsider to the town’s social and even spatial structure (though it quickly becomes apparent through his social relations

\textsuperscript{124} In Freud’s essay on the uncanny, or \textit{unheimlich}, the repressed matter is the infantile knowledge of the mother’s genitals that was once familiar, or \textit{heimisch}. 
that he is a resident of this town), has generated a certain distance in desire—he has no interest in ends, because he has no interest in beginnings.

Placing Ryder’s unconscious desires underlying such narrative two-steps aside, we can explore how such “double takes” are comical in their unfolding and pleasing in their discovery—even as they horrify. Kafka is purported to have laughed gleefully during a public reading of “The Judgment.” Ishiguro’s work is likewise comical; take, for example, the sequence in which Hoffman delivers Ryder to a room in which Ryder can practice for his recital later that evening. In his excitement to reach a piano, Ryder seems to miss a variety of crucial details of his setting, details that scale both large and small. His sequence of telescopic focus and double taking runs as follows: After pushing the door closed and then noticing that it had become “unlocked and was hanging open,” Ryder “clambered to a standing position” and “then noticed the latch mechanism was dangling upside down on the door frame.” Then, “after further examination, and with a little ingenuity, I managed to fix the latch back in place” (339). This solution was only a temporary one, however, as “the latch was liable to slip down again at any moment.” With his focus entirely on the latch, it is only later, just as his fingers were “poised over the keys,” that Ryder is further distracted by “a small creaking sound.” This in turn prompts him to swivel in his chair again, only to notice this time that “although the door stayed closed, the whole of its upper section was missing, so that it more or less resembled a stable door” (340). Incredibly enough, Ryder had missed this crucial, though seemingly obvious, detail; he claims that he “had been so preoccupied with the faulty latch [that he had] somehow completely failed to register this glaring fact.” To top it off, it is with a second creak that Ryder realizes “not only that someone had been in the next cubicle the whole time, but that the sound insulation between the cubicles was virtually non-existent.” This sequence is comical in its exposition, but demonstrative of the limits
of ToM: the character misreads his situation, and the reader, while unfazed at this point by Ryder’s mind gaps, is foiled again in his own “reading” of the scene. In this double complication of ToM, the character’s judgment fails his own assessment, while the reader is both amused at the character’s mishaps and troubled by such an elision—might he, the reader, also be prey to such temporal lapses in awareness and memory, even if they be more brief and even more subtle than Ryder’s? When this sort of normative ToM falls away, what sort of distinct attentiveness remains?

Arguably, Zunshine and other theorists of normative and non-normative ToM would insist on the binary nature of human reading: either one reads normatively (or at least consciously so), or one does not read at all. In her monograph on the subject, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2006), Zunshine distinguishes between the ToM critical to normative cognition and the cognitive results enabled by such cognition, results that trigger a multiplicity of interpretive readings that are performed within normative bounds. She writes that it is important to underscore here that cognitive scientists and lay readers (here, including literary critics) bring different frames of reference to measuring the relative “success” of mind-reading. For the lay reader, the example of a glaring failure in mind-reading and communication might be a person’s interpreting her friend’s tears of joy as tears of grief and reacting accordingly. For a cognitive psychologist, a glaring failure in mind-reading would be a person’s not even knowing that the water coursing down her friend’s face is supposed to be somehow indicative of his feelings at that moment. (13-14)

For Zunshine, a crucial insight offered by cognitive psychologists “is that by . . . parsing the world and narrowing the scope or relevant interpretations of a given phenomenon, our cognitive adaptations enable us to contemplate an infinitely rich array of interpretations within that scope”
(14). In other words, once normative theory of mind becomes properly empathic, it can deduce reasonable and relevant interpretations within a limited scope—yet, even within said scope, the interpretations might be of an “infinitely rich array.” In reading both people and literary fiction, then, the dual assumption in reading is that the reader (and the characters read) possesses a certain normative ability to parse behaviors as reflecting intentions, and that such intentions are contained within particular “interpretive domains.”

Yet, imagine that a non-normative reader of others—a failure at theory of mind—were not autistic, as in Zunshine’s study, but profoundly amnesic, even dreamily so, as in Ishiguro’s fictional account. The amnesia that I propose here is entirely hypothetical and not at all clinically based; it is, instead, constructed as a means for a thought experiment. In this hypothetical, the individual’s failure to read the minds of others would not be premised on an inability to be properly empathic, but on an inability to properly retain temporal context through memory. This perfectly amnesic reader would read others and the world around himself non-normatively in that he would scan each moment as its own singularity, devoid of context and history. In such a theoretical experiment, the individual would not possess normative ToM principally because of the particular kind of attention that he can and cannot pay to each moment. For even if the amnesic can posit an “infinitely rich array” of plausible intentions to another’s behavior, his lack of historical retention disables any sense of “interpretive domains.” Unlike the autistic, the amnesic can be properly attentive and even properly empathic; however, since he does not possess a sense of context, he is unable to distinguish reasonable interpretations from unreasonable ones. Such a cognitive personality might be highly attuned and attentive to the realm of the interpersonal, even as he fails to respond in a normative manner.
Admittedly, such a literary case study of a non-normative psyche has certain parallels in the annals of neuropsychological research, but its simplification, both in fiction and in my hypothetical case, have no absolute parallel in terms of diagnosis, even as its literary modeling articulates a critique of normative cognitive models. Endel Tulving, a pioneering researcher in the field of memory and consciousness, has studied pathological amnesics who seem to “be living in a ‘permanent present.’” (“Memory” 1) One subject, named N.N., “possess[es] anoetic and noetic consciousness but not autonoetic consciousness” (4); that is, he registers the temporal and spatial “current situation” (anoetic), he is aware of and operates on objects and events even in their absence (noetic), but he fails to remember personally experienced events (autonoetic). Ryder, in his bizarre, nearly moment-to-moment “ordinary consciousness”—and his failure to register the figures and surrounding drama engulfing those closest to himself—seems to parallel such a case study quite nicely. More recently, Tulving notes that such individuals, while rare cases, have been described as “noetically aware of many autobiographical facts, but this kind of awareness is greatly impoverished in comparison with that afforded by noetic consciousness.” (“Where in the brain” 217) Likewise, Lawrence Weiskrantz has shown that the amnesic can “carry out complex operations” and “think about items in his semantic memory” and “general knowledge”; however, the “amnesic subject” loses his evolutionary advantage “by not knowing what he can remember, by not remembering what he retains.” (217) Indeed, while the amnesic possesses consciousness, he does not possess what Weiskrantz terms “awareness”—the achievement of the very ability to “make a commentary of any particular event” (76). Weiskrantz’s “awareness,” importantly, is an echo of Tulving’s argument for a system of episodic memory—that is, a system in which a self is aware of itself as recollecting the past. In a similar vein, the prerequisite for a fully “conscious state,” philosophers David Rosenthal and
Daniel Dennet have both shown,\textsuperscript{125} is the ability to have “higher-order thoughts”—or thoughts about thoughts (71).

For the purposes of this study, however, I want to bracket the question of medical diagnosis and psychological form and focus, instead, on the question of aesthetics and representation of cognition, and the subsequent critique such a representation of consciousness makes possible on the normative bounds of ToM as proposed by cognitive psychologists. In the foregrounding of the gestural and dissolution of the teleological, interpretive domains determined by context become less relevant. The reader of Ishiguro (and Kafka) cultivates, through his empathic experience of such fictional narrators’ forgetfulness, a distinctly new and perhaps even queer way of seeing—and reading: a certain alternative to normative attentiveness of what is normatively missed or elided, through, paradoxically, the elision of proper plot contextualization. As a literary experiment of cognition, then, such authors’ experiments employ their expressionist aesthetics to explore and reveal even further, beyond cognitive norms, the possibility for narrated and represented human experience.

Arguably, then, Ryder, Ishiguro’s narrator with such a distinct, non-normative amnesic consciousness—an amnesia so profound that even he himself is entirely unaware of its profound effect—foregrounds the limits of ToM in his fragmentary, moment-to-moment consciousness, which at once eludes the “interpretive domains” of Zunshine’s normative character and pays great attention to the gestural, to the necessarily decontextualized singular moment of character performance. If anything, then, the reading experience of Ishiguro’s fiction for the so-called normative reader challenges the neat assumptions in Zunshine’s normative framing and suggests

a continuum of shared blind spots in even the most “normative” of consciousnesses. Kafka, too, was aware of this popular narratological and epistemological blind spot when he wrote, “‘But then he returned to his work as if nothing had happened.’ This is a remark that we are familiar with from a vague abundance of old stories, although it perhaps does not occur in any of them.” (“Reflections” 236) To continue “as if nothing had happened”—this is what Kafka depicts as the illusion of reading situations, people, and books alike. We return at each moment as if nothing disruptive had occurred between the present moment and the past, and certainly Ryder and Kafka’s narrators spend much of their peripatetic lives doing so; but, in fact, much has occurred, and, oftentimes, something quite uncanny, disturbing, and deeply disruptive has transpired. While Ryder’s long-term memory remains defunct, it is moments like these that highlight the elision within so-called normative awareness itself, within moment-to-moment living, that in its discovery disturbs the so-called normative mind that imagines itself as wholly attentive and aware.

While the discovery of lapses in conscious awareness is sometimes comical, as Ishiguro and Kafka both suggest, perhaps the desire to cast such sorts of reading as “non-normative” may reflect the perceived danger such foregrounding of attentiveness entails. As Benjamin notes in his reading of the gesture, certain gestural moments highlight the threateningly explosive potential of the nearly decontextualized gestures to the embedded narratives in which they are located. In a sense, then, attention to the gesture seems to enable a particular dissociation of event from context, and a disembedding of self from the surrounding events and culture that define it. One particular instance comes to mind in Ishiguro’s work: toward the end of the second evening, Ryder visits Sophie’s apartment (which, unbeknownst to him, is in fact his own apartment), and Sophie settles on playing a board game with dice. Boris had been given the book
that Ryder had acquired the previous evening, and is immediately fascinated by its content, murmuring “It’s great” and “It shows you how to do everything” (287). Leafing through the book, “he turned over some pages, and as he did so the book gave a sharp crack and fell apart into two sections.” Unperturbed by this disruption—in a book full of interruptions—Boris significantly “carried on turning the pages as though nothing had happened” (287). While this moment echoes Kafka’s aphorism—returning as if nothing had occurred—it foreshadows a more significant lapse later in the same scene. As Sophie settles to play with the dice, Ryder becomes gradually conscious that she

had been rattling the dice for an inordinate period. In fact, the rattling had changed in character since she had first started to play with the dice. She now seemed to be shaking it with a feeble slowness, as though in time to some melody running through her head. I lowered the newspaper with a sense of alarm.

On the floor, Sophie was leaning on one stiffened arm, a posture that made her long hair plunge down over her shoulder, concealing her face entirely. She appeared to have become completely absorbed with the game, and her weight had tipped forward oddly, so that she was hovering right over the board. The whole of her body was rocking gently. Boris was watching her sulkily, passing his hands over the crack of the book.

Sophie went on and on shaking the dice, for thirty, forty seconds, before finally letting it roll in front of her. She studied it dreamily, moved some pieces about the board, then began to shake the dice again. I could sense something dangerous in the atmosphere and decided it was time I took charge of the
situation. Throwing the newspaper aside, I clapped my hands together and got to my feet. (288–89)

Most disturbing to the reader for its unforgiving focus on what is an entirely uncanny moment, this narrative frieze highlights the gesture when observed in human behavior: in fact, it is the observation of a lapse, of a pause or break between two related narrative moments. Ryder significantly notes that he could “sense something dangerous in the atmosphere” after observing Sophie’s foreboding posture and frozen mien; but what is most dangerous here is the suggestive nature of attentiveness to the gesture—such attentiveness threatens, as a site of fissure within narrative, as an unaccounted-for break, to explode the very context in which it is embedded.

While this essay admits to bracketing the diagnosis of such experimental amnesics in favor of the attentiveness generated by their altered, non-normative perspectives, I conclude with the results of a study by experimental psychologist Frederick J. Evans. Evans demonstrates conclusively that posthypnotic source amnesia, the successful recall of semantic content without its temporal context—in which “an apparent dissociation between the content of accessible memories and context in which the episodic event originally occurred” (556)—is an experience shared by those who experience “a variety of normal and pathological contextual memory lapses” (557).

Disembedded remembering, Evans notes, is an experience that humans share, to a greater or lesser degree; “commonly,” he states, “We may meet somebody whose name or face is hauntingly familiar, but we cannot remember where we have met this particular person before, sometimes with disastrous social consequences.”

As this study of the varieties of consciousness proceeds, cognitive scientists who recognize the spectrum of amnesia might also recognize the spectrum of attentive experience that emerges in the very moments of forgetting. Experimental modernism, represented here by both
Kafka’s and Ishiguro’s works, attempts to articulate a new form of character consciousness by circumventing the necessary framework for the “interpretive domains” that ToM demands. With narrative context brushed aside, such forgetful, wandering narrators perform a sort of reading of gestures that, in turn, generates in its character—and reminds its reader of—a forgotten attentiveness that might exist between and amongst all narrative moments.

Of Fugues, Flaneurs, and Fictions

Where Ishiguro’s work narrates context-less narrative from the extreme vantage point of a first-person present perception, Maud Casey’s recent *The Man Who Walked Away* narrates from an omniscience that excludes the amnesic’s conscious perspective but makes possible a network of inter-discursive voices that alternately read and care for the amnesic. As a highly lyrical, “luminous,” and “liminal” work, Casey’s reviewers noticed a central “paradox”, in her work’s “triumph of style over story”, even with its “centrality of storytelling to human connectedness” (“One Step” BR9)—it at once explores the limits and possibilities for representing such a non-normative state by casting aside conventional narrative tropes of autobiographical narrativity and closure.

In Casey’s work, the amnesic in question is Albert Dadas, a fictionalization of Jean-Albert Dadas (1860-1907), whose curious case history is documented in a thesis by his resident asylum psychiatrist, Philippe Tissie (1852-1935), entitled *Les Alienes voyageurs*126. In the troubled, dissociated, and far-flung trans-European travails of the historical Albert, Ian Hacking, in his foundational study of the “mad traveler,” a “transient mental illness” of the late nineteenth century (1), considers epilepsy and hysteria as its source, before concluding that the fugueuer, as

---

he terms it, is the darker pathological manifestation of a social phenomenon in the late nineteenth century:

There is nevertheless a distinct class of prototypical fugueurs, all drawn from very similar social backgrounds. Such men have all sorts of problems, and they are curiously powerless in the face of their daily lives. It is these men who find, in the possibility of the fugue—which after all, means flight—an escape over which they have no control, and for which, after the event, they have no memory except when they make use of another device that allows them to remember, namely, hypnosis. I do not find in these cases any significant vestige of fraud or shamming. Instead, their powerlessness, which produces temporary mental breakdown, finds release in a mental illness which relieves them of responsibility, is cultured by medicine, and is medicalized in the culture of the day, a culture that includes both tourism and vagrancy. (50)

Finding expression in both tourist and vagrant cultures of the day, fugueurs take flight from their constricting lives, freed from powerlessness and culpability in a dissociated state. With the contemporary social and medical discourses and apparatuses of observation and diagnosis, dissociative fugue, a transient mental illness, becomes articulated for a time—but then ceases to be in the twentieth century.\(^\text{127}\) In Casey’s fictional work as well, Albert’s symptoms come to manifest a certain cultural diagnosis that is historically bound by its contextual discourses. Much as Hacking demonstrates the anomalous nature of this history-specific cultural diagnosis, it would be easy to imagine Albert, as one character notes, as “part of the throngs of pilgrims during the Middle Ages...if he had lived then, he might very well have been considered a spiritual pilgrim.” (124) His embodied dissociated walking, however, coming at the fin-di-

\(^{127}\) Of course, dissociation and amnesia, resulting from traumatic brain injury and neurological symptoms, are very much real contributors to mental illness, including historic diagnoses of fugue and hysteria. See Hacking, “Five Questions, Five Answers” in *Mad Travelers*, 80-102.
sécle, carries with it the cultural baggage of modern medicine through the modern institutions of psychiatry and the asylum, as well as of the modern pathological discourses of madness.¹²⁸

In terms of cultural diagnosis, the historical Dadas’s fugues fit comfortably between the middle-class epidemic of luxury tourism and criminal vagrancy. In terms of stylized, privileged, and even normative cultural practices, however, the most obvious antecedent to the figure of the fugueur in Casey’s fictional work is the privileged and mythologized flaneur, a foil to the fugueur but a single figure whose behavior aligns neatly in opposition. The flaneur is the conscious surveiler, chronicler, and materialist philosopher of the nineteenth-century Parisian arcades and crowds that Walter Benjamin famously read in Baudelaire’s Paris and Poe’s London. As the flaneur’s dissociated double, the fugueur is in little possession of his faculties while walking, and retains little control of the public and social spaces that he inhabits; the flaneur, as the fugueur’s flipside, is autonomous, aware, and centered in his urban setting—a cosmopolitan romantic of the city. In Benjamin’s study, “the street becomes a dwelling place for the flaneur” (“Paris” 19); in Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire, the flaneur enjoys the physiologies of both the city’s shops and faces; in his reading of Poe, the flaneur becomes an invisible detective, an “unknown man in the middle of the crowd.” (27)

In The Man Who Walked Away, Casey includes various characters who romanticize the flaneur as a traveling type and counter-point to their own social and cultural constrictions, as I will discuss; for Dadas the fugueur, the flaneur’s privilege, control, and even mastery of his mind and social sphere embodies everything beyond his reach. Unlike the flaneur who can reflect and collate his collected memories, the fugueur embarks on mindless walking tours of rural

In Albert’s words, after taken into asylum, his attempts at accessing his past experiences are barred: “I am living in different rooms. But with no doors between them.” (200) For Albert, his sense of self is at once defined by retrospective impasses and subjective multiplicities.

In his inability to recollect past experience as a coherent self, Albert’s displays a dysfunctional episodic memory, as Tulving has defined it, as the normative convergence of “self, autonoetic awareness, and subjectively sensed time.” (“Episodic Memory” 6) However, while restrained from embarking on his walking fugues, Albert is able to form new memories and recall new experiences, even as his retrograde amnesia, that is, his inability to recollect past dissociative episodes, is only subdued through fleeting flashes or sustained hypnosis.

**Ethics of Narration: Reading the Amnesic**

As Casey’s highly stylized work demonstrates, representing the tale of an amnesic fugueur, a dissociated, wandering subject whose past is fragmented and whose narrativity is not only apart from his subjectivity but absent and irretrievable, possesses certain formal challenges. Unlike Ishiguro’s narrator protagonist, whose first person narration enabled direct, immediate description, Casey’s unidentified third-person narrator is omniscient at points and limited at others, adopting a nearly Woolfian indirect discourse in its adhesion to and reflection of characters’ thought streams. In this way, she makes possible a narration of an amnesic’s thought-stream as it occurs, but she also offers objective distance for the observation of Albert by

---

129 In an earlier iteration of this dissertation, I proposed that Teju Cole’s narrator in his *Open City* embodies both the figures of the flaneur and the fugueur, deconstructing the binary by demonstrating how each contains the other. I have since discovered that Pieter Vermeulen offers such an argument in his “Flights of Memory: Teju Cole’s *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism” in *Journal of Modern Literature* 37.1 (Fall 2013), 40-57. In this article, Vermeulen argues that Cole’s narrator straddles the masterful control of the flaneur and the dispassion and desperation of the flaneur’s opposite, the fugueur as a critique of both discourses. Related to my reading of Casey’s work, I discuss how fugue states exist on a continuum of experience, with abled and disabled fugues typifying various forms of wandering.
himself—as he awakens from his dissociated romps—and by others, including the Doctor and Nurse Anne who come to observe, care, and treat Albert.

The narrator, in other words, is a critical site of articulation and disarticulation—of narration and distance—that makes possible an oblique representation of an amnesic’s cognition. At the work’s unconventional opening, the reader is called to attention to a missed presence, by conventional readers, of a radical presence of becoming in the act of walking. The prelude to chapter 1 begins “It was as though he had always been there, haunting the landscape, if only you were paying attention;” it ends in a series of walks of the same as-of-yet unnamed character, with the conclusion that “wherever he walked, he was filled with a wonder so fierce it was as if he were being burned alive from its astonishing beauty. When Albert walked, he was astonished.” (5) As an acknowledgment of always already wandering—“he had always been there”, the narrator calls to our attention that which exceeds a place within history through the subject’s own abstention from subjective time. Not only does Albert’s wandering precede the bounds of the novel’s beginning, however, but Albert wanders within his astonishment as well, within a perception apart from a continuous self, and this wandering, in turn, calls out to the viewer—by way of the narrator—to be noticed: “if only you were paying attention.” Transcending the impossible recall by the subject, the narrator allows the affects experienced in this fragmented subjectivity—wonder, astonishment, to enter the narrative of the work, and to spur a different sort of observation, or reading, by the observer/reader.

In this sense, Casey’s third-person narrator completes the representative work that Ishiguro’s first-person discloses. Both authors, when challenged by the narrative impossibility of representing that which does not enter subjective time—by way of Tulving’s episodic memory, the capacity for reflecting upon memories themselves—adopt a nearly frozen attentiveness to the
singular moment, or gesture—Tulving’s noetic awareness, the unreflective “conscious state that accompanies thinking about (knowing) the world” (“Memory” 4).

For Albert, the narrator later tells us, at the moment of his walking, memory is besides the point. Indeed, for Albert, the experience of walking need not be assimilated to memory and autobiography for its heroism to be pronounced: “Even when is lost, he not lost...he is, he is, he is here...He is all those Alberts. He is himself and himself and himself again.” (20) Insisting against identity as definitionally based on an able episodic memory, his narrator imagines Albert as unified in—and through—his multiplicity. His presence, in other words, is fully realized at each of his isolated, fugue moments.

However, where the narrator is generous in affirming and attending to Albert’s existence even without narrativity, Albert himself suffers in alternately experiencing his life as fragmented and present, and Albert’s Doctor, too, perpetuates such suffering by imagining Albert’s mind as a “dark street” in which the Doctor will “light the lamps, one by one.” (107) While able to recall the interludes between his dissociated spells of continental wandering, Albert lists the sites where he awoke from his fugues. However, in his walking, nothing can be recollected, nor can he weave together a narrative among his various stops. Instead, “he was here and then he was there. There is nothing in between,” (124) the work’s narrator summarily states.

And the so-called and nameless Doctor, himself a vagrant and wanderer who has fled a home in which both parents died of illness,\(^\text{130}\) and who continues to flee his apartment, flee Bordeaux, and flee the asylum on his bicycle, is determined to pin not only a name but a history on the disjointed identity of Albert: “Who are you Albert?” the Doctor thinks, in a “question that swims beneath the other questions.” (134) Determined to name Albert’s condition and figure as

\(^{130}\) See Hacking, 14, for a brief corresponding history of Tissie’s parents’ unfortunate deaths and Tissie’s early vagrancy and flights of childhood.
that of the fugueur (147)—that of both fleeing and chasing—the Doctor hopes to give “shape” to the drawn, physical map of Albert’s travels, and in turn, to give a continuous identity to Albert’s sharp fragmentation, a desire that underlies his own desire for self-knowledge and internal reconciliation (153-5).

Eventually, the Doctor treats Albert through hypnotic therapy, “discover[ing] another door in the mysterious house that is Albert,” (204) an act that he describes as “dreaming together.” (203) Hacking, in his reflections on the hypnotizer/hypnotized relationship as recorded by the historic Doctor Tissie, characterizes it as a relationship in which both figures were “extremely accommodating to each other’s needs and expectations...know[ing], without verbal formulation, the needs of the other.” (111) This might explain how, in response to the Doctor’s quest to uncover Albert’s narrativity, Albert himself is inspired to wish for a normative self-knowledge of a coherent history in his wish to be “a man...forged out of days, adding up to something with weight and heft.” (136) He assumes the Doctor’s wish to such a degree that he even lies in recounting his past, at one point, by offering an epic tale that includes a coherent “story with a beginning, a middle, and an end.” (158) Ultimately, while the Doctor proceeds to fail in normalizing Albert’s episodic memory and unified subjectivity, he comes to appreciate that “A life exceeds our ability to describe it” (145), allowing himself to heal his own fragmented, lost, and childhood memories, in a process that is very much self-directed towards reconciling his own past.

Indeed, what the narrator and implied reader understand, the Doctor, as a narrator-analyst of a more conventional sort, has to come to terms with the inability to narrate an identity. As Hacking puts in, in his historical description, “The man and his doctor were made for each other, opposite but parallel.” (14) When asked by the Doctor “What was it like, Albert? To walk? To
walk so far?” Albert responds: “Everything was...funny....the trees took fantastic shapes.” The Doctor is left speechless, in response: “It sounds...” he trails off, for he thinks, “it is difficult to know the truth when someone professes oblivion.” (130) With his impulse to name Albert’s illness, on the one hand, and Albert’s truth of oblivion’s impasse, on the other, the healing of an analyst in therapy—a central tenet to Freudian psychotherapy, in attempting to impossibly “see past the familiar” (132) and into his patient’s mind, becomes very much about seeing past the familiar in his own life, and especially the ambitions that blind him to his own forgotten past.

Indeed, the construction of Albert’s life resolves as impossible as the Doctor comes to construct his own childhood as impossibly retrievable and reconcilable. As Roger Kennedy has shown, in his reading of Freud’s work, “the conviction of truth may be just as therapeutic as the recapturing of a lost memory.” Both analyst and patient alike “do not have to know all about a past event for it to have significant consequences.” Instead, the construction of the past event in the present “is just as therapeutic.” (184-5) For Freud, the articulation of memory in the present may in fact be the site of the memory’s formation, construction, and reconciliation:

...memories relating to our childhood may be all that we possess. Our childhood memories show us our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods when the memories were aroused. In these periods of arousal, the childhood memories did not...emerge; they were formed at that time.131

Whereas for Albert, fragmentary perception while wandering eludes language’s signifying functions, the Doctor, who imagines himself “so close to grasping the something of Albert,” eventually comes to self-forgiveness through a certain acknowledgment of Albert’s impossible cloudiness, and his own forgiveness and reconciliation with his suppressed past:

He is so close to grasping the something of Albert; he would give anything to grasp it....He rushes ahead, through space and time to the moment when he will give Albert an answer to his question: This is who you are. The wind on his face slices through the feeling of almost and then his bicycle lifts off; it flies above the lake, over the city. It flies until there are his mother and father. Their answer is: You are forgiven. When he puts his face in the warm crook of their necks, they are healed...he pulls at his mother’s skirts, pointing at the sky, his finger tracing the path of the geese as they fly away.” (157)

With the desire to offer an absolute identity to Albert pushed to its absolute limits, Casey’s narrator offers a highly lyrical, even poetically truncated resolution, in which the movement of the Doctor’s bicycle mimics Albert’s own accelerated and fragmentary fugues, and the embedded scene conspires to guide the Doctor to his own reconciliation, a reading of his past losses and myths in his mother’s skirts and father’s fairytales of geese. Lifting off into his own compressed time-space with his bicycle, a newly popular object that is frequently figured as the corresponding technology to achieving Albert’s compressed fugues, the Doctor speeds beyond time, enjoying the drifting and timeless consciousness that eludes a neat temporality and narrativity. Famously, Tissie is the first doctor in Bourdeaux who pedaled on his rounds, a result of the flight that he experienced vicariously, as a child, while observing the renowned Leotard on a velocipede fly by. Within such a comparably mobile body—and a wandering, boundless-moment of contemplation—the fictional Doctor imagines a vision of forgiveness from his parents whom he failed to heal, as a child—a history from which he had fled and from which he

---

132 See Casey, 131: “This sort of movement is astonishing. He may not know exactly how Albert felt when he walked and walked and walked, but he knows the wonder of this.”

133 See Hacking, 14-16.
had suppressed, on the one hand, and towards whom he flees, on the other, in assuming a life of healing.

With healing figured as self-healing, and narrative construction for the other as narrative reconciliation for the self, the Doctor’s newfound understanding of Albert’s opacity approximates the position of the active, engaged narrator who participates, much as the Doctor does while performing hypnosis on Albert, in the shared indirect inter-discursive narration among the characters. In an admission to the Director of the asylum that a full articulation of Albert’s identity “has not yet taken shape,” the Doctor offers a metaphor that speaks to his use of and reliance on Albert: “The hypnotized belongs to the hypnotizer as the traveler’s stick belongs to the traveler.” (198-9) As a journeyer with Albert as his utility, the nexus of “dreaming together” that hypnosis makes possible occurs in the indirect discourse of the narrator. Take this moment of awakening from hypnosis, in which a certain transfer is imagined: “When his [Albert’s] eyes flutter open again, the Doctor’s eyes say: *I know everything you have forgotten.*” (194) Here, it is unclear if the Doctor’s eyes in fact communicate anything to Albert: Does Albert read reassurance in the Doctor’s eyes? Does the Doctor, in fact, communicate such reassurance, or does the narrator imagine it as being acknowledged—or even articulated? The space that this narrative holds, in establishing a spectrum of possibility and impossibility of communication, are possible only through the omniscient, indirect discourse of the narrator, a sort of wandering performance that keeps open these various multiple readings.

Ultimately, the narrator—along with the Doctor, as the work progresses—model a hybrid model of flanerie/fugue, in which wandering, as I’ve defined it, is a mode of cognition. The narrator of Casey’s work watches Albert, but cares for his predicament, too, even as they wander in tandem. The narrator, one could argue, is a highly ethical iteration of Benjamin’s *flaneur*—
adopting a presence of close monitoring while assuming distance in the foreclosure of absolute knowledge of experience. And the Doctor comes to appreciate and share, along with the narrator, a certain healing through assuming—or claiming as his own—Albert’s wandering consciousness, as a temporality of sequences that are radically fragmented and absolutely singular. The Doctor’s flight—from home, on his bicycle—is a fugue that he has practiced, but with which he has never come to terms.

And not only does the Doctor’s errancy enter into an ethical but a structural and cognitive relation with Albert, shifting Albert’s dissociated fugues from excluded to participating in a shared continuum of walks away. Nurse Anne, Albert’s regular caregiver, much as the Doctor, “walked out of a life” (73) of wealth and domesticity to serve others and heal wounds, as a military nurse. Even for Nurse Anne, who can recall her past, such autonomous walking away stands in contradistinction from any sort of flanerie (116)—it is, in her experience, a self-imposed exile. The myth of the \textit{flaneur}, for Nurse Anne, is projected onto a particular object—a sea shell carried from the Red Sea, by her father, who insisted that she would make a “a wonderful \textit{flaneur},” but who insisted, at the same time that she marry her “flatulent cousin.” (ibid.) In sharing and admiring the shell with Albert, she includes her own discontinuous walks with those of Albert, both characters admiring and envious of the shells that “carry their past with them.” (117) But of course, an object like the shell, much as the wind’s rustling through multiple lives and the narrators’ shared closeness with multiple narrated minds, comes to signify the very possibility for a story to be told otherwise.

Indeed, with the persistent movement of both the abled and disabled characters alongside the shifting, nearly cinematic drifting of the narrator’s vantage point, all of the assorted characters and voices in Casey’s work come to share a certain relief in the possibility of
becoming *within* fragmentation, converging in the voice of the narrator: “Moments like this one, moments of relief between who we were and who we will be: You are better *now*. We are better *now*. And *now*. And *now*. And *now*.” (203) Mimicking Albert, in their shared moments of healing, the “we” here (the Doctor, the narrator, perhaps the assumed collective triangulation of the aforementioned and the reader) realize how they’ve wandered, forgotten, and experienced healing on a *spectrum* of dissociated experience. Wandering, in other words, makes possible discontinuous self-identification. The work’s prelude to pay attention to such wandering, the figure of Albert, is also a call to attend to what’s missed in excluding Albert’s fugues as a form of self-expression. Attending to such wandering, in other words, makes possible a self-forgiveness for others’ own lapses in narrative.

Narrating the tale of a *fugueur* is on the one hand a highly ethical gesture—like Lerner’s and Sebald’s protagonist-narrators, the enlivening of an occluded and (literally) forgotten experience and on the other, an impossible, in the conventional sense. Unlike Ben Lerner’s narrator who can recall multiple selves through multiple pasts, Albert’s multiplicity remains barred from present recall, a sheer fragmentation of subjective experience. Yet, this fragmentation is narrated as a form of discrete, singular experience—akin to the gesture and heightened awareness in Ishiguro’s narrative. And this fragmentation becomes the language with which a *flaneur*-like Doctor—and narrator—can appreciate the blindspots of narrativity in his own life, and the method by which a narrator can attend through the repeated and final call to “listen,” at the work’s end, as a certain denial of narrative closure: “Albert will not return...He will not need to return. At least, that is how the story should end. It is the Doctor’s wish for him. *Here, Albert, a story just for you. Listen.*” Listening here, at the work’s end, recalls Albert’s invitation by his father to listen to his folktales about a prince with one wing who demands more,
to walk into the world, and forbids closure. It is, too, a collusion of the narrator’s voice and the
Doctor’s wish: the Doctor’s wish for closure realized through a gift given by the Doctor, in the
form of closure, and by the narrator, in articulating this wish—as the observer, flaneur, and
analyst—of the Doctor himself.
Conclusion: Amnesic Memoir and Mimetic Experiment

As works of narrated failures of memory and experiences of amnesia, Casey’s and Ishiguro’s novels adopt various imaginative strategies that represent consciousness and that situate amnesic non-narrativity within non-normative narrative history. Both works, I’ve shown, rely heavily on aesthetic techniques for the mimesis of immediate and non-normative phenomenological experience that produce forms of wandering cognition. Such wandering, I’ve shown as well, is not unique to the cognitive space within narratives absent memory—they are the ground of both cognition without memory and the ethical mimesis in the face of a great profusion, if not overwhelming presence or multiplicity, of memory, as produced by both Lerner’s and Sebald’s narrators.

In this conclusion, I reach beyond the tenuous generic boundaries of fiction/non-fiction by assuming that the production of autobiographical narrative and the aesthetic and ethical strategies of wandering minds takes place on a varied spectrum of memory and fiction. As I demonstrated earlier, the inception of the novel is founded on the production of Romantic autobiography, and so the very binary of fiction/non-fiction is irrelevant when assuming the fallibility of recollection and the creation of memories. In particular, reading the recent proliferation of amnesic memoir in light of the strategies offered by Casey and Ishiguro offers certain insight into the limits of narrating cognition and the diverse techniques offered by such memoirists in attempting to represent that which cannot be recalled. Of course, while the variable personal and inter-personal suffering from amnesic states should not be minimized in this study, I do argue that in reading articulations of identity apart from memory, we might honor the varied possibilities for identity and cognition apart from conventional narrativity and subjectivity.
The enactment of narrative wandering as a form of narration and narrative identity distinct from diachronic memory and autobiographical history has enjoyed a recent surge in memoir writing, though one founded on a long history in science writing and cognitive studies. David Stuart MacLean’s recent experimental *The Answer to the Riddle is Me* (2014) is representative of such an emerging sub-genre, as much as Su Meck’s investigative and journalistic *I Forgot to Remember* (2013). MacLean’s, Meck’s, and others’ works stand in the shadow of Suzanne Corkin’s very recent *Permanent Present Tense* (2013), a remarkable history of the amnesic patient known throughout the case study literature as H.M., and comparably renowned case studies mentioned throughout the cognitive and neuroscientific literature, including Endel Tulving’s famous “N.N.” case studies of retrograde amnesia, and Oliver Sacks’ case study narrative of “The Last Hippie,” among others.

As the focus of my study has been the representation of memory and perception, when narrated, apart from narrativity, the political and social causes behind such a mainstream acceptance of and interest in the oxymoronic amnesic memoir, the memoir that fails in its remembering, are multiple, complex, and beyond the scope of this dissertation. Andreas Huyssen, for example, might argue that such fascination with amnesia reflects our own anxieties behind an age of memory’s displacement into digital archives. An earlier critical theorist of our century, Theodor Adorno, might read the interest in amnesic memoir as a cultural admission

---

134 Another recent notable amnesic memoir includes Adam Burns and Maureen Burns’ self-published *Surviving Amnesia: Mind Over Memory* (2013), a memoir that chronicles anterograde amnesia—or the inability to retain memory following a traumatic brain injury—narrated by Burns’ mother with excerpts from Burns’ insufferable experience as a perpetual amnesic. The two memoirs that this chapter discusses are memoirs of retrograde amnesia, or amnesia of autobiographical memories that precede a traumatic brain injury, but in which the subsequent capacity for memory retention is not entirely disabled.


to the forgetting that accompanies all materialist and hegemonic reification. More recently, Anne Whitehead has resuscitated the ethical question of forgetting—and without amnesia—as a form of radical forgiveness, as articulated by both Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricouer. The fantasy of forgetting, then, plays into the religious-political discourses of salvation and rebirth. In a similar vein, in narrative studies, Jason Tougaw recently suggested that fictions and non-fictions acknowledge the suffering accompanying amnesia while positing, at points, that “there may be solace in amnesia, and menace in memory.” Generically, David Lethem writes, literary amnesia has been a basic condition of twentieth century literature, as “an existential syndrome that seemed to nag at fictional characters with increasing frequency, a floating metaphor very much in the air.” In introducing a representative collection of the literary sub-genre of amnesic fiction, he decides that amnesia, whether it be of the collective political type, the experience of the passing of human existence, or the blank backdrop onto which characters are conjured, is “a modern mood,” and “a very American one.” And most recently, in a forthcoming volume on memory, Sebastian Groes suggests that the “fear of forgetting” has become central to our cultural discourse around memory, not only because of digital displacement and post-modern characterization, by Frederic Jameson and others, as necessarily ahistorical and amnesic, incapable of recalling past or retaining present experiences (ix), but in our social cognizance of

---


deteriorating minds, through the “growing public awareness of an ageing population” and its impact on the “individual’s sense of their own identity.”

Regardless of the ambiance, alarm, and appeal of amnesia in contemporary culture and fiction, the narrativization, that is, the pulling and putting into language of the amnesic’s experience, has been a preoccupation of some of the leading scholars in the fields of cognition, though variably articulated with a certain philosophical twist. Famously, Oliver Sacks studied various amnesics, and in the introduction to his first amnesic case study, he quotes Luis Bunuel as saying “You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realise that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life at all...Without it, we are nothing.” While Sacks’ various essays on the relationship of memory loss and identity complicate Bunuel’s formulation, Sacks uses this framing definition as the normative bounds of identity, with the narrative arc for his studies built through his own literary form, at times, or, at other times, through his admission of—and usually vague gesture towards—a sort of diminished or disabled identity in the absence of memory.

Most evident, in Sacks’ writing, to create narrative and sense identity absent memory, is in his study of Greg F., a hippie, Hare Krishna devotee who was later discovered to have had a massive brain tumor that severely impaired his memory in the form of retrograde amnesia, making him unable to retain and recollect new experiences beyond 1970. Even worse: after a long illness, Greg lost insight into his own blindness. Without memory, and without the insight into his inability to recall or see, Greg is described by Sacks as confined “to a single moment—

141 See “Introduction” to Chapter 5, Memory in the Twenty-First Century Ed. Sebastian Groes (Palgrave: 2015), Forthcoming.
143 See “The Last Mariner,” 23.
‘the present’—uninformed by any sense of a past (or a future).” Greg, Sacks observes, “seemed immured, without knowing it, in a motionless, timeless moment.” (“The Last Hippie” 203)

Sacks is quick to judge, or at least distinguish, between value systems in the Krishna temple and in the modern laboratory. He decides that “this living-in-the-moment, which was so manifestly pathological, had been perceived in the temple as an achievement of higher consciousness,” and in perpetuating the supremacy of perceived, modern diagnosis over culturally relative subjectivities, he marginalizes non-normative, disabled identity and discounts the possibility for subjectivity apart from normative memory and narrativity. “[W]hereas for the rest of us the present is given its meaning and depth by the past...for Greg it was flat,” (203) he writes, in privileging the richness of a remembered life—and with the assumption of narrativity and a unified self, in the process—over life experienced in the absolute present. This is not to say, of course, that Greg is not at all disabled, in need of assistance, and often suffering. He is, as Sacks shows, unable to remember to perform—and uninterested in performing—basic life and bodily functions. It is the descriptive language that Sacks employs, in attempting and failing to locate a so-called identity, “ego,” or “soul” that is so troubling. Indeed, Sacks begins to sound much like the Doctor in Casey’s work—driven to uncover the essential, continuous identity of his study, and thereby save his study from what he imagines to be certain oblivion.

Yet Sacks’ very language undoes itself in its ambivalence. He diagnoses Greg’s “brooding” state as pathological mental “idling,” even as such a state was appreciated in the Krishna temple as “meditating.” (207) He finds disquieting and bizarre Greg’s word play, even as he describes it as “childlike spontaneity.” He worries about the ways in which Greg is “seized by his environment,” unable to distinguish himself from it, losing “its coherence, its inwardness, its autonomy, its ‘self’” but celebrates when Greg blends with the crowd at a Grateful Dead
show, showing a “rare and wonderful continuity of attention, everything orienting him, holding him together.” For a moment, in Sacks’ eyes, “he seemed completely normal...the music infusing him with its own strength, its coherence, its spirit.” (225)

Of course, the trouble with this portrait is manifold. Not only does Sacks distinguish between coherent and incoherent selves, but his assumptions lead him to conclude that his failure at narrating Greg’s experience for a sense of continuity and closure necessarily means that Greg’s experience is impossibly unknowable—and even to Greg himself. Greg, for Sacks, is a shell of his former self, doomed to repeat short durations of memory for the rest of his life—but his life-as-experienced is one of absence—and disadvantaged suffering. In a far more absolute manner of relating life to functional memory and normative narrativity, Sacks pronounces in his study of Mr. Thompson, the amnesic subject of his essay “A Matter of Identity,” that

To be ourselves we must have ourselves - possess, if need be re-possess, our life-stories. We must ‘recollect’ ourselves, recollect the inner drama, the narrative, or ourselves. A man needs such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative, to maintain his identity, his self. (109)

Of course, as I mentioned earlier, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s work on illness and narrative identity is a caution against the impulse for an “implied redemptive or therapeutic role of telling and writing.” For Rimmon-Kenan, the dearth of fragmented illness narratives suggests the genre’s fear of exposing the “ill subject’s vulnerability.” (22)

In reading amnesic memoir for the possibility not only of narrating and representing identity apart from memory, then, I offer a critique of Sacks’ assumptions regarding baselines for soulfulness and normativity. I follow a slew of contemporary cognitive psychologists,
researchers, and philosophy referenced earlier in this study, as well. Writing about the
distinction between memory and consciousness, for example, Endel Tulving offers a case study
of N.N., an amnesic who suffered a closed head injury in a traffic study and who, as a result, has
no capability “of experiencing extended subjective time, or chronognosia.” ("Memory" 4)
Absent the capacity for retro- or pro-jection in time, N.N. “has no difficulty with the concept of
chronological time” and “has a good deal of preserved memory capability.” N.N.’s impaired
memory directly affects his autonoetic consciousness, defined by Tulving as the phenomenal
experience of episodic memory conscious of the moment of recollection (6), even as his
semantic memory about his past is retained. The experience of his consciousness as it remains,
characterized by Tulving, is the dwelling in a “perpetual present.” (4) Stanley Klein and others
refined Tulving’s thinking by showing that semantic trait self-knowledge may very well function
independently of factual semantic and episodic memory (“A Self” 25-46).144 In one particular
study, Klein examined the amnesic 79-year-old D.B. who suffered from severe retrograde and
anterograde amnesia but could demonstrate reliable and consistent judgments for personality
traits for self-description in terms of how he others perceived him. This consistent pattern,
according to Klein, suggests that “the human cognitive architecture includes a subsystem of
semantic memory that is functionally specialized for the storage and retrieval of trait self-
knowledge” (“Diachronic” 797-8).145 Tulving’s and Klein’s case studies were very recently
reinforced by Nina Strohminger and Shaun Nichols, who showed the character trait perception is
retained to the degree that a moral faculty can be identified. Thus, independent of memory

144 In addition to this citation, see also Klein, et. al “A Social-Cognitive Neuroscience Analysis of the Self” Social
145 This particular case study is reinforced by additional evidence in the comprehensive analysis offered in an earlier
article by Stanley Klein and Moshe Lax, “The Unanticipated Resilience of Trait Self-Knowledge in the Face of
Neural Damage” Memory 18 (2010), 918-948.
functionality, perceived identity “is at risk for deteriorating during neurodegeneration primarily when the moral system is impaired...This effect is observed whether moral change is measured as a function of changes in moral traits or symptomatology related to moral behavior.” (9) Thus, identity discontinuity and relationship deterioration were affected only, in the presence of neurodegenerative diseases, by the injury to a moral faculty.

As the narrative correlate to such a cognitive theory of identity in the face of disabled memory, amnesic memoir, in its articulation of dispositions, trait self-knowledge, and even moral direction offers a strong, complementary perspective from the Humanities, though in its articulation through the mimesis of consciousness, it chooses to say less about memory-less consciousness than it does attempt to narrate it from the inside. Such memoirists attempt to narrate the unique textures of the “blankness” or “permanent present” that Tulving observed in his case study’s subject. In so doing, I suggest, they harness the aesthetic terms unique to a wandering mind—a mind both active and absolutely anti-narrativist.

Take, for example, Su Meck’s recent *IForgot to Remember*, a memoir of amnesia in the form of investigative journalism whose whimsical title seems to conflate and confuse normative forgetfulness with pathological amnesia. In her work, Meck pieces together her “prior life” through interviews, documents, and some speculation, holding her pre-amnesia self at a great epistemological distance. She suffers from what she calls a “peculiar sort of identity crisis,” in which she states, presently, “I don’t know who I’m supposed to be” (271); and to the present day, she still suffers from her trauma in memory, experiencing “traces of anterograde amnesia,” with “occasional blackouts” that leave her with “entire days” that she cannot recall. In her own, confessional words, she still struggles greatly with the concept of time, unable to project into the future or conceptualize elapsed time (272).
Yet, Meck notices that her “brain” is “happiest in the present,” and she’s come to
distinguish, along with her husband, Jim, the difference in her cognition between “Now” and
“Not now.” (190-1) Situating the “Now” in a history is challenging—when tasked to recall past
“Now” moments, she notices how she has to replay all intermittent moments to reach the desired
moment, a lengthy and often futile task. Still, she notices how she can “make sense of that thing”
happening now—and, she opines, even if she had access to her past self’s memories, she “would
have to figure out exactly who I am all over again” (273), an option her present self would rather
do without. In other words, she acknowledges that her present self would simply have to make
sense of past selves—but a continuity with these past selves is far from guaranteed.

Meck’s narrative is an extreme insistence of mimetic foreclosure. At no point does she
attempt to narrate or represent a dissociated or amnesic cognition. Writing in a distant tone and
retrospective perspective, Meck submits most of her pathological scenes to the eyewitness,
remote memory of others, and especially when recounting recurring amnesic episodes.146 Still,
she does not speculate about the quality of her cognition, nor does she privilege continuous or
narrativized identity over and above a discontinuous, fragmented, or even developmentally
stunted one. By the work’s end, her nascent self-conception and related narrative has just begun:
she is a community college student who confesses to having read her first book (in memory) at
the age of 22 (241); as she begins to tell her story of memory loss, and as her story spreads, she
is invited to speak in college classrooms, private institutions, and radio stations, and she is
featured in a cover story in the Washington Post (240-6). Her story’s resolution, if there is one, is
the discovery that amnesics, too, can tell their stories of impasses, lapses, and forgotten selves.

146 See, for example: “She says I could barely talk and I was holding my head in my hands, and people kept coming
up and asking if I needed any help. At the hotel the next morning, I was still a mess. Barb can remember checkout
time coming and going. She describes me as being” really groggy and slow, almost in slow motion.” (122)
Meck’s work of wandering through the textual and oral evidence, and piecing it together, encounters its limits—but it becomes a story that she learns to embrace as her own, too. She imagines possible histories upon encountering gaps in collective, shared memories. Early in her work, for example, she imagines what might have occurred in the ambulance en route to the hospital after the freak, traumatic accident in which her kitchen fan concussed her head:

The ambulance door swung closed, and I began my journey to the hospital. I would like to tell you that the paramedic gazed pensively at my vital signs, steadied my wounded head, held my hand, and even though I couldn’t hear the words, he told me in a think Texas accent, “Everything’s gonna be just fine.” But Jim wasn’t there, and I don’t remember, so there is nothing more to tell. (23)

For Meck, the futility of imagining what is irretrievable in memory is defeating, foreclosing in turn the very usefulness of the imagination’s workings. Yet the memory of the trip to the hospital is itself a remote one informed by Jim—and so transcribing this remotely held memory demands a certain leap of faith, a trust in the memory of others, and a certain imagining in assuming this story as her own.

For Meck, then, the ethics of her investigative work is the responsibility to her past self, but it ends with what might be reasonably confirmed. Jim, her doctor, the paramedic—all exist in that same space as the past self, and are as useful—or as continuous—with her present self as her past self might have been. Implicit in this amnesic narrative, then, is the acknowledgment that past selves’ discontinuities are fundamentally irreconcilable with a present self—a truth that Meck articulates throughout—even as the wandering through memory (and even memory remotely held by others) contains a broader definition of speaking for one’s self.
If Meck makes it possible for the definition of a narrating, autobiographical, mimetic self include past selves whose relation is discontinuous and whose memory is stored elsewhere, then David Stuart MacLean’s *The Answer to the Riddle is Me* attempts to enfold the mimesis of an amnesic self into a continuous narrative across a spectrum of non-normative cognition. Situated on the opposite extreme from Meck’s, MacLean’s work is not as imaginative as much as it stretches the limits of what it means to narrate a life anew from the retrospective vantage point of an amnesic memoirist.

The book is a personal memoir narrated as a fragmentary epic, broken into short chapters of varied lengths (some as short as a paragraph) in which MacLean narrates his awakening from an amnesia induced by the malaria vaccine malarium, and his subsequent adjustment to making sense of his past life and future—and newly “born”—self. His narrative is a sequence of vignettes, sometimes paragraph length, that constitute their own chapters within the multiple sections of the book. Much of his narrative articulates and attempts to make sense of the subsequent confusion and psychiatric hospitalization for a bout of intense hallucinations (at times horrifying, as he narrates it, and at other times comical) that follow his “awakening,” as well as his eventual re-learning of his passions, his family, his lovers, and his friends—as well as his past personality.

While his life is certainly discontinuous from pre-amnesia to post-amnesia, his gift as a writer on a Fulbright is clear in the memoir’s articulation of the very first moments of coming-to on a train platform in India, to the subtle social complications, back in suburban Ohio, with the assumption of his past personality through visual, textual, and even photographic cues. His first memory, in his new-self-narrative, begins with disclosing very little, allowing the reader to awaken, as it were, with MacLean: “I was standing when I came to. Not lying down. And it
wasn’t a gradual waking process. It was darkness darkness darkness, then snap. Me. Now awake.” (3) Nearly Kafkan in his awakening (but not lying down, like Kafka’s Gregor Samsa), we know little of MacLean’s life before awakening—and we fail in recovering any objective insight along with MacLean.

Indeed, the reader has no indication that MacLean’s amnesia is not drug-induced, as MacLean’s limited insight and absent memory entertains such a possibility when suggested by a policeman. Narrated in the immediate past present, MacLean offers flashes, brief vignettes, of drifting in and out of consciousness and conscious awareness, all narrated in the immediate past present. At the very beginning, while still in a psychiatric ward, this performance dramatizes his wildly Biblical hallucinations and the “roulette wheel” of his waking consciousness, in which “any moment could be any moment.” (46) Even upon returning home to convalesce, MacLean notes a certain familiarity, even as he “never experienced an avalanche of identity data.” (91-92) Ultimately, MacLean tries to make sense of his amnesic split as one on a continuum of experiencing the self as a multiplicity:

In the life I had woken up to, I found that I was often split between who I was and who I wanted to be. I grew up in small-town Ohio, but I wanted to be a world traveler; I went to small unheralded schools, but I wanted to compete with the country’s best academics for a Fulbright scholarship; I was dating Anne, but I wanted to be the kind of guy who dated someone like Geeta. These aren’t unique fractures when compared to anyone else on the planet, but it was into these fractures that the Lariam nestled, and instead of being merely divided, it blew me apart from the inside. (214)
Like all sufferers of amnesia, his pain and confusion is palpable, even as it seems to be an enhanced version of his propensity for duplicity—or a multiplicity of selves. As a method of narration, too, MacLean chooses to adhere closely to his memoiristic subject, challenging his reader to enter a narrative space with a limited, if not absent history.

Even more interesting is MacLean’s stylistic ability to represent his amnesic consciousness—an impasse performed by Meck—and the descriptive choices that he makes in the process. Nearly echoing Ishiguro’s Ryder, MacLean’s narrative voice has little insight, at first and at times, into his absented self—writing in truncated sentences, he presents a truncated self: “I stood still. I had no idea who I was. This fact didn’t panic me at first. I didn’t know enough to panic.” (3) In fact, his perception overwhelms his need to make narrative sense of his embedded history and of his embodied subjectivity.

What follows, absent narrative sequencing and coherence, is a fragmentary narration of pure perception—echoing the most discontinuous moments in Ishiguro’s narrative, and corresponding with both Benjamin’s theory of the gesture and Jameson’s theory of cognitive mapping. Coming to on a train platform, MacLean notices that “In front of me was a train,” and then proceeds to describe the train’s being and movements, along with his own movements in correspondence:

A heavy, shuddering train, its engine, half-submerged in smoke, painted a deep red. It blasted its horns, then clanked and panted into motion. People waved to me from open windows as the train shook itself free of the station. I waved back and noticed the whiteness of my arm, covered in hairs the color of straw. (ibid.)
MacLean’s writing glistens with attentiveness to the isolated object, and seems to process the acting subjects as distinct objects. Even a wave is an opportunity for his attention to wander, to notice his arm color and arm hair color, too. Liberated from its various contexts, much as Benjamin’s reading of the gesture in Kafka’s work, cognition is left to play in the margins, as it were, proceeding from object to object, wandering in its absolute attention, and without a need to categorize or prioritize objects within a perceived scene.

Following his absolute absence of self‐knowledge, MacLean discovers himself to be absent: he becomes aware of his memory’s absence. This initial discovery of an absent self, on the train platform, spurs an anxiety (“I wondered if I should have been on that train”, “This is when I panicked”). MacLean soon finds comfort in a policeman, who reassures him of the cause of his lapse: “You foreigners come to my country and do your drugs and get confused. It will be all right, my friend.” While quick and presumptuous comfort, MacLean is thankful and relieved to finally know his identity and history—and the cause of his trouble:

I was relieved. I should have known. This was the kind of trouble drug addicts ended up in all the time. It was serious, but I was thankful that this police officer had let me know who I was and that I wasn’t to be trusted. I knew who I was. He had given me a key to my identity. I didn’t have a name, but I now knew the kind of person I was. (7)

This anecdote illustrates a more regular drama in MacLean’s life of retrograde amnesia: the shuttling between genuine clarity and absolute anxiety due to the great gap and irreconciliable riddle between his pre- and post-amnesic selves.

Furthermore, whereas MacLean takes incremental comfort in his fresh discoveries, he alternates this biographical comfort with a continued eye for the absolute gesture, both a source
of revelation and self-discovery, and a recurring motif throughout. Take another early instance of such clarity of pre-narrativized cognition:

At the center of the snarl of the intersection, inserted in the chaos, three boys popped from vehicle to vehicle, clasping their hands together in routine genuflection, affecting a moment of solemnity, then darting their hands out for rupees. They were identical. Each wore small wire frames with no glasses in them, each wore a short length of cotton wrapped around him like a diaper, each was shaved bald, each had a tiny mustache drawn above his lip, and each was slathered head to toe in silver paint. Silver heads. Silver glasses. Silver dhotis. Silver sandals. Three silver boys dancing in the middle of the street in the middle of the day. Their tiny heads glinted as they climbed upstream through traffic like salmon. (13)

Moving from context to absolute perception, this chapter closing inverts the typical description-explication model of perception and narrative meaning. It starts with a speculation about motives, but ends with a double-take that reduces the boys to a nearly impressionistic image of fragmented objects, making possible a second, more gestural description of “three silver boys dancing in the middle of the street”, with a highly stylized, abstract re-conception of their fish-like color and movement.

For MacLean, wandering becomes both the cognitive motion and the style in which his work engages. On the one hand, MacLean wanders in and out of consciousness—and the aphoristic style of storytelling accommodates a broken history. But on the other, the narrating of cognition, itself, possesses its own method of wandering, too, that seems to resolve itself in perception at a standstill, an irreconcilable narrative form, but an absolute image.
Perhaps MacLean’s tale offers insight into Albert’s fugues, in the ways in which they are both punctuated by darkness but that are narratable, too, in their dissociated moments. MacLean, as it were, makes the narration of such fugues possible in his recollection of a newborn consciousness, a cognitive perception emerging in an extreme bareness.

Perhaps MacLean’s memoir, too, offers insight into the generic possibilities for the memoir, more generally, and for fiction, too: in his detachment from the series of self-portraits with which he is presented, he has little need to reconcile his past and present as a factual relation. The past might remain a fiction, and the fiction that can be written—as an answer to his self-riddle, in what can be recalled of the past—allows for highly lyrical moments of both perception and articulation and representation of that perception. Here, MacLean’s work recalls Rousseau’s, Wordsworth’s, or De Quincey’s more disoriented states in which lapses of memory made possible new modes of perception and autobiography.

And here, too, MacLean’s persistence to narrate apart from narrativity speaks not only to an ethical imperative to enact subjectivity and historicity as multiple, as Lerner and Sebald have shown, to wonder and wander about multiple possibilities of one’s and history’s past futures. But it once again confirms the very motion of wandering as the aesthetic motion underlying cognition, as Ishiguro and Casey have shown, as the limits of cognitive mimesis harnessed by writers when all else fades away.

In his philosophy of consciousness, Daniel Dennett argues that narrative and selfhood are deeply intertwined—and counter-intuitively so: “Our tales are spun, but for the most part we
don’t spin them; they spin us.” (418) Our stories, in other words, create our selfhood—and so for Dennett, in his groundbreaking theory of consciousness, the experience of one’s self isn’t actually the knowledge of a self—it is instead the experience of a representation of a self. This self-representation, sustained by a self-spinner, is the center of one’s “narrative gravity” (429).

In this study, I’ve attempted to reach beyond what it means to represent one’s self to one’s self as a necessary point of departure for self-consciousness. I’ve attempted to articulate cognitive models in narrative experiments that manifest beyond—or without—the bounds of normative cognition, memory, and narrativity. While the “narrative gravity” in Dennett’s model is, certainly, a “magnificent fiction” (ibid.), Dennett has expressed this sweeping theory without an eye for non-normative selves. For Dennett, “if you think of yourself as a center of narrative gravity...your existence depends on the persistence of that narrative.” (430) Overwhelmed by remembered and unrealized past selves, or absent basic autobiographical contextual memory, what sort of self-representation can be isolated, retained, and focused? Perhaps none that can be articulated and recorded in real-time and normative language, though perhaps, too, another form of subjective consciousness and even self-knowledge remains without a distinctly narrative self. Jonathan Franzen sensed as much in his father’s silenced body and degenerated brain: the “stirrings of a will” (Living Autobiographically 57), the persistent and particular desires and gestures through which an embodied mind cognizes and wanders.

---

Works Cited


