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DECIDEDLY UNCERTAIN

by

SOPHIA VAROSY

A capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Liberal Studies, The City University of New York.

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the
Capstone Project requirement for the degree of Master of Liberal Studies..

November 1st, 2016

Date

Rachel Brownstein

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November 1st, 2016

Date

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Abstract

DECIDEDLY UNCERTAIN

by

Sophia Varosy

Adviser: Professor Rachel Brownstein

My capstone project is meant to reflect the ideas I've been exposed to and the ways in which they have, as a consequence, influenced my life; the ways, I suppose, I can apply them. Over the course, or courses (literally), of my time spent at The CUNY Graduate Center, I felt (mostly) enthusiastic about the ideas and philosophies I was growing to at-least-marginally understand. However, as time passed I became increasingly more unsettled about my position as an "academic." In other words, I found that I was moved and motivated to increase my understanding of things, but never did I feel like I had any solid footing, especially when I was encouraged to pursue the specialized version of research/writing/applying knowledge. For example: in philosophy classes I felt less abstract and more creative; in research classes I felt less focused and more sprawling; in comparative classes I felt more philosophically inclined than literature-oriented. I was always lacking some foundation to draw everything back to and was always in the process of comparing different disciplines rather than specializing in them. It was-- or maybe just I was a bit of a mess.

In any case, the mess isn't something inherently negative. A Liberal Studies degree cultivates an ability to perspective switch, if you will, and I think this is invaluable. I do not, however, find that any one point of view is "better" than another and it has only become more

difficult for me to formulate arguments. I contradict myself, wittingly or not, because I invariably bring to mind another specialization's lens or framework and this means, often times, a disruption in the compatibility of whatever argument I'm attempting to convey or, as some philosophical proofs call for, "prove." This has become a huge part of my experience as student and I my goal was to be able to create a piece of work that conveyed all these angles I find both appealing and simultaneously contradictory.

At this point, I've thought back to who I think most interests me and, as a consequence, has likely most influenced my work. The names I've come up with are writers Jorge Luis Borges and W.G. Sebald. Many of my courses intersected these writers/thinkers and it seemed they were confounded over some of the same issues. Perspective, memory and relative understanding, specifically.

What I really like about them, in addition, is that their "trade" or focus, discipline, perspective etc., is more ambiguous and less straightforward. They blend genres, alter reality and incorporate the art of narrative. This is exactly what I've tried to do.

I've attempted to compile a kind "fantastical memoir" where I draw from academic experience, random interactions and end beyond as a means to create a composite of experience.

My experience has not been anything particularly individual in nature. I feel like when I talk to many of the people I happen across within the course of a day (whether at school, at the coffee shop, the yoga studio I teach at), everyone is blindly but enthusiastically (like me) seeking out reason and balance in this life and the result is something that appears to be totally scattered. My aim is that by writing a memoir that is in part my own, but part a composite of other's experiences, I might be able to capture some kind of understanding or truth about what it's like to be a human-- at least a human, in their twenties, in NYC, who has a mild idea about

where they've come from and where they'd like to go The result is a semi-accurate portrayal of what acquiring a Liberal Studies feels like; that is, something scattered and chaotic but overall enjoyable.

A thank you to all who aided these ideas,
Who made them become real.
I'll see you on the other side,
Or maybe you'll see me.

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Part One: Thoughts and Feelings

Today (nevermind what "today" becomes), I'm twenty-six years old and I experience the world as a pendulum; swinging between taking things too lightly and too heavily¹, erratically. For example, what that means for me is sobbing when I can't figure out how to proceed with my thesis and feeling as if the weight of the world is on my shoulders and understanding wholly that I'm going to die (when really what I've got are some pretty lucky problems) OR taking off for two months, in my case to Europe, and neglecting regular life and all the responsibilities that come with it, i.e., as mentioned, finishing a thesis. You could say I'm one proper, quality pendulum if one values the dramatic arts.

I can say, and it would be true, I've had many what-I-thought-were-promising thoughts, and even many whippy introductions formulated whilst I lay in bed at night stressing about the outcome of this project. But more often than not as soon as these thoughts reach the paper platform, what they become are confused, often-conflated and invariably convoluted rambles. I'm now hoping that this history of blunders, this trail of trial and error, will lead up to something promising, that I will have a better understanding of what it is I've been trying to say and therefore I will be able to snip these ideas down to the essentials. After all, time is valuable and I'm not trying to contribute to the wasting of it.

I didn't, and don't, mean to give a tremendous history of my failings, which would be a snore to get through, but it seems that these past

¹ Balance, for me, is a difficult chord to strike; though one could say that the mean of the two extremes is a balance, so, really, I'm doing just fine.

shortcomings are worth a reference as they have gotten me to exactly here. They are a compilation of varied sources: a mixture of many conversations, books read, thoughts thought (many of these splintering into a million different directions) and though I find this sprawl appealing it doesn't work so well in writing. Things get scattered, points get lost and, ultimately, I'm left with a thesis unfinished; you're left with nothing to read. Still, words are what I'm working with so I'll do what I can to be concise and straightforward and, if I'm lucky, maybe even a little convincing.

However-and-last-qualifier (promise), contrary to this proposal of "convincing", I'm reluctant to tell you that I have some kind of ultimate point to prove. Rather I ask you to consider the perspective, the interpretation of things that I'm presenting because they are my own. I can't prove to you that they are real or true or totally founded in some kind of airtight logic-- something complete with references and even evidence, because half of what I wish to convey is something far less tangible; it is rooted in feeling, in a response to something and that response, my particular reaction, is what I hope I am able to describe.

It all starts and ends with two names that have irrevocably (at least as far as I can tell) altered or transformed the way I view the world, how I even begin to make sense of it. These names are Sebald and Borges and my career at The CUNY Graduate Center kicked off and winded down considering their work. First semester, I turned up in a class focused on Sebald and his novel, *The Emigrants*; last semester, I enrolled in a class about Borges. Both are confusing, infuriating-in-some-ways writers who have the ability to make one entirely uncertain of the rules, the "truth" and, one's own conception of reality. They basically are jokesters. I've been told that calling them

jokesters is unusual and not the category they are usually put into, but I call them such a thing because I would say someone who makes jokes makes you either look at something perhaps not humorous, humorously or someone who plays a trick on you. I think I may have found my problem: I meant tricksters and I mean that their tricks leave the joke on you. They urge you to see things from another side or begin to believe something that may end up not being the case and this ability to enlist someone into the process of being duped-- and hopefully being able to learn from it-- is why I call them jokesters, what I've refined as "tricksters".

My point, or the one I hope to eventually arrive at, is that I think the "tricks" they play are ultimately something positive, maybe even beneficial. Dare I go as far as to say ethical? It could just be. What I wish to describe, once I get past toying around, is why and finally *how* this is relevant in the day to day; how I relate to it personally. I can only say that I believe what I'm telling you; however, it is for you to make of it what you will. That might even mean nothing at all.

As mentioned, my very first semester I found myself in a class about Sebald. It was an Intro class and it, at the very least, was meant to reintegrate those who have forgotten how to be a student, i.e., me and many others. I didn't at the time know that this particular class would have such a hefty impression on both my experience as a student and my life more generally. As things turned out it has. I mean, I'm not going throughout my days thinking Sebald, Sebald, Sebald: what would he think, what would he do? I do, however, doubt as a default setting and I think that this is, at least in part, due to the effect Sebald has had on me.

I was drawn to his writing right away: it was melodious, or maybe just rhythmic², descriptive, poetic and pretty much exclusively confusing. Still, though the writing and the point were not immediately (if ever) understandable, I always felt like I wanted to go on. I always felt there was something to discover. I was interested, engaged. I think that by reading it ~~we~~ I got much more out of it than a confusing story; for me it was a lesson.

W.G. Sebald's: *The Emigrants* raised a myriad of questions and considerations that left the reader, i.e., me, wrapped up in thought, baffled by uncertainty, and interested in pursuing the matters touched upon. He in no way dotted all his i's and crossed all his t's, so to speak; this wasn't a novel that was concluded, closed, or cleanly finished. All the narratives have a cloudy element to them; something that I would suppose-or-propose is for the purpose of imploring the reader to take a closer look at the words, pictures, and stories before them, and to become more critical of one's inclined-to-be conclusions about certain matters and events. As I plodded and persisted through the veil of grey, as the respective interpretations of the past built upon one another via the stories of different characters, what was once exclusively cloudy became suggestive of light. This book effectively illustrates how we, as humans, are susceptible to inadvertent falsehoods and how the seeking of answers, understanding or "truth"³ can both give us life, purpose, and meaning, while in the same moment pose a threat to demolish us, shake our foundations, unsettle our understanding of the world. The seeking of understanding via the stories of others can provide knowledge and in a sense set us free from our own personal

² Sort of had measures, like music or poetry even if there weren't notes to discern. "Melodious" might have been getting too far away from reality.

³ I quote this because I'm not really sure how I feel about the concept of truth and if it can ever be accessed and even if understanding of discovery of truth can be truly recognized. Not terribly relevant at the moment, but using the word "answers" seems less ridden with problems.

narrative, but we may find that along the way the “truth”, or understanding that we thought we have is broken or incongruous. We may find holes in our stories and we may have to challenge our understanding of things.

This seeking of answers and finding of uncertainty, this understanding that we can never fully grasp what the heck is going on here, can unravel two-fold. It could be conceived of as refreshing in that there is always something new to understand, some perspective to gain. On the other hand, it may just as easily make one uneasy because one may feel-- I sometimes felt-- like I'm always missing something and therefore, that there is no certainty at all. How one resolves to accept this proposal is, too, a matter of perspective. I digress..

The Emigrants is made up of four narratives that contain other narratives and seem to build upon one another, subtly raising questions about the power of narrative. As we are led through different conversations and experiences, a question comes to mind: what are the effects of narrative point of view? Readers must, from the very beginning, rely on someone else's version of events. There is no way to be impersonal when re-hashing or re-visiting memories; what we start with is our own collection of experiences to use as a context to compare to someone else's life. What that is supposed to mean is that if we only have our own perspective and understanding, we will read into others' stories based on our own experience, which doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the story of who we are trying to understand. It's more like a kind of projection⁴. However, as we gain more versions, more narratives within the narratives,

⁴ The term in psychology that puts our unconscious feelings and motives onto others and reads into other actions as what we are insecure about or defending within ourselves, though probably not known or recognized by ourselves.

we understand more interpretations of the same events and we are able to use these to build a more rounded, less biased, picture of the person or the event we are learning about. When there is a broader sample of people commenting on experience and the meaning of it rather than relying upon one person's necessarily limited version of what happened or who someone was, we are repeatedly urged to question our own interpretations. This kind of comparison helps keep individuals from becoming too entrenched in their own ideas about things, which can be quite dangerous.

The narrator is seeking, as the reader discovers, knowledge about people who are or have been involved in his/her life. The reader learns about his family, friends and acquaintances, and listens to their stories, absorbing their collected interpretations of other characters. However, we are placed one step away from narrator in that the accounts of the people we meet must be read and what is read is what has been conveyed to us by the narrator's writing. We are led to reflect that our version of events is as partial and limited as the versions of all people in the story. The farther one gets away from the "primary source", i.e., the actual person or the event being spoken about, the more disjointed, spotty, or seemingly inaccessible the actual "truth" can be. But it also seems that the more people's accounts we access, the more accurate or sharp the image becomes. By using this method of multiple narrators, Sebald suggests that the true story, the story of the search for understanding, proves to be a collection of many different interpretations. These different interpretations, once melded together, create a portrait more reliable than one person's version of events can be. Essentially, like statistics, the broader the sample size the more accurate the data.

For the sake of keeping this a reasonable length, I'll delve into detail about two of the four narratives⁵, the second and the fourth. Individually, as well as together, I think these contain examples that support my interpretation of what's happening here⁶ but that is for you now, the reader, to decide.

Situated on the very first page⁷ (1996, London) is a picture of a handsome, ancient-looking tree that functions as a centerpiece to an equally-ancient, unruly looking graveyard. Juxtaposed the narrator's seemingly extraneous description of the countryside, this photo seems to have no particular meaning. I am compelled to take it with a grain of salt: perhaps it suggests some level of melancholy to come. Similarly, I have to consider whether the descriptions of the landscape have any real endgame either as there doesn't appear to be anything meaningful about them. Perhaps descriptions of landscapes don't typically have an endgame, though I find usually it does something for setting the mood. In this case, there is dissonance between the landscape described and the imagery posted and so I am left feeling slightly down but mostly confused and this feeling persists throughout the novel.

In Chapter Two we are introduced to Paul Bereyter, who is described as the recently deceased former elementary teacher of our narrator, who seems to be writing autobiographically. In this narrative, he is attempting to put together the history of the man he thought he had

⁵ There is also one minor snippet of the first chapter, because I need it mentioned in order to fit the last chapter into some kind of context; however, the first chapter proper is not included.

⁶ As in what this novel is about and what the implications are on a grander scale, outside the pages of the novel; in life.

⁷ This same image is situated on the bottom half of the cover of the book so before we even start reading we have been exposed to this image twice; I imagine this isn't at-least-entirely by chance. It conveys some message that this kind of subject matter may become important; maybe it always is, though we don't immediately find out why. The image and the topic of death isn't talked about for quite some time in the novel but it does eventually come to light and this is perhaps the precursor.

known⁸but is met with evidence to the contrary. The narrator writes, “The obituary in the local paper was headed ‘Grief at the Loss of a Popular Teacher’ and there was no mention that Paul Bereyter had died of his own free will, or through a self-destructive compulsion.” (Sebald, *The Emigrants*, 27) We soon learn that the death of this former teacher was self-inflicted, though it was not presented as such by the newspapers. That simple sentence encourages reader to read carefully because we learn that things can be framed, nuanced and delivered in such a form that the truth is a hard to establish. We can think of this in terms of deliberate misinformation (like with newspapers and establishments with more strategic aims, generally, than candor) as well as people’s biases and interpretations. Thus, our narrator sets out to collect other people’s interpretations and understanding of Paul and by doing so uncovers a history he never knew.

...I was reminded then of how we had only ever spoken of him as Paul at school, not without respect but rather as one might refer to an exemplary older brother, and in a way this implied that he was one of us, or that we belonged together. This, as I have come to realize, was merely a fabrication of our minds⁹, because, even though Paul knew and understood us, we, for our part, had little idea of what he was or what went on inside him¹⁰. (28)

⁸ Of course there is the possibility that he had known him; that he changed over time and became a disillusioned-with-life man. That’s a hard judgement to make though and certainly not one possible to prove.

⁹ I take this to mean that we come up with our own versions of how things are, and who we think people are. We often want them to be what we think of them as, but that doesn’t make our version universally true; it just makes it true for us. Sometimes we need to curb or alter our own truths in order to see the bigger picture. Not always, admittedly, is that alteration pleasant.

¹⁰ For all our held beliefs in regard to thinking we understand others, we rarely are able to really, truly understand another person’s perspective. We cannot know what goes on behind another person’s eyes; we cannot know the thoughts that occur endlessly throughout another’s life. We are only able to see the thoughts that become actions and they are a spotty representation of the whole picture, never mind actions that are deliberately counter to how a person who is acting feels. Notwithstanding, it should be our endless mission to attempt to do so, because that is what makes a person empathetic, understanding and considerate.

For me, this points to the fact that we have little idea of what goes on before us. We materialize in the world and our story becomes the most real and true and it covers eternity as the story only begins being told once we are around to narrate it—at least as far as we, going only off of ourselves, can tell. In spite of that, the fact of the matter is there is so much that goes on before we, the “I”, emerge in any given timeline and so the Past is, as it were, aware of us but we are so often unaware of it. As an example: the narrator speaks about the town “S”, where he moved as a small child and it is the town where Paul became his teacher. He describes his personal experience of moving there as something very exciting. “I was overcome by a powerful feeling that a new life filled with the bustle of cities would be starting for us there” (30). Paul, as our narrator comes to learn, had an entirely different experience and therefore association with this particular town. Paul’s was made up of darker material, though the narrator would never have known this if he hadn’t spoken to others about Paul. This does make sense as our narrators’ fragment of history only partially overlapped with Paul’s timeline and definitely stood outside the dates of World War Two proper; a time that was very real and bore many consequences for Paul.

...Mme Landua was not in the least bit surprised that I was unaware, despite the fact that I came from S and knew what the town was like, that old Beryeter was what was termed half Jewish and Paul, in consequence, only three quarters Aryan. Do you know, she said on one of my visits, to Yverdon, the systematic thoroughness with which these people [Paul] kept silent in the years after the war, kept secret even, I sometimes think, really did forget. (50)

Information about the past wasn’t, then, easy to come by and isn’t, now, so easy to understand even if the information is available. Still, it very much *happened* and it is relevant if we wish to understand Paul. What the narrator is really doing as he collects different people’s stories is reframing his understanding of history and placing Paul within that understanding. Interestingly Paul stayed in this town that had contributed to a lot of hardship and pain in his life,

which may indicate, symbolically, that we never really leave behind our past and it affects us our entire lives regardless of if Time emerges between our present self and the past.

...he might stop or sit down somewhere, alone and apart from us all, as if he, who was always in good spirits, and seemed so cheerful, was in fact desolation itself.

It was not until I was able to fit my own fragmentary recollections into what Lucy Landau told me that I was able to understand the desolation even in part. (42)

By looking to more people who knew Paul and knew his life outside of our narrator's understanding we are able to build a bigger picture and fit Paul into the grand scheme of things. We discover the reality of "a grand scheme of things". We begin to understand *history*, memory and context rather than living in our own bubbles, which take up only a margin of time and don't understand the relationship, the consequences of actions of the past or inaction (as in failure to recognize the past) of the present. Left to our own devices, we may never even become aware of the omissions or manipulations of history or of our own biases and so it is our responsibility to seek answers via ourselves *and* others. Simply: the more people, the more narratives, the more stories to compare we have, the higher the likelihood that all angles of the past will be (re)covered, even in instances where the past isn't so readily relinquished.

In Chapter Four, the final narrative, we are introduced to Max Ferber; a painter. The narrator had once been a student doing research in Manchester. During that time he spent many hours watching Max create his works of art. "I visited as often as I thought acceptable, to talk to the painter who had been working there since the late Forties, ten hours a day, the seventh day not excepted."(160) We learn that the painter, Max, spends those hours, days, weeks erasing the work he has done and degrading the canvas he is working on until, finally, the portrait is realized on top of all this messy, inexact, often dissatisfied history. We don't receive too much insight as to why Max is the way that he is but as far as his paintings are concerned, I imagine them as

representative of history and all the experiences that lead up to the present, the final image. It may be hard for us to discern the layers, though we may try and that is just what our narrator does.

After a long absence, i.e., many years later, our narrator stumbles upon one of Max Ferber's painting in a random gallery and is drawn back to Manchester. This chance meeting with the past inspires him to take further action in understanding Ferber, someone who has remained virtually unknown,

..In May 1939, at the age of fifteen, Friedrich Maximilian Ferber (so the rather meager magazine account informed me) left Munich, where his father was an art dealer, for England. The article went on to say that Ferber's parents, who delayed their own departure from Germany for a number of reasons, were taken from Munich to Riga in November 1941, in one of the first deportation trains, and were subsequently murdered there. (178)

This tip of the iceberg inspires our narrator to dig deeper. We all have to start somewhere. He takes it upon himself to visit Max. During their second round of overlapping lives they get to talking more directly. Perhaps the more time that passes between Max and his difficult past, the easier it becomes to talk about it, but the harder it is for others (and maybe even himself) to really *understand* it. He explains to the narrator how he came to be in England: how his parents flew him out of Munich and he stayed with an uncle for some years. His parents were supposed to follow, but it became unrealistic that they ever would. They were killed in a camp without any mention of their names, their deaths or any kind of history, save for, as far as we know, Max's memory of them.

...Only gradually did it dawn on me that I would never again be able to write home; in fact, to tell the truth, I do not know if I have really grasped it to this day...Naturally, I took steps, consciously or unconsciously, to keep at bay thoughts of my parents suffering and of my own misfortune, and no doubt I succeeded sometimes in maintaining a certain equability by my self-imposed seclusion; but the fact is that the tragedy in my youth struck deep roots within me that later shot up again, put forth evil flowers, and spread the poisonous canopy over me which has kept me so much in the shade and dark in recent years. (191)

Though Max was at one point under the impression that he could suppress, ignore, or will away his past by enlisting the power of silence, the pain had other ways of preserving itself. In this case, it was via a route of agitated days and unfinished works of art. His past seemed to find ways of imposing itself on his life and his experiences in spite of his effort to put it out of his mind and, it is only at this later meeting that he seems to accept the reality that his past was painful and it must be *felt*. Following this conversation he gives a key to our narrator. It is without description or purpose but as narrator explores the grounds of Manchester he comes across a cemetery surrounded by a gate with a lock. Max's key is a fit. The description of such a place brings us back to the imagery presented on the first pages of the novel:

...What I saw had little to do with cemeteries as one thinks of them; instead, before me lay a wilderness of graves, neglected for years, crumbling and gradually sinking into the ground amidst tall grass and wildflowers under the shade of the tree. (223)

This cemetery is hidden away, abandoned, and seemingly forgotten, but a key opens the lock to uncover what lays behind us; what has been lost. Just like our narrator is wrenched back to the past, we are pulled, drawn, referred back to the beginning of the novel. The image from the beginning pages, of the overhanging tree set within a plot of gravestones, has been built into a context. What was once an image with incomplete-yet-ominous undertones has been unveiled by memories, narrative and regenerated understanding. By signaling the beginning of the book at the end, reader is implored to look back, to remember, to build a history and a context so we can better understand where it is we are all coming from. We gain awareness, a broader consciousness, and the best chance we have at cultivating these things, according to me, is by collecting different stories, told by different people who have all lived their own narrative. It is via the telling of stories and the overlaying of them that we are able to come up with a blurry but

discernible picture; one testament to the past, both the good and the sad. Like the graves that have become overgrown with new life, the past becomes intertwined with the present.

Points to take away from Sebald essay: narrator has to question his interpretations and beliefs as he incorporates incoming information from other characters. As we are reliant upon the narrator, this entails that we too participate in the reconfiguring of our own understanding. As narrator discovers information that was missing, we come to recognize that this missing information has had a direct effect on the way he constructed meaning from experience. By reaching out and weaving in others' narratives to his own life, history is recovered; interpretation altered.

It's humbling to come to terms with our inability to have the whole picture. There is something ethical about a collaborative effort to build understanding though *understandably* it can be seen as legitimately frustrating. It requires more work than leaving "the truth" up to our individual interpretations of reality.

Extension of note: some misunderstandings or underdeveloped understandings are not horrific and/or totally unethical. One example is our narrator's initial interpretation of Paul. Though he understood Paul as being one way and came to find out that he was someone at-least-a-bit-else, this is not the end of the universe. You could even say, and I will, that having a misconception of an individual is not uncommon and many times death is not the result of such an interpretative hiccup. However, there are other misconceptions that morph into beliefs, that may even evolve into beliefs about *whole groups* (prejudices or stereotypes) or philosophies about what is the correct approach to life (different religions). From here things get even more dicey. Beliefs may become justification for *action*, which is, the way I see it, an application of belief. At this point these underdeveloped

understandings become much more sinister for it is the *consequence* of these misconceptions, misunderstandings, misapplications that Paul and Max's hardship, difficulties and inescapable sadness are derived from. More on this pending words but I will find them as we move forward.

As far as exposure to Sebald, I had none before my first semester at The CUNY Graduate Center. I had no context for him as an author or a person; no notions about who he was or what he might be concerned with and, because of that, my reading of his work was initially very general. I didn't look at his history or imagine where he might have been coming from when he wrote the novel. (Not-so-ironically, this mirrors the narrator's initial potentially-misread understanding of Paul and Max.) However, as time went on, I heard different interpretations and was lead in a direction that considers his personal history. As my knowledge about him grew, I was moved towards the impression that the narrator in *The Emigrants* might have many shared experiences with Sebald and that the narrator's earnest approach to understanding the past might well have been the author's. That, maybe, is a question for another time but it was and is a point of interest. Borges, on the other hand, was a little more familiar. I had taken a short stories class my sophomore or maybe even senior year of undergrad and I knew a little bit about him, his interest in philosophy and his effective way of scaffolding confusion into reality.

Despite having different styles of writing, Sebald and Borges have some things in common. The first: I am drawn to them. I'm not sure why that is, or if that qualifies as something worthy of claiming as a similarity but it is a personal fact. The second thing is the effect their writing has on a reader. They leave the reader confused and intrigued. That may be a sweeping generalization so let the record show as far as facts are concerned, the only person I can account for as having definitively felt what I have and will be describing is myself. However, I wouldn't

discount the possibility they have already or could yet do for you what they have for me. Nothing is impossible and if there's anything I believe: nothing should be dismissed right off the bat.

However, Borges, differently than Sebald, shows us not what it is to be my version of what is ethical and discerning¹¹, but rather the possible consequences of *not* being so. He does so in a way that is very humane and allows for or maybe even encourages empathy-- if only empathy derived from our own understanding that we, too, are fallible and can become mesmerized by an idea. This empathy, or even sympathy, may be born from the angle of self-preservation rather than ability to be altruistically understanding¹² but that's a whole different question probably more suitable for another time.

To take the role of one who has, or had in the past, ceased to be critical of himself and his life philosophy, we have Otto Deitrich zur Linde: narrator of *Deutsches Requiem*. In this short story, we are given insight into the perspective of a to-be executed soldier of the Third Reich. Not trying to be funny, but somehow I do think impending death does lend itself generously to introspection.

In any case, however and more importantly-for-now: because the story itself is not "real", we cannot immediately dismiss the narrator even though he is cast as a person many would have good reason to preemptively condemn. Often when we hear about Nazi Germany, we are

¹¹ Seeking answers through a collection of questions, being skeptical, revisiting ideas and not taking anything as a constant truth etc.

¹² If that's ever even a thing.

programmed¹³ to despise what was done, and *who* did it, because it was in fact egregious. What we don't as readily consider is that a movement like that which took place in Germany, and throughout Europe, is not the effect of one night--or the "accomplishment", so to speak, of one individual. I should emphasize that I do not make this particular point to take away from the gravity and heaviness of actions taken by individuals. They were horrific and those who participated should be held accountable. However, what I mean to address more closely is the sheer number of participators, both direct and indirect, and to consider what it *means*. We think so often, how can it be possible that this ever happened? My question is: why is it is that such numbers *were* involved in the atrocities? Again, it was not (and it is never) one person alone who is the cause of such horrific effects; it is something more insidious. I am referring to something I find much more terrifying than a "big, bad, *evil* being." I am referring to the idea, the possibility that we are all capable of horrific acts, given the right circumstances and the wrong ideas. That means: we can all be taken with an idea, one that should lead us into the direction of alleged perfection. But these ideas are misguided and generally result in corruption, destruction and actions that, in retrospect, are seen as indisputably insane¹⁴.

...Early on, theology held some interest for me, but I was forever turned from that fantastic discipline (and from Christianity) by Schopenhauer with his direct arguments and Shakespeare and Brahms with the infinite variety of their worlds. I wish anyone who is held in awe and wonder, quivering with tenderness and gratitude, transfixed by some passage in the world of these blessed men--anyone so touched-- to know that I too was once transfixed like them--I the abominable." (Borges, *Deutsches Requiem*, 230)

¹³ When we place blame elsewhere, or on others, we effectively avert our eyes from looking inward; we are spared introspection. Unfortunately though, I think that is problematic. We are all capable of heinous acts and to put blame elsewhere, at least continually, is to dismiss the possibility *we* too can be a danger, which is, in itself, dangerous.

¹⁴ I think of this from religion to political movements. Usually there is some kind of blood, sacrifice or loss that it not seen as such because, in the eye of the do-er, it is for the greater good. Digressing a bit but getting back to the point at hand.

Borges does a couple of things by lending us this line. He references a German philosopher who was given credit, if you will, for being an influencer--whether he intended to contribute to the Nazi philosophy or not-- of the movement that overtook Germany. He, at the same time, points out that we all can be “transfixed”, as he put it, by one idea or another; that we, like he, might be transfixed by Schopenhauer, or Shakespeare or Brahms. We, like he “the abominable”, can be mesmerized by the same philosophies, or enamored with the same writing. In that line alone Borges implores us, albeit subtly, to understand that someone we may take as *evil*, someone we might be inclined to dismiss entirely is not altogether different from ourselves, that this person may have once been very comparable or similar to you or me.

As Westerners, we cannot disagree that the minds he mentioned have all had great influence on our conception of the world. Of course there is some distance between being influenced by someone--we are being influenced all the time-- and *applying* one’s interpretation of that *particular* influence to justify horrible acts. There is, however, undoubtedly a connection between influence and belief and again between belief and use of belief to justify action; perhaps even believing hard enough in something that one is sprung into action and not even rationalizing in terms of justification. Additionally, he puts Schopenhauer and Shakespeare within the realm of religion and I believe myself that this is not by mistake. Through this comparison, he effectively suggests that religion itself has been cause of much destruction whether religion takes the form of a conventional sort (Christianity, for example) or as a seemingly earth-bound logic (Schopenhauer’s philosophy).

Fundamentally, what these have in common is that they become something other than a story, or an interpretation. They become belief systems which are, if you can guess, believed in

and understood to be a certainty that something is correct, right or “true”. From the moment we go from interpretation to belief we cease to look for any kind of challenge, any perspective that might shake our foundations. What I am saying is that religion or blind faith, ultimately, is Skepticism’s retirement plan. Otto ultimately left the allure of Christianity/religion in favor of more “direct” arguments; the more tangible (it seemed) arguments of Schopenhauer. Still, they have the same effect on the person who is bound to the belief. The similarity between both is the certainty that the religion or the philosophy is fool proof, absolute. Eventually Borges, through the mask of narrator, highlights that all dogmatic beliefs are followed by the destruction of those who believe them. That is to say, we will be destroyer as well as destroyed if we allow ourselves to fall into the unrelenting grasp of certainty. He writes:

...Hitler thought he was fighting for a nation, but he was fighting for all nations, even for those he attacked and abominated. It does not matter that his ego was unaware of that; his blood, his will, knew¹⁵. The world was dying of Judaism, and of that disease of Judaism that is belief in Christ¹⁶; we proffered but violence and faith in the sword. That sword killed us and we are like the wizard who leaves a labyrinth and is forced to wander it for the rest of his days, or like David, who sits in judgement on a stranger and sentences him to death, and then hears the revelation: *Thou art that man.* (234)

Borges, perhaps controversially, references that Judaism *and* Christianity¹⁷ are actually death sentences. They both represent a belief in something and that will eventually cause devastation to the believer though this understanding often evades consciousness. Otto is a prime

¹⁵ Interesting that there is Schopenhauerian reference in this line, by narrator (or by Borges) about will and that it propels. Just another subtler reference to a person being enamored with an idea so much that it shows up in his regular speech and retelling of experience.

¹⁶ Christianity.

¹⁷By citing a belief in Christ he taps in Christianity as well.

example of such a proposal. He condemned many as a soldier of the Third Reich taking action according to his beliefs and now he sits in wait to be executed for those actions. He was living out the certainty that what he was doing was right, or true or a means to actualize some kind of distorted, corrupt, horrific perfection. “Now an implacable age looms over the world. We forged that age, we who are now its victim...What matters not is that violence, not servile Christian acts of timidity, now rules.” (234)

This is a last cry to implore a person, in this case reader, to question their beliefs entirely because we may wittingly (or likely unwittingly) be sentencing ourselves to condemnation if we have absolute faith in our held beliefs. Regardless of if we can get past Otto being a Nazi, we can empathize with his ability to understand the devastation that has occurred by his hand and the death of himself that must be his answer for it.

Essentially, everything within *The Emigrants* and *Deutsches Requiem* comes back around to my *belief* (which I understand is a contradiction) of check and balances. One that says, if you don't want to be living with a narrow or shallow understanding of things, like *The Emigrant's* narrator or if you don't want to sentence yourself to some kind of literal or symbolic death like Otto in *Deutsches Requiem*, then please, dear god, do be a little bit skeptical of the beliefs swirling around the social sphere and the individually built narrative we tell ourselves. If we are to take some more time considering the different sides rather than acting on the beliefs of one, there will always have less damage to make up and less convictions to die for.

There are two things I'm saying here that definitely need to be clarified:

On the one hand, as in the case of *The Emigrants*, we are talking about individuals who are made up of multiple narratives that are built by all the people who were a part of their life. The narrator has to collect these stories to build a better understanding of the individual and to reframe and rework his own personal interpretation.

In *Deutsches Requiem*, all of these collected stories, if you will, have become, for Otto, something other than a narrative. They have become a philosophy or a belief system-- a final interpretation of all the collected stories, if you will. At this point, someone has made a judgment about which interpretation is the "truth" and which interpretation is the "rule to live by" but this judgment itself is based on an interpretation. The problem is, from this point, once this idea catches on, people adopt the whole belief system and cease to question it. They no longer consider the other interpretations that may challenge it because they are under the impression theirs is correct and so any others must be **wrong**. As David Foster Wallace said of the Atheist and the Religious Man: both are guilty of blind certainty and this is exactly what I'm advocating against¹⁸. This is the leap that takes things from an individual misconception to a sweeping generalization applied to life itself that in many cases results in *action*, which, as it happens, is the only way to, at least on paper, commit an atrocity.

So to that end, I say in our individual lives we need to collect many stories from different people to come up with our own conception of individuals in our lives. On a grand scale-- one that has more to do with social philosophies and etiquette, we need to compare multiple points of

¹⁸ David Foster Wallace's 2008 Kenyon College Commencement Speech called "This is Water" tells a story of interpretation between an Atheist and a Religious Man and it comes down to a shared belief by both parties: blind certainty.

view, multiple philosophies, religions¹⁹ etc., and never become too convinced of any of them. Otherwise we may find ourselves in a similar situation as Otto, even if it's not literally the same.

Borges' and Sebald's works of literature are arguably *ethical* because neither seeks to blame. They do surely make reference to human error²⁰, but do not condemn it; they simply expose it. Blame is what encourages people to come up on the defensive, to ignore their own faults because it is too painful or too socially unacceptable to admit oneself *capable* of being at fault. Sebald and Borges both understand what it is to be human, and the fallibility factor inherent in *being* human. They are aware of our shortcomings and so they rather than blame, they prescribe accountability. Through their literature they enable the reader to grow, learn, understand and develop their own sense of responsibility. These works both illustrate the vulnerability of humans as well as humanize those who have gone astray. They aren't dismissals, punishments or condemnations but, rather, realistic reflections of the human experience. By creating works that are not "real life" but that describe very real and relatable to experience, they disable the blame inclination, while opening up a channel for empathy, understanding and a desire to move forward. They implore reader to take a look a hard look at themselves and understand that they, too, are likely very capable of a misguided interpretation of something; misguided interpretation that may inform a misplaced value, a misapplied belief in something, a cause, or other. Sometimes good intentions become something dangerous and uncivil, or at the very least inaccurate. To be so convinced of our own truth is to shut a blind eye to the possibility

¹⁹ As well as the individual stories that collectively make up whole religions because present within the whole may be contradictions that emerge between the stories particular religions are comprised of. We may *notice* this if we looked at our belief system sources more scrutinously.

²⁰ Operative word: human.

of fault and it is through the acceptance of the possibility of fault that we may be more inclined to self-awareness in the first place.

The way I understand it, each of us is one human living in a much bigger world and to think of having all the answers ourselves is kind of an absurdity yet somehow this absurdity occurs again and again. I think they encourage us to become comfortable living our lives a little bit blind; they encourage us to become comfortable with a reality of never-total understanding. Because, contrarily, it is “whole story” belief systems, like religion and science even, that are most capable of becoming dangerous. If you believe that you have all the answers, you can make the claim that you are acting in the best interest of the universe and any action taken may be done without justification because certainty has already taken care of reason. Sebald and Borges, the way I am reading it, understand that we are much more accountable and self-aware if we understand that we might not have the big picture. This acceptance makes us more thoughtful, responsible, even if that means being cautious.

Bottom line, literally (at least in terms of this segment): I think we could afford, really benefit, from a few more less-convinced people.

From a personal standpoint, I find the idea and acceptance of not having a solution to the question of the universe to be a relief. A) there is always something to discover, learn-- there remains some purpose by way of seeking answers day to day. B) I can conserve some energy because I don't have to preach and go through my days attempting to impose my supposed holistic understanding of things upon those who are not yet “enlightened”. Essentially, I can chill a little bit harder and probably do less damage to the people around me because of it.

But, anyhow, I still have several more thoughts I have “thought” and the question that occurs to me is: why does any of this matter? Is this, or can this be, applicable to everyday life or, rather, is it some kind of lofty, irritating line of thought that rings as relevant only within an exclusive realm: academia? One could say it matters even if it was purely academic, but my ideals ask of me that my thoughts double dip between academic and everyday life.

The uncertainty that both Sebald and Borges instill in readers, or maybe just what they have instilled in me, has had an effect on how I read the world around me, but also how I make sense of myself. I mean, if you are to accept my proposal that uncertainty is the best policy, then it must follow that you apply that same kind of self-awareness, maybe even self-consciousness, to yourself and that’s just what I’ve attempted to do.

The question(s) I’ve come to ask are: what do I think about myself and do I think that what I think about myself is an accurate thought? Can I rely upon myself as my professional reference to prescribe who I am as a person? For a long time, I believed myself to be the best person to understand who I am because, as we all know, we spend a lot of times with ourselves. We have the advantage of depth. However, sometimes total immersion makes seeing objectively very difficult and I’m an advocate, again, for a broad range of references.

John Locke proposed that the way we can claim to remain the same person is through our memories—the way we can identify ourselves as the same self presently, as the same person we were in the past, is by retracing our past memories to our present state of being and, furthermore,

recognizing our past self within those memories. The end of our chain of remembered memories, for Locke, ends our ability to personally identify ourselves as the same person. What Locke stated was:

For since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that which makes everyone to be what he calls self, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things; in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now it was then and it is by the same self with this present one that now reflections on it, that that action was done. (Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 7)

Locke and I are in some respects, and to some degree, in agreement. To disambiguate: he said that human beings think and "...since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that which makes everyone to be what he calls self, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things; in this alone consists personal identity..."(7), which I interpret to mean that we need others in order to identify ourselves as something apart from them and it is only via thinking that we are able to make that identification. The important thing to take away from this classically-philosophical style of writing (I can't even handle it sometimes) is that, ultimately (or maybe in order to begin²¹), we need others to recognize ourselves. I have no argument with him on that point, but I am inclined to think that there is something missing from his view in regard to what I believe is a continual and socially-influenced process; that is, the building of self-conception. Furthermore, our disagreement is punctuated by his claim that individual memory is the root of one's ability to claim to be the same person. He seems to suggest that it is the responsibility, in a sense, of a single player to account for himself/herself. That single-player approach would be to say: "it is up me, only; *my* thoughts and *my* memory to provide evidence that I am me and always have been". From a practical standpoint, how can we rely on one person

²¹ Being ourselves.

to have the whole story? I mean, I know if it is only the story of ourselves or our perspective we wish to convey we can say we have all the answers, but often we are part of a much bigger world and our story isn't all that there is and, second, we don't even contain all the memories of our past to make an honest claim about having all the material needed to make this kind of judgment. There are many lapses in individual memory, especially of our younger years. We need others to let us know what we were doing and what was going on at that point because I for one can tell you the memory from then is all very vague and hazy if existent at all.

Alongside Locke I've had the pleasure of reading a bit of Marya Schechtman, who wrote in response to John Locke's proposition. She writes ...“something in this view has seemed very right, and it has had tremendous staying power.” (Schechtman, *The Truth About Memory*, 3) Given our individualistic western perspective, and the emphasis on being one's own person and accounting for oneself, I believe the whole notion of a self-conception, (expressed as *self*-conception) illustrates the desire for a person alone to be in charge of who they are. Culturally, we want to be seen as individuals and, in that, we also want to believe we have historically been, and we continue to be, the sole creator of the individuals we are. This sentiment in regard to self-conception and the individual seem very present in Locke's proposal-- that after identifying oneself as being different from other thinking things, one should hold oneself fully accountable for the being of and remembering of the person that they claim to be. This marks the moment where John and I diverge.

To make an appeal for organization, as I typically do but rarely maintain, I will propose an idea about how self-conception is created, and how it can be and *should* be maintained. As implied by the word “maintain,” and as I'll go over more thoroughly, I don't think self-conception is a one and done, as they say, deal. You have to keep at it, keep refining it and there

is a way to do that, I think, that makes heaps of sense and helps maintain the concept as well as the accuracy.

As I began before, I agree with Locke inasmuch as needing others to identify ourselves as individuals. Note: I'm even agreeing that there can be such a thing as an individual; I can get on board with that too. The matter I am concerned with, especially in light of all this talk about the individual, is how we should keep ourselves individually, as far as our conception of self, in check. These files, too, may be reliant a bit on memory. Given that memory is a finicky thing, and interpretation can be a bit of a snag, I think we need more hands on deck to do the job of creating the individual's self-conception. I do not think it is the individual who *can* be in charge, of understanding themselves properly; and I think that is okay. It might even be something promising as it ensures connection to others.

So let's see here: I'm saying that in order to determine who we are, we *need* to place--and continue to place--ourselves in the context of others. Not only is it that we become aware of ourselves in a crude, initial-understanding sort of way by the sheer presence of others, but also that the whole idea or necessity of self-conception is only valid when we consider ourselves part of something bigger than ourselves. We have to come up with understanding and create a concept of who we are only because of the presence of others and because we have to be able to be someone others can understand. If it was just us existing individually, who really gives a flying frisbee about explanation. Then we could just be and not have to answer to anyone. But that is not the reality of things and by understanding that we are part of something more involved than the individual we must come up with some explainable idea of who we are. I say we here because it isn't just "I" who am doing it. I understand myself via my relationship with others and

through the dialogue I have with others; and others and their understanding of me contributes to my self-conception just as much as my own more internal understanding of myself.

When we revisit how we behave or how we have thought, or thought we have behaved etc., and cross-reference this with other people (as I am advocating), we generally gain a better understanding of ourselves. We also accept challenges to our own conception by incorporating other people's versions of how they understand us to be. If we are in sync with who we think we are or if there is some dissonance between our own and other's stories of us, we gain self-awareness via dialogue with others. This communal contribution and honesty between parties is, I think, a good thing. It is from both sides of experience: our personal experience and personal feelings as well as what we are given as feedback from others that shed light on self-conception. In this way, we can either responsibly continue to maintain an opinion of ourselves or, alternatively, find that we have to reconsider our interpretation of ourselves.

To reiterate because it is my favorite: there would be no reason to come up with a self-conception if it weren't for the social tendencies we have as humans. If we were to be on our own all the time, there would be no need to understand ourselves— because, honestly, we would:

- a. either have no concept that we existed in any individual “stands out” kind of way, in which case we would have no need to think we required understanding, or
- b. less obscure, if we did make it to the point of understanding ourselves there still would be no reason to come up with any explanation of self because there wouldn't be anyone around to explain ourselves to.

Since our default backdrop setting is generally social in nature(to varying degrees), we need to understand ourselves in order to explain where we are coming from and to feel that we are or can be understood.

Now that we have arrived, more or less, at the making of self-conception and a loose outline of what it entails, it is time to apply this to the field of memory. As discussed, people who have relationships (as most people do) have self-conceptions that are influenced by these relationships. There is an interplay between how we view ourselves and how others see us. Who we interact with then, of course, influences how we view ourselves. This handful, to heaps, of people we connect with are the manifestation of our self-conception, as it were. We find people who we think are in line with how we view ourselves and, at the same time, these are the people who judge us to be either true to our self-conception or deluded by it. These are the people whose opinions we trust enough to make those personal judgments. So, how does all of this fit within memory? It seems to circle back to action and consequence. There can be no judgment of self-conception without it. There can be no dissonance, or misconception, between self-conception and reality without an action done. Being as no one can see our internal thoughts or feelings, they can only trust that our words are true and interpret our actions as a means to determine who they think we are. How can we become aware of ours and others actions? By looking back and consulting the past. What gives us that ability? Memory. Why is this looking back important? Because it serves as reference point to where we are now and maybe even where we are going. We can process our understanding of ourselves via the information, the memories, and the conception others have scaffolded of ourselves as a means to temper our own ideas of self. This may not work for everyone or every time and of course there is the possibility of someone misinterpreting us but the more hands you have deciphering words and actions the

more likely the portrait will be accurate. These portraits are built based on others' experiences with you and these experiences are recorded via memory. As an aside, if there are more hands on deck there is more of a chance that memories are retained because let's face it, memory is fallible and the individual is as well. More memories in more heads equals more chances a history and a timeline is recorded, remembered.

Within the field of memory, it is an accepted view that we all have memories, even of the same events, that are slightly different in their makeup. Based on our own physical perspective, our mood, or events leading up to experience—one's own perception, from the very start, has a hue of its own. This is not a problem, per se; it is all part of being human—being that we are different people physically and emotionally, we have to have slightly varied experiences. However, this reality, if taken too far, can contribute to not only our own misconceptions but to beliefs about our lives that are misguided. We might believe that we are one way, and interact with the world around us based on that conception only to find that we are, in fact, perceived to be something entirely different than we feel ourselves to be. If left to only our own thoughts, and interpretations of events, there would be no reason to question our personal take on the matter. We could go along through our lives believing that we are one way while, in reality, being something quite other than that. I think that would do more harm than good to ourselves by believing something different than the entire world; no one wants to be Don Quixote at least as far as I know.

Regardless, we have all had cases where this has happened I'm sure and it doesn't mean we get so far as believing we are a magic unicorn princess who's come back to save the last rose of the universe--whatever that means. However, more subtle and less insane differences in conception do have to be considered. I'm rambling a bit at this point, but I'll give a personal

example while I'm at it. One of my best friends, Kelly, whom I have known for years, has a tendency to exaggerate the character and attributes of the people she meets. Most people, for her, fall under extremes. This is a consistent, character trait that she has—the fact that her perceptions can be wildly inconsistent with reality. However, I have been friends with her for years and have deduced this as a pattern present in her personality; she has accepted this as well.

When Kelly met her new roommate I received a report that her new roommate was "...an Australian, super-mega-babe, genius who made killer stop-motion videos and all the men swooned for..." Upon meeting this reputable roommate, I found that she is a good-looking Australian woman who makes videos on occasion and has a boyfriend who she isn't super smitten with. Obviously there is some contrast in perception here, though it is not all entirely in conflict. There are some basic similarities but our interpretations diverge in some ways, namely in their degrees of intensity.

Due to our friendship, our connection, and the regular interactions we together participate in we are able to continually gain each other's perspective. If Kelly had only her own perspective to rely on she might act in a certain way towards her roommate; she might act in a way that catered to the idea that her roommate was this super-mega-awesome-untouchable human being. If then, her roommate perceived this behavior towards herself, her own self-conception might come into question. She might start to think she is some god-like human. Of course, again, these are all exaggerations, but the idea behind them is pretty straight-forward. We are all in this world together. We all perceive the world and the people, animals and objects who are in it. The way we perceive the world influences our own perceptions and actions and as a result the actions we contribute to the world *become* other people's perceptions. Our perceptions become real in their consequences. There is a pattern present. We have a dependency on others for our own self-

conceptions and so, in return, we are also responsible for giving people an accurate account of our perceptions of them. We wouldn't want to help contribute to an over-the-top self-conception.

Considering all of this, I believe we have some responsibility to make sure we and others aren't seeing things in a way that is so far-fetched from reality— unless, of course, we are aware that we are doing so. Like the eyes and ears I provide to check Kelly's reading of others and even herself, I want her eyes and ears to make sure I'm coming up with a reasonable reading of reality-- in terms of how I see myself and how I read others. Because of course, another point I should exaggerate, I can be balanced, measured and reasonable when revisiting her interpretations and experiences. I can be the tempering agent, but when it comes to things happening in my own life and with things I have some kind of personal investment in my interpretations become much more difficult to discern as far as accuracy go. I have trouble appraising things happening in my own life just as she has issues in her own. When we have someone close to us who is honest and truthful, they can usually help us de-riddle what appears to be impossible to read because they are less invested in the outcome. Another stupid, girly example: if I like someone and suddenly I find myself reading into everything to try and discern how they feel, I already have some kind of desired outcomes in place and so I may seek evidence to support that particular outcome. I may need someone who is not emotionally invested in the outcome to read into the situation more objectively. That's when friends come in. They keep you grounded, and they keep you in check with reality; and the same set of eyes that determines whether your "person of interest" is returning the interest, they also help you see yourself objectively and so they become the tempering agent for building of self-conception in relation to others.

That may have been a little bit of a stretch, or a conflation, but the approach is the same. Interpreting external experiences or internal experiences with an open dialogue and acquiring as many interpretations as possible as a means to understand what the hell is going on in your own life and in others is done most thoroughly if done as a collaboration. We need friends, or relationships—essentially, individuals outside of ourselves and who we trust, to give us an accurate account of our behavior in the present and our behavior in the past. It is exceptionally difficult to be an objective judge of yourself as you are inextricably tied to the object of your judgement. We cannot see ourselves clearly, so we need others to help us discern who we are. Since others cannot see themselves clearly, they are in need of our assistance. In addition, it is important to note that these perceptions have a hand in the way that we view our past. We apply our perceptions in the form of present self-conception to our past as a way to make sense of it. We might, looking back, streamline a theme, by altering the details of memory, to fit in with our current self-conception only to find, through conversation and memory sharing with others, that our memory is filled with incongruous material. We often believe our memories to be vivid and therefore true when in fact they are surprisingly inaccurate— especially in the details. (Phelps, *Emotions Impact on Memory*, 1). So again, we call to others to help us maintain accurate files, as it were.

Our own bias, suggestibility, and inevitably of the increased unreliability of memory over time are real and true shortcomings of memory. (Schacter, *Seven Sins of Memory*, 3) However, the more people involved in the process of remembering, the more likely we are to gain a truthful composite of the event or experience. More than a fault, and arguably what Schacter was suggesting, is that it is a positive quality that our memories can be and are influenced by others. The individual left without the bias or subjectivity of *others* is left solely with the imagination of

themselves. I argue that our own bias or unconscious willingness to selectively pick memories that fit our conception of self is easier to do when left alone; when no one is there to argue the claim. We are most susceptible to the deception of ourselves. I think the influence of others in regard to the way we recall the past and visualize ourselves within the past is actually a savior for what would otherwise be a one-sided, necessarily skewed collection of memories and a, therefore, likely, inaccurate self-conception. Social interaction and social memory, serve as a way to maintain some system of checks and balances. We can, through our relationships with others, assure that our memory bank—the one that consistently contributes to our self-conception and consequent approach understanding the world—is re-visited and continually approached with a degree of criticality. The longer we have after the experience of an event, the more room for fault or error we have; the more self-administered alterations can be implemented. With the help of others we can remain true to the past and the stories we tell ourselves, of ourselves.

To conclude, the comparing of memories through social connection and conversation is how we gain the possibility of understanding ourselves, the patterns in our lives, how we can make sense of the world and ourselves. We are all vulnerable to the default, one-sided perspective; the one set of eyes we view the world from behind. (Again, literally.). However, we can all make an effort to avoid being duped by ourselves by the seeking of assistance from others. Being that having a self-conception is made relevant by the presence of others to begin with, I believe that it logically proceeds that we should use a social collage of memories and perceptions, a composite of memories, to inform our own concept of self. To that same token, we have a responsibility to describe present interactions and perceptions as we see them and to all recall memories as we remember them for others who, too, are striving to come up with an accurate self-conception. We have a responsibility to have dialogue about the past and the way

that events occurred from our point of view. Our own experiences of those of others, from (and of) the past, will have influence over present and future experiences; they will have influence over our conception of ourselves and others' conceptions of themselves. Collections of interpretations give us all context, and with context, again, we can all make informed judgements; in this case judgements about who we think we are and if we can say, with confidence, that we are who I think I am.

The Realest Bottom Lines:

- 1) I'm primarily advocating for fewer opinions and more thoughts because it takes more listening and less talking to understand ourselves.
- 2) It takes some time, patience and interest in others to understand those different from ourselves.
- 3) Before we start listening to one friend's story to make a judgement about a person, or one philosophy to make a judgement about an entire population, I vote we just sit back for a second and think.
- 4) A little uncertainty and a couple more questions can do more good than harm.
- 5) It is possible that my claims are often too general, but one has to be general when one is considering multiple perspectives and not intent on dismissing any.

As far as having a point or a final opinion: well, that's just the bane of a Liberal Studies student's existence.

The End of Something.

Part Two: Experience

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(A) Background of the Project

The MALS program at the CUNY Graduate Center has been a trip for sure. The ups and downs I have felt were intense and challenging, but ultimately I think that Challenge²² makes a person more dynamic and that is something I would categorize as positive. There have been moments (let’s be real, months) when I have been absolutely intent on leaving the program; but there have also been moments of lucidity, which I can be grateful for because they ensured that I don’t have to look back on any kind of made decision²³ with regret. They are the reason I am here deeply involved with writing and submitting a “white paper”. I can accept that the way to here has been messy and it still feels a bit disorganized but, finally, I feel semi-confident that I will make it through alive.

The MALS program has allowed me a lot of experimentation and exploration as far as the academic world is concerned. I’ve been able to take many classes that approach difficult topics from a multitude of angles. These have ranged from ethics and aesthetics to literature and social theory to any other number of angles and topics, which I won’t get too hung up on

²² Capital C indicating challenge as a kind of entity or a thing one encounters that brings strength.

²³ Dropping out, leaving the program or, even, “going in another direction” (if we want to be delicate).

naming. As an additional plus, I've had the liberty and the privilege to learn and question subject areas alongside many different minds who have diverse life palettes-- who are coming at the questions raised from very different life experiences. With that comes different perspectives, and different approaches, different interpretations of the same material; and with *that* comes a lot of ways to view what it is we are considering in an environment that encourages different points of view to come forward. From my fiery haired and whimsically-minded friend who lives in South Brooklyn with her husband, Alex, and two daughters, Sonya and Anya, who is WOOFING²⁴ through Germany this summer²⁵, who periodically schemes how to set me up with the "handsome man" at the Turkish baths and will "drink five beers with me" when this project is finally over, to my Colombian-American friend who takes the train in from Long Island every day, who has an easy, intelligent way of speaking, strides into class with his work-worn²⁶ leather messenger bag and fancies Sicilian pizza (by his description as "the saucy one"): there is a lovely collection at the CUNY Graduate Center. It has been the place where very different seeming worlds intersect with my own and the result is a lot of things to learn-- both academic and life-wise. That is something pretty neat and in that regard I'm delighted to have had that be the experience had by me.

A peep back in time: last fall I finished my last semester of classes at The CUNY Graduate Center, "Borges, and His Precursors" and "The Morality of Inequality." The Borges number was a Comparative Literature class-- the first ever I've taken; and the second was an Ethics class in Philosophy. In a strange way they complemented each other, even though on the

²⁴ World Wide Organization of Organic Farming.

²⁵ You can see that I started writing this a long time ago; and it took me a while to complete it. Altered tense would be last summer, as I am now currently residing in the Fall 2016 semester.

²⁶ Work-worn in this case would be a bag humbly accepting of all the books, papers and miscellaneous things that come to fill its different compartments over the course of a commute.

surface they appear to be unrelated. Things are not always as they seem-- so I've heard and even believe. Of course, the similarities or intersection of themes between these two classes may have just been my reading, but that read is worthwhile to me because it has to be as it is my own. Anyhow, these two were the closers of the whole classes element of being a graduate student but the degree was far from being behind me. As one aspect neared its end, I was quickly approaching the inevitability of a whole different kind academic venture: the final proof I had learned a thing or two in the last two years spent at The CUNY Graduate Center; that is, a graduate thesis. I found myself increasingly more anxious about the prospect of such a thing-- something that was required to be done in order to round out the experience of graduate school. It was now-- or rather, what has become *then*-- the time for me I to come up with the final piece of evidence to prove I had *earned* my graduate degree. That is not perhaps what is meant by a thesis project, but that is how I felt about the whole thing and feelings feel (can you imagine?) very real and urgent.

Time continued, as it does; classes finished, final papers were submitted,-- I had even arrived at the point of grades returned. It was becoming no longer possible to avoid the whole thesis obstacle. I had been pondering, considering and dabbling with different ideas but I had finally reached the no-alternative-except-to-start-writing moment. Stop thinking, start doing. The only problem was I still wasn't quite sure what I would be doing; what I was even qualified to or invested in enough to write about. I had taken a lot of classes, and I *felt* like learned a lot in the last couple years, but when it came down to it I couldn't put my finger on any particular focus or emphasis that I believed I could write a whole thesis on. This turns out to be a kind of sensible consequence of pursuing a liberal arts degree. You have a lot of hands in a lot of baskets but no extensive focus or line of thought developed. I mean I *had* taken a lot of classes in different

disciplines and I did like to compare and contrast perspectives but a compare and contrast piece isn't the most exciting as far as theses go-- at least I didn't think so. I was left with a very unproductive thought which was: I had no idea how to prove I'd learned anything at all. As I scrambled to come up with ideas in regard to what I should write "about", I was continually reminded by someone in my network that you write "for" something-- not about it. You have to stand for something. About or for--whatever the cause may be, I had no immediate or convincing idea. I was a bit on board with everything and not wholly in argument of anything. Stand for everything, fall for nothing, as they say. Just kidding, back to business or at least the narrative at hand:

Truth be told, I've always enjoyed writing, but it has become wildly apparent to me that enjoying ideas, and dabbling with different perspectives is not the same as having a hard-and-justified opinion and being able to convincingly argue for it. My MO is typically to contradict myself--often in the same sentence. I start an argument in favor of one idea and by the end of the sentence I find myself countering my own point. I just like to keep things well balanced? The problem with this is that I go back and forth endlessly and the result is no fixed argument. It's actually very frustrating, very cyclical and, as you may be very unsurprised to know, not very good for deadlines.

The root of the problem, if we want to call it that, is I have difficulty separating perspectives, or argued perspectives, because it seems to me all arguments are focused on the same focal point being considered from different angles-- and they're all pretty correct from their position! An angle, or perspective can only be "wrong" if the values being valued by one particular perspective is not the same set of values valued by another. The problem with values is that they seem to be a matter of opinion (besides a few things like the rightness and wrongness of

murder and so forth etc.). Most often, judgements are opinions and they are really just different; not better or worse or right or wrong. If things are a matter of opinion, who has the right to judge *who* and *what* is right? I certainly feel like I don't and I certainly don't know how one would navigate that judgement if they did; and, pretty quickly, this is becoming something far away from the point I thought I might have had.

Backtracking, backtracking and so anyway: it happened that I was still in contact with a professor whom I took a class with a couple semesters back. On and off we had exchanged emails about possible thesis ideas and we landed on one that seemed, at the time, very relevant. I was finishing a yoga teacher-training program and I had a real interest in the body *and* in the mind: the yoga teacher-training combined with “Western Intellectual Traditions” seemed to perfectly represent those combined interests. I was most keen on looking into and advocating for a cultivation and development of the two, simultaneously. This, I believed, was a way to develop a higher understanding of experience. I was under the impression that yoga is just one way, one portal, to cultivate this multi-faceted development of the mind and the body, superior to a focus on one OR the other. For example, the time it takes for the body to open, to stretch, and to strengthen requires patience of the mind, endurance of the body, and consistency of both. Mind informs body, body informs mind. They work in tandem. Yogic philosophy, which is a combination of meditations and Asanas (or postures), requires a collaboration of these two aspects of self. I even had my own experience to incorporate²⁷. I had initially “done” yoga purely because I thought it would be a great way to gain strength and flexibility. I wanted to own my body, in a way-- use it to my mind's ends. It a decision made exclusively for how I could

²⁷Though I came to understand personal experience is not so approved of for thesis writing. You can consider this moment a possible foreshadowing to how I ended up at capstone rather than thesis.

mold my body, be in control of it. But what I found, to my surprise, was that over time my mind and my focus and intention behind my application of yoga was changing. Slowly it became, and is still becoming, “a practice.” I realized I didn’t have to control my body, I could understand it, work with it and my mind would benefit too. I’m becoming calmer, more patient with myself but still determined and committed to challenging my mind and body. I’m also more comfortable with both. Sometimes I forget this, I slip into a flurry of un-calm, but I eventually make my way back, remember to breath and to carry one. Not everything goes in the direction you imagined and not every day will feel the same; not every day will *be* the same. It’s most important, in yoga and in life, I think, to not let yourself be discouraged if one day seems to fall behind the advancement of another; life isn’t so linear as a timeline likes to suggest.

But, still, Sophie get back to the point of this moment: my then-advising professor encouraged me to look into “Somaesthetics” and the work of Richard Shusterman, who has apparently written a lot on this topic. I did some research and was pleased but also disheartened to see that everything I had been beginning to develop in my head had already been written by this man. It is always nice to bump into an affirmation that you’re not a crazy person and your idea has merit, but it is also difficult to figure out where to go with something when you realize where you thought you could have gone is an already-arrived-at destination. What I had been concluding via my journey as a “practicer” of yoga was being described for me by someone who researches the field. I could have been a corroborating detail to his story, but mine was becoming lost in what had already been figured. Perhaps with some further research I could and would have found a differentiating feature between Shusterman’s thoughts and my own, but in that moment it didn’t appear likely.

As an alternative route, we attempted to develop how it could be proven that the mind-body duality and dismissal of the body is still present in the modern world-- despite the supposed support for a less dualistic perspective as expressed by Shusterman and the earlier monist Spinoza et al. If one--I-- could prove the opposite of what we think we think (as a group, on the whole, etc.), then there might be a new argument available for why a real consideration of “Somaesthetics” should be brought more seriously into the realm of philosophical discussion. A lot of the material proposed by this emerging field has been met with reluctance and exclusion by the more traditional thinkers in the western philosophical tradition.

For a while it seemed promising. I began doing my research and even began some writing, but the more into it I got it the more grand and expanded the idea grew and the less philosophically grounded it became. The proposals I submitted were often critiqued to be “not philosophy”, and yet I couldn’t understand even if they weren’t philosophy how they could be “not relevant.” The direction I was headed was, instead, partially scientific, partially psychological, partially philosophical and partially my own, perhaps-unfounded, musings. These problems, again, all seem so reasonable and perfect when I think about what it is I have spent my time studying. I have been pursuing a liberal studies masters, which has meant I have been spending time studying multiple perspectives, which has made me leery of having one perspective, which has made it difficult for me to choose an angle. I’m not sure whether this makes me spineless because I don’t have a final opinion or, maybe, it makes me thoughtful because I’m accepting of different angles and not so quick to take sides. Again, a matter of perspective. In any case, this reality became my struggle because it seems my current world (academia) requires that I have an opinion (and a justified one) or at least that I convince myself and a few others that I do. This struggle of having no opinion as well as a steadfast inability to

fabricate or manufacture the semblance of one seemed to be impeding my chances at graduation (and, as it turns out, it sort of did or at least *delayed* it²⁸).

Eventually, in a flurry of frustration and moroseness, I found myself at the door of the executive officer of the MALS program, Mathew Gold. I brought with me my to-be proposal for the thesis and some other ideas of what I might pursue. Despite the recently experienced turbulence, I thought I might give the thing a shot. He read the abstract and agreed it was too broad and too difficult to turn into a thesis-- maybe even just too *not* philosophy. We sat in the office, while I suffered a minor emotional attack and considered the possibilities. When I say a “minor emotional attack”, it might very well mean that I actually cried kind of a lot in that, like, spastic kind of way you cry when you’re trying not to and you didn’t expect that you would and you’re embarrassed but deeply embedded in an emotional reaction and disentangling from it is impossible. Anyway, I’m sure I made him a little uncomfortable but I suppose that’s part of the gig. I can’t have been--at least I hope not to be--the first student to come in having a conniption and likely I won’t be the last. He supplied me with a fitting anecdote from his own experience-- something I really appreciated. It was centered around his time as a Master’s student. He was involved in the field of literature-- interpreting the meaning conveyed or embedded in the written pages of books. As I understood it he felt in some way that he was always resisting or that something wasn’t falling into place. There was, the way I interpreted it, a bit of tedium to the process, a bit of a feeling of being some steps behind. Whether or not this was a true anecdote or an anecdote for my benefit I do not know; but, whatever it is that they were, or are, the words

²⁸ As I’m adding these tidbits not in my second semester of capstone writing. Though I did eventually find my way, it did take a little longer for me to find the form and movement my project would take given that writing a standard thesis wasn’t something I was enthusiastic about or capable of. Whether or not this lack of interest and inability are correlated in some way, I’m not really sure but it seems possible if not plausible that they could be.

helped ease my misgivings. As it happened, in spite of his career trajectory being something enlisted in literature, he somehow found his way into digital humanities (something that seems like a far step from literature, but maybe isn't) and everything fell into place. Somehow, from there, all the things that had before presented as obstacles became enjoyable challenges and his whole perspective on the process of research, of learning, of experiencing a program or a life course, changed. I may have inadvertently altered a couple of things and don't quote me on the absolute accuracy here, but the gist I received was that sometimes you just have to find your niche and when you do all that seemed exclusively difficult and uncomfortable becomes enjoyable in its difficulty.. because you are engaged, because you are interested and because you are enthusiastic about what it is that you are doing. And sometimes it takes a lot of sh*t, and a lot of offshoots and a lot of roundabout experiences to get you there. And, ultimately, sometimes the path of least resistance doesn't mean you're being lazy or you're cutting corners; it might simply mean that you found the right thing. Whatever the case may be, he proposed I think about doing a capstone project-- something which would give me some freedom and a bit more wiggle room; a little more room to play. Within the framework of capstone, rather than a specialized thesis, there might be more opportunity to apply the liberal studies perspective, one that is inherently not specialized. I might also, on this route, be able to draw my personal experiences; something that is kind of taboo in purely academic or thesis-type writing. We need facts and evidence not feelings and opinions!

When I left his office, I felt immense relief as well as a very new feeling of *enthusiasm*. The thesis was history. That ship had sailed, sunk, and now sat calmly in its wreckage. The new vessel, I imagined, would take the form of narrative-- one which might encapsulate the experience of being a Liberal Studies student. For me this meant it would capture what I had felt,

obstacles encountered, humorous situations involved in, and all the general life chaos that happens alongside. Some might be real; some might not be. Perhaps it would be an actual autobiographical account, but that wouldn't be so clear. It's ambiguity, I hoped, might mimic some of the authors I had enjoyed most: Borges and Sebald. Whatever it may become or has now *became*, the cardinal requirement was and still is that I am able to demonstrate how the capstone could be linked to the MALS program. In short, it can't be willy nilly whatever I want, which is fair and makes a lot of sense because this isn't, after all, The Sophia Program. A girl can dream though and she does, often.

(B) Where Are We Going With This?

The concept of what I wanted to write about in the capstone format started out loosely: I knew I wanted to do something that was light and fun but also something that brought to light the challenges and difficult aspects of my experience as a student. What I hoped would translate was a comedic version of what had and has been often uncomfortable and not felt to be so funny. I wanted to capture the antics of at-least-one Liberal Studies student: myself. By extension I hoped that maybe some of it might seem relatable, but it wasn't my agenda to make this something that necessarily had to be convincing or point proving; it was mostly to be a kind of story, a liberal studies narrative.

I *thought* I would write about classes, interactions, experiences in the library, thoughts in my head and a plethora of other things, unfiltered and uncut because that was what came to mind when I thought about what it is actually like to be a liberal studies student. I imagined I would write excerpts taken from a philosophy class-- that I might compile the perfect mock philosophical conversation as a way to demonstrate what philosophical jargon sounds to

someone not so attuned to the language; I pictured whippy words describing a frantic bike ride up sixth avenue, dodging international shoppers and locals alike, shooting right on 35th and locking my rusted, used up old bike to some haphazard pole (or bike stand if I was lucky) as preface to a class where I would realize I was sweaty, and dirty and often out of breath while my classmates sat calmly, collectedly and dressed smartly in business casual-- just always looking so *on; being* so on even. I could imagine writing about the labyrinth that is the CUNY Graduate Center and finding myself lost in the mirror-effect design of the establishment. I thought I might even capture some offhand, marginally profound conversation had in one of its serpentine hallways, or casually on the spike-ridden, would-be ledge seats outside. I thought, even, I might be able to express how perfectly cliché is the life I have managed to obtain. I could describe, from real life having some kind of pseudo-intellectual discussion likely inspired by a class, while working at the coffee shop I work at, making a latte (or, let's be real, handing over a black coffee), wearing, also, all black; while simultaneously experiencing an uncomfortable revelation in regard to how many "Brooklyn vibes" stereotypes I was managing to fulfill all in one day, in one place, in a particular moment²⁹!

(C) What Actually Happened?

As you can imagine, my capstone narrative got more-than-a-little out of hand. Totally scattered, totally unfocused and difficult to make a compelling argument for as, again, even though I had some room to play around with ideas, I had ~~one~~ two arguments--the main ones--left to actually account for : relevance of the project and enjoyability of the read. My advisor, Rachel, and I agreed that within what I had written there were excerpts of reasonable passages

²⁹ It was and is kind of mortifying when I think about it.

and a handful of potentially-interesting thoughts. What was needed most was a semblance of focus³⁰; I needed some concrete thing to anchor all my unfocused and spiraling thoughts *to*.

Before we get into the concept of the new-and-approved capstone project, let me just reiterate how not-straightforward it has been even to get to “now³¹”. Some directions I took up before discontinuing have been: “A Holistic Consciousness”, “Yoga: Intersection of Mind and Body”, “The Illusion of Perfection”, “Thesis 2016”, “Alternate Thesis 2016” [end theses], “Fantastical Memoir”, “Menagerie is Life”, “Capstone 2016, old format”, “Capstone 2016, new format”, “Mind Transcribed to Paper”, “Please be done, Capstone”, “[Insert Compelling/Zingy Title Here³²]”, “Liberally Confused” and finally “Sensibly Nonsensical³³”. You may note the progression from thesis paper, to dire uncertainty, and finally into the realm of a capstone project. As you can see the final product is “Decidedly Uncertain” so even when I thought I was going to be done it turned out that I was ill informed. So it goes.

However, a turning point in the “figuring³⁴” happened in collaboration with many conversations: some brainstorming and some shooting off of ideas with Rachel and others. What I, and others, came up with as a solution to my problem of scattered-ness were a couple, actually three³⁵, papers that would fulfill the role of grounding documents. They are a portfolio of thoughts that can be directly applied to the academic material I was exposed to during my time in

³⁰ Focus being literally the bane of my existence. But, I understand the value of it, and I am upset by my inability to grasp it. Still, working on it.

³¹ Which has become then because I’m looking back writing about something that has already happened and I already know the outcome of.

³² Clearly reached an end of changing titles and wanted an overarching one that could be applied to any form it became, ideally.

³³ As I re-read this, months later, I can say that the name has changed yet again; and the concept, though still connected has been applied a bit differently than expected.

³⁴ As in maybe reconfiguring how to write a capstone while maintaining a kind of focus that I hitherto failed at.

³⁵ Which has again become two rather than three.

classes. Let's call them evidence as they are the literal and documented story of the thoughts I was having during my stint as an "academic." Some of these pieces are slightly altered to reflect new thoughts on older material, some remain untouched and some, even, are news to me because I have in the meantime forgotten I ever had thoughts on the things considered. Rather than trying in a roundabout way to describe the things I was thinking about in the form of some winding narrative, having these more focused pieces serves as a way to avoid getting too wrapped up in my own tangents; things that are pretty much exclusively disjointed, unfocused and only marginally interesting even to the one thinking them; ie, me. Main point: the papers preserve and represent the function, if you will, of my time at "The CUNY Graduate Center".

I incorporated a doctored paper from my first Intro Class, where we studied W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*, a revamped paper from my, "Borges and His Precursors" class, which resulted in a paper that compared Sebald and Borges, and a more free form paper that is derived from a memory and ethics class. However, most of this last one has been altered in this final compilation.

In addition, there is personal narrative interwoven between the academic pieces and these are what remain of the liberal studies narrative. These parts are ridden with more feeling and emotion; they preserve the story-like element that I had initially been so intent and enthusiastic about doing. You could say that these are little excerpts from my "actual life³⁶".

(D) Why I Chose To Do It This Way

³⁶ As if academia was a dream. Honestly, in some ways it has felt some way distant and disconnected so, who knows, maybe it has been.

Let's keep this simple and let me account for why I chose to do it in the way I've ended up finishing this capstone.

Though it was originally a kind of reactive choice, a response to not being able to write a thesis, this capstone project became much more. It became an intentional project and one that I wouldn't have been able to do had I remained fettered to the realm, the expectations, of an academic thesis.

I'll tell you a couple of reasons why: a lot of it has to do with my fixation on conveying my *feelings* on the whole academic experience. Like I said before, academia doesn't like things based on mood, feelings or any sort of unreliable and subjective element, which is, again, understandable. However, I believe all these aforementioned things are a huge part of our experience and though they may be unreliable, to dismiss them altogether is to be *inaccurate* or at least not well-rounded.

Feeling and emotion is a huge part of our experience. We connect with others based upon it; we relate to stories because of it. Sometimes the subject matter of experience may look different, but the feelings that are incited by the writing of narrative may be similar and that is how we can connect to those who we *think* have experiences different from our own; and therefore we can connect to those we believe to *be* different than us. We can connect via our relation to emotion. Of course, like you may have connected yourself based on what I've shared and what may be self-contradictory, feelings can do just as much damage as good-- like my freak outs and unreasonable reactions to the whole business of writing a capstone. Relying on emotion and feelings alone can be unreasonable; feelings can be fickle, I say. Ultimately, what we, or what I've been looking for is some kind of balance between the two. I'd rather not consider feeling OR logic; I'd rather consider logic AND feeling; and how *both* of these things play into

our lives. Therefore, I chose a strategy of academic writing in collaboration with personal narrative. Bada bing, bada boom! This echoes that whole business of mind and body connection that I started out with, but I won't get back into that.

Feeling, I think, is what originally drew me to Borges and Sebald. I didn't quite know what I liked about them, but I felt drawn to them. Because I had to come up with reason, I looked for evidence³⁷ why this might be and this multi-pronged approach to understanding their writing has left me smitten with them. Though they have confused and confounded my conception of reality and what it means to experience a life, I think that I would be, in a different way, more lost without them.

As I was pushed to think about the "why" as far as my pull to them; as I searched for *reason* for my attraction to their work, I realized that they both write in the form of narrative and I think that this medium, more than others, allows for the reader to feel connected and engaged. That is the reason I have now applied to the feeling. I felt connected to them; I felt engaged by them and therefore it is reasonable that I would be drawn to them before I understood the "why". Both of their writing is poetic, and in some ways like a song and, in the same way that a song might, they lure us in and make us feel. We-- or I-- can relate to their writing on an emotional level and when this happens, I understand that something needs not be wholly-logical or evidence-ridden to be real. What I have determined, and what is probably not provable is that feelings are just as real, though less seen; and unlike research articles or academic writing, narrative allows for the encompassing of this other aspect of experience. Because a life is lived a lot inside our own heads, bursting with a lot of feelings and characteristics that are not

³⁷ Which has been explained in the papers incorporated in my capstone.

immediately seeable I think it is powerful to read and write in a medium that does a bit to convey these more intangible qualities of living³⁸.

Rather than an argument that is won or lost based on evidence and reason, emotion accounts for actual living-- it doesn't serve a function like proving a point. As an aside, sometimes logic can prove something that's not even possible, so logic alone is just as unreasonable as emotion is when taken without any grounding or cross reference with logic. Bottom line: it's not that I don't value reason and logic, I just like the two (feelings or emotions and logic or reason) working in tandem and I hoped that by creating a project that drew from both pools I might be able to give a real impression of what living as a graduate student has been like. It's not something I'm trying to prove, it's something that just *is*.

In addition, I think narrative or story building does more than help us connect with others. It helps us to connect the dots in our own lives. As I've referred to before and probably will again (reiteration is my jam) my "path", to use a cliché, hasn't always felt so linear or forward moving. It's been random and garbled and often times in the present I'm not sure any one thing I do can be made sense of. There's not really a logic or a method to the madness, as they say. However, over the course of time and as my own story unfolds, all of these seemingly random pieces come together to tell a narrative and within the larger story some sense can be made-- even if it is just that this sort of randomness is a pattern in itself. This degree, what I'm doing on the side and what I've done in the past is all apparently different, but together I'm building a portfolio and building a life that is diverse and liberal and the unpredictability is not surprising. One might even say, looking back, that it makes perfect sense I was drawn to this particularly unparticular degree in the first place.

³⁸ Narrative may also foster logic and reason but the point I'm trying to convey is that narrative, as I understand it, is a platform where *both* angles are welcome.

It was important to me³⁹ (and another reason why I chose narrative) that I *not* try and prove a point by all that I'm saying. Because my capstone is a story, my own, there is no reason to prove it to anyone else. Proof is normally relevant if the endgame is to prove one thing more real or more true than another and I am not competing for having the "best" or "most right" storyline. However, over the course of writing I may have come to some conclusions for myself, or about myself, but these need not be imposed on anyone else. These thoughts are my perspective and nothing more; and I'm okay with that.

Ultimately, I've simply tried to convey how the authors and philosophies I've come across during my life, but especially in the program, have had a very particular effect upon me and how I interpret my reality. By drawing on these particular pieces, I hoped to illustrate what themes have been circulating in my thoughts throughout my graduate experience; and, in addition, I hoped they might demonstrate how one class had influence on the next; and how all the classes combined alongside my other experiences help render the framework I use to construct meaning out of my own experience. No one thing is isolated and compartmentalized or respectively focused in its reach. For example I could say that you can see from my writing that my initial interpretation of *The Emigrants became* involved and participatory in my interpretation of later material; and in addition what I became exposed to in my later material affected my retrospective interpretation of *The Emigrants* and these *together* inform the way I make sense of the rest of my life and the story or narrative that I build.

The last thing that I want to touch upon that is present in my capstone is something of a visual cue; it symbolizes all that I've tried to previously described with the use of words. I'm

³⁹ I think this is because (as I started out saying at the beginning of this paper) proving a point comes down to perspective and I think perspective is a point of view and not something that is more right or more wrong. I can thank a Liberal Studies degree for this take on the situation.

talking about the changing fonts. Though the fonts do make up words, if you look at them just as an image or a conglomerate (not individual words with individual meanings) I hoped that they might indicate a multitude of things for me and the reasons I have for using them just keep growing.

Initially, I think I just liked Courier New and still think everything looks better written in that font.

More seriously though, the fonts represent both my regular life (Courier New), which is more like a play with adventures and stories and the other font (Times New Roman) represents the academic aspects of my life. The footnotes are in Georgia for indeterminate reasons.

I see them as representative of the changing disciplines and perspectives that are part of being a Liberal Studies students.

One more way application they have is to be a nod at all the previous thesis/capstone attempts. In this interpretation, the changing fonts indicate that several sources, several influences and so forth that have contributed to where I've ended up.

Off the cuff these different fonts maybe look wild and disorganized but what you may also find (and what I hope you do) is that over time there is some kind of order to the madness, which is similar to my academic and life experience. As an aside, I checked with the format guidelines and these particular style of fonts have all been sized according to the rules, though unlike thesis requirements I have obviously not been loyal to one style. I guess we can tack that onto the list of just one more way or reason that my final project is more a capstone than a thesis.

In any case, collectively, these fonts make up the whole and so there is meaning to looking at them as such; as something part of a bigger picture. This project couldn't exist without them being put together, like how, for me, all my random classes, experiences and interests have

culminated into the story that I tell myself, and the messy reality that I believe in. There is typically a broader umbrella that all the weird, strange and incongruous things fall under and in this case I've claimed it as my personal narrative.

As it turns out and as you can see, from the beginning of this project until its end, what I *thought* I'd do and what I have ended up doing looks a bit different, but I think my intention has stayed somewhat true though the form has changed/been altered. I can say with utmost confidence that the most difficult part of writing this was figuring out how to write about daily experience and to connect it to other things in a way that was at-least-semi fluid and easy to read; maybe even enjoyable to read. If I had been to simply talk about my own life in the garbled, random way I started, there was nothing really for reader to hold on to. My hope is that now that it is a bit more organized and that there is a semblance of grounding that the whole thing fits together nicely and the evolution from how this started to how it will be submitted is interesting in that things don't always turn out how you imagine, but things do find a way of working themselves out. As for me, I'm really happy with the outcome.

Now that I've reached the end perhaps it's the right time to consider what worked best as far as overcoming whatever obstacles I had along the way. What helped is, loosely, conversations, patience and a bit of a step back.

There were times (plenty) that I felt like this was going nowhere and that I would never figure out how to finish this project. I became frustrated and let's face it a little bit hysterical. A bit of a perspective switch never helped anyone more. There was a time when I was so set on finishing this in one semester and having this program be done and over with that I forgot about enjoying the actual work of it. I didn't want to look any more at what I was doing nor did I want to enlist myself in the effort it would take to finish this in one semester. However, when I got

over that and resigned myself to or maybe just opened up to a different course (which was more accepting of taking a second semester to finish the project) the whole thing became more fun; a kind of challenging-but-interesting extracurricular rather than something that was *in my way*. I think this change in attitude is palpable (at least if you cross compare this with old drafts); there is a bit of a shift from being contrived and Angsty to playful and laid back.

The second thing that really, really helped me was talking to my friends, family and my advisor. Essentially, having conversations. There was a long time where I was dancing around what it was I was trying to say; I didn't even know what I was going for and it was apparent when I would try to describe to others what I was writing about. By having conversations with different people, they would directly or inadvertently say things that helped me to connect the dots; something I had certainly not been able to do with my thoughts alone. It's helpful to bounce ideas off of someone and in the course of a conversation it is amazing just how much clarity or organization of a previously-jumbled thought can come about.

The third and final thing (that I'll expand upon anyway) that absolutely helped me get this thing done was taking a step back from it entirely. Like I said in number one, I did decide to take on an extra semester and not stress out too much over the extra time spent on this project. What I didn't say was that after that initial decision to extend the deadline, I dropped off from writing altogether. I bought a ticket to visit Stockholm, Berlin, Budapest and Holland. I didn't look at my paper. I hardly even thought about it. I met people, I had more conversations; I saw friends I hadn't seen in five years and they gave me perspective that I then brought back to this. After that month of not even glancing at what I'd written, I figured out what I had been trying to say. So my greatest piece of advice to anyone that might listen is sometimes it requires a step back to see what it is you've been looking at. Sometimes when you are so embedded in

something, it's difficult to discern the form of what it is you're writing and a little time and a little space can do just as much for clarity as a conversation. Those were my obstacles and these are just a couple of the things that have helped me get to here.

(E) Where It All Goes From Here

When asked by the establishment to touch upon whether I intend on continuing on with this project, my answer is both yes and no (go figure). Yes, I will continue to use this degree in ways that are more difficult for me to describe than if I could say I am absolutely continuing on with academia and will be writing more on the topic of narrative, uncertainty and beyond. I can't say that I think that will happen but it certainly could because I haven't done what I imagine for most of my life and certainly not for this project. However, I do know that I will continue to have thoughts on what I've discussed and probably all that I've been thinking about will expand its meaning over time. I will use this degree as I live my life and as I continue to try and make sense of all that is happening around me. I'll continue to write, in my own time and in my own way because that has always been something I like to do; I can't imagine not doing it. So there is a chance that even this particular project may grow. Maybe I'll find a way to revamp it or refocus or repurpose it in the coming years. I say "no" though because there is no direct application or expansion of this that I can come up with in the moment. Time will clarify for me where this all is headed. But let me be clear: after these two years, I feel full and grateful for the experience but also admittedly relieved that it is over. After spending some time thrashing around in the

abstract, I am quite ready to dive into something more concrete. I'm dabbling with the idea of cabinetry and I'm scheming a move to Berlin⁴⁰. So that's where this has brought me to.

(F) If There Were a Point, What Would It Be?

As a closing, final point or let's just call it a soliloquy, I suppose that I could say there is and has been no obvious or single function presented by this project just like there is no obvious point or single function to my Liberal Studies degree⁴¹. That is not to say I don't think there value in a more open-ended investment. My point is that, though I've felt at times uncomfortable or out of place, at "The CUNY Graduate Center", being a tad out of place has cultivated my ability to adapt, to grow. My point is, maybe, it's all right to be a "jack of all trades" but master of none. My point could even be perhaps that mastery is a myth; we can only rely on building understanding and also understanding that it can never be fully, and finally, built. My point is that sometimes in a moment there is absolutely no point to things, but that is not to say sense and meaning won't fall into place. My point is that I have a lot of points, which can also be construed as having no point at all⁴². I really couldn't say for certain.

Rather than saying my time at the CUNY Graduate Center has brought me to some final point or or helped me come to some conclusion about really *anything*, it has left me more confused than I started. My present point or position is that rather than being put out or discouraged by this confusion, I savor it; because it remains in theme with the random, and

⁴⁰ Since writing that I've bought a one way ticket for March first. So I have conviction in at least one thing; movement.

⁴¹ That's not meant as an insult, it is meant as a fact. But as there is no particular point, the liberal studies can be applied to anything, to life and that is something invaluable.

⁴² It is after all a specialized world asking for answers from a liberal studies girl.

disjointed theme of my entire life-- and that makes *sense*. My point is that we've reached the end, or just an imposed idea of an end which is called "a deadline."

So I thank you, it's been a hoot and a holler, and "that's all the news that there is until now."⁴³

⁴³ My aunt's father worked at a radio station in the sixties and seventies and he told me a story the other day that ended with what he used to say on the radio, which was "that's the new 'till now". I thought it was excellent. I put it in, slightly altered, at the end because it suggests the open-endedness that comes with every moment.

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