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### **Object Expression: Diligent Realism in the Works of Roland Barthes, Elena Ferrante, Karl Ove Knausgaard, Valeria Luiselli, and W. G. Sebald**

John Knight

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OBJECT EXPRESSION:

DILIGENT REALISM IN THE WORKS OF ROLAND BARTHES, ELENA FERRANTE,  
KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD, VALERIA LUISELLI, AND W. G. SEBALD

by

JOHN KNIGHT

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

2021

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Diligent Realism in the Works of Roland Barthes, Elena Ferrante, Karl Ove Knausgaard, Valeria  
Luiselli, and W. G. Sebald

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John Knight

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature  
in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Date

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André Aciman

Chair of Examining Committee

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Date

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Bettina Lerner

Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee:

André Aciman

John Brenkman

Giancarlo Lombardi

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

## ABSTRACT

Object Expression: Diligent Realism in the Works of Roland Barthes, Elena Ferrante, Karl Ove

Knausgaard, Valeria Luiselli, and W. G. Sebald

by

John Knight

Advisor: André Aciman

In the past twenty years, ambiguous yet meaningful encounters with objects have become a trope in contemporary fiction. Collections and archives, found objects and commonplace articles of modern life have especially substantiated literature that engages themes of displacement and selfhood. The method of incorporating objects into these works ranges from explicit cabinets of curiosities to more subtle appearances, but in each case material reality is the conduit for fundamental expressions of character. These authors draw the reader's gaze toward an object as a way to indirectly articulate subjective experience, conspicuously displacing the central concerns of a text. This study examines how this outwardly misleading focus might be an effective technique for representing the psyche.

Using insights about language, memory, and identity from the personal writing of Roland Barthes, each chapter surveys the objects in prominent works of fiction: *The Days of Abandonment* by Elena Ferrante, the "Seasons Quartet" by Karl Ove Knausgaard, *Lost Children Archive* by Valeria Luiselli, and *Austerlitz* by W. G. Sebald. As a whole, the study contends that these authors use objects to dramatize the psychological conflicts of their characters by personalizing the encounter with material reality. Furthermore, it posits that objects might retain

a fundamentally linguistic quality when arranged in a work of fiction, and could therefore be “read” as part of the text on the page. The object serves as a meeting place between the subjective and the social in these works, and as such invites multiple associations that transcend limitations of individual perspective.

Not only does this use of objects present an evolution of narrative symbolism, it illustrates a style of realism, one that might be called diligent, in which a steady focus on objects reveals a psychological drama indirectly. What is overt about the object at times indicates what is understated about the character, and this staging of passive or circumstantial narration reflects modern demands of representation. This study analyzes such realism through the lens of object relations, and evaluates the implications of this trend for the form as a whole.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Roland Barthes and the Language of Objects

In the past three decades, there has been a proliferation of literature that takes objects as central structural components. These works range from novels to autofiction and memoir, and the objects they employ are often commonplace items or actual artifacts drawn from the world outside the book. Objects have always served as emblematic props in literature, the handmaidens of artifice that are sometimes so representative of a novel that they become a kind of mascot for the entire work—the scarlet letter, the madeleine, Emma Bovary’s wedding bouquet. However, in many novels of psychological and physical displacement written in the last thirty years, objects have become more than evocative symbols. Objects are employed in these works as pivots from one subjectivity to another, and suggest not only anachronism and longing, but a hidden, unarticulated element of the story. The objects in these recent works function as prisms through which perspective is complicated, enlarged, or directed. This is literature in which a character’s psyche is revealed in juxtaposition with a thing, so much so that the story appears to be concerned in equal measure with both the human and the inanimate.

In these works, objects are endowed with resonance, and their appearance (or disappearance) generate narrative development. Dubravka Ugrešić fills *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1999) with purses, family heirlooms, and photo albums to unravel lives not her own and to reckon with the trauma of exile and persecution. In Annie Ernaux’s *The Years* (2008), the narrative is determined by commercialized objects that constitute the materialism of contemporary life. Paul Harding’s *Tinkers* (2009) proceeds through the reconstruction of clocks and the sale of household goods from a cart. Teju Cole’s *Open City*

(2011) is a trove of encounters with urban objects that ironically and subtly convey a Black man's mind contending with a colonial past. Much of Susan Howe's work uses objects and archival material, especially *Spontaneous Particulars* (2014). Yoko Ogawa's *Memory Police* (2019) chronicles political alienation via the disappearance of objects. Judith Schalansky's *An Inventory of Losses* (2020) details the absence of twelve objects as an approach to understanding memory. In *The Ancestry of Objects* (2020), Tatiana Ryckman dramatizes a lustful bildungsroman in the relationships between the objects that surround her characters. Maria Stepanova's *In Memory of Memory* (2021) circles around the artifacts of her family in an attempt to locate her position within a nexus of inherited trauma.

This preliminary list can go on, but four writers in particular epitomize a literary engagement with objects. Elena Ferrante surrounds the characters in all her novels with dolls, dresses, books, cookware, and jewelry that consistently attend the identity crises she portrays. Karl Ove Knausgaard grapples with fatherhood and selfhood via descriptions of everyday things for his unborn daughter in his "Seasons Quartet" (2018-9). Valeria Luiselli packs *Lost Children Archive* (2019) with objects that inform both character actions and narrative voice, and calls attention to the technique by invoking a theory-laden and object-obsessed "archive." And in all his works, but especially in *Austerlitz* (2001), W. G. Sebald commissions objects to direct and field his characters as they reckon with lost versions of themselves. From old rucksacks to porcelain figurines, dusty pool cues to a blue sequined shoe, objects populate Sebald's narrative like mute sentinels, pointing his characters forward.

These works are concerned with a variety of themes—domesticity, fatherhood, immigration, exile—but the consistency of their method is striking. That objects form the backbone of these narratives almost betrays a wariness of traditional techniques of plot, as if a

drama that proceeds only by carefully described characters and pending dénouement were too blatantly literary. Instead, privileging an object's thingness—its taciturn persistence amid comings and goings—propels the narrative by nonetheless invoking the relationships and histories that are either cumbersome or impossible to state directly. The power of an object to *suggest* has come to be more valuable for the writer than the more explicit expediencies of plot. Objects appear to link languages that exist alongside one another: cultural and political languages as well as the psyches of multiple and separate subjectivities. These objects are not symbols, nor are they solely mimetic. Rather, this mode of literature makes the case for narrative as an assembly of objects for the very reason that their presence is at once undeniable and undetermined.

As objects have become more prominent in works of literature, scholarship on this subject has likewise gained traction. A basic survey of the theoretical tradition that considers objects as a means of revealing something fundamental about art and human relationships might include a core set of major thinkers—Eliot, Benjamin, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Bachelard, Adorno, Foucault, Baudrillard, Deleuze, Barthes—each of whom considered objects in the articulation of broader theories. These thinkers were concerned with culture, but they used objects as tools or entry points to illustrate and ascertain their positions. Literary criticism, phenomenology, semiotics, history, and sociology have all found in the concept of the object and the relations that surround it fertile ground for the analysis of contemporary society and art. In circling the distinctly modern question of the human position in the world, objects proved a natural foil throughout the twentieth century.

Various strains of object-oriented theory have found purchase in the past twenty years. Under the banner of “new materialism,” these often consider objects as active, generative

subjects themselves, capable of determining, expressing, and animating a range of meanings.<sup>1</sup> Arjun Appadurai's early work on the social determinations of objects has been advanced by thinkers such as Bruno Latour, who has used what he terms multiple modes of material effectivity to consider new approaches to sociological studies.<sup>2</sup> Scholars such as W. J. T. Mitchell and Bill Brown have pursued art criticism through the lens of object relations.<sup>3</sup> From a phenomenological perspective, thinkers including Levi R. Bryant, Graham Harman, Timothy Morton, and Steven Shaviro have advanced a version of speculative realism termed object-oriented ontology, arguing that objects exist independently of their relations and therefore cannot be any less privileged in their being than human subjects.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile political theorist Jane Bennett has posited a "vital materialism" whereby objects actively determine human experience and therefore may be considered moral ends in their own right.<sup>5</sup> Karen Barad used objects to elaborate what she terms "agential realism" to revise feminist and post-structuralist theory, while Jussi Parikka has taken up a similar materialism to rework media studies.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A nice counter to this position can be found in Christopher Wood's essay, "Image and Thing, A Modern Romance" where he argues that the "anthropomorphizing" of objects is motivated by a perception of a lack in the artwork or in art itself.

<sup>2</sup> Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Bruno Latour, "The Berlin Key or How to Do Words with Things," in *Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture*, ed. P. M. Graves-Brown (New York: Routledge, 2000), 10-21, in which he writes, "things do not exist without being full of people."

<sup>3</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 1-22, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344258>.

<sup>4</sup> Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011); Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Carus Publishing, 2002); Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*, (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2013); Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

In literary scholarship, object relations have informed studies on longing, poetics, memory, structure, character, and modernity. Employing a critical lens that recalls Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, Susan Stewart used miniature and gigantic objects, as well as collections and souvenirs to examine the "formation of a notion of the interior" and the narrative expression of longing.<sup>7</sup> More recently, she has expanded this approach by considering the material ruins of culture and the aesthetic hold decay has on literary works such as those of Wordsworth, Goethe, and Blake.<sup>8</sup> After reviving a Heideggerian distinction between the object and a thing in his essay "Thing Theory," Bill Brown went on to a study of materialism in early twentieth century literature in the work of Mark Twain, Frank Norris, and Henry James.<sup>9</sup> Allan Hepburn turned to the appearance of art objects in fictional works of the 1970s and '80s and used this approach to delineate questions about aesthetics and value.<sup>10</sup> Marianne Hirsch has analyzed photographs, "testimonial objects," and household items in modern fictional works of displacement to advance her theory of postmemory and inherited trauma.<sup>11</sup> And by applying the term "archive" and contrasting material resonance with Foucauldian discourse, J. J. Long has argued that the appearance and grouping of objects in certain fictions, especially those of W. G. Sebald, allows a distinctly nuanced approach to the questions and demands of modernity.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), xi.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, *The Ruins Lessons: Meaning and Material in Western Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Allan Hepburn, *Enchanted Objects: Visual Art in Contemporary Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> J. J. Long, *W. G. Sebald: Image, Archive, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

Each of these studies suggests some potential merit to approaching literature through the analysis of the objects that distinguish them. The relationship between subject and object is productive or revealing for the very reason that it demands interpretation. It recalls, in fact, the distinction that Barthes makes in *Camera Lucida* between the *studium* of a photograph, the presumed interest and explicit signification of an image on the one hand, and the personal, accidental “prick” of an image on the other, the *punctum*.<sup>13</sup> All photographs make objective claims, Barthes suggests, but some of them “wound” us personally. The idea of the *punctum* has been widely celebrated and explored, but this often forgoes the other side of the coin, the *studium*, and most of all the relationship between the two. There is a strange kind of conversion of experience that Barthes tracks between the *studium* and the *punctum* of a photograph, wherein the one informs the other, and even this is not always what actually appears in the photograph, but what the viewer remembers (or misremembers) after seeing it. Considering the Winter Garden Photograph of his mother, Barthes writes it “was indeed essential, it achieved for me, utopically, *the impossible science of the unique being*.”<sup>14</sup> While Barthes never explicitly expanded this dialectic beyond photographs, it does seem perhaps possible and worthwhile to extend it to objects.

For instance, in the diary that Barthes kept for more than a year after his mother’s death, he writes occasionally about travelling. Work and other responsibilities draw him away from the house he shared with *maman* and where he continued to live—to Casablanca, Morocco, Gabès. At first it does not matter where he is, for his sorrow is boundless, consuming him at all times, in all places. But nearly a year after his mother’s passing, when her absence has become somewhat more familiar and therefore slips further into the periphery, he begins to resent leaving. Barthes’s

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<sup>13</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 25-7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

mother died in October 1977, and in April of the following year he writes, “Now that *maman* is no more, I no longer have that impression of freedom I had on my trips (when I would leave her for short periods of time).”<sup>15</sup> Then at the beginning of August he writes, “Disappointment of various places and trips. Not really comfortable anywhere. Very soon, this I cry: *I want to go back!*”<sup>16</sup> Two days later he makes a note that is almost like a personal promise: “Make no trips except those during which I have no time to say: *I want to go back!*”<sup>17</sup> And two weeks later he bears down on this feeling again, “I no longer bear travelling” he writes. “Why is it that I keep trying, like a lost child, to ‘get back home’—though *maman* is no longer there?”<sup>18</sup>

This entry sets off a series of short mediations that consider the home the two shared, and especially the daily demands on Barthes in that place, among those things. As Barthes circles around what is not only an instinct to stay put but the actual fear of leaving, he discovers that his aversion centers on the shared language he is able to maintain with *maman* in this house. There is a kind of transaction between the living and the dead; not an internal discourse, but an actual presence in the daily concerns—a way of living—for those who remain. In *Camera Lucida* Barthes insists that in a sense, he and his mother never “‘spoke’ . . . never ‘discoursed’” but simply lived together, “the frivolous insignificance of language, the suspension of images must be the very space of love, its music.”<sup>19</sup> As Barthes presses down on this same dynamic in *Mourning Diary*, he understands his own absence from this house as the abandonment of this communion with his mother; in travelling he does not fear forgetting *maman*, but feels that in another place he cannot remain in possession of her. If he is not at home to manage the cooking,

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<sup>15</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 114.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, *Camera Lucida*, 72.

clean the clothes, arrange the furnishings as she once did, then he loses her all over again. “To travel is to separate myself from her—still more now that she is no longer there—that she is no more than the most intimate expression of the quotidian.”<sup>20</sup>

Such an expression does not consist only in performing daily tasks or being around the objects that were once *maman*’s—it becomes a matter of values. The manner in which one arranges a home with furnishings both practical and decorative determines how life will be lived in that space. If your house is filled with appliances, you will microwave your food and dry your clothes in a tumble dryer. Whether a house is cluttered or curated, routinely cleaned or filled with cheap furniture—these arrangements are a matter of taste and temperament, and reflect the values of the inhabitant. And this is the crux of Barthes’s longing: by assuming his mother’s interaction with the objects of the house, he engages with her as in a conversation. It is not that these objects were once handled by her or that it was in this particular space where she lived, but that by living *through* these items, Barthes lives with his mother still. “I try to continue living day by day according to her values,” he writes, “that alliance of ethics and aesthetic that was her incomparable fashion of living.” And again in a separate note: “To share the *values* of the silent dailiness (to manage the cooking, the cleaning, the clothes, the choice and something like the past of objects), this was my (silent) way of conversing with her.”<sup>21</sup>

This is an unusual way to encounter objects and the past in a literary context. We are familiar with the madeleine, but Proust’s objects serve only a preliminary function of transport, of collapsing time. The madeleine is hardly more than a device, a way into the story of a childhood. The object could be anything, and does not so much determine a present narrative as it does invite reminiscence. On the other hand, the airplane overhead, passing cars, the tolling

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., *Mourning Diary*, 190.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 190, 192.

bell all direct the narrative gaze of Mrs. Dalloway and her crowd, but the bell, car, and plane themselves matter little. It is not the active engagement with these things that propel us through Woolf's London, nor the understanding of their context that determines the experiences of her characters. Though Barthes's notes are no polished piece—nothing more than jottings intended for a book that would never be written—his concern with the specificity of objects as the basis of an entire, personal language is a curious liberation of “the thing” from “what it symbolizes.”

The most important part of Barthes's daily routine is keeping flowers on the bedside table in the room where his mother lived and slept and died. It is one of the premier reasons why he does not wish to travel nearly a year after her death. As he prepares for a trip to Morocco in July 1978, he writes that removing these flowers overwhelms him with “the horrible fear (of her death).”<sup>22</sup> A month later, one can almost sense his relief at being back in this room as he notes its “locality,” the significance of this space epitomized and made visible by the flowers he has returned to the bedside. He wants to remain at home always, “so that the flowers here will always be fresh.”<sup>23</sup> Keeping the flowers fresh is its own kind of dialogue between mother and son, past and present. The flowers are finite, they wilt and die, and unlike the daily ministrations Barthes likely made for his mother that are no longer required, these flowers will always need refreshing—the potential for engaging the value they embody is infinite, something Barthes can always do, so long as he is at home.

The word at the heart of this chore is instrumental, whether Barthes realizes it or not. He does not “replace” the flowers, but keeps them *fresh*. He uses this word, *fresh*, a few times throughout the diary to convey multiple aspects of his mourning. In one instance, his mother's death is thought of as an abrupt fact, something so close to Barthes that is as though it is always

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 191.

happening. “Mourning: not diminished, not subject to erosion, to time. Chaotic, erratic: *moments* (of distress, of love of life) as *fresh* now as on the first day.”<sup>24</sup> But he also uses the word to describe his mother—that she gave “an impression of freshness,” like “Cezanne’s blue.”<sup>25</sup> In another instance he employs the word to convey the telescoping of time that his mother’s death has caused him to experience as he recalls his life with her. He is watching a film that mentions rice powder, which brings his early childhood back to him: “*the self never ages. / (I am as ‘fresh’ as in the ‘rice-powder’ days).*”<sup>26</sup> When he uses the word again to describe what he does to the flowers at *maman*’s bedside, it is as though all of these resonances come to be embodied in this object—the immediacy of his mother’s passing, the tenuous experience of time, and her very essence are all wrapped up in keeping the flowers fresh.

Before his trip to Morocco, Barthes notices this very quality of representation as lived experience. He recalls Winnicott’s psychotic who fears a catastrophe that has already occurred. This was an idea put forward in a paper likely written around 1963 but not published until 1974 that describes a psychic defense in which a patient bypasses the incorporation of a “primitive agony” (separation from the mother, for instance) into conscious ego-identity, and subverts the trauma of such an event into the unconscious. Such a person essentially lacks the maturity or psychic framework to incorporate trauma into a conscious self, and therefore persists in fear of this breakdown and “must go on looking for the past detail which is *not yet experienced.*”<sup>27</sup> This substitution of a self-created inner reality for an external one prompts the psychotic to search the

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 172, 134.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>27</sup> D. W. Winnicott, “Fear of Breakdown,” in *D. W. Winnicott: Psycho-Analytic Explorations*, ed. Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, Madelein Davis (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 91.

future for events that have happened in the past, suffering thereby a feeling of living an unlived life.<sup>28</sup>

Nearly a year after his mother's death, Barthes writes "*I fear a catastrophe that has already occurred. I constantly perpetuate it in myself under a thousand substitutions.*"<sup>29</sup> This kind of active suffering, he suggests, prevents him from writing a proper text about *maman*, confined instead to scraps. It is as though the fragmented pursuit of Barthes's own mourning embodies the disassociation with the trauma that has already occurred. His language—the conscious organization of the self in relation to reality—is not fully formed, he is still searching for the future manifestation of the past. And yet he finds within the nonlinguistic—the objects, the routines, the flowers—a language for his trauma. In contending with the things that surrounded his mother, Barthes both embodies a fear of breakdown—he affirms his psychosis—and orients himself in relation to the past.

Barthes finds that trauma is a linguistic act, that language provides the integrative power by which the finality of the past enters into the whole of the present. "My suffering is inexpressible but all the same *utterable*, speakable. The very fact that language affords me the word 'intolerable' immediately achieves a certain tolerance."<sup>30</sup> The naming of an experience gives substance to that experience. Yet when Barthes encounters his unwillingness to leave his home and his fear of removing the flowers from his mother's bedside table, he gestures toward an in-between space of language. Here the flowers come to enact a linguistic function by allowing Barthes to commune with his loss in the present tense. They offer a language in which he can say, "This is intolerable." In other words, there is something like a linguistic need that

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<sup>28</sup> This idea is expanded and given good grounding by Thomas H. Ogden, in "Fear of Breakdown and the Unlived Life," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 95, no. 2 (2014): 205–223.

<sup>29</sup> Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, 203.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

compels Barthes to keep the flowers fresh—they are the language of his suffering, and their utterance (their refreshing) locates Barthes in the present tense, in a lived life.

Though Barthes is only making notes, saying what cannot be said appears to sit at the heart of *The Mourning Diary*. Such literariness is in part what gives the collection substance as a book, fit to collect, organize, and publish. Barthes is investigating what it means to name his own suffering, and finds that doing so straddles the sayable and the unsayable. This tension drives the work, and even the pages themselves are mostly white space with a few suggestive, incomplete lines of text. The irony of Barthes's position is not wasted, and the extreme vulnerability of the writing gives it a unique urgency. There is hardly any sheen here between author and subject; whereas the self's constitution in language is so carefully performed in his autobiography, here Barthes proceeds almost by apophasis, showing the reader pieces of himself indirectly. It is as if in *Mourning Diary*, he pushes himself beyond this edge of language, and that through objects this secondary language becomes available to the subject. In allowing the significance of the interaction with objects to be felt, yet leaving the meaning of such an interaction free of analytic tampering, Barthes lets these things speak and anchors the psychology of his own loss.

This unplanned and unperformed instance of object-as-text and object-as-image anticipates a style of writing that has become central to contemporary literature. Writers across the board use objects in just this way to achieve narrative ends in the understated, indirect literature of displacement and psychology. This study, then, synthesizes the use of objects in determining narrative. It delineates how objects translate experience in the works of Ferrante, Knausgaard, Luiselli, and Sebald, making the case that an analysis of these texts through the lens of object-relations proves a revealing critical mode. While this study refrains from anthropomorphizing objects, it does take seriously the claims of the new materialism and

evaluates how such scholarship might be constructive in literary criticism. Maintaining a distinction between an object and a thing, the following chapters attempt to understand why objects have become so widely incorporated into current literature by focusing on the space between a subject and an object. There a dynamic emerges that obliquely discloses characters to the reader, much like the fresh flowers reveal Barthes to himself.

The first chapter uses Ferrante's *Days of Abandonment* to examine the psychological associations that can be invested into objects and then turned into a driving narrative. This extends the private language of things that Barthes brushes against in *Mourning Diary* and shows how it can be arranged into a dramatic work of fiction. In Chapter Two I turn to Knausgaard's "Seasons Quartet" in which he blends memoir and essay in simple descriptions of commonplace things addressed to his unborn child. Here Knausgaard attempts to strip away the associations around objects and uncover the variety of experience and an excavation of the self. Chapter Three takes up Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*, analyzing the formal collection of objects under the banner "archive" and considering how objects in the hands of children shift the language that surrounds immigration, history, and personal narratives. Finally, Chapter Four considers Sebald's *Austerlitz* and the manner in which objects might both reveal and satisfy an unlived life. Throughout, Barthes will remain a touchstone, both guide and antagonist. While much of the scholarship on object relations outlined above emphasizes the cultural associations of certain materials, I have introduced Barthes here to shift the sensibility of the discussion toward language. The relationship that Barthes identifies between the *studium* and the *punctum*, and in his yearning for fresh flowers, is fundamentally linguistic, and the chapters that follow explore the same unspoken yet distinctive "prick" of an object.

In the following texts, there appears a diligent effort to reformulate genre by collapsing the distinctions between writer, narrator, and protagonist. We might categorize this in Barthesian terms as texts that use an image-repertoire in which several masks (personae) take over the story to represent an entire psyche.<sup>31</sup> Such a text achieves not essayistic metaphor—a discourse that asks “What is it? What does it mean?”—but the metonymy that puts forward a different question: “What can follow from what I say? What can be engendered by the episode I am telling?”<sup>32</sup> The distinction is one that Barthes traces from Jakobson, but brings to bear in various texts of his own, especially *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Whereas *Mourning Diary* is really only a set of notes toward a book that was never written, Barthes’s autobiography is a fully realized text, written just a couple years before *maman*’s death and with the fully-performed image-repertoire of a polished work of art. Here the ideas that are simmering at the surface of Barthes’s loss are dilated and extended in a proper artifice of text. By turning toward a few select iterations of the object and its encounter as detailed here, it is possible to see, in a preliminary way, how the linguistic relationship between thing and subject arises and is employed.

At one point, about halfway through his memoir, Barthes pauses to list a number of what he calls anamneses—small, insignificant snippets of memory. A landau with two horses; a dairy woman who gifts hot chocolate and croissants; being hoisted on to his mother’s shoulders, wrapped in a sheet, and chasing a bat from the bedroom with fire tongs; soup and toast by the fire on Sundays; buying magazines in a shop full of the smell of frying potatoes; little perfumed cones burned to keep mosquitoes away; a bonbon in the shape and with the taste of a raspberry; Colonel Poymiro straddling a chair; the afternoon snack of cold milk with sugar and the old

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 120.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., “*Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure . . .*” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 278.

white bowl with a defect in the glaze that made it so difficult to know if the spoon, “as it turned,” was touching the defect or some yet undissolved sugar. There are sixteen of these anamneses (though Barthes makes it clear there could be more) and they are “the action—a mixture of pleasure and effort—performed by the subject in order to recover, *without magnifying or sentimentalizing it*, a tenuity of memory.”<sup>33</sup> Later, he remarks that only the anamnesis is exempt from signification—that it is a *matte*, insignificant haiku, the only possible utterance that escapes the image-system.<sup>34</sup>

It is a curious insistence, for surely these snatches of memory mean *something* to Barthes. Regardless of whether they are “fond” memories, they do represent the subject’s past and substantiate the existence of the self through time. And despite Barthes’s insistence that they are recorded here without magnification or sentimentality, the fact of their record does magnify them, and not a few hit sentimental notes (on the streetcar from his grandparents’ house headed for soup and toast by the fire? Wrapped in a sheet with *maman*?). One must resolutely take Barthes at his word that these are *matte* recollections, yet it does make sense why he might make such an attempt. Everything he puts down on the page about himself is a representation, an aspect of the image-repertoire of “Roland Barthes.” Even among the various personae and masks, ranging first to second to third person voice, any utterance exists within what Barthes calls the image-repertoire and can therefore be probed with *What does that mean?* and becomes part of the value of an autobiography—to arrange the significance of one’s life, to signify where the meaning takes shape.

But Barthes is wary of oversimplification: he is both conscious and unconscious of what defines and creates the image-repertoire in which he (his self) traffics. It is possible to identify

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 109.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

the ideas that drove his writing, the movements of his career, and his obsessions, yet the book in its entirety also consists of what he does not know: “the unconscious and ideology, things which utter themselves only by the voices of others.”<sup>35</sup> These things, the symbolic and the ideological, pass through the subject and are impossible to articulate directly, “since I am their blind spot.”<sup>36</sup> Some part of the writing then must court what is behind the curtain. The anamnesis does just this, it makes the space to observe the wires animating the subject. The writer proceeds partly in the fashion of Orpheus: without directly attaching a psychoanalysis or political criticism to every scrap of memory, he leads the past out into the open, without turning around.<sup>37</sup> The anamnesis is the erratic recall that collapses time in an otherwise aged body. The unaffected reports of life help to determine a relationship with the past that is not bound to explanation or analysis, but (and this is the tantalizing part) *might* still lead to revelation. Once again, a finger points to something just over our shoulder.

Of course, this is not an innocent term. Anamnesis, from the Greek ἀνά, “up” and μνήσις, “memory” is embedded in the relationship between the physical and the spiritual, the body and the soul. It has a long history and resonances that place it precisely in the vortex of the limits of memory, the acquisitions of knowledge, and a transformation, even a salvation of the self. In one tradition, the term recalls the epistemological trappings of the Platonic forms available to the immortal soul. Plato uses the term in both *Meno* and *Phaedo* to illustrate his theory of knowledge as a wisdom “remembered” out of the eternal. When Meno wonders how a person might search for knowledge when one does not know what to look for, Plato pushes the question up against the distinction between body and soul, insisting that since the soul is immortal, it “has been born

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 153.

often” and already knows all things, and may therefore recollect whatever it has known before.<sup>38</sup> “Nothing prevents a man, after recalling [ἀνάμνησις] one thing only—a process men call learning—discovering everything else for himself” and illustrates this by prompting the young boy onward toward geometric truths.<sup>39</sup> The point is driven further in *Phaedo*, where Plato insists that learning is a form of recollection of what the soul knew before its birth in the body.<sup>40</sup> The Platonic anamnesis attempts to see what is true—not the representations of things, but things in themselves. It is a recollection of what is beyond one’s own life, beyond the physical and sensory. What is represented anamnetically is a picture of reality that *suggests* something else, a representation so stripped of artistic flourish that it denies the very thing it represents, expressing instead what is “tenuous,” a life, perhaps, other than the one that has been lived.

The term also carries significant theological weight, for it is the word used in the Gospel of Luke during the last supper when Jesus breaks the bread, passes it to his disciples, and encourages them to take communion “in remembrance of me” (τοῦτο ποιεῖτε εἰς τὴν

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<sup>38</sup> Plato, *Meno*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle*, ed. S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2005), 80d.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 81d.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, *Phaedo*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle*, ed. S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2005), 75e. This mode of gaining wisdom through recollection also provides the groundwork for Plato’s reservations about the mimetic qualities of art. Plato characterizes the dichotomy between the body and soul as fundamentally limiting—that the body, with its illnesses, desires, illusions, and wants, distorts and impedes the pursuit of truth. “If we are ever to have pure knowledge, we must escape from the body and observe things in themselves with the soul by itself” (*Phaedo*, 66e). Insofar as death offers the ultimate release, Plato recommends that in the meantime we might “refrain as much as possible from association with the body” and employs the word *catharsis* (*Phaedo*, 67a). When Aristotle takes up this same word in his defense of the arts, the epistemological quandary of Plato is joined with an aesthetic concern. For just as war and base pleasure are a consequence of the body’s wants, so do the arts appeal to our pity and fear. Plato’s reservations about mimetic representations that arouse the passions falsely and overshadow the rational are here countered by Aristotle suggesting that tragic mimesis affecting the most intense emotions is what, in the end, achieves the catharsis necessary for the intellect to transcend the body. See Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Stephen Halliwell, Loeb Classical Library 199 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 47.

ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν) (22:19). The phrase is repeated again with the cup of wine, as well as in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, and becomes a cornerstone of Christian liturgy that emphasizes the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus, and by extension into his divinity. The believer who takes the Eucharist participates in the sacrament that symbolizes the physical reality of God and becomes a channel for His grace. Just as Christ's body is sacrificed for the salvation of the Christian's soul, so does the taking of communion at once affirm the divine and transport one beyond the physical. In the course of the entire ritual, it is the anamnesis that confers the commemoration of the Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ; a memorial of what is both known and not known. Above all, the anamnesis makes present and ratifies that which is otherwise invisible.

Finally, and perhaps more practically though no less suggestively, an anamnesis denotes the medical history of a patient acquired by a physician in search of a diagnosis. In medical terms, a doctor can observe clinical signs—objective indications of disease or injury, like high temperature, a rash, bruises. On the other hand, there are symptoms—those subjective experiences like dizziness, headaches, tiredness. The signs are obtained by physical examination, while the symptoms are described in a medical history—an anamnesis. Only by weighing both can a doctor offer a diagnosis, and the anamnesis stands in service of both the body and the cure.

Barthes, surely, knows this etymology. As if searching for both a diagnosis and transcendence, he offers his erratic list as though it is evidence of something only the reader can decipher. Does it mean anything that these are the randomly recalled moments? Perhaps, but the significance of the anamnesis is not actually in what an image means, but a brief extrapolation of memory from the body wherein the subject actively transcends the self. While the body ages, these memories have somehow remained fixed, independent of the injustices of time and the

development of Barthes's personal history. And by dredging them up (some "mixture of pleasure and effort"), Barthes extends beyond his body's temporal position, not just by recalling the past, but by expanding the reach of his "unconscious" memory in the present. And these snippets, haikus as Barthes calls them, are more often than not directed by some object. The bowl, the chair, the fire tongs.

It is interesting to juxtapose the anamnesis with an episode that is not so open-ended. The unknown is less in play, for instance, in Barthes's recollection of the time he was trapped in a hole. All the other children climb out and stand at the rim, teasing him until his mother rescues him. "Lost! alone! spied on! excluded! (to be excluded is not to be outside, it is to be *alone in the hole*, imprisoned under the open sky: *precluded*)" until his mother comes and takes him away from the hole and the taunting children "—against them."<sup>41</sup> Here is the antithesis of the anamnesis—a memory full of color and sentiment, of nearly explicit psychological consequence and indulgence. The "loamy soil," the exclamation marks, the final emphasis "against them" all smack of meaning. A memoir without this kind of intentional recollection would seem thin—in this anecdote there is an overt promise of something formative bubbling to the surface. Yet at the same time the meaning of this episode is obvious: the little boy stuck in a hole waiting to be rescued by *maman*. A book of only such instances would not only come off overly sentimental, but the subject would appear *only* as a performance of an image of itself. In other words, the fragments of memory give Barthes an edge on what is real—both what he knows and what he does not—and thereby render his monument, which can only ever be an artificial totem, authentically resonant.

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<sup>41</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 121-2.

Consider the first of the anamneses, the afternoon snack: “*cold milk with sugar in it. At the bottom of the old white bowl there was a defect in the glaze; he never could tell if the spoon, as it turned, was touching this defect or a patch of sugar that had not dissolved or had not been washed.*”<sup>42</sup> No meaning is particularly clear in this, yet there is also something familiar—the trick of perception, a lazy, childish fascination. This recollection tells us very little, if anything, about Barthes’s psychological formation or relationships, we learn nothing about his desire. And yet a certain value does arise, some language of perception that is tied to the world’s physicality. He notices and is uncertain, something is both sugar and an imperfect glaze. A young boy twirls his spoon.

Is it the case that behind this unsentimental (though is it truly?) recollection there lies some knowledge that Barthes accesses indirectly? Is the writing a remembrance of himself whereby Barthes converts the body, now aged and declining? Has he properly diagnosed himself? These questions seem to overstate the effect, yet the very fact that they can be leveraged on an episode in which a boy drinks cold milk is significant. In another recollection, Barthes tells of 1945 in Leysin when he had part of his rib removed, and that it was then returned to him wrapped in a piece of gauze. For a long time he kept this piece of bone in a drawer, alongside other “precious” objects like “old keys, a schoolboy report card, my grandmother B.’s mother-of-pearl dance program and pink taffeta card case.” Then, one day “realizing that the function of any drawer is to ease, to acclimate the death of objects by causing them to pass through a sort of pious site, a dusty chapel where, in the guise of keeping them alive, we allow them a decent interval of dim agony,” he flings the rib chop from his balcony, “as if I were romantically scattering my own ashes.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 61.

Despite the etymological promise of the term, is the anamnesis nothing more than a bit of bone decaying in a drawer? Casting off these snippets might be just as liberating as it is revealing. Yet recalling the moment from the *Mourning Diary* in which Barthes marvels at how few things his mother left behind and that this scarcity makes it nearly impossible to get rid of anything she possessed, it is clear that there is some middle ground.<sup>44</sup> The object does matter, it can transport and suggest just as well as it can gather dust. When Barthes throws his rib into the street for the dogs, he acknowledges the staying power of the thing. It is not important to keep a piece of one's rib in a drawer—doing so achieves only a vague sense of idiocy. The mother-of-pearl dance program, on the other hand, the pink taffeta card case—these objects remain. Even though the drawer might be conceived of as the place where an object goes to die, Barthes does not empty everything over his balcony. We do not know what happens to the other objects, but it somehow seems unlikely that he would toss that pink taffeta case. How could he? Such an object means something and perhaps the point to be understood in this episode is that Barthes is the kind of man who keeps it in his drawer, his dusty pious site. Perhaps we are only treated to the bit of bone so that we also catch a glimpse of the card case. The chair and fire tongs, the white porcelain bowl, the raspberry bonbon, the perfumed cones—these objects are both respite and invitation, nothing at all and yet quite telling, indeed eloquent.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., *Mourning Diary*, 201.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Rock, Paper, Scissors: Objects and Fate in the Novels of Elena Ferrante

The novels of Elena Ferrante have received tremendous attention for their depiction of friendships, their mix of high- and low-brow style, and for the dynamics they trace between mothers and daughters.<sup>1</sup> Her novels are capacious and lush, at once gossipy and complex. Ferrante draws on an array of literary traditions and techniques to achieve her wide-ranging effect, but a striking aspect of her novels is the constant appearance of simple, commonplace objects that seem to drive the story. Dolls, dresses, books, telephones, jewelry—these things and many others are threaded through all of Ferrante’s works with precision and no easy symbolic reading. At one time an exploding brass cooking pot seems like a negation of domestic prophecy in *My Brilliant Friend*, while at another it reappears, gleaming at a wedding. The more Ferrante insists on these items, the more they become essential to the relationships and identities of her characters.

Perhaps the most obvious example are the dolls that bookend the Neapolitan Quartet. Elena and Lila meet as girls, each playing with a doll outside their apartment building. They agree to trade and Lila enigmatically, almost maliciously, pushes Elena’s doll through the grate into the basement of the feared Don Achille. Defiantly, Elena does the same, insisting that what Lila does, she does. The two girls venture into the building to retrieve the dolls but cannot find them and conclude that Don Achille has already snatched them away. Lila decides that they must

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<sup>1</sup> See Rachel Donadio, “Italy’s Great, Mysterious Storyteller,” *New York Review of Books*, December 18, 2014; Olivia Santovetti, “Melodrama or Metafiction? Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Novels,” *Modern Language Review* 113, no. 3 (2018): 527-45; and Lidija Haas, “Thinking Against: Elena Ferrante’s Radical Vision of Female Resistance,” *Times Literary Supplement*, September 11, 2015.

confront him directly, and screwing up their courage they ascend the stairs to the top apartment and knock on the door. Don Achille has no idea what they are talking about, but he gives them money to replace the dolls, which the girls spend on a copy of *Little Women*. This book, in turn, instigates the writing that eventually culminates in the book we are reading, and the missing dolls—along with the many emotional and psychological suggestions that surround this episode—become the foundational myth in the friendship of Lila and Elena.

In the final pages of *The Story of the Lost Child*, the last volume in the series, Elena, who is now an elderly woman, discovers the dolls wrapped in newspaper on top of her mailbox in Turin. At this point Lila has disappeared while Elena has made a career as a novelist, believing all along that she is the one in control of the two friends' narrative, especially the one we have been reading. But the two dolls suddenly suggest otherwise. "She had deceived me," Elena thinks about Lila, "she had dragged me wherever she wanted, from the beginning of our friendship. All our lives she had told a story of redemption that was *hers*, using *my* living body and *my* existence."<sup>2</sup> But immediately, in a characteristic Ferrante turn, Elena denies this interpretation. "Or maybe not. Maybe those two dolls that had crossed more than half a century and had come all the way to Turin meant only that she was well and loved me."<sup>3</sup> These dolls could mean one thing, or they could mean another, but most of all Elena's confrontations with and reactions to the objects—both as a girl and a grown woman—allow multiple things to be true about both girls and the terms of their relationship. Cowardice and manipulation, courage and

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<sup>2</sup> Elena Ferrante, *The Story of a Lost Child*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2015), 473.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

affection, coincidence and design all swirl around these characters in the uneasy encounter with the thing.<sup>4</sup>

In Ferrante's hands, objects frequently become the instruments of destabilization and the means of interpretation. These mute physical objects at first appear irrefutable and easily defined, equally available to all characters. Yet in the space between the thing and the person, an array of significance arises that is at once subjectively specific and externally generated. In this distance between the physical and emotional, Ferrante places her dramatic movement. Objects never symbolize a concrete meaning in Ferrante's works, but indicate intricate and often conflicting experiences, desires, and fears. And frequently the encounter with the object has some bearing on the capacity of a character to determine or influence an outcome, perception, or identity. Insofar as the object has a physical existence that extends beyond a single character's perception, shrewdly manipulating or understanding the object confers on the character the power to control the narrative. With the dolls, Elena and Lila jockey for the upper hand, pushing each other's doll through the grate, and this sets the tone for their entire relationship. In turn, when the dolls reappear sixty years later, they not only force Elena to reconsider her beliefs about her own self-determination and which one of these women has been pulling the strings, but insist on an uneasy finale in which definitive answers remain just out of view.

This constant reinterpretation is central to Ferrante's works, in which she very often subverts or adjusts the literary tradition in which she is operating. Combining the interests of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective with classical influences and contemporary realism,

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<sup>4</sup> For a meticulous investigation of dolls across Ferrante's works, see Elena Zagaglia, "All Literature is Childhood. About Elena Ferrante," *Encyclopaideia* 23 (53):105-13, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1825-8670/9358>, as well as Nilay Kaya, "Lost Dolls, Lost Souls in Elena Ferrante's *La figlia oscura*," *Annali di Ca' Foscari: Rivista della Facoltà di lingue e letterature straniere dell'Università di Venezia* 55, no. 1 (2019), <http://doi.org/10.30687/AnnOr/2385-3042/2019/01/022>.

Ferrante is adamant, as she told *The Paris Review*, that “there is no work of literature that is not the fruit of tradition, of many skills, of a sort of collective intelligence.”<sup>5</sup> And yet Ferrante’s novels push these traditions further, expanding them by pressing one against the other, and securing more various outcomes for her characters.<sup>6</sup> To some degree, the objects in Ferrante’s novels and the expectations attached to them provide her with the means of exploiting generic anticipation and shifting narrative possibility. Just as objects can destabilize notions of control and meaning for Ferrante’s characters, so too do they provide one of the ways she maneuvers literary convention. To the same extent that the dolls transform into *Little Women*, their reappearance draws into question whether Elena has only imitated the example set by Alcott’s Josephine March while Lila has created the truly original story. Using dresses, dolls, cookware, telephones, and so many other common objects of domesticity, childhood, and marriage, Ferrante reconfigures expectations around the women in her novels and recasts the psychological landscape of their concern. In the space between the object and the subject, Ferrante shakes out certainty and articulates the conflicting interpretations of her characters.

In the context of this study, Ferrante’s work offers an initial examination of the way that objects provide access to the expression of desires, values, and emotions that are difficult to state

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the influences of The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective on Ferrante’s work, see Dayna Tortorici, “Those Like Us,” *n+1*, Issue 22, Spring 2015. For a reading on Ferrante’s engagement with and subversion of the expectations of contemporary realism, see Jon Baskin, “Out of Good Reasons,” *The Point*, Issue 10, June 16, 2015. Ferrante’s own thoughts on the matter were published as an interview with Sandro and Sandra Ferri as “The Art of Fiction, No. 228,” *The Paris Review*, Issue 212, Spring 2015.

<sup>6</sup> See Stefania Lucamante, “Undoing Feminism: The Neapolitan Novels of Elena Ferrante,” *Italica* 95, no. 1 (2018): 31-49; Lidija Haas, “Thinking Against: Elena Ferrante’s Radical Vision of Female Resistance,” *Times Literary Supplement*, September 11, 2015; Mary Caputi, “‘The Known Footsteps of my Mother’: The Power of the Abyss in Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan Novels,” *Theory & Event* 23, no. 3 (July 2020): 641-663; Patrizia Sambuco, “Elena Ferrante’s *L’amore Molesto*: The Renegotiation of the Mother’s Body,” in *Corporeal Bonds: The Daughter-Mother Relationship in Twentieth-Century Italian Women’s Writing* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 129-51, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/9781442699496.9>.

directly. The following chapter traces the appearance of objects in one of Ferrante's earlier works, *The Days of Abandonment*, as a specific example of a technique she employs throughout her work. The analysis of the significance of objects here suggests a sense of meaning as an unstable interpretation that must be consistently reengaged, and that doing so capably or correctly is powerful. Ferrante's characters understand themselves in part through their interactions with things, and both the extent and limitation of their comprehension is made legible to the reader in these same objects. It recalls Barthes's description of the flowers that he refreshes on his mother's bedside table. He cannot bear to abandon this chore, and thereby the flowers and the need to keep them fresh show us something about Barthes's interiority—his unbearable sorrow—more eloquently than if he were to describe it outright. Ferrante operates in a similar fashion, and she uses this linguistic capacity of objects at once to revise received expectations and traditions and to enact her psychological drama.

At the beginning of *The Days of Abandonment*, Olga's husband abruptly leaves her and their two children. Olga does not know why he has left her. He tries to convince her that he is a poor choice as a husband and that she will be better off without him. But after a couple weeks his absence begins to register as more than a passing phase, and Olga resolves to learn the truth. She calmly decides to prepare his favorite meal—pasta with meatballs and potatoes—realizing that the only external sign of her agitation is an “inclination to disorder and a weakness in my fingers, and, the more anguish increased, the harder they found it to close solidly around things.”<sup>7</sup> As she starts cooking, she cuts herself with a can opener, then a bottle of wine slips out of her hand and shatters. She reaches for a rag and knocks over the sugar bowl. All of this gives Olga such a

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<sup>7</sup> Elena Ferrante, *The Days of Abandonment*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2005), 17.

sense of weariness that she goes to sleep, forgetting about her children and leaving a mess in the kitchen. When she wakes up, dazed, her situation returns to her but she refuses to believe she is helpless. She cleans the kitchen, gets the meal prepared, and when Mario arrives, she finally digs out the truth that yes, there is another woman. After making his admission, Mario shoves a forkful of pasta into his mouth, and chews vehemently until something cracks and he spits out a bloodied shard of glass. Reeling with fury, he jumps up, screams at Olga, and storms out, slamming the door behind him.

At this point, Olga begins to spiral out of control. Mario's affair overwhelms her, and *The Days of Abandonment* traces the unravelling of the life that Olga thought was secure. Ferrante accomplishes this through a variety of means, and the interactions she constructs between Olga and objects around her help reveal Olga's psychological fall. At first, Olga turns to physical things to assert that she is not helpless. She reinforces the lock on her door, fetches a can of insecticide to keep the house free of ants, puts on the special earrings Mario had once given her. But much like her attempt to cook a meal for Mario, she proves incapable of manipulating objects to the ends she desires. As she fails to perform the daily tasks that once defined her domestic life, these objects lead her to realize how tenuous her relationship is with this world that was once so familiar to her, and how little she can admit about herself. At every turn and despite best intentions, Olga's grappling with the physical only makes her situation worse. Her phone stops working, her earrings go missing, the front door refuses to open.

The literary tradition of destroyed women is substantial, and part of Ferrante's intention is to subvert the frequently tragic outcome.<sup>8</sup> *Bovary*, *Karenina*, *Effi Briest*, and *Medea* all haunt

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<sup>8</sup> This phrase, "destroyed women," is derived from the English translation of Ferrante's novel. The original, *donna spezzate*, might be more accurately translated as "broken woman," as it is in *Frantumaglia* (see page 107). But the rendering in *The Days of Abandonment* appears to intentionally echo Simone de Beauvoir's collection, *The Woman Destroyed*, one of the books from which Olga finds

these pages, but perhaps most salient is the connection to Dido, the doomed queen whose city burns when she is spurned by Aeneas. Dido's Carthage is built on the values of matrimony and fidelity, and the stones of her temples and palaces are the objects that have been used to build that promise and hold it in place. When Aeneas abandons Dido and she throws herself on his sword atop a funeral pyre, Carthage also catches fire. Likewise, Olga has used commonplace things to construct her union with Mario, but when he leaves she is no longer able to control them. Olga's kingdom collapses: her apartment falls into disarray, she rarely cooks any longer, she crashes the car, she forgets to pay the bills.

Eventually her reckoning culminates in a single day in which Olga and her children become trapped in their apartment. At this point, even language has begun to deteriorate for Olga and she turns to physical things not only to prove she is a strong, capable woman, but to anchor herself in reality. And yet she remains unable to use objects the way they are supposed to be used. Instead, a hammer becomes an instrument for pounding on the floor, she tries turning the key to the locked door with her mouth, and she gives a paper cutter to her daughter with instructions to prick her if she becomes distracted. Suddenly Olga is using the tools at her disposal in bizarre, apparently psychotic ways. She has reasoned out why she must operate this way, and given her circumstances her logic makes a certain amount of sense. Yet on the other hand, because these commonplace things are not being handled according to their ostensible purpose—to hammer nails or cut paper—Olga also appears to have gone mad.

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passages copied into her own notebook that she does not remember transcribing (page 106). Early in the novel, when Olga attempts to rationalize her situation, she writes "*La femme rompue, ah, rompue*, the destroyed woman, destroyed, shit," (a passage quoted at greater length below) and later, after she has recovered herself, she rereads passages in her notebook, "leafed through the ones about women destroyed. I read and felt that I was safe, I was no longer like those women" (59; 183-4). I have largely retained the word "destroyed" here so as to preserve the link with the intentional translation of the novel.

Between the first scene in which the wine bottle shatters into the meal for Mario, and the moment when Ilaria cuts a long gash down the side of Olga's leg, objects both transfigure Olga and reveal aspects of her psyche that she cannot grasp directly and perhaps is not even aware of. Olga's incompetent relationship with things first asserts how unprepared she is to contend with Mario's departure. Then her illogical use of the objects reveals how close she is to unredeemable insanity, and threatens to condemn her to a literary tradition of destroyed women. Finally, Olga's interaction with objects after she does escape her apartment and begins stitching her life back together accompany a return to logic and coherence. These things retain the history of Olga's experience, and present her with a continuing interpretation of her self and the rest of the world. Throughout, they serve as an indicator of Olga's psychological state, functioning as a kind of secondary vocabulary of her predicament and preparing the transformation from victim to survivor.

After Mario finds the glass in his pasta and storms out, Olga slowly begins to clear the table. Then the dog needs to go out. "Everything pointed out to me the practical consequences of abandonment," Olga thinks. "From now on it would be like this, responsibilities that had belonged to us both would now be mine alone."<sup>9</sup> This is the first apprehension of her new situation, and she warns herself not to neglect these household duties. Doing so, she fears, will transform her into the grief-stricken, doomed women she has read about in books or the abandoned *poverella* of her childhood who, after her husband had left her, was consumed by tears and eventually drowned herself. Immediately, the physical objects around Olga seem to promise a way through, if only she can keep them all in order. She hopes that if she can perform

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<sup>9</sup> Ferrante, *Days of Abandonment*, 20.

the daily tasks with what is at hand, she will not only retain some degree of control and perhaps even convince Mario to return, but will avoid the fate that she was raised to believe was inevitable for the abandoned woman.

Yet already in the cooking incident, a direct link is established between Olga's anguish and her ability to manipulate the physical. Olga knows this to be true, yet she does not want to take seriously what it signifies. In the weeks following Mario's departure she denies what her bumbling incompetence suggests and, desperate to avert disaster, frantically focuses on the aspects of her life that she can control. She turns to language as the rational, ordered way to maintain and determine her identity. She becomes obsessed with the way she speaks, and writes long letters to Mario in the belief that if she could put everything down on the page, she might see where things went wrong. Most of all she implores herself to pay attention to the world around her: do not forget to turn off the stove, remember to take the dog out, be sure to pay the bills. She is terrified she will neglect her children in some irrevocable way, noting a growing sense of danger about the "physical requirements of their lives" and increasing anxiety that she might not only fail to meet their needs, but could even harm them.<sup>10</sup> For years, Olga has built her identity on the successful execution of these daily tasks, and in her frantic attempt to parry Mario's absence, she looks to the common household objects and errands of her middleclass life to sustain her, as if manipulating these things correctly and executing the duties of a responsible woman, mother, and wife will deliver her from coming undone.

Yet Olga's new position is more complex than she can admit to herself. Mario has not left because Olga had failed to keep the house organized and the children fed; he has abandoned her because he has fallen in love with another woman. Or, more to the point, he has stopped

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 27.

loving Olga. This truth is excruciating for Olga who has devoted herself to their union—to homebuilding and childrearing, but also to the honesty, loyalty, and affection of a partnership—essentially wrapping her entire identity into the act of loving this man. Years ago she gave up her job and then her hope of writing novels, taking on her role as mother and wife at the exclusion of her professional ambitions. Olga’s entire self-worth is centered on the success of her relationship, and despite Mario’s infidelity she still wants him back; she still loves him. The psychological circumstances she must suddenly navigate revolve around the possibility that she herself—as a wife and mother, but most of all as a woman—is not worthwhile. As long as she persists in her love for Mario, she can never be free from the anguish that his rejection causes in its judgement of her as insufficient in all of these categories. Olga wants to live fully, yet the absence of Mario creates an instability in her life that she cannot reconcile. In the most damning and traditional sense, she does not know how to be a woman if she does not have a husband to love. Whereas Olga had spent the entirety of her marriage to Mario carefully circumscribing herself to fit the mold of their partnership (bearing and raising the children, fielding and encouraging Mario’s professional development), she now confronts a void in which these things no longer count, and perhaps were only ever false indicators of stability and happiness.

“He’s gone, you’re still here,” she writes to herself. “You’ll no longer enjoy the gleam of his eyes, of his words, but so what? Organize your defenses, preserve your wholeness, don’t let yourself break like an ornament, you’re not a knickknack, no woman is a knickknack. *La femme rompue, ah, rompue*, the destroyed woman, destroyed, shit. My job, I thought, is to demonstrate that one can remain healthy. Demonstrate it to myself, no one else.”<sup>11</sup> When Olga tries to save herself by performing the duties of a responsible wife, she is only engaged superficially with her

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 57.

predicament. Olga mistakes household duties for the key to her deliverance, yet the only way that Olga can truly transcend the damning judgement of Mario's departure is to stop loving him. This, of course, is the revelation at the end of the long day trapped in her apartment that suddenly allows Olga to free herself and move on with her life. But to arrive at this moment, Olga must contend with her misconceptions about her own missteps. Ferrante dramatizes this in Olga's inability to force the physical world to yield to her control, and to confront the fact that even if she could manipulate the things as she intends, doing so does not deliver her from the pain of her separation. As Olga's anguish increases in her attempts to understand her own inadequacy, so does her inability to handle daily affairs, despite her vigilance. There is a psychological shortcoming here exemplified in the mismanagement of common objects that in turn sets up the full extent of the change Olga must undergo to prevent her ruin.

Four objects in particular—the phone, earrings, can of insecticides, and door—force Olga into the reckoning of Saturday, August 4th, and all of them gain their significance in Olga's attempts to assert herself. After Mario leaves, Olga begins calling their mutual friends to find out as much as she can about Mario's girlfriend. Hoping for reassurances, she uncovers only scraps of information and tortures herself filling in the details and entertaining further doubts about herself. A few weeks later Mario calls on Olga's cellphone. There is something wrong with the landline he reports: all he can hear are hissing sounds and distant conversations of strangers. He wants to come collect a few things, a visit that provides Olga the perfect excuse to show him all that he has forsaken by leaving. She cleans the house for the first time in weeks, puts on makeup, and selects a pair of earrings that belonged to Mario's grandmother and that he has only

permitted her to wear once before. The evening is a disaster—Olga cannot control herself—and just before Mario leaves he tells her not to wear those earrings anymore, “they don’t suit you.”<sup>12</sup>

Olga’s mania increases and the following day she returns to the phone to call friends for more information, as if she has exhausted her own insight. But Mario was right, the phone does not work. Olga tries her cellphone but it runs out of batteries and she throws it against the wall, breaking it. The next day she discovers that ants have invaded her apartment. She retrieves a can of insecticides and sprays the poison everywhere. “I did it uneasily, feeling that the spray can might well be a living extension of my organism” but nonetheless assiduously, until every corner of the house is covered and the ants appear to be defeated.<sup>13</sup> Then, after taking the dog for a walk, she discovers that the apartment door is open and the earrings are missing. Olga knows that, of course, it was Mario who snuck into the house and took back the earrings, but she chooses to believe instead that it was someone else, some anonymous thieves. She will have to have the door reinforced, she resolves, because that is what a strong, competent woman would do.

At this point, Olga sees in her relationship with things both evidence of her self-worth and means of her defense. The phone, earrings, can of insecticides, and door are all approached as objects of security, but her focus on them in these narrow terms reveals a willful lack of insight. Rather than solve her problems, these objects only frustrate Olga’s situation further. When the door eventually becomes responsible for Olga’s confinement on Saturday the 4th, it is as though it is the culmination of her misguided and incomplete thinking. There is no real reason for Olga to have the door reinforced, and if she could allow herself to admit that it was Mario, not thieves, who stole the earrings, her predicament on Saturday might have been different. Here,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 49.

Olga confuses domestic responsibility (the need to protect her home) with the significance of Mario's actions. She invents a threat so that she can perform competence, when in fact the more helpful but difficult course of action is an admission about who this man is that she insists on loving. Mario cannot bear to part with his grandmother's earrings—he can abandon his dog, his children, his home, and his wife, but not the earrings. This is not the image of a man Olga has fallen in love with, but she cannot yet bring herself to see in Mario this childish shortcoming.

In the days leading up to Saturday the 4th, Olga cannot get the phone to work properly. Most of the time it is dead, or filled with hissing sounds. Olga wonders if perhaps she has forgotten to pay the bill (which she admits doing since Mario left). Olga tries calling the phone company from a pay phone, agrees to pay more money, but the situation does not improve and she resolves to visit the company headquarters in person to complain. At the office, a man indifferently informs her that there is no one to complain to because everything is digitalized. Exasperated, Olga retreats, nearly faint from all the exertion, and as she rounds the corner she sees Mario with his lover, and understands for the first time that the woman is the same young girl Mario tutored years ago, who had been at the center of their only preceding marital crisis. They are window shopping, and Carla is wearing the earrings.

It is a pivotal scene—Olga flies into a rage and attacks them, knocking Mario to the ground and kicking him. Then she turns toward Carla. Olga wants to pull the earrings from Carla's ears along with her flesh, exposing her as nothing more than a receptacle for “the insupportable horror of our living nature.”<sup>14</sup> Olga sees this girl as the embodiment of Mario's crude desire and an affirmation of her own inadequacy. The realization comes out in garbled fragments of sentences, and Olga knows she appears incoherent, but internally she is beginning

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 72.

to understand. Eventually Mario pushes her away and carries off Carla, leaving Olga drained in the middle of the street. “For what could I do, I had lost everything, all of myself, all, irremediably.”<sup>15</sup> In this moment the earrings describe to Olga a sexual reality of Mario’s choice that she has not yet been able to admit. Later that evening, as she sits in front of a handful of sleeping pills and a full glass of cognac, Olga insists to herself that the love she had believed in was nothing more than an exaggeration of sexual chance. At one point Mario desired Olga, and she was foolish to believe that this signified more than base desire. It was not love, it was just the fulfillment of an animal function.

This is, of course, a pessimistic reduction, but it is the first time Olga has entertained the notion that the reason for Mario’s departure could be anything other than her own fault. The phone and the earrings propel her into this new position, one both dangerous and violent. She is about to down the pills and cognac when she catches sight of Carrano, her downstairs neighbor, and recalls that she has his wallet, which she found in front of the building months ago but forgot to return. Almost as an experiment, Olga uses this object to gain entry into Carrano’s apartment and seduce him, as if a sexual conquest of her own would make her even with her husband and prove her desirability. But the episode turns sordid and unsatisfying, and Olga retreats to her apartment. On the stairwell she sees the *poverella*, the first appearance of this ghostly image from Olga’s past, who taunts her from the corner. Olga rushes into her apartment and is able to calm herself only by saying out loud: “I love my husband and so all this has meaning.”<sup>16</sup> She falls asleep with this sentence in her head, and when she wakes up it is the morning of Saturday the 4th.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 88.

Ferrante has positioned objects around Olga that eventually lead her to the day of her reckoning. Olga has attempted to use these things to assert herself over and against the condemnation of Mario's rejection. They are all common objects that for years Olga has capably controlled to build her life with Mario and her identity as a woman. Yet now they do not yield. What Olga wants from these things, they are no longer able to deliver, and her refusal to accept the full significance of this shortcoming propels her into increasingly tormented positions and eventually to the edge of madness.

The image of the "woman destroyed" has always haunted Olga. Since she was a girl she has seen the story repeat itself again and again, yet insisted to herself that such women were pathetic—too weak and foolish to avoid tragedy. The *poverella* and other abandoned women in novels and plays who descend into helpless pain and ignoble deaths when the men they love leave, strike Olga as cautionary tales, and she believed herself more careful, more capable. Olga both feared this fate more than any other, and convinced herself that she was beyond such a tragedy. But with Mario's departure, Olga is forced to reconsider who she is and the fact that she may not be impervious to the same suffering she has loathed in others. She starts to waver between the past and present, among versions of herself and the stories of her childhood. The daily errands, caring for her children, preparing meals, keeping the house clean—all of it comes up against an unwillingness to believe she has become the very thing she most despised.

As different iterations of Olga's predicament appear to her throughout the Saturday in her apartment, the context in which she is struggling expands. In addition to Olga's personal reckoning—confronting her affections for Mario and what she believed about the solidity of their life together—Ferrante establishes a literary precedent of tragedy that she then subverts when

Olga survives. The writing that Olga has been doing in her diary has been her attempt to understand what is happening to her and where she went wrong.<sup>17</sup> As Saturday unfolds, Olga finds this notebook open in the living room with passages transcribed from de Beauvoir's *The Woman Destroyed* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* that she does not remember copying out but are there on the page in her tiny handwriting and underlined in red. She sees three questions Anna asks herself in a sudden lucid flash, just as she falls to her hands and knees in front of the train, "Where am I? What am I doing? Why?" Olga knows the passage well but cannot answer the questions for herself. "I was lost in the where am I, in the what am I doing," she realizes. "I was mute beside the why."<sup>18</sup> Despite recognizing herself in these passages, Olga's intense focus on the practical demands of her domestic life has rendered her incapable of addressing the more fundamental question about why she is acting this way.

Anna's words also recall Dido's at the moment when Aeneas sails from Carthage. In a fit of rage Dido orders her ships to pursue him then recalls herself. "What am I saying? Where am I? What madness / Takes me out of myself?"<sup>19</sup> Both Dido and Anna have sudden moments of clarity just before they succumb when they can see the extent of their own role in their undoing, but it is too late for them to change course. Ferrante, on the other hand, threads bits of lucid self-reflection throughout *The Days of Abandonment* in moments when Olga catches herself before making some mistake, or reflects on events after they have transpired. This is a kind of self-surveillance that Ferrante has highlighted elsewhere, insisting that certain women "practice a

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<sup>17</sup> In her interview for *The Paris Review*, Ferrante emphasizes that all her novels, though written in the first person, are imagined in the third as women who are leaving written testimony of their lives. She remarks that in moments of crisis, women often "try to calm themselves by writing" and she adapts this assumption in protagonists who write in order to understand themselves. Ferrante insists that by approaching her protagonists in this way, she herself can believe in her character. "It's principally the truth of her writing that engages me," she says (see *Frantumaglia*, 285).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>19</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Vintage Classics, 1990), 4.825-7.

conscious surveillance on themselves,” a self-criticism in which “the female body has learned the need to watch over itself, to take care of its own expansion, its own vigor.”<sup>20</sup> Rather than being policed by her husband, society, or parents, Olga is her own supervisor, a modern woman who is only beholden to herself and therefore constantly exercising a self-criticism that is by turns helpful and damning.

This type of self-surveillance has been one of the tools Olga has employed to fashion a life for herself with Mario and their children. By keeping any untoward urges or inclinations in check, and eliminating any hints of hysteria or vulgarity, Olga has been able to project and actualize the image of womanhood that she desires. This is part of the calculation that informs her focus on the household responsibilities in Mario’s absence, and it recalls not only *Karenina* and *Dido*, but *Emma Bovary* and *Medea* as well. Ferrante seems to want to deliver her protagonist from this literary precedent in which self-surveillance comes too late, or only serves to facilitate tragedy by making suicide the logical conclusion. Olga is close to this the night she sits with the pills and cognac, wallowing in disgust for the attraction she believed was love and her own inadequacy on these terms. Likewise, *Dido*’s grief at the departure of *Aeneas* ravages her mind to the point where she sees no recourse except to die as she “deserves.”<sup>21</sup>

Virgil’s martyr is, of course, not only a wife and a queen, but also in the process of building a city. When *Aeneas* first arrives in Carthage, he is amazed by the construction—workers laying courses for walls, rolling stones for citadels, dredging harbors, quarrying pillars for a theatre. “How fortunate these are / Whose city walls are rising here and now!” he cries out.<sup>22</sup> He enters a temple planned for Juno, the god of marriage and childbirth, and after

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<sup>20</sup> Elena Ferrante, *Frantumaglia: A Writer’s Journey*, trans. Ann Goldstein (New York: Europa Editions, 2016), 103-4.

<sup>21</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid* 4.758.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.595-6.

marveling at the craftsmanship and the reliefs depicting the Trojan War, sees Dido for the first time, striding among her people, encouraging them in their work. Ferrante notes that in Virgil's use, the city of Carthage is not just a background but a potential: "material that is being worked, stone exploded at times by the internal moments of the two characters."<sup>23</sup> As the passion compounds between Dido and Aeneas, the city reacts, construction pauses, waiting to see what kind of city it will become—one ruled by a joyful marriage or mired in the rage of abandonment. Ferrante suggests that the stones themselves feel, and will respond to the actions of the humans, as though both are characters. Indeed, as Dido falls upon the sword, fires erupt: "As though all Carthage or old Tyre fell / To storming enemies, and, out of hand, / Flames billowed on the roofs of men and gods."<sup>24</sup> With her final breath, Dido curses Aeneas, and his future Rome, calling for eternal enmity between the two cities. "No love, / No pact must be between our peoples."<sup>25</sup> The city constructed on the premise of marriage and childbirth, founded by a woman who secured the land through her facility with needle and thread, and built as a living repudiation to the murderous city of Dido's past, is cursed and burns.

Olga too has attempted to build a city dedicated to marriage and childrearing that repudiates a past of violence. This is her home, the small apartment she shares with Mario, where she believed they were joined in a common vision. When Mario leaves, when some god whispers in his dreams that he is made for other shores, Olga's construction pauses. The house becomes chaotic, Olga forgets the children at school, the phone stops working, jewelry goes missing, and ants invade. She installs a reinforced door, suspicious of everyone. In both cases—Dido's and Olga's—the feminine city does not entirely know how to proceed. The creation made from

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<sup>23</sup> Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, 149.

<sup>24</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid* 4.927-9.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 867-8.

objects of domesticity erodes with the introduction of hostility, betrayal, abandonment—those things antithetical to stereotypical female instinct. Yet Ferrante insists that Olga is not necessarily condemned to Dido’s fate and could transcend both the trappings of the idealized home and the constricting animosity, anxiety, and doubt she encounters in its destabilization. As the phone, door, and can of insecticides morph from innocuous, useful objects of domesticity into agents of overwhelming psychological uncertainty, Olga’s literary and cultural precedents are laid bare and Ferrante maneuvers her into a scenario in which she will either change and prevail or hold fast and be destroyed.

As in many of her works, Ferrante appears to be searching in *The Days of Abandonment* for a new kind of language, one that both engages the intensity of desertion and offers a literary alternative to the tradition of tragedy. To understand the severity of Olga’s situation, Ferrante seems to say, we do not necessarily have to watch her annihilate herself. To get to this point, Ferrante unhinges Olga’s language to break her out of the literary trajectory yawning before her. At first Olga is unable to control the way that she speaks (she spews vulgarities), then she stops recognizing the words that appear in her own notebook. As the events of Saturday the 4th unravel, her language becomes less and less reliable as the means of understanding and decisive action. It is as though Ferrante wants to establish, or even quote the language that typically surrounds a character in Olga’s position, and then shake Olga away from its logical conclusion. In a 2003 essay, Ferrante writes about “*frantumaglia*,” a jumbled state of mind in which the logic of language breaks down.<sup>26</sup> Many of Ferrante’s protagonists contend with this lapse in one way

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<sup>26</sup> In a written letter to Sandra Ozzola in 2003, Ferrante reports that she picked this term up from her mother who used it to indicate a certain state of mind in which emotion and intellect appear to conspire against language. Ferrante admits to suffering a similar loss of stability herself, and describes it vividly (see *Frantumaglia*, 99-100). In her *Paris Review* interview, Ferrante maintains that for her writing is an act of conveying this state of mind into language, and thereby funneling all the relevant tradition and experience into a “concretely narratable object” (see *Frantumaglia*, 288).

or another, and here Olga's ability to express herself to herself, and to comprehend the world through language, deteriorates. She finds that she is talking to herself and carrying on conversations with the *poverella*. Desperate, she turns to objects to keep herself planted in the realm of logic. "I had to anchor myself to things," she insists, "accept their solidity, believe in their permanence."<sup>27</sup>

Here is some articulation of the motivations behind Olga's actions throughout the novel. If she proves incapable, careless, irresponsible with physical things in the absence of Mario, Olga will not be able to exonerate herself from her own suspicion that she is indeed a failed woman and does not deserve Mario or the life she thought they were building together. While Olga's self-denigration stands to dissolve her into confusion in which she cannot understand what has happened, the physical objects that substantiate the domestic tasks appear to offer her an alternative by which she can remain attached. Insofar as a key, a hammer, and a thermometer are simple objects with straightforward, unambiguous uses, they provide Olga a potential substitute for the slippery language she has not been able to corral into an adequate explanation of her situation. And yet she cannot read the thermometer and does not know how to get the phone to work to call the doctor for her sick son. Olga has always feared that she would "grow up and become like the *poverella*," and believes that as long as she can say to herself that she is adequately resisting the humiliation of her abandonment, *and believe it*, she will not succumb to this fate. Before the pivotal Saturday, objects had offered her concrete evidence of this competence, and as her words slip away from her and she becomes increasingly distracted, she turns to them again. "I was reacting well," she insists just before she tries to turn the key in the

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<sup>27</sup> Ferrante, *Days of Abandonment*, 114. For an extended discussion of how *frantumaglia* determines the plot of *The Days of Abandonment*, see Victor Xavier Zarour Zarzar, "The Grammar of Abandonment in *I giorni dell'abbandono*," *MLN* 135, no. 1 (2020): 327-344. doi:10.1353/mln.2020.0004.

door, “very well, I was holding tight around me the parts of my life, compliments, Olga, in spite of everything I wasn’t leaving myself.”<sup>28</sup>

Yet notwithstanding her best efforts, the key will not turn in the lock. Desperate, Olga goes to the storage closet and fetches the hammer to pound out the door. Again she fails, and starts inventing new uses for these things. She hands the hammer to Ilaria and tells her to pound on the floor, without stopping, until Carrano comes to check on them. She attaches a paperclip to her arm so that the pain will recall her to herself. She ties a crowbar to a piece of string and swings it around outside below her balcony until it smashes through Carrano’s window. When the paper clip stops working, she hands a paper cutter to Ilaria with instructions to prick her whenever she seems too distracted, too detached. Eventually all she can think to do with the stubborn key at the door is to put it in her mouth, to attempt turning it with her entire body. In the context of Olga’s situation—both physical and mental—her reasoning for this behavior makes some sense: if she can attract Carrano’s attention, he might be able to help; if she keeps floating away from her immediate surroundings, pain in her body might keep her present; if turning the key with her hand will not work, maybe her mouth will be better. However, these are not how these objects are intended to be used, and when Olga can do nothing besides frantically distort their function, we understand that her belief in the physical control of the house has failed to protect her from the detachment she has so feared. It is the failure of objects in Olga’s hands to mean what they have meant before—the hammer no longer means nail-driver, the paper cutter no longer cuts paper, and the reinforced door no longer protects Olga from thieves but endangers her entire family—that reveals the precarious teetering of Olga’s mind.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 116.

At this point, the physical objects of the novel have shifted the interpretation of Olga's psychological state. Initially the outlet by which Ferrante expresses Olga's tenuous reaction to the guilt and turbulence surrounding Mario's departure, objects have now become the means of destabilizing her conception of how domestic precedent might serve her, and draw into question her grasp on what is real and what is not. Furthermore, Olga's frustrated, ineffective, and perhaps even detrimental relationship with things begins to evoke suspicion about herself. Along with the hissing phone and the stubborn lock, the dented insecticide can calls her actions into question. Did she spray so much insecticide that she poisoned her whole household? "What was I? A woman worn out by four months of tension and grief; not, surely, a witch who, out of desperation, secretes a poison that can give a fever to her male child, kill a domestic animal, put a telephone out of order, ruin the mechanism of a reinforced door lock."<sup>29</sup> These things undermine Olga's sense of purpose and her certainty about how to avert the disaster she feels is close at hand. But they also raise a troubling question that she cannot quite bare to look at directly: Is all her bumbling incompetence evidence of her unworthiness, or has it been, to some subconscious extent, deliberate? Did she actually intend to ruin the phone? Has she intentionally failed to use her key correctly? Did she mean to feed her husband glass and seal herself and her children into their poison-coated apartment?

When Olga asks this question, it is still framed in terms of some fundamental shortcoming—is she simply exhausted or a witch who unintentionally secretes toxin? Yet the interactions Olga has with objects that consistently morph into dangerous scenarios pushes the question beyond accident and toward intent. Olga has, after all, been an extraordinarily competent woman her whole life, fashioning a functional identity from the raw materials of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 118.

domesticity. She knows how to use things, and that is where the danger lies. Through Olga's dealings with objects, Ferrante can suggest malicious possibilities about Olga that might otherwise seem overblown. Stating directly that Olga contemplates suicide or would like to kill Mario would flatten this character, and is not actually in keeping with the person Olga seems to be. Olga does not think these things—she is the kind of person who avoids such admissions and convinces herself otherwise. By explicitly rolling such intentions into Olga's internal discourse, Ferrante would surrender this character to aesthetically trite formulations, and a literature of hysterical women that she wants to avoid. Yet such possibilities *are* a part of Olga's situation, and through objects Ferrante secures a manner of obliquely incorporating them. Ferrante leaves intention ambiguous, which in turn expands the scope of what Olga may hope to accomplish and makes her simultaneously guilty and innocent.

To some degree, Ferrante's depiction of Olga's bewildered encounters with objects and the unconscious desire these things suggest achieves with objects a similar effect as the *frantumaglia* does with language. The physical world becomes both jumbled and threatening, something Olga may or may not use correctly according to reasons she may or may not understand.<sup>30</sup> As such, Ferrante succeeds in troubling the precedent of a woman destroyed linguistically, physically, and psychologically to the point where the path toward ruin and salvation seem equally possible. As the Saturday wears on, the responsibility for delivering the family, a responsibility that should be Olga's, falls to her daughter, Ilaria. Again, Ferrante inverts

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<sup>30</sup> A similar moment transpires in *My Brilliant Friend* when the boundaries of the world begin to dissolve around Lila. "It seemed to her that everyone was shouting too loudly and moving too quickly. This sensation was accompanied by nausea, and she had had the impression that something absolutely material, which had been present around her and around everyone and everything forever, but imperceptible, was breaking down the outlines of persons and things and revealing itself" (89-90).

the tradition in which Karenina and Bovary abandon their children, and enacts a kind of restructuring through the relationship between mother and daughter.

Ilaria pricks her mother three times with the papercutter. The first instance occurs while Olga is lost in contempt for Carrano who does not answer her cries for help but did accept the chance for sex the previous evening; the second while she is recalling her inability to use a key in the door of a cabin where she and Mario spent a weekend with Carla who, at the time, criticized Olga for being too involved with the children and not prioritizing her own intellectual work; and finally as Olga is fumbling with the key at her own door, believing that perhaps Mario's departure has robbed her of the physical ability to correctly use such an object. Each of these are precise iterations of the confinement that Olga is desperately trying to escape. Male sexual demands, domestic interference with intellectual and professional ambition, and the lack of practical acumen that would allow Olga to escape her own house and properly care for her children—Ilaria's prick pulls Olga out of each and anchors her in her own specificity. In doing so, Ferrante secures for Olga the salvation that was not available to Karenina and Bovary, not at the hands of the man who has abandoned her or even through herself, but by the insistence of her daughter. Olga seeks to arrest the pattern of destroyed women that is passed from generation to generation, that haunted her own childhood and determined the great works of literature. Ilaria's handling of the object, though violent and contrary to the intended use of a papercutter, is at last effective: it keeps Olga attached.

As a result, Olga does eventually find her way out of her apartment and establishes an independent life. Only after Ilaria has returned her mother forcefully to the present can Olga admit to herself that she no longer loves Mario, inverting the sentence that calmed her down after

her embarrassing sexual encounter with Carrano and the arrival of the *poverella*. After Ilaria makes the cut above Olga's knee, Olga locks the children in their room and goes to the study where Otto, the family dog, is dying. At the moment when Otto expires, the confusion that has plagued Olga's language and actions also evaporates. She realizes "that Mario had become again the good man he had perhaps always been, I no longer loved him."<sup>31</sup> This is the fundamental move that she has been unable to make for months: to forgive Mario and resolve within herself a new truth. Only then does Gianni revive, Carrano ring the bell, and the key turn in the door's lock. Once again things function as they should.

What is it about Otto's passing that allows Olga to finally utter these words? Or rather, why is it that the dog is the object around which Olga's realizations cohere? To some extent the connection is obvious: Otto was, essentially, Mario's dog, a gift to the children that Mario cared for and that viewed Mario as his master. In a sense, Otto is Mario's property, the embodiment of this man's lapsed interest in his family. When the dog dies, so does Mario's claim on the family. But perhaps there is something more. First, there is always a question of poison surrounding Otto—there is a rumor that someone, perhaps even Carrano, leaves strychnine-soaked biscuits in the park. That someone might kill Otto is a looming threat and after Olga has regained some control, she cannot shake a tormenting sense of guilt that she was responsible for the animal's death. Perhaps she was too careless with the insecticides, spraying them all over the house. She does, after all, find the can dented by Otto's teeth and the little spray cap missing. In this way the dog's existence becomes entwined with the can of insecticides. Then later, Olga comes home one day to find the children playing "dog"—Ilaria has the collar around her neck and Gianni is pulling her on the leash, threatening her and demanding obedience. Olga confiscates the collar

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<sup>31</sup> Ferrante, *Days of Abandonment*, 146.

and locks herself in the bathroom where, before she can stop herself, she slips it around her own neck. “When I realized what I was doing I began to cry and threw it all in the garbage.”<sup>32</sup>

On the one hand we could read this as further commentary on the lingering idea of domestic stability that Mario afforded. But the association between the dog and the can of insecticides is perhaps useful for complicating the merely symbolic. Realizing her responsibility for Otto’s wellbeing was the very first moment Olga faced Mario’s departure as a new fact of her life. It marked the beginning of her campaign to perform the domestic duties capably in order to survive her ordeal and perhaps even entice Mario to return. On the morning of her tortured Saturday, the last time Olga leaves her apartment before being locked inside, she takes Otto to the park. A few hours later, she finds the dog ill in Mario’s study, filling the room with a terrible stench. Immediately Olga is disgusted that all of Mario’s things are still here, and humiliated, “even more humiliated than I had felt in all these months” that after taking care of Otto all this time, the dog would, in his sickness, still retreat to the room that most fully retained the traces of Mario.<sup>33</sup>

Hours later, Olga discovers the can of insecticides next to the bookcase, dented by Otto’s teeth. At this point she has become significantly disoriented. As she picks up the can, she hears a voice saying, “At times the solidity of things is entrusted to irritating elements that appear to disrupt their cohesion.”<sup>34</sup> Olga looks up from the can to see the *poverella* sitting at her desk, a gruesome image of herself who, after uttering these words, goes back to writing in Olga’s notebook. This is a baffling sentence that could mean in multiple directions. Olga has just considered that the ants, which have returned and are crawling along the base of the bookshelf,

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 126.

are in fact not enemies, but a force holding the house together—an irritating but important element. Perhaps this peculiar formulation suggests the first counter to Olga’s presumption that her salvation lies in her ability to perform her domestic responsibilities, like keeping the apartment free of ants and taking out the dog. Maybe the very thing that *appears* to disrupt, or that Olga *believes* to be unwanted, is what will offer her cohesion. Olga has never considered getting rid of the dog; she unquestioningly took up its care in Mario’s absence. Likewise, she always presumed that her affection for Mario was warranted, and in fact that their union was the only thing between her and disgrace. This belief has been embodied in her domestic fealty and to abandon this notion, Olga is sure, is to resign herself to the life of the *poverella*. And yet the *poverella*’s warning seems to suggest otherwise: if Olga could accept the irritating elements of her separation—namely, that she has been wrong to believe she needed Mario and is thereby largely mistaken about her identity and the tremendous effort she has made to maintain it—she might find real solidity.

Olga peers over the *poverella*’s shoulder, and recognizes the handwriting as her own. She feels the weight of the can in her hand and wonders if maybe she had been spraying the insecticide all night, and perhaps that was why Gianni and the dog were ill. “Or maybe not. My opaque sides were inventing culpability that Olga did not have. Painting me careless, irresponsible, incompetent, leading me to a self-denigration that would later confuse the real situation and keep me from marking its margins, establish what was, what was not.”<sup>35</sup> This is the first time Olga catches a glimpse of what she is doing to herself. Over and again, Olga blames herself and invents fault that she can only answer with domestic competence. Yet at this moment, she sees past herself, almost as if she’s been let in on a secret. Otto and the insecticides

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 127.

frame her encounter with such a moment. In the dog's last moment, Olga's proximity to "real death . . . unexpectedly made me ashamed of my grief of the previous months, of that day with its overtones of unreality. . . . How could I have let myself go like that?"<sup>36</sup> There is a sense of calm returning here alongside the perspective that has been thus far eluding Olga.

As Otto dies, Olga clears herself of any claim to or involvement in male desire and romantic entanglement. These aspects continue to swirl around Olga as she puts her life back together and reclaims her sense of womanhood. The object of the dog becomes inseparable from notions of poison, culpability, and obligation, and it continues to mediate Olga's interaction with men and her past. Unable to shake her sense of guilt about Otto's death, Olga visits a veterinarian who assures her that it was likely strychnine, not insecticide, that caused such a death. "You have no responsibility other than that of being a very sensitive woman," the vet tells her, to which Olga responds, "Excess of sensitivity can also be a fault."<sup>37</sup> Still harsh with herself though also more realistically wary, Olga tries to push past this man who uses a patronizing tone to flatter Olga, and she is compelled to eventually rebuff him at a dinner party. Again the dynamic between responsibility and desire is linked to the things Olga has been handling, and the man's advances come with an unabashed sexual condescension that Olga now recognizes as noxious.

But the image of the dog keeps recurring. That evening Carrano knocks on Olga's door. It is the first time she's seen him since he took Otto's dead body away from her house and buried it. Olga is hesitant but welcomes him inside. In the living room he picks up the dented can of insecticides and asks why she has not thrown it away. Olga tells him the vet's diagnosis of strychnine, suggesting that it was Carrano who killed Otto. He becomes flustered, insists that he

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

was only trying to warn them about the poisoned dog biscuits, and calls Mario arrogant. Olga brushes him off, saying that Mario “has the flaws of us all . . . a man like so many others,” and admits that she did hardly anything more noble when she came to Carrano’s apartment that Friday evening.<sup>38</sup> Their sexual encounter meant nothing to her, she says bluntly. Carrano is stricken. He admits that their evening together was very important to him, and when Olga unsympathetically cuts him off, he murmurs, “You are no different from your husband.”<sup>39</sup> Then he makes to leave and hands the insecticide can back to Olga before walking out, closing the door gently behind him (unlike Mario who was always slamming it). For days the conversation irritates Olga, not only Carrano’s accusation that she is like Mario but the ways these men—Carrano and the vet—have described her husband. Was he really an aggressive opportunist? Meanwhile she keeps hearing the sounds of the dog licking water from his bowl as she tries to sort through the answers.

It is not until Olga’s friend invites her to a musical performance that she sees her neighbor in a different light—he is the cellist and delivers a remarkable performance, full of harmonies and exalted feeling. Olga is taken aback and at the end feels as though “the shade of Otto had joyously crossed the scene like a dark vein through bright, living flesh.”<sup>40</sup> On the way home Olga’s friend tells her the vet has been asking after her, using the dog as an excuse. Olga does not go back to the vet, in part because the notion of a rash sexual encounter repels her, but also because “I no longer wanted to know if it was strychnine or something else that had killed Otto. The dog had fallen through a hole in the net of events. We leave so many of them,

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

lacerations of negligence, when we put together cause and effect. The essential thing was that the string, the weave that now supported me, should hold.”<sup>41</sup>

During this time Olga takes a job at a travel agency and one day Mario and Carla walk in. Olga confronts them, coldly but with precise control (unlike their previous encounter over the earrings). She tells Mario that Otto died, that he was poisoned, and when a startled Mario asks who was responsible, she calmly tells him that he was. “I discovered that you’re a rude man. People respond to rudeness with spite. . . . Or maybe there was only the need for a scapegoat. And since I wasn’t going to be, it was up to Otto.”<sup>42</sup> A few days later Mario comes to the house to get a few things, and negotiate the children’s care. Another icy exchange transpires in which Olga again suggests that Mario is not as innocent as he would like to believe. Now Ferrante puts the words of Karenina and Dido into his mouth: “What I am, what I’m not, how do I know” and then he wearily points at Otto’s bowl. “‘I’d like to get the children another dog.’ I shook my head, Otto moved through the house, I heard the light clicking sound of his nails on the floor. I joined my hands and rubbed them slowly against one another, to eradicate the dampness of bad feeling from the palms. ‘I’m not capable of replacements.’”<sup>43</sup>

Through the family dog, Ferrante has achieved a transformation of the language and the fate available to Olga. Initially the embodiment of domestic responsibility that Olga believed would be the measure of her salvation, Otto becomes suffused with the aura of decay. The things that Olga thought must be attended to and maintained proved an insufficient bulwark against the psychological void she was facing, becoming instead detrimental. Olga’s domestic eagerness to prove her desirability and apologize for her own shortcomings was the equivalent of spraying her

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 183.

entire house with poison. She goes after the ants only to realize that the solidity of things is often entrusted to irritations that only *appear* to threaten cohesion. That Mario has acted out an essentially base sexual urge is an irritating idea, in part because it undermines Olga's fantasy of an impervious marriage. When Olga acknowledges this dynamic rather than trying to bury it beneath the assumption of all responsibility, she discovers that she is not, in fact, at fault. For months, Olga attempts to eradicate the disruption of Mario's absence, but in doing so mistakes the true aspects of her own wellbeing.

Otto becomes the scapegoat, and Olga is left to disentangle what is poisonous and what is not. Whether he died from strychnine or insecticide is an open question. If there were poisoned dog biscuits in the park, it seems that this was a consequence of Mario's abrasiveness, and the dog's death is therefore his fault. Alternatively, if it was the insecticide, then the death is on Olga's hands, though perhaps this is an achievement rather than a failing—the dog's passing does, after all, make it possible for Olga to admit she no longer loves her husband. In any case, both the dented can of insecticides and the image of the dog continue to determine the events of the novel: the vet's solicitations, Carrano's accusations and musical performance, Mario's reckoning, and Olga's triumphant control. In each of these scenes the ghost of Otto evokes guilt and wariness, danger and clarity. Ferrante essentially trades the specter of the *poverella* for the clicking nails of the dog, the inevitable destruction of a woman for the sacrifice of an idealized marriage. Both Olga and Mario are to blame, but only Olga can see the full extent of this joint culpability, leaving Mario unwittingly muttering the words of the destroyed women.

The novel ends on a scene with Carrano. Olga comes home to discover the small white nozzle of the insecticide can on her doorstep. Carrano has been leaving her small objects she misplaces—a button, hairclip—and she understands that this is the final gift. For the first time

since that Friday evening, she goes to his apartment and asks him kindly about the nozzle. He is evasive, indicating that he found it in the trunk of his car and it must have been in Otto's fur or mouth. Once again Olga sees things a little more clearly:

I thought with gratitude that in those months, discreetly he had worked to sew up around me a world that could be trusted. He had now arrived at his kindest act. He wanted me to understand that I no longer had to be frightened, that every moment could be narrated with all its reasons good and bad, that, in short, it was time to return to the solidity of the links that bind together spaces and times. With that gift he was trying to exonerate himself, he was exonerating me, he was attributing the death of Otto to the chance of the games of a dog at night.<sup>44</sup>

In this moment Olga decides to go along with him. She doubts the nozzle is really the one from her can, she is not about to be fooled so easily, but admires the intention behind Carrano's act. "He was trying to communicate silently that, through his mysterious gift, he knew how to make meaning stronger, to invent a feeling of fullness and joy."<sup>45</sup> These of course are the feelings that Olga desired in her union with Mario, the very opposite of the despair that detaches and ruins abandoned women. She interprets Carrano's offering through the object that has itself shifted and travelled along in the novel. Once the means of spraying insecticides, the white nozzle is the last remnant of Otto and the uneasy truth of responsibility in the dissolution of Olga's marriage. It suggests Olga's disillusionment as well as her desire for stability. Through the object, Ferrante

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 188.

articulates these varied and even contradictory ideas at once, ultimately providing Olga a path toward something other than destruction, while abandoning Mario to his fate.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Bare Bones: The Object and Identity in Karl Ove Knausgaard's "Seasons Quartet"

In the final volume of Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle*, he confronts the social consequences of his writing. Over the course of the six-volume novel, Knausgaard details everything he can about himself, from his teenage shame and family discomfort to the kinds of cigarettes he smokes. "I imagined I was going to write exactly what I thought and believed and felt," he confesses toward the end of Book Six, "in other words to be honest."<sup>1</sup> In every sentence he "tried to transcend the social world by conveying the innermost thoughts and innermost feelings of my most private self, my own internal life, but also by describing the private sphere of my family as it exists behind the façade all families set up against the social world."<sup>2</sup> And yet as he comes to the end of this project, he realizes that the forces of the social realm are "*absolutely* impossible to break away from" and that the "truth of the I [has] turned out to be so incompatible with the truth of the we, or this is how it is meant to be, that it foundered after only a few short sentences."<sup>3</sup>

In other words, Knausgaard arrives at the end of his monumental and widely celebrated book only to admit that everything around him and even his own self are linguistically bound, and therefore fundamentally social. Not only is it impossible to escape the social realm in this writing, but the attempt to do so has been both a failure and destructive. In the course of Book Six, the reader learns that many people in Knausgaard's life have become furious with him for publishing these books, accusing him of immorality and causing reckless pain. His uncle tries to sue him, and Knausgaard's wife, Linda, has a breakdown and lands in the hospital, presumably

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle: Book Six*, trans. Don Bartlett and Martin Aitken (New York: Archipelago Press, 2018), 825.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 824.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 825.

because of the pressure these books have put on her. “This novel has hurt everyone around me,” Knausgaard writes, “it has hurt me, and in a few years, when they are old enough to read it, it will hurt my children.”<sup>4</sup> He deems the novel a failed experiment because he has “never even been close to saying what I really mean and describing what I have actually seen” and insists that if it has any value, it is in the demonstration of how “the force of the social dimension is visible and also the way it regulates and controls individuals.”<sup>5</sup> Knausgaard has achieved the opposite of what he set out to do, and that the “experiment” faltered seems to some extent inevitable, insofar as writing is always a social act. Apparently accepting both the limitations of the form and the responsibility for the pain he has caused with this book, Knausgaard concludes *My Struggle* with the words, “I am no longer a writer.”<sup>6</sup>

And yet a few years later a new series appeared, written again in Knausgaard’s signature confessional tone, but this time addressed to his unborn daughter, diluting the binary of the “I” positioned against the “we” in *My Struggle* with the intimacy of “you.” The “Seasons Quartet,” as the four books have come to be known, recount about two years in Knausgaard’s life after the success of *My Struggle* when his fourth child, Anne, was born. At times diary, epistolary, confession, autobiography, essay, and fiction, they follow no set pattern and defy easy categorization. The first two books, *Autumn* and *Winter*, are structured as three letters addressed to Anne (unborn until halfway through *Winter*) interspersed with a series of short essays charting each month of the season. *Spring* is a memoir-like telling of a single day shortly after Anne was born that ranges back to the previous summer when she was conceived and Linda was once again

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 1007.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 1152.

hospitalized. *Summer* combines short essays with diary entries made during the summer two years after Anne's birth.

But at the heart of these four books are meditations on commonplace objects. Brief essays on rubber boots, bottles, daguerreotypes, tin cans, telephones, Thermoses, chairs, pipes, Q-tips, and many other everyday objects substantiate the series, tying together the otherwise disparate modes of writing. Knausgaard's concern is still himself, and his focus on these objects appears to be a new approach to the same problem of *My Struggle*. Rather than meticulously cataloging every thought, belief, and feeling, here Knausgaard describes the small objects of the world in elemental detail, ostensibly explaining them to a child who has no knowledge of their material or cultural significance. The result is another attempt to understand his life outside the pre-established linguistic apparatus of memoir.

As Knausgaard details objects in the plainest terms, he essentially denudes them of any lyrical connotation, as though doing so might reveal something that he has not yet been able to articulate or explain. Objects allow him to exercise his powers of observation and record his subjective experience of the world without depositing subjectivity in anecdote, confession, or character description, all of which, he has found, hurt or offend. Knausgaard insists that his private self is always in some conflict with his socially-determined self, and he turns to objects as a way to *sound* completely neutral about his interior investigations, even if total neutrality is only an ideal (as he discovered in *My Struggle*). He therefore frames his relations with, or his observations of objects (insentient, non-social) as his most authentic self-expression. Rather than define himself in relation to the people around him, sacrificing their privacy to the project of his self-revelation, in these four books Knausgaard reveals his personality via his contact with the

less vulnerable (and less litigious) inanimate realm: he uses the generic quality of objects to emphasize what is particular about his gaze.

While Elena Ferrante draws on a wide literary tradition to make objects important to her characters, Knausgaard finds objects most useful when they are stripped down. In Ferrante's novels, she wields the associations that amass around objects to depict Olga's control over her own identity. In *The Days of Abandonment* objects serve as both an anchor in reality and a destabilizing force: they compel Olga to confront her preconceptions about her situation and to overcome her own sense of groundlessness. Through Olga's encounters with things and her attempts to manipulate them, Ferrante expresses emotion and revises claims to power within relationships. Knausgaard, on the other hand, takes nearly the opposite approach. Devoid of implication or sentimentality, Knausgaard's objects serve as a kind of armor against the more volatile social world, and he uses them to build a fort of neutrality, so to speak, one in which his daughter, the only one who has not been injured by the inconsiderate confessions of *My Struggle*, can hear his voice without being wounded or exposed by it. By providing the unadorned details of objects, Knausgaard attempts to pass some true part of himself along to his daughter not through association, but in a kind of savage rawness. In studying simple things and imagining how his daughter may come to know them, Knausgaard creates a venue of intimacy. He attempts to exit the solipsism of *My Struggle* and use his observations to field a more inclusive work that explores the demands of fatherhood without betraying what he believes is essential to himself.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In an essay for *The New York Review of Books* titled "I, Knausgaard," Daniel Mendelsohn suggests that this is ultimately the failure of *My Struggle*: that "Knausgaard's creation, for all its vastness and despite its serious intellectual aims and attainments, reduces the entire world to the size of the author." In the "Seasons Quartet," Knausgaard attempts to expand his minute representations to include a shared reality.

Not until the third book in the series, *Spring*, do we learn the details of Linda's struggle with depression. She and Knausgaard have been together for more than a decade, and have three children, each two years apart. They live a comfortable suburban life in a small town in the south of Sweden. The book takes place on a spring day in 2014, a few months after Anne is born. It is the day of the Walpurgis festival, and that night there will be a large bonfire the whole family will attend. Except for Linda, who is in the hospital. During the day Knausgaard takes Anne to visit her mother, and in the course of the journey tells us (and, in a way, his daughter) about the previous summer. We learn how Anne was conceived at a high mark in an otherwise grim time when Linda's depression had become overwhelming. To some extent, she and Knausgaard believed having another child would help. But about a month into the pregnancy, Linda sinks so far into despair that she can hardly leave her bed. Knausgaard does the chores and manages the children, doing what he can to protect them from the difficult truth. One day Linda asks, begs, for her husband's help, but Knausgaard insists that the darkness is something she must confront herself. He can support her, he says, but he cannot do things for her because this only encourages the disease. The next morning he goes into their bedroom and cannot wake her. He knows she uses sleeping pills and tells himself she is only sleeping deeply. But the hours slip by and still he cannot rouse her. He calls for an ambulance and finds in the bathroom she has taken all her pills.

This occurs at the end of the summer, just before Knausgaard begins writing the first two books in the series. Yet in those works, he never discusses any of this turmoil, and hardly mentions Linda. We only really see her in relief—a natural, necessary extension of the daughter who is the addressee of the writing. There is no overt consideration of depression or suicide, and Knausgaard never remarks on the dynamic between himself and his wife. Nor does he express any real concern for his daughter's existence, or suggest that it had ever been jeopardized.

Instead he writes short essays on blood, twilight, the migration of birds, fingers, teeth, and picture frames. Typically, he starts with an elemental description, which then unspools some memory, admission, or observation. The pieces seem to have no real point, and Knausgaard hardly offers an opinion about the litany of domestic responsibilities that shape his days. The closest he comes to discussing the anxieties that surround his family are broad, nonspecific meditations on loneliness, forgiveness, pain, silence, and ambulances. Never does he connect these things explicitly to himself or to Linda, but simply prods them along as though merely pondering that they exist.

Yet there is a sense that something is lurking underneath. In the first “Letter to an Unborn Child” in *Autumn*, Knausgaard writes that he wants to show the world as it is to Anne, “Only by doing so will I myself be able to glimpse it.”<sup>8</sup> This still partakes of the solipsistic register of *My Struggle*, yet here Knausgaard is building into his quest for individuality a concern for another person, accepting, to some extent, the social character of his writing, as if he has learned his lesson.<sup>9</sup> Putting the world in direct relation to himself renders it somehow inchoate or false; only by arranging his observations for someone else can he see what he sees. “I want to show you the world as it is now,” Knausgaard writes: “the door, the floor, the water tap and the sink, the garden chair close to the wall beneath the kitchen window, the sun, the water, the trees. You will come to see it in your own way, you will experience things for yourself and live a life of your own, so of course it is primarily for my own sake that I am doing this: showing you the world, little one, makes my life worth living.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Ove Knausgaard, *Autumn*, trans. Ingvild Burkey (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 5.

<sup>9</sup> In her review of these books for *The Atlantic*, Ruth Franklin suggests that Knausgaard had been “spooked” by the response to *My Struggle*. She offers an insightful reading of the social demands Knausgaard attempts to juggle, and the self-diagnosed failure of his memoir.

<sup>10</sup> Knausgaard, *Autumn*, 6.

For readers acquainted with Knausgaard's work, this is familiar terrain. Shame, despair, and death are all thickly woven through the six volumes of *My Struggle*: a meticulous account of Linda's breakdown and Knausgaard's own guilt about his complicity in this fall substantiate the last two hundred pages of Book Six. But rather than describe his own anguish or painstakingly recount each conversation he has with Linda or his other children, Knausgaard turns immediately to the objects around him. One of the first essays in *Autumn* is titled "Plastic Bags" and Knausgaard muses on this item of consumer culture that, because it takes so long to decompose, is often found in the most unexpected places. On the day he is writing, he notices one flapping from the roof of their house, and a few days earlier he had come across a layer of shopping bags while digging in their garden. "The plastic bag has something inviolable about it," he writes, "it seems to exist in a place beyond everything else, including time and its inexorable modality."<sup>11</sup> He recalls that one of the most beautiful things he has ever seen was a plastic bag floating in a limpid, green sea about ten feet below the surface, absolutely motionless. He recalls that "it resembled nothing other than itself" and wonders why, when he saw the bag, he could not look away.<sup>12</sup> The plastic bag did not fill him with joy or contentment, but "it felt good to look at it, the way it feels good to read a poem that ends in an image of something concrete and seems to fasten on it, so that the inexhaustible within it can unfold calmly."<sup>13</sup>

In this preliminary example, Knausgaard uses the object to motion toward something essential yet inexplicable about himself. In describing the elemental simplicity of the plastic bag, which repels soil as well as water and ends up on rooftops, in the earth, and floating at sea, Knausgaard evokes his own eccentric relationship to the object. Somehow his rudimentary

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

knowledge moves him, he cannot look away. By describing what is apparent in the thing, he indicates something that arises within himself, something also inviolable yet less specific. There is still a focus on the self in this writing, but Knausgaard is using the commonplace object to mediate the interiority he would like to express.

In a following essay he turns to teeth, marveling first at how these “little enamelled [sic] stones” form in the soft mouths of his children and then fall out.<sup>14</sup> At first, losing a tooth is an event for a child, but then it becomes routine, a piece of the body discarded. One of Knausgaard’s children loses a tooth while eating an apple and hands it to her father. “It feels wrong to throw it away,” he writes. “The tooth is a part of her.”<sup>15</sup> But what is the alternative? Save it in a box as some token evidence of who she was? “In this tooth she will stay ten years old forever,” he sighs. The moment recalls Barthes’s decision to throw his old rib out his window to the dogs on the street. But whereas Barthes is keen to allow the lyrical potential of this disposal its full range (“as if I were romantically scattering my own ashes”), Knausgaard keeps emotion at arm’s length.<sup>16</sup> After noticing his daughter’s tooth will always indicate a little girl even as she grows into a woman, he opens the cupboard under the sink and drops it in the trash on top of a used coffee filter. The essay ends as Knausgaard places a crumpled muesli bag on top, “so that the tooth is no longer visible.”<sup>17</sup>

Here, Knausgaard refrains from sentimentalizing the object, as if to claim that emotion remains most intact when unarticulated. He shows a relationship between a person and the world around her, establishing a physical exchange in which what is a part of someone can be

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 61.

<sup>17</sup> Knausgaard, *Autumn*, 24.

transformed into a foreign object. Rather than pursue the associations of this conversion from animate to inanimate, he merely drops the tooth into the trash and covers it up. In stripping away the lyrical imagery of this moment, Knausgaard seems to be soliciting the object itself, rather than the writing he could surround it with, as though the raw materialism of a tooth might indicate childhood's ineffable poignancy more accurately than any outright phrasing.

This focus on physicality helps to elucidate a distinction between the interior and the exterior that Knausgaard wants to explore. Throughout these books, he is constantly grappling with the *exchange* that occurs between his own private experience and his activity in the world. In Knausgaard's understanding, the self is arranged to navigate society and family, and this necessarily splits a person's identity in two: a private self that is authentic but inconsiderate, and a social self that is accommodating but slightly false. Knausgaard seeks to bring these two halves as close together as possible, and here uses objects as emblems of the interior/exterior compromise that he feels defines life. Plastic bags and teeth point toward this exchange, and by proceeding to focus on these and other objects rather than on the people around him, Knausgaard attempts to express the private without compromising privacy.

Early in *Autumn*, Knausgaard includes a short essay on picture frames. He describes the object that marks the edge of a picture but is not a part of the picture itself, and observes that a frame without a picture is empty. But *frame* can also be used figuratively to describe a boundary. "The frame limits a phenomenon, sharply demarcates an inside and an outside, and by isolating it, the phenomenon becomes clearly defined, that is it becomes something in itself. It gains an identity."<sup>18</sup> Quickly Knausgaard has moved from describing something simple to the fundamental concerns of the book while keeping what is personal at a remove. He goes on in a

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 45.

dry fashion: in nature there are no frames, and so the activity of framing is likely a distinctly human endeavor. Not only are we framed physically via houses and clothing, but also within ourselves through certain opinions, thoughts, experiences. These frames, both visible and invisible, make the world comprehensible to us, and determine behavior as well as desire. Since life is always changing, sometimes desire aligns with the frame, and sometimes it pushes beyond it. “Common to all these,” Knausgaard writes, “is the longing for authenticity, for the real, which is simply the place where one’s notions about reality and reality itself are one and the same thing. Or in other words, a life, an existence, a world unframed.”<sup>19</sup>

The frame, described in generalized language, edges toward a kind of allegory for the role that all these objects assume in Knausgaard’s series. The object appears in juxtaposition to experience and thereby emphasizes the distance between the interior and exterior. Knausgaard is attempting to signal that the navigation of this space is common to everyone, and an effort that his daughter will have to make herself. In refusing an entry of the “I” into the objects around him, Knausgaard at once leaves them associatively blank (his daughter can invest them with her own experiences, memories, and longings) while simultaneously marking them with his gaze. Whether he means to or not, Knausgaard coyly stamps these objects as his own property, while denying that he has done any such thing.

As he describes the objects around him and vaguely acknowledges his experience of them, Knausgaard finds that his reaction to objects like plastic bags and teeth indicate his own personality. He ponders how his grasp on the significance of objects has changed since he was a child, and by extension, how Anne’s own personality will be formed by the material around her

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 46.

as she grows older. At one point, while considering the sight of other people's fingers, Knausgaard suggests that the whole variety of entities that we encounter including "trees, tables, bicycles, houses, plains, lakes, cats, cups, telephones and electric torches . . . are also parts of our personality."<sup>20</sup> Yet a child's fascination with her own tooth fades as the object becomes familiar. There is an exchange here as well, not only in the way that an experience of the physical world governs a child's development, but also in the evolving conceptions and relationships that a person assumes as she ages.

Weighing his own personality as well as those of his children, Knausgaard constantly thinks through his role as a father. He marvels that his children's realities—their concerns, fears, desires, passions—are so different from his own, and he describes objects almost as props to illustrate the disparity and to recall his own childhood when he too had a relationship to the world that is utterly distinct from the one he has forty years later. He is interested in how the transition takes place, how conceptions of reality develop as people grow and their relationship to the exterior world changes. The objects of his home might mean one thing to Knausgaard and something else entirely to his children, and so he describes an object in its most basic simplicity to trace the discrepancy. In doing so, he seems to suggest that he might illuminate the unspoken dynamics that exist within the family. "The whole array of objects in a house," he writes in *Spring*, "all meaning deriving from the relations within a family, the significance that every person dwells within, all this is invisible, hidden not by the darkness but by the light of the undifferentiated."<sup>21</sup> When Knausgaard does differentiate, he aspires to articulate something about himself without overexposing its significance.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., *Spring*, 1-2.

This kind of impersonal writing in which objects are stripped of their lyrical association is epitomized in the essay on rubber boots about halfway through *Autumn*. Knausgaard catches sight of the boots in the hallway that, along with the other jackets and shirts hanging in the foyer so closely “resemble the bodies they sheathe” that at times he enters the hall and has the impression that “the entire family’s bodies are hanging on pegs and standing on the floor in the dark, like their negatives as it were. Then the thought may come to me of what life would be like had they died in an accident and all that was left were the spaces they once occupied.”<sup>22</sup> To some extent, this is the kind of clear-eyed confrontation with death that was so distinctive about *My Struggle* and brought Knausgaard unreserved critical acclaim.<sup>23</sup> But here he swerves away from himself; he does not entertain what his life would be like without his family, or how their deaths would emotionally affect him. Instead he recalls that his boots were his father’s, who is dead (as readers of *My Struggle* know well), and are one of only two items of his that Knausgaard has kept, the other being a pair of binoculars. Knausgaard suspects that of all the objects his father left behind, he kept just these two because they were neutral. He could never have retained his father’s lambskin jacket, he admits, whereas the rubber boots “are not in any comparable way an expression of individuality, but are more or less the same for everyone.”<sup>24</sup> He goes on to describe how useful these rubber boots are, their “thick, rather stiff rubber is shiny and smooth, so that water cannot cling to it,” and that they fit so snugly around the calf with a sealed interior; “that the boot is absolute proof against the weather can occasion great pleasure,” he chirps. “To be invulnerable, to be protected, to be a separate entity in the world. . . . Yes, oh yes, that is *precisely* wherein joy over the properties of the boots lies.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, *Autumn*, 91.

<sup>23</sup> See James Wood, “Total Recall: Karl Ove Knausgaard’s ‘My Struggle’,” *New Yorker*, August 6, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Knausgaard, *Autumn*, 92.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

This is a distinctly different register than *My Struggle* that almost viciously prioritizes the impersonal dullness of an object's usefulness over the personal associations, life stories, and sufferings that they potentially indicate. The final chapter of this study considers how W. G. Sebald uses objects throughout *Austerlitz* to do just the opposite, essentially courting the lyrical and mysterious properties of objects to draw out a complex and even impossible desire. But here, Knausgaard essentially refuses the psychology of his character (himself) by insisting on the material practicality of the boots. Sebald does not deny this aspect of objects, in fact using the extraordinarily practical rucksack as an identifier for Austerlitz, yet he also turns this object in multiple directions, revealing almost an entire psychological trajectory through it. Knausgaard, on the other hand, while writing a book ostensibly for his daughter, chooses to forgo his most intimate emotions that might be tied to the objects he confronts in the hallway and essentially denies association by insisting on functionality. What does he achieve by doing this? What image of himself does he preserve for his daughter, and how does this more accurately represent this man than a lyrical investigation? The essay is not without its tenderness, but Knausgaard offers the most unsentimental version of himself, a person absolved of worldly affectations. The absence of individuality here effectively goes past subjectivity and positions Knausgaard on an equal plane with all human beings, one in which there is no difference, no personal history, no judgment. In a sense, he has gone from one extreme to another: from indiscriminate personal reportage to the objective levelling of difference. What appears before us on the page is at once universally human and entirely anonymous.

Certainly, this approach hardly risks offense. And yet, is this the only advantage to such writing? If Knausgaard wants to express and preserve some piece of himself for his daughter, how does his emphasis of the raw materiality serve his purpose? In *Summer* he writes, "it struck

me that my inner being, the person I am to myself, has changed in recent years, and how often I get the feeling that I am no one, that I am merely a place which thoughts and feelings pass through.”<sup>26</sup> He compares himself with objects that “are just there, side by side, and the identity of the place they thereby constitute is as distinct and unique as it is accidental.”<sup>27</sup> Knausgaard’s experience of things appears to compel him to acknowledge how the self’s identity is at once a verified entity and a fiction. Because it has no physical reality, the self takes its cues, so to speak, from the objects around it and models itself in relation to these objects. Therefore, Knausgaard seems to ask, is it possible that by removing all the personal associations that make rubber boots more than a functional “sheathe” and aligning one’s own identity with the “thingness” of objects, does he represent his most authentic self?

And yet this appears to be something of a two-way street, for just as Knausgaard attempts to remove himself from the objects he describes, his personality nonetheless seeps in. “My identity, the person I am to myself,” he writes in *Spring*, “is woven into the world of things in such a way that it is impossible to say where one ends and the other begins.”<sup>28</sup> This becomes even more apparent as images of his father reappear in Knausgaard’s attempts to posit his own role as a parent. While he turns away from his relationship to his father in the description of the rubber boots, he returns to this man again and again as he describes objects in their elemental form. Knausgaard thoroughly analyzed his relationship with his father in *My Struggle* and makes no explicit indication that his interest in the “Seasons Quartet” lies in rehashing this dynamic, yet as he tries to catch a glimpse of the experience of his children and their relationship to objects, Knausgaard seems to necessarily evoke his own father and the image he had of him as a child.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., *Summer*, 81.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., *Spring*, 63.

Knausgaard still sees his father through the eyes of himself as a child, yet also understands him from an adult perspective. Through objects, Knausgaard attempts to show how these two images might coexist, and anticipates the same experience for his own children. Despite his reluctance to admit the lyrical quality of objects, Knausgaard finds that he cannot entirely escape the resonances that they retain.

For instance, *Summer* opens with a short essay on lawn sprinklers. Knausgaard describes his work with this unassuming tool and seems almost caught by surprise that he even owns a sprinkler, admitting that “of all the things I remember from summers when I was growing up, the lawn sprinkler is the most emblematic, it is the single object around which the greatest number of moods and events cluster in my memory and which evokes the most associations.”<sup>29</sup> He goes on to describe the summertime sight of the sprinklers in his childhood neighborhood, the sounds of the water falling, and how his father was in charge of his family’s sprinkler, running the hose up through the basement window, and the faint ache Knausgaard felt that the window couldn’t be properly shut while his father was watering.

That I myself am now master of a sprinkler and both turn it on and move it around unaided, in my own garden, ought therefore to mean something to me, if not a lot, at least a little, since the life which back then I only observed—the life of grown men and women—has now become mine, something I no longer regard from the outside but fill from within. It doesn’t, I take no particular joy in turning on the sprinkler, no more than I find pleasure in buttering a slice of bread or taking off my shoes as I enter the house. Now it is the world of the child that I observe from

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., *Summer*, 3.

the outside, and what more fitting image for this asymmetry in life could there be than the basement window, which is at once high up beneath the ceiling and low down near the ground?<sup>30</sup>

Knausgaard does not attempt to deny the sprinkler its associations here, nor does he overly exalt his experience with this object. In fact, what the associations are do not seem to matter as much as the way in which Knausgaard's encounter with the object reveals to him a shift from exterior to interior, from being a child imagining the life of adults to being an adult imaging the experience of a child. This change has occurred slowly, imperceptibly, yet the object reveals to Knausgaard how absolutely he has transformed. When his daughter is old enough to read this book, she too will have undergone some shift from the child who watched her father water the garden to an adult on her own terms.

A similar episode occurs later in the same book when Knausgaard recalls a small boat that his father owned. He begins with a dry consideration of how the form of an object is dictated by its use and that boats, like spectacles and bicycles, have been perfected in their form over time. Gradually Knausgaard recalls the boat of his childhood, "a traditional clinker-built double-ender" with a special engine that a crane would lower into the water in the spring and that Knausgaard and his brother would scrape and repaint in the winter.<sup>31</sup> He recalls gliding out into the ocean with his father, who sat at the tiller smoking a pipe. And he remembers thinking back then that the boat was too slow for his father, that the object and the man were a mismatch. "Now I think of it as a child's way of understanding a fundamental thing about him. That the speed he had inside him was greater than the life he was living, and that it was only a matter of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 60.

time before the force of this asymmetry would fling him out of the trajectory which included the wooden launch, the pipe, the house and the children, and into another one, faster and wilder.”<sup>32</sup>

Once again what begins as an elemental description of an object transforms into a personal account that distinguishes between the gaze of the child and the experience of the adult, and suggests a shift from one into the other.

Perhaps this manner in which the personal seeps into objects, especially in childhood, is exactly what Knausgaard relies upon to corroborate a book on fatherhood that proceeds through elemental descriptions. In contradistinction to Knausgaard’s own effort to remove any sentimental identification with sprinklers and rubber boots, in *Winter*, he shows how thoroughly his children do just the opposite. Knausgaard reflects on all the stuffed animals his children have and notes that these toys “act as agents for their feelings, an extension of their inner world. . . . The stuffed animals represent them.”<sup>33</sup> The plush toys are blank receptacles in which his children invest their conceptions about reality and how it should be, Knausgaard writes, which eventually come up against the world as it really is and changes as they adjust what they perceive to be true and what they desire. Objects, in this iteration, are intermediaries between the self and the rest of the world, and consequently take on some aspect of the person they frame.

He recounts taking one of his daughters to the hospital for an operation on her ear. The girl brings her toy rabbit and presses it to her chest as they wait, declaring that she wants to be a nurse when she grows up. In the operating room, the child double-checks that the rabbit can be there and repeats her career ambition to the nurse preparing the anesthesia. During the operation, Knausgaard waits with the rabbit in his lap and when his daughter wakes up in the recovery bed, he puts it in front of her as she grasps for it eagerly. Knausgaard has promised her a toy of her

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 74.

choosing after the procedure, and on their way home they buy a house with a family of plastic rabbits inside. Just as Knausgaard is paying for the item, his daughter runs outside and is sick on the street, vomiting blood she had swallowed during the operation.

As he describes the episode, Knausgaard offers no commentary on the events and imagery he recounts. But he consistently notices the toy rabbit—where it is and how his daughter holds it. Without being explicit, here Knausgaard depicts the relationship between objects and personality that he describes in the chapter on stuffed animals. Insofar as the stuffed animal represents something about this girl to herself, she can take comfort in its presence. The rabbit reassures her by somehow preserving her: she seems to believe that finding it in her hands when she wakes up is part of what makes the operation a success, as though an essential piece of herself has not been lost. Knausgaard pairs this identification with the reality of life and a pending future: the seriousness of the operation, the desire to become a nurse, the blood in her vomit. In this episode, various aspects of identity are caught up in the object, and Knausgaard uses this dynamic to display the distance between childhood and adulthood, and how personality shifts over time. The daughter wants to become a nurse, but who knows if she will actually do so. She also wants more rabbits, and the toy describes both aspects of this girl at once—her sense of growing up and the naïve yet “real” consolation she takes in a stuffed animal. This is a different formulation than the one the Knausgaard uses for the rubber boots and the lost tooth. There, emotion was removed from the object in a reserved, almost jaded tone that Knausgaard appears to equate with being an adult, whereas the identification with an object at the hospital registers as something particular to being a child.

In addressing these books to his daughter, it appears to some extent that Knausgaard is offering them to her as a kind of reference as she aligns her interior self with the exterior world.

Knausgaard presents objects not entirely devoid of his own associations but largely denuded of definite meaning, and invites a conversion of what belongs to the “I” into something experienced by the “you.” Towards the end of *Autumn*, he includes an essay on the metal Thermos, those ubiquitous bullet-like silver flasks. Again Knausgaard describes the object in numbing detail, observing that it is an ordinary item that will go unnoticed in some situations, yet seem inappropriate in others. No one thinks twice about a Thermos in the office, but it would be odd to bring one to a dinner party. The Thermos is a kind of extension of one’s own home into the outside world, and thereby is something of an anomaly among domestic objects, for it only comes into its own when it is outside the house. The Thermos “weaves around itself a web of associations and memories, for it was always there on car journeys, boat trips, hikes in the mountains and in the forest, connecting everything that was out there with everything back home without us ever thinking about it. Only later, when we look at all the photos from that time, does it become obvious that the Thermos is at the center of all of them, like a kind of family totem.”<sup>34</sup>

Just as the essay on frames evoked the boundaries that distinguish the individual from the collective, here the Thermos registers the family unit within the larger customs of society. Knausgaard is not explicit about what memories and associations their family Thermos evokes, only remarking that it does weave these memories around itself. The essay conjures blurred movement around a fixed point, as if one were watching a sped-up film: Knausgaard and his family scurrying around, hiking and camping, driving to school and taking vacations, each person a swath of motion, hardly distinct from one another, while at the center of the image the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., *Autumn*, 198-9.

silver Thermos remains an unassuming focal point. By calling attention to this object, it is as though Knausgaard is planting a clue for his daughter: someday she might read this book, and thereafter will always pick out the Thermos in those family snapshots. She'll notice it in the photos of her childhood, and it will both fix her attention on a time that has passed, recalling her father and her youth, and reveal what is no longer there. "It discreetly embodies all that bound us together back then," Knausgaard writes in his final sentence.<sup>35</sup>

Once again, Knausgaard leaves the lyrical potential of an object largely unformed, as though he were positioning the Thermos in the future for his daughter's own associations and remembrances. He makes no real attempt to disclose a meaning, or to even assert that one exists beyond the general laws of physics (that it keeps drinks warm) and social custom (that it does not belong at dinner parties). On the one hand, perhaps this is a kind of gift to his daughter, a talisman of their family as distinct from the rest of the world. On the other, perhaps the Thermos invokes those aspects of himself that Knausgaard may not be able to see or state directly, but that his daughter might know as she recalls her sense of him in her own childhood. The object here operates within a similar framework as the *studium* and *punctum* that Barthes describes. The description of the Thermos is matte: it retains no specificity about the family outings or personal anecdotes. Yet the reader might still be stirred by the image; there remains an invitation in the address to Knausgaard's daughter for her to either invent or remember a *punctum*. Knausgaard generates this solicitation by not asserting himself too forcefully in the *studium*, as though he does not want to taint what his daughter might bring to the image in the future.

Perhaps this helps to explain the sensation Knausgaard comes to in *Summer*, the final book of the series, of continually giving pieces of himself away and being merely a site where

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 199.

memories and thoughts pass through. Here he seems to be courting some nuance to the position that objects might be stripped of their associations, as though by considering how his children invest themselves in their toys and the resonance of a sprinkler, he recognizes the need to reposition himself. He still does not identify with the objects around him in the same way as might his daughter, yet in *Summer* he adjusts the description of what he has been doing in these books, speculating that what he attempts to put on the page, “isn’t part of my identity, merely a product of it.”<sup>36</sup> This is a curious admission, given how personal his entire project seems to be. Knausgaard appears to presume a distinction between what he writes and what he is, as though the social self that he represents in language must necessarily misrepresent some part of what is authentically his own. Whether this is true or not, the notion of writing as a *product* of identity is indeed very different from writing that *records* identity. Whereas a memoir seeks to be a record of one’s life, Knausgaard’s stripe of autofiction looks to recast it entirely. “Although everything I write these days is autobiographical and in one sense deals with my life,” he writes, “life itself is still something entirely different.”<sup>37</sup>

However reductive this formulation may be, what Knausgaard seems to be grappling with is that as a social product the “I” of literature might not represent the self as it really is, but as it might otherwise be. Whatever un-socialized identity exists privately, it must conform to the social demands of the image-repertoire (to use Barthes’s term) as soon as it is put on the page. The only way to be both honest and considerate, in Knausgaard’s model, is to remain silent. Refusing that in the “Season Quartet,” he has attempted some *product* of his identity constructed through a relationship with objects. Rather than insist on ruthless reporting, Knausgaard notices the Thermos and rubber boots, but refuses to endow them with himself (unlike his daughter with

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., *Summer*, 89.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 125.

her rabbit), thereby denying any socially determined iteration of his individuality. To some extent, the stripping away that Knausgaard performs on most of the objects in these books might be viewed as an attempt to leave them bare and *available* to his daughter. By pointing them out in their most elemental form and refraining from investing himself in them, Knausgaard presents objects to his daughter that are not exclusively claimed by the inconsiderate private “I,” but ready to be handled and reinvested with her own associations.

Yet if Knausgaard’s attempt in these books is to strip objects to their bare components so that they might be available to his daughter, how successful is he? Furthermore, what bearing does this attempt have on an understanding of literature that focuses on the inanimate as a way to access character? In *Summer*, it appears that Knausgaard reassesses the mode in which he started. What began as a meticulous attempt to remove himself from the objects around him has evolved into a demonstration of how objects “discreetly embody” both him and the rest of his family. He contends that “the task of art is to see something as it really is, as if for the first time. And if we are serious about seeing, then the person who sees is also a part of it, for there is no such thing as a neutral gaze, a neutral landscape, it is always charged with an underlying meaning.”<sup>38</sup> Without necessarily accepting this definition of art, it is perhaps useful to consider it in relation to these books. By the end of this series, Knausgaard seems to accept that his identity still seeps into the objects he mentions—he marks the rubber boots and the plastic bag by writing about them—even as he insists on their universal generality. In a sense, he appears to admit a necessary compromise in the fourth book, forgoing objectivity so that a resonance of his self might be available to his daughter as she reads this text. Rather than obviating identity, perhaps

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-9.

Knausgaard realizes that the boots, sprinkler, and Thermos more accurately press what is personal into the margins, postponing meaning for the intended reader's gaze.

This corresponds to some degree to Knausgaard's interest in the exchange between the interior and exterior forms of personality, the movement from private to public. He finds this distinction between the inner and outer troubling because neither state feels to him wholly authentic. Therefore he endeavors to communicate through a distant relationship with objects the navigation of the personal and the social, this constant and fluid activity of living as if naming it for what it really is. In Linda's depression and collapse Knausgaard interprets the urgency of his concern: "Between this external world and the inner reality that your mother lived in," he writes in *Spring*, "there was almost no connection any more. That's what happened, the connection was broken. . . . In themselves objects and events don't mean anything. They become meaningful through the resonance they evoke. . . . and that is what happened to your mother, the world no longer resonated within her."<sup>39</sup>

In a way, this recalls the import that Ferrante assigns to objects in *The Days of Abandonment*. There the objects around Olga are crucial aspects of her reckoning with her failing marriage and understanding of herself. She turns to objects to anchor herself in reality, but she fails to handle them properly and slips dangerously close to the edge of an abyss that is perhaps not so different from the one Knausgaard here describes. In both cases, objects offer characters a way to remain attached to the world. Both Knausgaard and Olga attempt to understand themselves partly through the objects that surround them—they have distinct ideas about how their identities are reflected in these objects and accordingly how each thing can and should be used. Knausgaard's identity is not contingent on this relationship in the same way that

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., *Spring*, 101-2.

Olga's is, in fact he makes a distinct effort to displace himself from the objects he observes. Doing so, he suggests, allows a nonabrasive participation in the delicate social and personal dynamics of his own family. In particular, objects provide an entry-point into the lives of his children that is not an act of exposure or betrayal, and not compromised by the confessional mode Knausgaard has assigned to the private "I." Instead, describing the elemental forms of objects allows Knausgaard to orient his writing as an address to a "you," one in which what is considerate of his family is not subjugated to what is truthful about his own experience. In a sense, the objects in these books grant Knausgaard access to personality, both his own and his children's.

Knausgaard's exercise is especially useful in relation to the following chapter that takes up Valeria Luiselli's novel, *Lost Children Archive*. There Luiselli gradually shifts the novel's narrative voice from a character who closely resembles Luiselli herself to a ten-year-old boy. Objects are instrumental to this move, as they first reveal to the adult character the limitations of her own perspective and then become an actual hinge from one narrative voice to another. In the ten-year-old boy's hands, the same objects that the adult narrator viewed only as functional tools become the instruments of play. As the boy's imagination takes over the narrative, objects are released from their intended purposes and begin to inspire connections and associations that become essential to the story Luiselli wants to tell but were unavailable to a rigid, politically determined adult narration. Just as they do for Knausgaard, objects allow for language in Luiselli's novel that is not confined to the private concerns of the "I" but invoke a more inclusive, considerate address to "you." In a sense, Luiselli's novel radically expands the attempt Knausgaard has made by situating the childhood relationship to objects within a complete narrative. The capacity of objects to discreetly embody the dynamics of a family is employed by

Luiselli to not only indicate a distinct yet subjective perspective, but to determine the entire shape of her novel.

Knausgaard's turn to objects is an attempt to retreat from the uncharitable force of *My Struggle* while retaining his authenticity. Rather than focusing on the lyrical sentiments that govern his own personal experience of objects, he presents objects in their elemental form and thereby gives the power of interpretation to his daughter. This solves, he suggests, the ethical dilemma he faced at the end of *My Struggle*, and provides insight into the exchange that occurs between childhood and adulthood and the extent to which reality can be subjectively molded by personality. Luiselli pushes this even further to solve for concerns about appropriation and generate plot. Moving from objects that are stripped down to those that are augmented by the imaginative play of children, the following chapter suggests that the object can be an active rather than a discreet embodiment of social dynamics, and, when explicitly employed, can narrate a public consciousness more broadly than any given private perspective.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Archive and The Game: Valeria Luiselli's Objects in Play

So far this study has observed the use of objects in two very different works. In Ferrante's novel, the objects that surround Olga reveal conceptions she has about herself and offer her the means potentially to control the outcome of her story. Ferrante's objects are fundamentally associative—they welcome and make use of a shifting array of symbolic, literary, and emotional readings. By contrast, Knausgaard seeks to absolve objects of their emotional connotations, reducing each thing to its most literal and elemental presence. He hopes to uncover the central nature of his own identity by interacting with such stripped-down, universal icons.

Valeria Luiselli's novel *Lost Children Archive* combines these two methods. The novel is in part a story of children who leave their homes in South America and travel thousands of treacherous miles to cross the southern American border illegally. But it is also about a woman searching for a way to understand and responsibly tell the story of these immigrant children. Luiselli has worked as a translator for such children in American courts, an experience she chronicled in a nonfiction book, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions*. Her novel is an attempt to recast those encounters into a fictional narrative that more broadly dramatizes the political and social circumstances of these children.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the events recounted in *Tell Me How It Ends* (2017) are folded into *Lost Children Archive* (2019), and read together the books function like two sides of one coin—fictional and nonfictional treatments of the same story. The cross-country road trip, immigration interrogations of children, deportations by airplane, Apache Indian sound projects, and many other aspects are all part of both books. As Luiselli writes in *Tell Me How It Ends*, “perhaps the only way to grant any justice—were that even possible—is by hearing and recording those stories over and over again so that they come back, always, to haunt and shame us” (30).

Yet Luiselli recognizes that there is a gulf of privilege and security between herself and her subject, even though she is a Mexican-born writer with American citizenship. Luiselli is the daughter of a diplomat, and attended private schools around the world. She is sensitive about appropriating stories that are not her own and her writing toes the line between social justice and art. How does a novel help children find asylum? Why bother even dramatizing these children's story? "So that others can listen to them and feel—pity? Feel—rage? And then do what? No one decides to not go to work and start a hunger strike after listening to the radio in the morning."<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, she asks, can engaging with this issue in any shape other than a social justice documentary be defensible? And does a work of art have to be "for" anything? "But then again, isn't art for art's sake so often an absolutely ridiculous display of intellectual arrogance? Ethical concern: And why would I even think that I can or should make art within someone else's suffering?"<sup>3</sup> Can socially mindful art only be authored by those who belong to the persecuted party?

To some degree, Luiselli's novel is an experiment in the negative: by admitting these concerns and shortcomings, she fashions a work that might satisfy each category—aesthetic, moral, social. The experiment hinges on Luiselli's representation of other people's voices, and whether she can create a language that is not her own but to which she retains credible access.<sup>4</sup>

The formal struggle here is not only with the authoritative language used to describe the plight of

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<sup>2</sup> Valeria Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive* (New York: Knopf, 2019), 96.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>4</sup> There is a resonance here with the notion of heteroglossia advanced by Mikhail Bakhtin in "Discourse in the Novel" in which a novel combines multiple languages at once. Per Bakhtin's argument, the author is restrained by the lexical discourse in which she has lived and must therefore invent credible languages of disparate experiences. This can happen in a number of ways—point of view, character's speech, employing "genres" such as diaries, letters, newspaper clippings, and so on—but the fundamental effect is to expand the credible "zone" of narrative experience into an "authentic stylization" of a multi-layered image of language. Luiselli does this in various ways, not least of all by employing "archive" as a credible genre.

these children (the journalistic voice of record), but with the artistic access to the experience itself.<sup>5</sup> Part of her solution is to use objects to direct a narrative voice and frame a point of view that are foreign to her.

Initially the novel is narrated by an unnamed woman who closely resembles Luiselli herself. She is on a road trip with her husband and their two children from New York to Arizona, and the car is packed with objects for the journey. The two adults have items that they believe will help them understand and document stories of persecution in the American Southwest: books, recording equipment, maps. The children have toys and survival kits that they play with in the backseat, inventing stories and games that freely intersect and diverge from the issues their parents talk about in the front of the car. Halfway through the book, as the woman watches her son use a pair of binoculars he was gifted for his birthday, she realizes that the language he and his sister have been inventing more accurately represents the story of the children at the border than her own politically determined attempts to understand the crisis. She cedes the narration to him and the rest of the book is told from his perspective as an address to his younger sister.

As the narration shifts, it becomes clear that the woman is incapable of using the objects she has brought with her (books, maps, photographs, a tape recorder), objects she thought would equip her to tell this story. These items do not yield to her, just as Olga is unable to manipulate the objects around herself in *The Days of Abandonment*. In Ferrante's novel, Olga's conception of the world is mistaken, and she attempts to use the objects of her household to reestablish a reality that no longer exists. Olga has an established idea of how the external world is and should

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<sup>5</sup> The critical response to Luiselli's work as a novelist advancing social justice causes has, in general, praised this ambition (see especially Parul Sehgal, "Valeria Luiselli's Latest Novel is a Mold-Breaking Classic," *The New York Times*, February 11, 2019 and Claire Messud, "At the Border of the Novel," *The New York Review of Books*, March 21, 2019, among others) though is also wary of such an effort's shortcomings for realist fiction (James Wood, "Writing About Writing About the Border Crisis," *The New Yorker*, January 28, 2019).

be, and when she is nonetheless unable to mold the world to fit these expectations, she is forced to reconsider what she believed to be certain. Likewise, the woman in Luiselli's novel has an understanding of the situation at the border that has been over-determined by a politicized discourse and she is forced to come to terms with this when all the books, maps, and photographs that she has assembled to make sense of what is happening leave her more frustrated and confused than ever.

Instead, she realizes, the way that the boy encounters these objects and articulates his experience of them—the pictures he takes with his camera, the observations he makes using his binoculars—proves the more insightful course. And once the narrative has changed perspectives from the woman to the boy, the children's possessions become even more central to the development of the plot. Eventually the boy and his five-year-old sister set out into the desert on their own to find the lost immigrant children without telling their parents. They do not quite realize the danger involved in this undertaking; it all has the flavor of one of their backseat games even though they have snuck out and have hardly any provisions. The boy uses the objects in his backpack to navigate their route, but he does so in the manner of childish play. Meanwhile his story is interspersed with another that tells of a group of immigrant children slowly making their way to the American border. These children also have backpacks, and the objects they carry with them are all that remain for them of their families and where they are from. Just like the boy and his sister, these other children relate to the world through the games they invent, using the objects in their possession to translate their experience. As the boy and his sister wander through the desert, the narrative shifts back and forth between the two groups of children until they finally meet and exchange the contents of their bags.

The suggestive power of objects throughout the novel—the multiple perspectives they field and the imaginative language they inspire—helps Luiselli challenge notions of a fixed, official record of history. The organizing principle of Luiselli’s novel is, of course, the archive. As a collection of documents, images, maps, and sounds, the book is presented as its own assemblage of archival content. By using the term, Luiselli invokes notions of cultural and political claims to power and interpretation, as well as something incomplete. There is a range of ideas about what “archive” means. On the one hand, an archive is a depository for documents, books, and papers that may prove of historical interest. But what gets selected and why are not easy questions to answer, for how is one to know what will prove of historical interest? And likewise, once placed in the archive, the material takes on an outsized import, as though by its very selection it becomes broadly representative and especially significant. Furthermore, it is impossible to know what has been left out of the archive, for as much as an archive reveals about the past, it also withholds information about what it lacks. Thus the archive is a site of power as well as one of preservation; an array of exclusion as much as inclusion. An archive can only indicate the events that took place via the selections it contains, it cannot present a comprehensive history, and this imbues the items in an archive with a suggestive allure. The objects in *Lost Children Archive* not only determine the activity of the protagonists, but offer a criticism of the archive as a supposedly all-encompassing and reliable record.

*Lost Children Archive* begins as the unnamed family of four prepares to leave New York. The father is a sound documentarist eager to record the ambient sounds of the American landscape as a way of documenting the violence wrought on Native Americans, particularly the Apaches (recording what sounds are in the landscape now, he contends, captures the echoes of an

otherwise lost people). The mother, the first narrator, is a sound documentarian who is invested in the plight of children trying to cross the border. (Apparently there is a fine distinction—she is the “sound librarian” while her husband is the “sound chemist.”) The boy is the man’s son whose biological mother died when he was born, while the girl is the woman’s daughter from a previous relationship. The woman and her husband met while making a sound documentary of all the languages in New York City, and now that this project is over, they are growing apart—he wants to relocate to the Southwest, she needs to remain in the city. With the dissolution of the family in sight, the summer trip stands as the final chapter together, and as a contrast to the forced separation of the children on the border from their families back home.

From the beginning, language and sound are paramount. Not only are the man and woman steeped in sound recording, but the narrator consistently notices how the family shares an intimate language. She wonders which parts of this story the children will remember and how the pronouns the family uses will shift alongside its geographic relocation—whether the family will be a we, they, us, he, I (curiously, she does not consider “you,” the pronoun that comes to dominate the text). Language has been failing the marriage, the woman and the man struggle to communicate as they once did, and no one seems to entirely understand the change transpiring. The day before the family leaves the city, ants invade the house and the girl offers a jumbled prophecy-explanation that they all accept as good as any: “The ants, they come marching in, eat my upperworldpanties, they take us where there’s no catastrophes, just good trophies and tooshiefreedom.”<sup>6</sup> It is the bizarre formulation of children, yet this unexpected and playful language will come to be essential to the novel. “From that day on, I think,” remarks the woman, “we started allowing our children’s voices to take over our silence.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive*, 28.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-9.

As the family leaves the city, their language expands as well, transforming into a parlance filled with the myths of the American west, song lyrics, children's misappropriations, directions, complaints, and quotations from the various books they have brought along. This sonic intensity is compounded by the stories that the man tells about the Apaches and those of the lost children that the mother listens to on the radio. In the second half of the book, it becomes clear that all of this language is internalized by the children without any distinction between what is real and contemporary on the one hand and imagined or historical on the other. With childish naïveté that verges on prescience, all the words, lyrics, myths, reports, instructions, and names constitute the entire plane of reality for the boy and girl—there is no separation between, say, the lyrics of a David Bowie song, sacred Apache landscapes, and their mother's ambition to find the lost children. Eventually this new, idiosyncratic language becomes something the family relies on while everything else remains uncertain. They even take on new names, inspired by the stories of the Apaches: Papa Conchise, Lucky Arrow, Swift Feather, and Memphis respectively replace father, mother, boy, and girl.

The ephemeral nature of sound and language in *Lost Children Archive* provokes questions about what is permanent and official. If the sounds of a place and the things people say disappear almost immediately, how might history be reclaimed, listened to, understood? What sort of trace is left behind? Something intelligible or only silence and junk? The narrator thinks of the recordings her husband makes, the books that the family reads, the photographs the boy takes, and the maps that they follow as the material of their passage. These physical objects will be the enduring evidence of their trip, the “archive” of this novel, and they are all packed into seven boxes in the back of the car. Boxes I-IV are the husband's, filled with notes, books, tapes, pictures, index cards, maps, folders—all relating to the Apache project, recording, and ghosts.

Box V is the woman's, likewise loaded with books, maps, and lists of objects left behind in the desert, all pertaining to the missing children and archiving. Box VI is the girl's and Box VII the boy's, both of which they decide to leave empty to fill up along the way—the collections that will document the trip itself. If the parents' boxes are essentially the sources from which Luiselli's novel derives, the children's boxes will be the record of what the novel ultimately becomes.

The family leaves New York the day after the boy's tenth birthday. For presents, he has specifically asked for no toys, only "real" things. He receives a polaroid camera from his mother and a small survival kit from his father that includes binoculars, matches, a compass, and a Swiss Army knife. He puts them all in his backpack, and they become the essential objects of the novel.

Initially, the camera consumes his attention. The boy is excited to start documenting the trip, but the first few pictures he takes come out milky white. "Perhaps," the woman suggests, half serious, half teasing, "they're coming out white not because the camera is broken or just a toy camera but because what you're photographing is not actually there. If there's no thing, there's no echo that can bounce off it."<sup>8</sup> Later the woman decides that she would like to take a picture of the children and their father as they play an Apache-inspired game. She goes to her son's backpack for the camera and alongside the compass and Swiss Army knife, she notices little cars and rubber bands; the random objects of a child. And she recalls once looking through her sister's desk drawer for a forgotten ID, "suddenly wiping away tears with my sleeve as I went through her well-ordered pencils, colored clips, and random Post-it notes addressed to herself—visit Mama this week, talk more slowly, buy flowers and long earrings, walk more

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 55.

often.”<sup>9</sup> She wonders how it could be that these unremarkable objects, the detritus of a life, have such power. “Impossible to know why items like these can reveal such important things about a person,” Luiselli writes, “and difficult to understand the sudden melancholy they produce in that person’s absence. Perhaps it is just that belongings often outlive their owners, so our minds can easily place those belongings in a future in which their owner is no longer present. We anticipate our loved ones’ future absence through the material presence of all their random stuff.”<sup>10</sup>

This kind of treatment of objects of the past will be explored more fully in the following chapter on W. G. Sebald, but here it is enough to notice how these objects provoke in the woman a predictable feeling of nostalgia. She finds the camera instructions and learns that the polaroid has to be stored in a dark place while it develops. She teaches the boy, and allows him to place his developing images in a little red book she has brought along. Once the narrative switches to his perspective, the boy describes how it was his job during the trip to keep the back of the car organized, especially the boxes. And though he is not allowed to go looking through them, sometimes his mother would permit him to get the little red book so that he could put the pictures from his camera between its pages. Using that permission as an excuse, he pokes around the box, just a little, a looking that stirs in him the same sensation he felt in the park once when he and his sister played a game of burying clay figures for future scientists to discover. “Except with Ma’s box, I was not the one who made the clay figures but the scientist who had found them centuries later.”<sup>11</sup>

Here Luiselli echoes what the woman felt looking in her son’s backpack and sister’s drawer, but in the attitude of a child. And this changes the tone of the experience entirely.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 207.

Whereas the woman encounters an overwhelming sorrow looking through her sister's things, a pain associated with absence, the boy's mode is one of discovery and wonder. The accidental glimpse these objects afford does not result in emotional poignancy or nostalgia for him, perhaps because as a child he does not entirely grasp the finitude of life. Instead, the encounter with his mother's objects is an opportunity to understand something about her. Very often objects are used in a fiction to evoke a person's absence, but here Luiselli pushes this resonance further by suggesting that the object may also posit something new, it may provide us with clues to something we did not previously apprehend.

The little red book proves to be a crucial part of this creative encounter with the physical. It is an object that initially belongs to the woman, but eventually comes into the possession of the boy. It is titled *Elegies for Lost Children*, and is the only invented document in the novel. Luiselli provides a description of the fictional author, Ella Camposanto, and a summary of the book: it is based loosely on the Children's Crusade of 1212 though could also have been written with the not-so-distant future in mind of Europe or North Africa or Central America. Chiefly, the little red book is at once historically informed and loose enough to describe all migrant children. As the family makes its way across the country, the woman reads these elegies out loud to her children while the boy slips his photographs between its pages. In this way Luiselli introduces a third-person narration of the lost children into the text, one that is far enough removed to potentially avoid criticisms of appropriation. By the end, the little red book stuffed with photographs is the very image of the book Luiselli would like to write.

These elegies tell the story of a group of seven children making their way to the American border. When the woman reads these elegies out loud to her own children, she (much like the reader) instinctively assumes a separation between that story and her own. But for the

boy, no such distinction exists. Just as the song lyrics and myths he hears in the car are valid constituents of reality for him, so are these elegies. When his narration usurps the woman's, it becomes clear that these seven children are the ones he believes he and his sister will find in the desert. He continues to read the elegies out loud to his sister, and slowly Luiselli erodes the distinction between the immigrants' story and that of the boy and his sister, entwining the two narratives as contemporaneous. As the siblings make their way into the desert, the group of immigrant children arrive at the border. Eventually the separation between the elegies and the boy evaporates entirely, as the two groups of children take refuge from a storm together in an abandoned boxcar, the culminating scene of the novel.

Whereas the first half of the novel, narrated by the woman, remains rigidly confined to a single perspective, the second half, narrated by the boy, is porous. Furthermore, the little red book comes to have more of a bearing on these characters than the boy and his mother initially expect. What this object reveals to the woman and to the boy is different, and it compels them to react in distinctive ways: the woman simply becomes angry at the unjust hardship these children endure, while the boy innocently goes looking for them. In part, what makes the object so important here is not its physical, universal aspect (as is the case for Knausgaard), but the quality of the looking and the kind of understanding it inspires. This is first depicted as a feeling when the woman sorts through the boy's backpack and the boy pokes around her box, and then becomes more consequential when the story of the lost children sends the boy and his sister off into the wilderness. Objects broker the comprehension of these characters, and more importantly they reveal distinctions between one perspective and another. And finally, the story contained within the object—the tale of the seven migrant children—moves beyond the physical bounds of paper and print, and becomes a living part of the journey the boy and his sister undertake.

After the boy becomes proficient with the camera, his attention turns to his binoculars. Throughout *Lost Children Archive* the objects of looking—photographs, cameras, binoculars—are always close at hand, and the glances, observations, and vision of all the members of the family are carefully portrayed. Just like the camera, the binoculars offer a means of specialized sight, they are a tool of interpretation. Eventually it is through this object that the woman realizes the boy is best equipped to observe the lost children. The shift in narration occurs just after the family has arrived at a small airstrip outside El Paso, Texas where a group of refugee children will be deported by plane. The woman has been adamant that the family witness the extradition, as though by doing so they might somehow right the wrong. As they rush to the scene, only the children speak, “their thoughts filling our world . . . blurring all its outlines,” the woman thinks.<sup>12</sup> For the first time she wonders how she and her husband’s concerns have occupied the minds of her children, and how much the children’s games and stories have affected the adults. In the backseat, the boy and the girl are imagining some war-like scenario with Border Patrol and American bluecoats, and suddenly the woman realizes that her children “are the ones who are telling the story of the lost children. They’ve been telling it all along, over and over again in the back of the car.”<sup>13</sup> In this regard, Luiselli goes further than Knausgaard, who merely marvels at his children’s capacity to meld and adjust disparate realities, and fully dramatizes the children’s imaginative synthesis of the world.

The family arrives at the airfield just before the children are boarded onto the plane. It is a dry, hot scene with steam coming off the tarmac and dust in the air. The woman and her son are standing at a chain-link fence, scanning the airstrip with the boy’s binoculars. The woman uses them first while the boy pesters her to give them back. Reluctantly (much like a child herself) she

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

hands them to him, and asks him to describe what he sees. He begins in terms that he knows his mother will recognize—the brown hills, the plane—a staid, simple description. Then uniformed men appear, escorting about fifteen small children. The woman snatches the binoculars back, but becomes so overwhelmed by what she sees that she throws a fit, kicking at the fence until her husband must restrain her. The boy takes the binoculars back. When the woman is calm again, she seems to accept that the boy is now her interlocutor, but realizes that as long as she asks him to speak in her language, she will not receive an accurate representation. So she switches modes: “Tell me what you see, Ground Control.”<sup>14</sup> With this, she enters into the world of the games the boy and girl have been playing in the car, mixing their favorite David Bowie song with stories of Apaches and the immigrant children. The boy picks it up immediately: “The spaceship is moving toward the runway,” he replies. The woman keeps prodding, and as he describes the scene in bizarre images, the boy secures for the woman—and for the reader—a new narrative access. After the plane disappears into the sky, she finally understands:

It’s his version of the story that will outlive us; his version that will remain and be passed down. Not only his version of our story, of who we were as a family, but also his version of others’ stories, like those of the lost children. He’d understood everything much better than I had, than the rest of us had. He’d listened to things, looked at them—really looked, focused, pondered—and little by little, his mind had arranged all the chaos around us into a world.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 185.

The spaceship imagery emphasizes the figurative, unfathomable distance between America and the country to which these children are returning—they might as well be going to the moon. Unencumbered by the need for accuracy here, the language that the binoculars allow goes to the very core of the issue. This is the first time in the novel where the imaginative language of the children stands in for the recognizable image-repertoire of adults.

To some degree, the imagination's relation here to the unexpected and revealing has a long history, and recalls some aspect of the romantic appeal to imagery that lies beyond daily perception. Coleridge's distinction in particular between primary and secondary imagination has some resonance here. Coleridge establishes the primary imagination as "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation," that is, a kind of human-scaled yet divine genesis.<sup>16</sup> The secondary imagination is the action taken by that finite mind "to idealize and to unify" what has been generated. "It is essentially vital," Coleridge concludes, "even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead."<sup>17</sup> Luiselli creates a not entirely dissimilar distinction, as though the primary imagination of children retains what Coleridge terms an "esemplastic power" to produce an unfettered poetic ideal, while the secondary imagination of adults struggles to order what it beholds while observing a political sensitivity. Objects here serve as a kind of conduit, from the limited imagery of the woman to the expansive transformations of the boy, and once the narrative shifts to the child's perspective, they become even more central to inventive descriptions.<sup>18</sup> Luiselli essentially establishes the imagination over ideology here, moving from that which is sanctioned toward the untethered.

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<sup>16</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works*, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 313.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> After all, in his notes on the composition of "Kubla Khan" Coleridge described the images that rose up before him as "things." See Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling, *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature: Romantic Poetry and Prose* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 255.

Immediately following the scene at the airstrip, the boy takes over the narration in an address to his sister. The conceit is that he is making a sound recording for her, telling her their story so she never forgets. Curiously, this also introduces the “you” into the story, a pronoun that stands in contrast to the “I” and the “we” that frames the first half of the narrative, recalling Knausgaard’s claim in *My Struggle* that the second person retains an empathic consideration that the first and third person neglect. Whether Luiselli has something similar in mind is unclear, though she does seem to be interested in undermining the authority of any one perspective. From here on the narrative becomes much more fluid, shifting voices and perspectives, and guided largely by the children’s games as well as by objects in the sky.

A few days after the family watches the children deported by plane, they are staying at a rented cabin on the edge of a wilderness area, close to the Apache land that has been their destination. One night the boy wants to read more of the elegies from the little red book. Rather than try to find the book among his mother’s things in the car, he brings her box inside to his room while the rest of his family sleeps. He knows he is not supposed to intrude, but after he takes out the little red book he cannot help himself. “I was about to close the box again and get ready to read when something came over me, which I cannot explain. I felt like I needed to see what else was in that box, look at all the things that I knew were always under the little red book, things I wasn’t allowed to look at so never did.”<sup>19</sup> Once again, the boy encounters the same sensation that Luiselli tracked for the woman looking through her sister’s drawer. He is not supposed to be looking through his mother’s box, yet the intrusive nature of transgression, the *possibility* that these objects could reveal something more, pushes him further. Circumscribed by social conventions of privacy, rarely do we catch such intimate glimpses of another person. “But

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<sup>19</sup> Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive*, 235.

no one was watching me now,” the boy thinks to himself.<sup>20</sup> Here these objects inspire more than just a sentimental reflection, and the intrusion has consequences.

The boy inventories everything from his mother’s box, and decides that he and his sister must set off into the desert to find the lost children on their own. The archive of private things propels the narrative forward, directing the children out from the safety of their parents’ supervision. It is not just that the boy has caught sight of something fleeting about his mother or the political situation that concerns her; he has interpreted the objects and resolved to act. “It was silly of me to have broken a promise and looked inside Ma’s box. But also I finally understood some important things after looking at all that stuff, understood them with my heart and not only with my head.”<sup>21</sup> Just as the image of the airplane granted to the boy by the binoculars is somehow more revealing than the news reports on the radio, so does the little red book and the maps in this box reorient the boy’s relationship with the lost children. Carefully he packs his backpack with maps, the red book, his binoculars, knife, compass, flashlight, matches, and camera, and his sister’s backpack with a little food and a children’s book the family has been reading and rereading, *The Book with No Pictures*. The next morning, before their parents are awake, the two children set off, using the Apache names have assumed, Swift Feather and Memphis.

As they make their way through Apacheria, Memphis asks Swift Feather to tell her about the lost children. He does his best to imagine them, and eventually takes his binoculars out of his backpack. “They’re coming to meet us and we’ll meet them over there, look,” he tells her, and they peer through the glasses at large thunderclouds amassing over the valley, with birds circling

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 238.

above.<sup>22</sup> Memphis asks if they are eagles and Swift Feather tells her “yes of course they are, those are the eagles, the same eagles the lost children now see as they walk north into the desert plain” and with that the narrative makes its first shift in the book’s penultimate section, from first- to third-person, from Swift Feather to the group of immigrant children.<sup>23</sup> Once again, it is an object, the binoculars, that becomes the narrative’s fulcrum, providing the right vision of another object in the sky, the eagle. In the desert, the children’s possessions serve them in a variety of ways, though persistently the tools for looking—binoculars and camera—prove most useful. Adapting a technique she attributes to Virginia Woolf, Luiselli changes perspective via airborne objects. Just as the narrative shifts from the woman to the boy when the plane takes off from the El Paso airstrip, in the desert the narrative moves from the boy to the group of immigrant children via eagles.<sup>24</sup>

These lost children also have backpacks with toothbrushes, sweaters, underwear, a bible, photographs. These are the only possessions these children have, packed with care by parents and grandparents. In the elegies, these children do not even have names—the moment they are handed over to their guide, he simply numbers them, youngest to oldest, and these numbers become the whole of their identity. Their backpacks—their archives—are the only record of who they once were and what they hope to become. Some of the things they carry are obviously useful, but some are not. One of the children has a bag of marbles. Another has a broken cell phone. He found this phone by the railroad tracks, and holds on to it, along with a black hat. One

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> The technique is also used in the film *Wanda* by Barbara Loden when a toy airplane directs the camera’s gaze from one party to another in a languid, senseless, desert-like scene with a storm approaching. Though Luiselli does not mention this film, she does include a book by Nathalie Léger called *Suite for Barbara Loden* in the mother’s box. An odd homage to Loden in itself, Léger’s book also culls meaning and perspective from archival material and found objects.

night, while the man in charge is sleeping, this boy, the sixth, pulls out the phone and shows it to the other children. He invents a game: “Here,” he says, offering it to one of the girls, “call someone, call anyone.”<sup>25</sup> She takes the phone and pretends to call her grandmother to tell her that everything is okay. The phone is passed around the group, some of the children making earnest “calls” while others make jokes, until it is handed to the youngest boy, the one who sucks his thumb. This boy makes the longest call to his grandmother, telling her about the other children and that he carries with him a stone in his pocket, one of the stones that his grandmother used to throw into the green lake. When he is finished and all the children have spoken, the sixth boy tells them that the broken phone is also a camera, and they all huddle together for a portrait. The boy pretends to focus a lens and says that on the count of three, when he takes the picture, they all have to say their names. He adjusts his black hat, counts, and they all shout out into the night who they are.<sup>26</sup>

Again, what is possible to see and say is mediated by an object. This is not the earnest, stripped-down description of Knausgaard, but the inventive imagination of children taking creative liberty with a thing. It hardly matters that the cell phone is broken or that it is not a camera. All these children need is an object that can suggest or invite an alternative reality. Just as the playful language of the boy in front of the airplane conveys the scene of deportation to his mother, so do the theatrics of these children make their identities real. In his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, Italo Calvino discusses the “magic objects” of romance, around which “there forms a kind of force field that is in fact the territory of the story itself.”<sup>27</sup> A similar ambiance is established here: meaning is negotiated by the thing, and while Luiselli often uses the object to

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>27</sup> Italo Calvino, “Quickness,” in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 32.

prompt a childish game that in turn reveals more than “adult language,” she persistently allows the object to retain unexpected properties, as though suggesting that all things we encounter might have more of a bearing on our lives than we expect.

For example, when the immigrant children are waiting in the train yard for their first train, an old witch approaches them, prophesies doom, and for a fee offers to interfere with the fates on their behalf. When the children decline, she shuffles away, then turns and lobs a ripe orange at them, which hits the oldest boy, number seven, on the shoulder. The children and everyone around them are hungry, but no one touches the fruit, which dropped to the ground without rolling and then slowly rots away. Days later, boy number seven becomes the first casualty among the children when their coyote punishes him for compulsively reading out the words on the side of the train while running to catch it. Meanwhile, at one of the first towns the train passes, a crowd of people gather to throw food and fresh fruit up to the children on top of the boxcars, including oranges which most people peel and eat quickly but one girl saves under her shirt. At the next town, another crowd of people are waiting by the tracks and the children eagerly get ready to catch the food, but instead these people pelt them with stones. Later on, when Swift Feather and Memphis arrive at the boxcar in the valley, Swift Feather throws a stone inside to see if anything is there. An enormous eagle emerges and flaps up into the sky, after nearly twenty pages of narrative flipping back and forth via eagles, “until it was a smaller object up there” along with the other eagles.<sup>28</sup> As brother and sister stare up at the birds one last time, a stone hits Swift Feather in the shoulder. He turns and there in the boxcar are the other lost children, the real children, not just stories about them. Together they make a fire and find three

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<sup>28</sup> Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive*, 330.

eagle eggs in a nest, which they cook and share, consummating the joining of the two narratives in a single meal.

It's a strange progression and impossible to say that stones, oranges, and eggs "symbolize" something particular. Rather Luiselli constructs a sequence in which the things that accompany the action seem to possess latent potential; sometimes it comes to bear on the children, sometimes it does not. Nothing "happens" because the girl tucks the orange under her shirt or because the youngest boy has kept a stone in his pocket all this time, and there is no direct correlation between the orange striking the boy's shoulder and his death. And yet much in the same way that Ferrante endows the objects around her protagonists with an actualizing potential, and Calvino suggests some attenuating magical power, so does Luiselli embrace the covert consequences and articulations of the objects that accompany a journey. Furthermore, if these things could be preserved in some kind of archive, she seems to be asking, would they tell the story of what happened? Probably not, even though the stone is the object that the young boy is sure to "tell" his grandmother he still has.

This distinction between what is meaningful and what is not comes into sharp relief in an episode just before the lost children reach the border. The train on which they are riding makes a stop at a military checkpoint and soldiers climb up onto the roof. They walk among the children and adults, taking their bags and throwing everything over the side. The children can sense the threat and the youngest boy, tempted to suck his thumb instead "bends over his crossed legs and bites the strap of his backpack."<sup>29</sup> The soldier approaches, takes the backpacks from the children, and pulls out each item from inside, one by one, naming it before tossing it over his shoulder and off the train, as though questioning the intelligence of the child who would bring such an object

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 310.

all this way. “Toothbrush? Marbles? Sweater? Toothpaste? Bible? Underwear? A broken telephone?”<sup>30</sup> The children make no resistance, the soldier leaves, and the train pulls away amid “the heaps, the broken, the beautiful rubbish, all colors of stuff beaming now under the sun.”<sup>31</sup> Not only does this leave the children with nothing, but it underscores the oddity of the things they have been holding. Without a personal connection, objects are just stuff. The scraps in the sister’s drawer, or the rubber bands in the boy’s backpack, when detached from the context of their owners, appear as junk. Yet a broken phone is at once trash and the means of uttering a name; one person sees a small prop plane through the binoculars, another sees a spaceship. In the essay “The Dehumanization of Art,” José Ortega y Gasset suggests that modern art might divest objects of their “lived” reality so as to “compel us to improvise other forms of intercourse completely distinct from our ordinary way with things.”<sup>32</sup> Luiselli does just this, making a case for augmentation whereas Knausgaard favors reduction. In alternating between depictions of objects as meaningless and meaningful, Luiselli suggests that to dismiss them as merely material is to forfeit the scope of their power.

Without their backpacks, the children have nothing yet the boy retains the black hat that appeared to confer some authority on his game with the broken phone, as though it were some strange sorcerer’s hat. Days later, after the children have scrambled over the wall and run from the bullets of Border Patrol, this boy falls and cannot get up. One of the girls implores him, pulls him by the sleeve, but he cannot go any further and gives her his black hat in a silent gesture that means “carry on.”<sup>33</sup> As they wander through the desert, the four children who remain arrive at a

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 311.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, “The Dehumanization of Art,” in *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature*, trans. Helene Weyl (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 21-2.

<sup>33</sup> Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive*, 322.

ghost town full of old houses with broken windows and scattered furniture, and some random things lying in the dirt—a fork, the sole of a shoe—more junk that no one is left to redeem. The youngest boy picks up a pink cowboy hat and wears it as they keep walking. Then, the morning after the two groups of children have spent the night together in the boxcar, Swift Feather wakes to find that everyone is gone and Memphis is making mud pies for breakfast. She has traded nearly everything in Swift Feather’s backpack for a plastic bow and arrow. He is initially irate, concerned that they will not be able to find their way without his things. But Memphis is calm, she knows the journey is almost over because she lost her tooth. She has also given away her book without pictures, and secured for herself and her brother the two hats. “The pink one is yours,” she tells him, “and the black one is mine.”<sup>34</sup> The boy calms down, they pretend to eat mud pies for breakfast, and then set out for the mountains and Echo Canyon.

Where did this bow and arrow come from? How could the lost children have been carrying this toy with them over the wall and past Border Patrol? It is the first we have heard of it, almost as though Memphis has conjured it from thin air. Yet this toy and their two new hats prove to be the children’s salvation. When they arrive in the mountains, they cannot be entirely sure where they are. They set out to explore and “because we had the hats and we also had the bow and arrow, we decided to play the Apache game we used to play with Pa.”<sup>35</sup> It is a hide-and-seek game and when Memphis finds her brother she shouts “Geronimo!” At that moment, her voice echoes back to them, “bouncing back even stronger and longer” and they know that they have found Echo Canyon.<sup>36</sup> They shout their Apache names together and then they hear a

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 336.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 337.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 338.

different echo, that of their parents calling out. This is the end of the journey, the lost children are found.

Once again, the objects facilitate a childish game that in turn determines the narrative arc. Despite Swift Feather's initial insistence to his parents that he wanted "no toys" for his birthday, the practical tools he receives can only take him and his sister so far. Only once the tools have been exchanged for toys do the things the children possess deliver them into safety. Meanwhile, we learn a few pages later that the two girls that the woman has been looking for, two sisters who may or may not have been with Memphis and Swift Feather that night in the boxcar and would have carried on in their journey with the "survival" tools from Swift Feather's backpack, have been found dead in the Sonoran Desert.

Ultimately the toys that make possible the game, once again allow the declaration of names. Immediately following this scene, Luiselli includes an inventory of Box VI, which belongs to Memphis and is full of the "echoes" she has "collected" throughout the trip. The novel then concludes with all the photos Swift Feather has taken as the exclusive contents of Box VII. Together, these two collections underscore how incomplete an archive really is when presumed to accurately account for what has happened. Neither box tells the story, though they are not entirely indecipherable either. The spaces and connections these echoes and photographs open up—that is, the deceptive objectivity of objects—arrange many possible narratives, and Luiselli's novel becomes situated between what is real and what is not. After all, where did these photographs come from if not from the story we have just read?

Luiselli's novel is in many ways an experiment in form. She begins from a place of personal experience and ends in a radically fictionalized narrative. Luiselli herself witnessed the injustices

of the American immigration system through her work as a legal translator, and is compelled by the history of repression and murder that those in power have systematically and routinely perpetrated on those without. Her aim with this book is in part political; she wants to comment on and engage with this history and ongoing policy while presenting a version of the story that otherwise remains invisible. Furthermore, she is concerned with how the past is remembered and documented, and what vanishes irretrievably. *Lost Children Archive* contends with the artistic difficulties the socially mindful author faces in dramatizing a political subject and telling a story that is not her own.

As we have seen, objects are a crucial aspect of this effort, functioning toward two major ends. The suggestive language that arises from objects in the hands of children releases Luiselli from the constraints of her own experience and the staid images of political nonfiction. This technique is propulsive but it also relates more broadly to Luiselli's overall adoption of the term "archive" to describe the work. The second function of objects is ultimately to complicate notions of truth by showing how what is documented, preserved, and official is only a sliver of the story. Luiselli's obvious concern in collecting objects into a so-called archive—made explicit by her novel's title and her inclusion of books on archive theory as central props—suggests that the reader consider the archive as a form, and determine where that form and the literary claims of the novel intersect. The success of both, Luiselli seems to argue, depends on the legibility and resonances of the objects inside. In this sense, the experience of exploring an archive is not so different than looking through a sibling's drawer or child's backpack. Both encounters produce a sense of further meaning, an extrapolation of something latent in the original action that reveals itself only in retrospect.

Given the difficulty of arranging an official yet unbiased record, *archive* has been taken up in the past forty years as a metaphor for theories on power, exclusion, and discourse. Perhaps the most far-reaching exploitation of the term has been Foucault's use of *Archeology of Knowledge* to describe the domain of statements where systems establish language as events and things. This overarching view of the archive acknowledges the archive's ties to the structures that determine experience. "The analysis of the archive, then," writes Foucault, "involves a privileged region: at once close to us, and different from our present existence, it is the border of time that surrounds our presence, which overhangs it, and which indicates it in its otherness; it is that which, outside ourselves, delimits us."<sup>37</sup> Such delimiting is taken up by Derrida in *Archive Fever*, one of the books Luiselli includes in the husband's boxes, in which Derrida prods the term etymologically to endow it as both a place of beginnings and law, as well as the house of authority. Between these two theoretical appropriations of the archive—Foucault's systemic considerations and Derrida's etymological rendering—the term has taken shape as a metaphorical tool used to describe all kind of scenarios in which history and authority, origin and observation intersect.

Perhaps the most influential text about archives for Luiselli is Arlette Farge's *The Allure of the Archives*, published by Editions du Seuil in 1989. A short book, it is part defense of archival work, part instruction for the novice archivist, and part theoretical examination of what occurs when the archivist extracts historical meaning from the contents of an archive. Farge's argument is fundamentally about the interpretation that the archive demands, and the way in which it allows a reconstruction of the past to serve the concerns of the present. Referencing Foucault, she asserts that archives do not tell truth, but *of* truth, and that they demonstrate and

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<sup>37</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 130.

embody individual positions between systems of power and a self-identity. The archive “preserves an infinite number of relations to reality” and “into this complex game . . . slip fable and fabulation, and perhaps even the ability for someone to transform everything into fantasy, to write one’s story or to turn one’s own life into fiction.”<sup>38</sup> Essentially the archive invites a grappling with the harshness of reality and collusion with multiple, even conflicting experiences. To access this realm of truth, the archivist (or novelist) must allow the scattered details of life to surface without constraining them to logical or predetermined narrative. “You develop your reading of the archives through ruptures and dispersion,” Farge writes, “and must mold questions out of stutters and silences.”<sup>39</sup> These become the very directives of Luiselli’s novel. Not only does she imagine the stories of the lost children in the *Elegies for Lost Children*, but employs the fables of children to elicit the possibilities of different realities.

At the beginning of *Lost Children Archive*, Luiselli establishes the “archive” in a traditional sense, which she then uses to create fictions that tell *of* truth. The archive that she creates among the boxes in the backseat of the car is not only a collection of documents and books that the adults believe will help them tell the stories they seek, but an open repository for a new kind of story, one that cannot be told in familiar terms. This type of archive is both subversive and unconventional, for the children’s camera, binoculars, and storybook prove more consequential than the diaries of Susan Sontag, the Cantos of Pound, and the other objects in the adults’ boxes. Here, Luiselli shows us that parallel to the official archive there may exist many other, equally revealing and consequential collections requiring interpretation that is not

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<sup>38</sup> Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 30-1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

hamstrung by what Foucault might term the prevailing discourse. Luiselli dramatizes this through the objects that become the means of play for the children.

Despite the fundamental conceit that the term archive appears to secure for Luiselli, her attention seems to be most readily drawn not to the archive itself but to the distance between the record and the events as they transpired. Sound is one useful way to orient this investigation, for it is at once a physical, potentially linguistic event that also ricochets off the objects it encounters. It is this kind of echo that Luiselli is seeking. Rather than attempt to strip away the excesses of language in order to uncover the official record and an “accurate” dramatization of immigrant experience, she arranges her novel as a lyrical array of events and sounds echoing off each other. Luiselli wants to trace the resonance of people in a landscape—a family, refugees, Apaches—and she understands “echoes” as not only made of sound, but also of experience. While Knausgaard uses objects to chisel away the suggestive lyricism of language so as to preserve identity in its raw form, Luiselli turns to things to allow her language to become expansive. The object’s capacity to evoke multiple descriptions of the same event is essential to Luiselli’s project.

To some extent, Luiselli amends the experience of looking through someone else’s drawer—an encounter with the latent meanings of objects—in the context of sounds. “The inventory of echoes was not a collection of sounds that have been lost,” she writes, “but rather one of sounds that were present in the time of recording and that, when we listen to them, remind us of the ones that are lost.”<sup>40</sup> This sort of accidental glimpse is precisely what is useful about objects in Luiselli’s novel. So often the things that remain are revealing because they have been taken out of their original context. As Farge writes, “the spoken word, the found object, the trace

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<sup>40</sup> Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive*, 141.

left behind become faces of the real” but the overwhelming feeling of having discovered Truth never lasts.<sup>41</sup> The object “reveals nothing more than its physical presence . . . [but] its importance lies in the interpretation of its presence, in the search for its complex meaning, in framing its ‘reality’ within system of symbols—systems for which history attempts to be the grammar.”<sup>42</sup> In a sense, by arranging an archive, perhaps even by simply invoking the *idea* of an archive, Luiselli allows this system to speak, to invent, to determine, as though she were animating the historical pieces that someone in the future will find tucked away in a drawer. Luiselli relishes the way that things can take on multiple meanings, especially once they have been removed from their common, everyday context. The objects in this novel—much as they constitute an archive—are the starting point, and the book becomes a collection, both substantive and limited, that inspires and solicits interpretation.

The woman’s discovery at the airstrip that her son’s game offers the most truthful description of the deportation is the discovery of Luiselli’s novel. It is not archives that tell us a story, but how well we imagine the circumstances of archival material. As Farge writes, archival work is an act of interpretation: “a new object is created, a new form of knowledge takes shape, and a new ‘archive’ emerges. As you work you are taking the preexisting forms and readjusting them in different ways to make possible a different narration of reality.”<sup>43</sup> Luiselli uses binoculars, a camera, a cell phone, hats, and eagles to initiate and sustain this imaginative work, creating not only the narrative’s propulsion, but a novel that makes its own case for credibility even when its culminating scene is the dream-like desert meeting of fictional and real people in an abandoned boxcar for a meal of eagle eggs. By the end, what is left in the archive is not the

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<sup>41</sup> Farge, *Allure of the Archive*, 11.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-2.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-3.

ratifying element—these are only fading echoes and amateur photographs with no captions. Instead, the novel turns on the children’s inventions and their consequential play, the activities that tell *of* truth. By arranging the children’s games through objects, Luiselli draws out the experiences that exceed her own and allows interpretation to remain multiple. The archive speaks through the objects in the hands of children, a shout that bounces off the canyon walls and echoes back.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Secondhand Shop: The Objects of Unlived Lives in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*

About two thirds of the way through *Austerlitz*, the titular character travels to Terezín, the fortified town that served as the Theresienstadt Ghetto from 1941-45. Austerlitz has learned that his mother was sent here in late 1941 or early '42. Vera, an old family friend, tells him that for many years now Terezín has been an "ordinary" town, yet Austerlitz sees no residents except a ghostly figure who disappears in the park and a deranged man ranting wildly to himself who suddenly vanishes. Austerlitz takes photographs of closed doors and finally comes upon the Antikos Bazar, apparently the only shop apart from a small grocery. The large depot is closed, but in four picture windows Austerlitz sees a grand assortment of objects, surely only "a small part of the junk heaped up inside."<sup>1</sup> These things at first mean nothing to him, yet they are the only traces of real human life in the entire town. For reasons he does not understand, Austerlitz stands for a long time with his forehead pressed against the glass, staring at the objects, "as if one of them or their relationship with each other must provide an unequivocal answer to the many questions I found it impossible to ask in my mind."<sup>2</sup>

Austerlitz never specifies what these questions could be, or why the objects in this shop window might provide answers. Yet this impression, that these physical things offer some crucial clue, drives the novel. It recalls what Walter Benjamin depicts as an object's "aura" in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction:" a "phenomenon of distance" between the observer and the observed.<sup>3</sup> "The person we look at," writes Benjamin in his essay on

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<sup>1</sup> W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 195.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 222.

Baudelaire, “or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return. This experience corresponds to the data of the *mémoire involontaire*.”<sup>4</sup> A relationship of mutual sight, the kind that occurs between people, here arises between human and object. The feeling Austerlitz entertains in front of the Antikos Bazar derives from such transposition. At this point he has finally turned toward his own past after a lifetime of almost willful amnesia and travelled to Terezín where he hopes to recover some aspect of his mother. Instead Austerlitz finds a lace tablecloth, brass mortars, cut-glass bowls, ceramic vases, a little box of seashells, a hunter’s bag, a Japanese fan, a landscape painting of a river. Despite what he knows—that these are worthless trinkets and moth-eaten clothes—the gaze of these things, which stand in place of his mother, draws Austerlitz into a reverie. “They were all . . . timeless . . . perpetuated but forever just occurring, the ornaments, utensils, and mementos stranded in the Terezín bazar, objects that for reasons one could never know had outlived their former owners and survived the process of destruction, so that I could now see my own faint shadow image barely perceptible among them.”<sup>5</sup>

Sebald here endows these objects with the same aura that Benjamin identifies; the floating reflection in the window is the image of Austerlitz that appears in the space between the

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 188. The phrase “*mémoire involontaire*” is Proust’s, coined in contrast to “*mémoire volontaire*.” Benjamin is in part interested in the way that Proust restored the figure of the storyteller who does not convey information but embeds what happens in himself “in order to pass it on as experience to those listening” (Benjamin, 159). To this end, *mémoire involontaire* is critical, for the past, as Proust says, lies “somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakable present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us), though we have no idea which one it is” (quoted by Benjamin, 158). Sebald is also trafficking in these ideas, using objects to gesture toward what is beyond the intellect, and embedding this experience in his narrator as well as the reader.

<sup>5</sup> Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 197.

object and the character himself. James Wood has suggested that part of Sebald's intent is to equate Austerlitz with the inanimate things around him, as though this man himself is one of the objects that has been left behind, forgotten, a piece of rubble in the movement of history.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Jens Brockmeier has argued that this scene at the Antikos Bazar ultimately secures for Austerlitz a definitive "autobiographical glance," whereby the objects become "mementos of his own lost memory."<sup>7</sup> Yet throughout the novel, Sebald does something more than merely draw parallels between objects and Austerlitz or position objects as symbols of Austerlitz's own displacement. Though Austerlitz does feel some relation to these trinkets, Sebald also invests them with the capacity to meet the gaze of characters, and this in turn drives an interpretation of what the objects "see." Time and again, Sebald frames scenes with pensive descriptions of commonplace objects, or threads the same object through multiple events. An aura becomes attached to these things, and an opportunity arises not only to trace their unique context and history (or to use Benjamin's term, their "authenticity") or to understand them as a foil for Austerlitz's own plight, but to interpret the image of the self that the object extends.

Whereas Ferrante's characters turn to objects to regain and assert self-possession, Sebald's objects provoke his characters' self-questioning. An essential aspect of this is an object's associative potential, which Sebald allows to manifest in the circling, often incomplete language he uses to describe them. This stands in stark contrast to Knausgaard's reductive cataloging—Sebald relies upon an object to be broadly evocative, while Knausgaard seeks to distill objects into one clearly defined essence. The objects in Luiselli's novel inspire a shift from the rhetoric of political journalism into the playful vocabulary of children, and while objects do

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<sup>6</sup> James Wood, "Sent East," *London Review of Books*, October 6, 2011, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n19/james-wood/sent-east>.

<sup>7</sup> Jens Brockmeier, "Austerlitz's Memory," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 6, no. 2 (2008): 362. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pan.0.0016>.

not directly change the language that is available to *Austerlitz*, they do provide an alternative to the received, generic images of the persecution of the twentieth century, thereby encouraging discursive thought about these tragedies.

Throughout *Austerlitz*, Sebald establishes and appeals to the aura of objects to depict the past that is not otherwise accessible through the avenues of voluntary memory. Alongside the latent meanings of these trinkets, there is a suggestion here about Austerlitz's own attempt to locate himself. This is a central question for Sebald: How do the ones who excavate their past position themselves within the findings? Austerlitz does not unearth many definitive answers, and the effort that begins as one of recovery and slowly morphs into an attempt at salvation, eventually resolves into a process of acceptance. This search is not for lost time (after all, Austerlitz does not own a watch) as much as it is for a part of the self that exists somewhere between what happened and what did not. Here, objects are invested with the ability to return the gaze of characters. This image of the person reflected is an amalgamation of desire and history, and Sebald uses this composite to suggest the full scope of his character's psyche. Objects provide a proof and picture of identity, establish a relationship with time, and most of all guide the experience of reliving the past. Using the specific physicality and simultaneously mysterious origins of objects, Sebald reflects the image of a character who is likewise both in time and outside of it, both known to himself and a stranger. Such a character only truly exists at the moment when he can articulate a desire, but before the attempt to fulfill it has tarnished the *anticipation* of its fulfillment. Objects provide the means by which Austerlitz comes into this position, allowing him to imagine, and thereby recapture, the life he cannot live.

Apart from the moment in front of the Antikos Bazar, the only other time in the novel that Austerlitz confronts his own image is when Vera presents him with the photo of a boy dressed as the Rose Queen's page. This should be the image that unlocks Austerlitz's childhood, but it only leaves him perplexed, failing to evoke even a memory of this moment. "I was not moved or distressed," Austerlitz reports, ". . . only speechless and uncomprehending, incapable of any lucid thought."<sup>8</sup> Austerlitz's own identification with the image fails and this creates a curious dynamic in the novel, for if the objects that supposedly represent the subject accurately across time do not in fact preserve what is essential about a person, then what does? Austerlitz examines this photograph with a magnifying glass, as though the thing he is looking for might just be really small, or maybe hiding somewhere. Certainly, this is a ridiculous way to look at such an image, yet it suggests that Austerlitz's concern is not only about *what he can recognize in himself* by looking at a photograph, but about *where in an object* recognition resides.

The identity of Austerlitz is a central preoccupation of the novel, and the answers, such as they are, rarely come from the expected sources. Instead Sebald arranges commonplace objects around Austerlitz that draw out reflections and interpretations of who this man might be. When the narrator first encounters Austerlitz, he is sitting in the *Salle des pas perdus* in Antwerp's Centraal Station.<sup>9</sup> The narrator describes him in some detail—wavy hair, heavy walking boots,

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<sup>8</sup> Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 184.

<sup>9</sup> Establishing Sebald's "lost steps" over and against Proust's "lost time," and conjuring the notion of a "lost cause." And while a common moniker of waiting rooms at train stations and in courthouses, one of the better-known *Salles des pas perdus* is at the Palace of Justice of Brussels where Austerlitz meets the narrator by accident very early in their acquaintance. Austerlitz reports that this building is "the largest accumulation of stone blocks anywhere in Europe," and though he does not mention the coincidence that there exists in this building a room of the same name as that in which he and the narrator first met, he does remark that the enormous building was so hastily built that it contains "corridors and stairways leading nowhere, and doorless rooms and halls where no one would ever step foot, empty spaces surrounded by walls and representing the innermost secret of all sanctioned authority" (29). Lost steps confined by a mountain of stone.

workman's trousers—and notes that he removes a camera from a rucksack to take a few pictures of the mirrors in the hall. The following day, after resuming the conversation and walking through the city with the narrator, Austerlitz makes his concluding remarks at the Antwerp Glove Market just as he slings his rucksack over his shoulder. The two men meet a few more times in Brussels and London, but then twenty years pass before their next encounter. The narrator has just had eye surgery but he recognizes Austerlitz on the edge of a rowdy drinking crowd by his rucksack, which sends him into a reverie on the likeness between Austerlitz and Ludwig Wittgenstein.<sup>10</sup> The philosopher also carried a rucksack with him everywhere, to the point where his sister once wrote to him that this object was almost as dear to her as Wittgenstein himself. In fact, the narrator comes to think of Austerlitz every time he sees a photograph of the great thinker, one of which appears on the third page of the book. Both men, Austerlitz and Wittgenstein, the narrator tells us, share a supreme aptitude for logical thought inextricably linked to confused emotions, as well as a “wish to manage with as few possessions as possible.”<sup>11</sup>

Quickly this initially unremarkable object that Austerlitz carries with him has become not only the means of recognizing him after two decades, but solicits an association that provides the first insight into Austerlitz's character. The comparison with Wittgenstein is both favorable (the famous philosopher who also spent his career relentlessly investigating the relationship between objects, language, and identity), and circumscribed: both men's logical thought dogged by their confused emotions. This rucksack, Austerlitz proceeds to tell the narrator, has been “the only

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<sup>10</sup> For more on the comparison between Wittgenstein and Austerlitz see Nina Pelikan Straus, “Sebald, Wittgenstein, and the Ethics of Memory,” *Comparative Literature* 61, no. 1 (2009): 43-53. Straus suggests a correlation between ethics and aesthetics centered on the photographs that appear in Sebald's text, taking cues from the philosopher.

<sup>11</sup> Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 41.

truly reliable thing” in his life.<sup>12</sup> What kind of man says this about his backpack? If he endeavors to live with as few possessions as possible, are they all inside? Sebald even includes a picture of a frumpy rucksack hanging from a coatrack. But this initially innocuous object slowly begins to accumulate significance and, much like the objects in the Terezín bazar window, comes to be one of the things that not only reveals Austerlitz to the narrator, but to Austerlitz himself.

Nearly a hundred pages later, Austerlitz is in the throes of despair. He has buried all his writing in his backyard and is roaming around London at night, tortured by a feeling that he has no idea, cannot even express in words, who he is. Again and again he inexplicably returns to Liverpool Street Station which is under construction, and one day notices a white-turbaned porter sweeping up trash. Without thinking, Austerlitz follows this man through a doorway to a massive waiting room (another *salle des pas perdus*). The cavernous room has been sectioned off for renovation but as Austerlitz steps behind the plastic sheets he sees, quite suddenly, the figures of a woman and a man dressed in the style of the thirties, as well as the boy they have come to meet, a child of about four years in white knee-high socks alone on a bench, a boy Austerlitz recognizes by the rucksack in his lap as himself. “I felt something rending within me, and a sense of shame and sorrow, or perhaps something quite different, something inexpressible because we have no words for it, just as I had no words all those years ago when the two strangers came over to me speaking a language I did not understand.”<sup>13</sup> The recognition of a self via an object is like being addressed in a foreign language: a meaning indecipherable, but a meaning all the same. Indeed, in the days following young Austerlitz’s meeting of the pastor and his wife, his little

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 137.

green rucksack inexplicably disappears, an absence he associates with “the dying away of my native tongue,” as if this thing were the physical manifestation of speaking and comprehension.<sup>14</sup>

The memory of arriving to England that Sunday morning at the Liverpool Street Station prompts Austerlitz to confront his willful ignorance of his own past and the twentieth century history of Europe. This decision propels him to Prague, where he reconnects with Vera who stood with four-year-old Austerlitz on the day he departed from Czechoslovakia all those years ago. She recalls to him the boy at Wilsonova Station with a rucksack—“*un petit sac à dos avec quelques viatiques . . .* those had been Vera’s exact words, summing up, as he now thought, the whole of his later life.”<sup>15</sup> Not only is the rucksack something that Austerlitz has come to rely upon, but it is here presented as the ultimate emblem of his life. A little sack with the small things for travelling seem to be all that Austerlitz has ever had, as if his life were nothing more than a brief journey. A viaticum is an allowance for travelling expenses or a supply of small provisions for a trip, from the Latin *via*. But it is also the term used for the last rites given to a person on the verge of death. The things Austerlitz carries with him in his rucksack—his camera, his notebook, maybe a few pencils—are both his only necessary provisions, as well as his ticket to another life.

When Vera later reminds Austerlitz of his family’s trips to Marienbad, he recalls the journey he took there years before with Marie de Verneuil, perhaps the one true love of his life. It was to be a lighthearted trip, one of healing and companionship, but while he is there Austerlitz cannot shake an overwhelming sense of foreboding and becomes withdrawn, unable to describe to Marie what he feels. Eventually she confronts him, taking offense that he hasn’t

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

unpacked, “always preferring to live out of a rucksack.”<sup>16</sup> He tries to explain but falls short and remains isolated from Marie, forcing her to turn away. Only later, when Vera tells him of his past in this resort town, does the reason for Austerlitz’s despondency become clear, though by then it is too late, Marie is gone. Austerlitz departs Prague, taking the same train route through Germany that he travelled as a boy all those years ago, and steps off in Nuremburg where an old woman presses a one-mark coin into his hand, “probably taking me for one of the homeless because of my old rucksack.”<sup>17</sup>

Objects in Sebald’s hands are not simply emblematic or restrained in their significance. The rucksack that was initially portrayed as the only reliable thing in Austerlitz’s life is also the spur to investigate his own past and “*un petit sac à dos avec quelques viatique,*” words that sum up his essence. It would make sense if Sebald left the rucksack alone at this point, for it has served its narrative purpose by elucidating these corners of Austerlitz’s psychology. Yet the final two mentions of the object complicate its significance. Marie criticizes Austerlitz by way of his rucksack, as though he were some child or half-formed person whose presence in the world is fundamentally stunted. And in Nuremburg, the city where Austerlitz’s father first witnessed the horrific nationalistic furor of the Third Reich, the rucksack represents Austerlitz as homeless. Not only has the rucksack shown Austerlitz to himself, but it presents him to the reader through the eyes of other characters who find in Austerlitz the same qualities that he happens to entertain himself—a stunted life and homelessness.

At once the source of meaning and an indication of a tenuous place in reality, the rucksack does not become an exalted object that can only mean in one direction. The object confers on Austerlitz varied recollections and identities, evoking and revealing some of the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 224.

conditions of his displacement as well as affirming through the eyes of others what he feels to be true about himself. Nonetheless, the rucksack might very well end up in an Army surplus story as nothing but a piece of junk. In fact, it often seems that it is *because* of an object's insignificance that it can potentially signify. Just as Barthes refuses to analyze the white porcelain saucer with the imperfect glaze, offering it as a "matte" anamnesis, so does the unassuming aspect of the rucksack make it a suitable vehicle for various affiliations in *Austerlitz*. What is plain and commonplace about the rucksack helps it retain an unqualified presence in the novel, and prevents it from being reduced to a reliable symbol. The multiple associations Austerlitz has with his rucksack suggest the kinds of connections he is looking for in the trinkets at the Terežín bazar. It essentially validates Austerlitz's feeling that an old piece of clothing or lost figurine might reveal unequivocal answers to yet unformed questions.

The invisible significance of physical objects not only links meaning with the inconspicuous, it also arranges an experience of time.<sup>18</sup> A critical aspect of objects in *Austerlitz* is their capacity to outlast their owners and persist through the years; to be at once immersed in time while also outside of it. Of all Austerlitz's possessions, one of his most treasured is a gold-framed card with willow leaves from a tree on St. Helena and a piece of lichen taken from Marshal Ney's tombstone on July 31, 1830. It was a gift from André Hilary, and reminds Austerlitz daily of his adored teacher and friend who was also the first person to whom Austerlitz ever revealed his true name. This occurred after Hilary delivered a long lecture on the 1805 Battle of Austerlitz and Napoleon's most dramatic and arguably important victory. While Hilary

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<sup>18</sup> In scholarship on Sebald, the claim is frequently made that photographs in particular are the object that collapses distinctions between different time periods (cf. Carolin Duttlinger, Stefanie Harris, J. J. Long). Mary Griffin Wilson offers a particularly lucid argument of this kind in "Sheets of Past: Reading the Image in W. G. Sebald's 'Austerlitz,'" *Contemporary Literature* 54, no 1. (2013): 49-76. This section seeks to extend the understanding of Sebald's manipulation of time beyond the photograph to include the material properties of objects.

is speaking, Austerlitz not only feels an increasing connection to the people of France but “the more Hilary mentioned the word *Austerlitz* in front of the class, the more it really did become my own name.”<sup>19</sup> Hilary essentially baptizes Austerlitz in his true name, and sets him on a path of an academic career that will deliver him from the stifling manse of a country preacher. After high school, Hilary helps Austerlitz obtain his British citizenship, and the two men remain close, often visiting the dilapidated country houses and estates all around Oxford.

On one of these excursions, they come to Iver Grove, a stately property belonging to James Mallord Ashman, whose ancestors built the house and who now farms the land himself. Ashman shows the two friends around and tells them about his grandfather, the last man to live in the building and a reclusive insomniac who devoted himself to studying the trajectory of the moon. However, Ashman continues, leading them into the billiards room, on cloudy nights or during a new moon, his grandfather would play pool against himself until dawn. Since his grandfather’s death on New Year’s Eve in 1813 (on the eve of the year of Napoleon’s first abdication and the beginning of the Bourbon Restoration), not even a cue has been touched in the game room. Everything—the ivory balls, chinks, brushes—lies as it was left one hundred and fifty years ago. Even the ledger where the man entered his wins and losses against himself with scientific precision under the rubric *Ashman v. Ashman* remains open on a tall desk. “It was as if time, which usually runs so irrevocably away, had stood still here, as if the years behind us were still to come.”<sup>20</sup>

In the middle of this scene is a full-spread image of two billiard balls, one black and one white, about six inches apart on pock-marked felt. They look celestial, like the moon and its opposite in orbit. Ashman describes how during the house’s requisition in 1941, he hid the doors

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<sup>19</sup> Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 72.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

to the billiards room and nursery with false walls and wardrobes, as if the fact that these spaces remained untouched (still redolent, in some way, of Napoleon himself) was the most valuable part of the property. Then in the early 1950s when he returned to the house, Ashman looked back into the nursery and was overwhelmed by the objects preserved inside—the model train, Noah’s Ark with toy animals, the notches on the side of the table he carved in a fury when he was eight years old the day before he was sent off to preparatory school—“as if a chasm of time were opening up before him,” and the next thing he knew he was outside firing his rifle at the clock on top of the coach house, leaving on its face a new set of marks.<sup>21</sup>

How to measure a life held in abeyance? The precise pattern tracked by the clock misrepresents the dimensions of existence for these characters. And yet how is one to get beyond a framework so fundamental to human conceptions of self? Here, Sebald turns to objects to articulate an acute instability in the present. The game of billiards, its white cue scattering and pursuing the other balls, is here juxtaposed with selenography, the delineation of the moon. Yet what is there to delineate? The moon tracks the same path night after night, month after month, year in and year out. It is perhaps the most well-understood celestial body. Delineating its progress is about as revealing as describing the hands of a clock circling twelve numbers—after the facts have been established, there is not much more to say and certainly no surprises. Billiards, on the other hand, combines mathematical geometry and physical certainty with the unpredictability of human skill. While there is an exact numerical description of how a shot should ricochet off the rails and the direction it will knock the other balls, there are so many miniscule factors that determine the trajectory—how the player holds their cue, the exact place the cue strikes the ball, the angle of the arm—that controlling them all perfectly is just beyond

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

the humanly possible. Anyone who has played billiards knows how often these universal laws of geometry and physics can evaporate in the middle of a game. Sometimes one cannot help feel that it might even be a game of luck, for so often there are inexplicable runs, flashes of skill that the next day disappear when the balls refuse to land in the pockets. The game starts to seem like the intersection of chance and will that, of course, because it is a game with no time limit, occurs outside the constraints of the clock. On these terms, *Ashman v. Ashman* suddenly begins to seem not so ridiculous after all, as if a record of all the games won and lost against one's self might very well be an accurate description of this man's existence.

“In what way do objects immersed in time differ from those left untouched by it?”<sup>22</sup> This is a perennial question for Austerlitz who is himself seemingly outside of time. The situation he faces is part of what André Aciman has termed “irrealis time” in which time, to the extent that it exists at all, “operates on several planes simultaneously, where foresight and hindsight, prospection and retrospection, are continuously coincident.”<sup>23</sup> Austerlitz's feeling that he has been living the wrong life is in part confirmed when he begins to track down his origins. It is not quite that Austerlitz made a conscious mistake, but that time has left him behind, transpiring in such a way that his life both does and does not seem to have occurred. Not only was he displaced at a young age, cut off from his parents and compelled to adopt a new language and citizenship, Austerlitz has spent his entire career immersed in a truncated history. His meticulous architectural studies have always stopped just at the turn of the twentieth century, and for much of his life he actively avoided all knowledge of contemporary Europe, especially Germany and the entire period of the Second World War. To the extent that his work was an attempt to

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>23</sup> André Aciman, “Sebald, Misspent Lives” in *Homo Irrealis: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 75-88.

understand his society, he might as well have been studying the moon. This does not appear to have been a conscious decision, but once Austerlitz realizes how absolutely he has eschewed this most relevant time period, it seems impossible to think of it as anything other than a peculiar, *unconscious* mistake.

The image that Vera hands over to Austerlitz in Prague of himself as the Rose Queen's page is an absolute fact, but a mute one; the years have wiped it clean. Instead, Austerlitz begins to assign it his own, invented meaning: "I always felt a piercing, inquiring gaze of the page boy who had come to demand his dues," he says, "who was waiting in the gray light of dawn on the empty field for me to accept the challenge and aver the misfortune to come."<sup>24</sup> In other words, the photo prompts him to reimagine the way his life might have unfolded. Suddenly Austerlitz feels responsibility for the past, as though he must find some way to turn back the clock and rearrange a crucial event.<sup>25</sup> Objects like this photograph that compel Austerlitz's gaze yet withdraw just before they confer a definite revelation are essential to Sebald's project because

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<sup>24</sup> Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 184.

<sup>25</sup> There has been some useful criticism about Sebald's engagement with "belatedness," originally a concept Freud used in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to describe the compulsion to repeat a repressed trauma long after it occurred. Cf. Carolin Duttlinger and Mary Griffin Wilson, both of whom make good use of this photographic example to locate Sebald in scholarship on trauma. But the moment also recalls Donald Winnicott's psychotic who, as discussed in the introduction of this study, is unable to incorporate trauma into his psyche and therefore continues to fear a catastrophe that has already occurred. Barthes likens himself to such a person in *Mourning Diary*, and the characterization seems perhaps more closely aligned with Austerlitz's psychological position than belatedness. In Winnicott's study, repressed trauma prompts the patient to search the future for events that have happened in the past, and this, Winnicott argues, is responsible for the feeling of living an un-lived life. Despite Austerlitz's attempts to reenact his trauma (taking the same train through Germany that he did as a child, returning the Estates Theater where his mother performed, etc.), he remains disoriented in an unsteady present where the future could somehow influence the past. The feeling that this page boy has come to collect his dues is exactly the kind of fear that Winnicott describes, and the ensuing sensation of living the wrong life a further symptom of the illness. Aciman's treatment of "irrealis time" pinpoints this precisely in terms of the continued persecution of the Holocaust when he writes, "It's not about what did not, will not, but about what could still but might never occur" ("*Sebald, Misspent Lives*," 82). In this framework, the discussion about Sebald's grappling with trauma expands into a nuanced consideration of the more broadly applicable psychological conditions that lead to the "counterfactual."

they suggest for his characters that the divisions between past, present, and future are not absolute. The photograph snatches a moment away from time, and thrusts its subjects into a kind of parallel universe where time's ravages are briefly suspended, yet reconciliation remains impossible.

James Ashman, who has diligently preserved the billiards room just as his grandfather left it, invokes the descriptive power of the objects to express this unreal time. These things provide an avenue behind the clock, so to speak, a simultaneous co-existence of all time. When Ashman opens the nursery and finds the cuts on the desk, he is at once a boy of eight about to be sent away and a grown man reencountering himself. He brings to this moment all he knows has transpired since those marks were carved. And this is Sebald's game, his works are exercises in receiving objects from the past which his characters endow with their knowledge of what has transpired in the intervening time. These things and their associations are not memories so much as instigations, and beneath the weight of everything that has come since, they become infinitely complex, at once mathematically logical and impossible to decipher.

Sebald plucks these relics from the corners and animates this process of reencounter. "It seems to me," Austerlitz muses, "as if all the moments of our life occupy the same space, as if future events already existed and were only waiting for us to find our way to them at last."<sup>26</sup> At another point, he wonders if "time did not exist at all, only various spaces interlocking according to the rules of a higher form of stereometry, between which the living and the dead can move back and forth as they like."<sup>27</sup> To some extent, the entire novel becomes a kind of study and measurement of solid objects that interlock spaces across time. Much like the rucksack, the rooms preserved at Iver Grove and the objects within them offer a distinct articulation of

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<sup>26</sup> Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 257.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

Austerlitz's groundlessness in the present. The resonance of the untouched pool cue and model train, of the open record book and the marks on the desk, provide some means of parsing Austerlitz's cryptic feeling that he has always had "no place in reality, as if I were not there at all."<sup>28</sup> These are not only symbols or reflections of Austerlitz's situation, but expose the otherworldly feeling that Austerlitz means and stand an alternative to the rigid ticking of the clock.

The exact same consideration surrounds the "memento" from Hilary—the bit of lichen and a few willow leaves. Without context, these would be nothing but trash, but the knowledge that the leaves are from the island of Napoleon's final exile, and the lichen snatched from Ney's grave (a martyred hero of republican principle) on the very day that the Bourbon monarchy fell, establishing, for the first time in France, a popular sovereignty—all of this alongside the intimacy that Austerlitz shared with Hilary and the ways of thinking that he learned at his side, makes the framed leaves and fungus uniquely capable of collapsing chronology and extending a simultaneous co-existence of these different times.<sup>29</sup> These things, precisely because they have been removed from time, retain their historical associations. In a sense, Austerlitz is only able to make his enquiry into the past through objects that have, like him, been removed from it.

While *Austerlitz* is the story of a single man, through him Sebald broadly invokes the displaced and disappeared. In part, this seems to be one of the functions the unnamed narrator serves: a witness to the history of persecution, emigration, and loss. The narrator receives Austerlitz's

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> There is an intentional association here with Bergsonian "duration" as developed by Gilles Deleuze into "coexistence" and "non-chronological time" in *Cinema 2*. Mary Griffin Wilson uses these terms to make her argument about the relationship between photographs and time in Sebald's novel, yet she overlooks the image of the billiards balls, missing the connection between objects and time in a complimentary relationship to photography.

account of himself, and endows it with even further layering, augmenting Austerlitz's story and providing a framework for conceiving such an outsized past.<sup>30</sup> And perhaps the narrator's role reflects how the reader is likewise engaged in the process of recovery, as though Sebald is pointing at his narrator and saying to his reader that our task is not so very different. The effect is one in which specific histories and lives evoke unnamed thousands, and the experience of encountering just one individual—Austerlitz—is broadly refracted. And just as the objects that affect Austerlitz signify in multiple directions, so do they link his narrative with many others. In short, a further consequence of lingering on the questions that surround a physical thing is to extend the subjective approach of the novel outwards and enunciate a collective reckoning.

After the narrator's first encounter with Austerlitz, he visits the Breendonk fortress outside Antwerp that was requisitioned by the SS as a prison during the German occupation of Belgium. The narrator is not entirely sure why he has been drawn there other than Austerlitz's description of its star-like design the previous day. He is aware of the gruesome history of the place and yet once there both can and cannot understand what he is seeing. In the anteroom of the fort, one of the wheelbarrows that was used by the prisoners to remove the millions of tons of soil that covered the fortifications is on display, a crude and clumsy object of rough-hewn planks and an iron-shod wheel, surely weighing at least a hundred pounds. And even though the museum displays this object as a kind of prop by which to imagine what life must have been like

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<sup>30</sup> Marianne Hirsch has suggested that this is an *affiliative* role that characterizes second-generation engagement with trauma endured by the previous generation. In her discussion of "postmemory" whereby descendants of trauma survivors endure their own, related trauma, she writes, "Affiliative postmemory is thus no more than an extension of the loosened familial structure occasioned by war and persecution. It is the result of contemporaneity and generational connection with the literal second generation, combined with a set of structures of mediation that would be broadly available, appropriable, and, indeed, compelling enough to encompass a larger collective in an organic web of transmission" (*The Generation of Postmemory*, 36). Austerlitz, the narrator, and Sebald are all contemporaries who can, according to Hirsch, affiliate the same trauma inheritance.

for the prisoners forced to push it, full of wet earth, over the ground furrowed by ruts and mired by rain—prisoners who probably had never done any physical labor before and who were not only starved but constantly beaten—the narrator finds that “it was impossible to picture them bracing themselves against the weight until their hearts nearly burst.”<sup>31</sup> It is an odd admission, for the narrator has, in fact, just described these people and their horrible chore. Yet Sebald seems to be saying something else: that even though we can look at a thing, describe the experience it signifies, and even conceptually admit the pain associated with it for another person, it is exceedingly difficult, perhaps even impossible, to truly understand the experience of living in such pain. Here, the object that so often plays the go-between from one subjective experience to another, refuses a transference. It is facile, Sebald suggests, to believe that in simply seeing a wheelbarrow (or looking at a photograph, visiting a memorial, recovering diaries, or so many of the other ways we attempt to assuage ourselves of history), we can know what it was like or claim to have done some justice.<sup>32</sup>

In a 2001 interview with Michael Silverblatt, Sebald cautioned against depicting the Holocaust directly. He suggested that the terrible images of these camps seared into our minds actually “militate against our capacity for discursive thinking, for reflecting upon these things, and also paralyze, as it were, our moral capacity. So the only way in which one can approach these things . . . is obliquely, tangentially, by reference, rather than by direct confrontation.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> There is a robust debate about what constitutes an “authentic” object of memorial (Cf. James Young on the insufficiency of symbolic memorialization, Gary Weissman on that fantasy of witnessing, and Steffi De Jong on the object as witness), and various scholars have suggested the strengths and shortcomings of Sebald’s overall approach to mourning and trauma (Stefanie Boese, Jens Brockmeier, Richard Crownshaw, Katja Garloff, Marianne Hirsch, J. J. Long, Samuel Pane, and others). The aim here is to invoke this vein of scholarly debate (one that Sebald himself engaged) by placing the object’s insufficiency as an authentic memorial within the context of the broader ways it determines the narrative of this novel.

<sup>33</sup> Sebald, W. G., “Michael Silverblatt, A Poem of an Invisible Subject (interview),” in *The Emergence of*

This echoes the warning of Hilary in the classroom on the day of the Austerlitz lecture, when he asserts that the performed images of history are the “images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered.”<sup>34</sup> This is precisely the case for his narrator at Breendonk who finds that instead of being able to grasp the lives of the inmates, he has an easier time imagining the ones with the whip. After the anteroom, he sees the officer’s mess with scrubbed tables and bulging stove, and can “well imagine the sight of good fathers and dutiful sons . . . sitting here when they came off duty to play cards or write letters to their loved ones at home.”<sup>35</sup> Not only does the object that is intended to facilitate empathy fail to foster a genuine connection, but in the mess hall the narrator admits instead a guilt-ridden sensitivity to the wrong group. The narrator (and anyone who visits the site of persecution) wants to be able to connect with the people who suffered, as if by doing so he might provide some retroactive justice or at least validation for the victims. And perhaps something else is in play too, the desire to clear one’s own sense of guilt, as though visiting the memorial and being appalled by the wheelbarrow absolves one of the blame.

However the horror remains opaque, and it does so *because* of the presence of the wheelbarrow. The physicality of this cumbersome, primitive thing pushes the experience the narrator seeks further away. Meanwhile it is easy to imagine some part of the emotional experience of the officers in their mess hall, the men who were responsible for the terror that was so extreme in others as to be unfathomable. “After all,” the narrator admits, “I had lived among them until my twentieth year.”<sup>36</sup> Sebald’s narrator catches himself in the act of paying moral lip-

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*Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 77-86.

<sup>34</sup> Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 72.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

service to his own culpability. The narrator wants to clear his conscience, yet realizes he is more like the SS guards than he is the people who suffered at their hands. And through the object of the wheelbarrow, Sebald not only articulates this bind for all Germans, but for all people. Furthermore he locates the experience of his narrator confronting himself in a scenario in which he is both implicated and helpless. Through the wheelbarrow, the narrator appears to be saying once again, “This is unbearable.”

The quandary Sebald’s narrator is up against seems to be one of scale. When the narrator thinks back on his trip to Breendonk and reads the captions of the photographs of the stations of the fortress, his memory continues to cloud over, just as it did on the day when he was there, “because I did not really want to see what it had to show.”<sup>37</sup> As he reflects on the trip he thinks about “how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on.”<sup>38</sup> It is an unwieldy sentence in a novel where the histories of places and objects are so often the instigations of memory and constantly reengaged by Austerlitz and others. Sebald’s work seems to do the opposite of what his narrator claims is happening in this sentence. The history of Breendonk *has* been described, and the experience the narrator has at the museum is exactly the way the past, however imperfectly, is passed on. And yet Sebald returns to this feeling repeatedly, the sense that even though we can visit the sites of the past, perhaps see the objects that were a part of a lost life, history still slips away. A similar moment occurs when Austerlitz visits the Ghetto Museum in Terezín, immediately after standing transfixed in front of the Antikos Bazar.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 24.

I went around the exhibition by myself, said Austerlitz, through the rooms on the mezzanine floor and the floor above, stood in front of the display panels, sometimes skimming over the captions, sometimes reading them letter by letter, stared at the photographic reproductions, could not believe my eyes, and several times had to turn away and look out of the window into the garden behind the building, having for the first time acquired some idea of the history of the persecution which my avoidance system had kept from me for so long, and which now, in this place, surrounded me on all sides.<sup>39</sup>

This is a remarkable sentence, for without describing anything Austerlitz encounters, it conveys the overwhelming experience of his seeing. He is himself implicated, and we have a clear sense of both his horror and his shame, and he admits that for the first time he starts to have some sense of the history he has willfully denied. Yet the more he tries to reencounter or deepen his familiarity with this place and what has happened here, the more it slips away. In the pages that follow he partially catalogs his encounters in the museum—the framed ground plan of the star-shaped fortifications, the items that belonged to the inmates (handbags, belt buckles, clothes, brushes), and the areas for agricultural exploitation—and it appears that once again a place and the things in it have passed on a history.

Yet Austerlitz insists at the end of his visit that “I understood it all now, yet I did not understand it, for every detail . . . far exceeded my comprehension.”<sup>40</sup> His understanding starts to sound like the conception of his own existence—both of and separate from this world. That this

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

repository of objects and information at once reveals the past and simultaneously withholds it is almost like the image of the Rose Queen's page: the definite information, the picture, does not satisfy the mind. Rather, after the initial shock of realizing that there is indeed something meaningful within grasp—what Austerlitz describes at Terezín as an overwhelming emotion that forces him to pause, look out to the garden—the knowledge this expectation promises remains out of reach. Instead, it is the *possibility* of discovering an answer or finding the right photograph that becomes most meaningful.

In her perceptive article, “‘Forever Just Occurring’: Postwar Belatedness in W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*,” Stephanie Boese follows the same scenes outlined above at Breendonk and Terezín to draw conclusions about the material import of artefacts in *Austerlitz*. She notices that the German word *begreifen* means “to understand” but also “to grasp,” and suggests that the objects in these places are important not only as signifiers of trauma but because of their physicality, which has the potential to affect an experience of the past for someone like Austerlitz who cannot access it directly.<sup>41</sup> Her reading is valuable in the context of Holocaust studies and expands the scope of the scholarship that surrounds Sebald’s reckoning with collective trauma. Yet while the physicality of the object may serve an important affective function, Boese does not explore how this happens or to what degree. It is the possibility of what these objects promise that inspires a desire or a yearning to understand (*begreifen*). And it is from this aspirational position, one that is both rooted in his present and reaching into the past, that Austerlitz experiences (is affected by) the full measure of loss.

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<sup>41</sup> *Journal of Modern Literature* 39, no. 4 (2016): 117.

In his search for lost steps, Austerlitz's most fervent wish is to reencounter his mother. He asks Vera about her persistently, and her final years become the initial focus of his research, prioritized over information about his father. When he returns to London after his first journey to Prague and Terezín, Austerlitz obsesses over Theresienstadt, trying to understand it and searching for clues that will bring his mother into view. After a monumental eight-page sentence in which Austerlitz circles his own shame at having waited so long to confront the past and pays tribute to H. G. Adler, he arrives at the discovery of an archival film from the ghetto. The prospect of such a film—that piece of media which more than any other proclaims to represent reality *as it really was*—promises to reveal something fundamental for Austerlitz. He spends months trying to find it, convinced that if he could, perhaps something would be resolved.

I kept thinking that if only the film could be found I might be able to see or gain some inkling of what it was really like, and then I imagined recognizing Agáta, beyond any possibility of a doubt, a young woman as she would be by comparison with me today, perhaps among the guests outside the fake coffeehouse, or a saleswoman in the haberdashery shop, just taking a fine pair of gloves carefully out of one of the drawers, or singing the part of Olympia in the *Tales of Hoffmann*. . . . I imagined seeing her walking down the street in a summer dress and light-weight gabardine coat, said Austerlitz: among a group of ghetto residents out for a stroll, she alone seemed to make straight for me, coming closer with every step, until at last I thought I could sense her stepping out of the frame and passing over into me.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 245.

Austerlitz does not even know if this film exists, and yet his imagination takes off, raising up in front of him the desire to reclaim a connection with his mother. And it is not only that he might catch a glimpse of her and see what it was really like, but that Austerlitz would *recognize* her, and she in turn would come directly toward him. This is a particular desire, as if only Austerlitz's mother could confer on him a true identity. Austerlitz's ability to distinguish his mother might confirm that he is in fact her son and that despite all the years, a whole lifetime in another country with surrogate parents, he has not lost that most fundamental aspect of self-identity: the ability to know his mother "beyond any possibility of a doubt." And in turn, if Agáta would look toward him, would pass over, through the screen that holds time at a distance, the two would be reunited, mother and son once again whole.

Surprisingly, the film does exist, and when Austerlitz finally gets his hands on it he spends months carefully watching it, even paying someone to slow it down so that he can examine each individual frame. And he convinces himself that she is there, behind a balding man, her face partly covered by the time stamp. Already this is completely different than the encounter Austerlitz fantasized. Nonetheless he brings a print of the still on his next visit to Prague, where in the theatrical archives he discovers another photograph that resembles the dim recollection he has of his mother. The reader is prepared for a revelation: two photographs! Austerlitz brings them to Vera, but instead of triumph, we find the most indifferent and roundabout description of her verdict. "Vera, who had already spent some time studying the face of the woman in the concert audience which I had copied from the Theresienstadt film, before shaking her head and putting it aside, immediately and without a shadow of doubt, as she said,

recognized Agáta as she had been.”<sup>43</sup> This is followed by a stunning photograph of a woman emerging from darkness, and it seems impossible that such a relic would not command some definitive resolution. Immediately, however, Austerlitz’s narrative about this episode ends. He has nothing further to say about his mother, and limply gives the narrator an envelope with this photograph inside, “as a memento.”<sup>44</sup>

Just like the photograph of himself as the Rose Queen’s page, this image solves no mystery. Austerlitz does not even care to keep it—he hands the photograph over as if this picture of his mother, perhaps the only one he has, is nothing more than a cheap postcard. At the very moment when it seems Austerlitz might secure his grip on the past, satisfaction withdraws. Austerlitz has nothing to say about the image or about the disappointment of the film, as though the photograph’s factuality means nothing compared with the anticipation of the encounter. It is as though the film served its purpose well before Austerlitz ever saw it, the *possibility* of what it might reveal was more meaningful than the image it ultimately affords. And this is a crucial aspect of Sebald’s novel: Austerlitz’s desire is only fulfilled in the absence of what he desires. Here stands a fragile but evocative intersection with the human psyche. Sebald recognizes that what is satisfying is not what we have, but what we could have. And furthermore that the moment we firmly grasp something and call it our own, its allure and promise dissipates. The best things, the most meaningful moments, objects, and encounters, are those that we still imagine one day securing.<sup>45</sup> Before it actually exists, the film *is* the answer Austerlitz is looking

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> The example recalls the moment Charles Swann is about to kiss Odette de Crécy for the first time. For months Swann obsesses over this possibility, is nearly driven mad by the tension of Odette’s touch and withdrawal. Pages and pages are filled with yearning, and yet at the moment when the kiss is within grasp he delays it for a moment longer, as if about to leave a landscape forever. And the kiss itself is never even described. Sebald of course assimilates many of Proust’s turns, but it is worth noting how he here converts the romantic desire that manifests in the anticipation of fulfillment into a kind of memorial

for, while the disappointment of reality is kept at bay. As in Proust's novel, it is not the conclusive recovery of the past that Sebald is after, but the search for it. *Austerlitz* is not just a novel about how memory works, but a dramatization of the desire *for* memory, the story of its pursuit.

In her work on postmemory, Marianne Hirsch remarks on the indexical power of the Theresienstadt film. Initially it appears that what Austerlitz needs is some confirmation of his mother in this place, yet his fantasy before seeing the film reveals instead the desire for a preserved familial link. It is not actually what the image depicts that is important, but the relationship between the viewer and the photograph. Borrowing a term from Margaret Olin, Hirsch describes this altered dynamic as a “‘performative index’ . . . shaped by the reality of the viewer's needs and desires rather than by the subject's actual ‘having-been-there.’”<sup>46</sup> Olin herself came to this term in an analysis of Roland Barthes's description of a photograph by James Van der Zee that he describes incorrectly or perhaps misremembers. Olin uses this to draw into question the very existence of the Winter Garden photograph of Barthes's mother, which may actually be an amalgamation and confusion of a different photograph of Barthes's family as well as a description by Walter Benjamin of six-year-old Kafka.<sup>47</sup> “If the immense power of the photograph does not come from that which was in front of the camera,” Olin writes, “it lies elsewhere. . . . We endow [photographs] with the attributes we need them to have.”<sup>48</sup> This is the

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desire, as if drawing a parallel between the pursuit of love and reclaiming the past: both illusory destinations that are constantly just beyond reach.

<sup>46</sup> Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” in *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 47-8.

<sup>47</sup> Hirsch goes on to make a further comparison between Barthes and Austerlitz, who also mistakenly describes the woman he finds in the Theresienstadt film beneath the time stamp. Austerlitz mistakes the necklace his mother is wearing in a nearly identical manner as that in which Barthes mistakes the necklace in Van der Zee's image (Hirsch, 47-8).

<sup>48</sup> Margaret Olin, “Roland Barthes's ‘Mistaken’ Identification,” in *Touching Photographs*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 68-9.

performative index of a photograph, and it aligns closely with the *aura* that Benjamin observes in an object. And Barthes is keenly aware of this same quality when he writes “I may know better a photograph I remember than a photograph I am looking at.”<sup>49</sup> As Hirsch writes, “The need for a ‘before’ is not a matter of reality or indexicality, but of fantasy and affect. As Austerlitz shows, photographs can provide the stage for just such an affective encounter that can bring back the most primal childhood fears and desires for care and recognition.”<sup>50</sup>

The needs that Austerlitz brings to a photograph also determine his encounters with objects. While the original context and history of an object are important, these are not the only attributes of physicality that instill in Austerlitz the feeling that an object might answer the questions he finds it impossible to ask. The same meticulous and subtle maneuvering of the object to evoke and then guide desire that Sebald employs helps explain the secondary language that Barthes courts with his fresh flowers. In the fantasy occasioned by the Theresienstadt film’s possible existence, Austerlitz lives out a desire that he cannot otherwise articulate for an experience he knows cannot exist. The impossible moment of mutual recognition with his mother and the fusion with her nonetheless transpires, as though Austerlitz really is living two separate lives in parallel realities. Likewise Barthes both is and is not with his mother so long as he keeps those flowers fresh. In both cases the object is a portal that reveals and withdraws, generating the conditions for desire and its fulfillment; a state of mind in which the past and the future coexist. Because objects only reveal themselves piecemeal, they help direct this longing.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 53.

<sup>50</sup> Hirsch, “Generation of Postmemory,” 52.

<sup>51</sup> There is a philosophical undercurrent here that lightly resembles what has recently been theorized as “object-oriented ontology” in which the relationship between object and subject determines the full extent of “reality” (cf. Ian Bogost, Graham Harman, Timothy Morton, et. al.). An important aspect of this theory is the extent to which objects are withdrawn from their surroundings—whether they should be considered self-contained entities or fundamentally relational. The kind of withdrawal I have in mind here is much more closely aligned with the way that a dream recedes upon waking, but for the epistemologically-

The trinkets in the bazar raise questions, the rucksack dissimulates, the wheelbarrow confuses, the possible existence of a film draws out yearning. The physicality of these things inspires a sense that they might provide some clue, which in turn compels connections and interpretations.

This performative aspect of the object and its aura becomes even more clear in Austerlitz's visit to the Estate Theater where his mother once performed. The image that Austerlitz finds of his mother in the Prague theatrical archives recalls the first evening that he spent with Vera in the Šporkova apartment. She tells him of his mother's debut in Prague in the role of Olympia in Jacques Offenbach's opera, *The Tales of Hoffmann*, a part Agáta always dreamed of, and of a dress rehearsal that they all attended together. The next morning Austerlitz goes to the theater and sits for a long time in the empty seats, trying to conjure some recollection of being there as a child. But the harder he tries the more his mind seems to cloud over, until "someone or other" walks across the stage behind the velvet curtain, "sending a ripple through the heavy folds of fabric."<sup>52</sup> Without warning, the "shadows begin to move" and Austerlitz catches sight of the beetle-like conductor in tails, hears the disjointed sounds of the orchestra tuning and the flush of voices, and "all of a sudden I thought that in between one of the musicians' heads and the neck of a double bass, in the bright strip of light between the wooden floorboards and the hem of the curtain, I caught sight of a sky-blue shoe embroidered with silver sequins."<sup>53</sup> That evening he asks Vera about the shoe and she tells him that yes, Agáta did wear such shoes for her part as Olympia, and further that Austerlitz was, as a boy, deeply affected by the dress rehearsal, perhaps because he was afraid that his mother had truly changed into a complete stranger.

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concerned discussion see Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011).

<sup>52</sup> Sebald, *Austerlitz*, 161.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

Two objects are essential to these revelations—the rippling curtain and the blue sequined shoe. Without these physical hooks, the recollection that Austerlitz seeks eludes him. Only when Vera recalls his distress after Agáta’s dress rehearsal does Austerlitz re-encounter the grief “previously unknown to me” when he lay in bed, listening to the clock strike the hour and waiting for his mother to return to him from the theater, “from that other world,” and sit beside him.<sup>54</sup> And in an almost imperceptible shift in tenses from the past to the present, Sebald finally allows Austerlitz his full grief: “I see her wearing an ashen-gray silk bodice laced up in front, but cannot make out her face, only an iridescent veil of pale, cloudy milkiness wafting close to her skin, and then, said Austerlitz, I see the scarf slip from her right shoulder as she lays her hand on my forehead.”<sup>55</sup> Much like the moment when Austerlitz imagines recognizing his mother in the Theresienstadt film and she in turn passes out of the frame and into him, here Sebald combines the past and the present in a gesture of physicality. Alongside the curtain rippling and the shoe appearing, a scarf falling from the shoulder creates the moment when Austerlitz suddenly feels, once again, the hand of his mother.

Part of these encounters contend with Austerlitz’s fear that Agáta is a stranger to him. Just as he wants to be able to recognize her in the film, the young boy wants his mother to return to him from the stage where he has seen her transformed into someone else. Not only does the young boy see his mother in unfamiliar clothes pretending to be an entirely different person, but her role in the opera is one of doubleness. Olympia is Hoffmann’s first love, but also a mechanical doll that only appears to be human. Everyone can see this except Hoffmann, who has been tricked into wearing special glasses that prevent him from seeing the truth about this woman. Austerlitz too strives for an ideal, and synthesizing the image he had of his mother as a

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 162.

boy with the one he desires as an adult also occurs in a scenario in which sight is confused. At the theater, the proscenium arch of the stage is like “a blind eye” but then Austerlitz sees the curtain ripple and “catches sight” of the sky-blue shoe. At home, as a boy, he lies with his “eyes wide open in the dark” waiting for his mother to return, and in the end he both can and cannot see her: there is the ashen-gray bodice but he cannot make out her face, and it is ultimately her hand on his forehead that transcends the unreliability of sight and brings her presence to him fully.

The physicality of these scenes is both real and imagined, consequential and fleeting. And the objects that substantiate them cannot be suspended, they slip beyond their immediate purpose to reveal something else: the fluttering curtain, the sky-blue shoe are like a faint piece of music, a brief scent. What these things mean to Austerlitz is not entirely subjective, though neither is it broadly obvious. He interprets the way in which his attention lands on them, and follows their suggestions down otherwise concealed pathways. We can never be entirely certain what an object might reveal, Sebald seems to suggest. The photograph of Austerlitz’s mother at the Estates Theater is not nearly as consequential as asking Vera about the flashing image of a blue sequined shoe. On the one hand Sebald does not settle for the obvious interpretations, yet on the other he insists that objects can mean or describe otherwise hidden aspects of our experience through their layered contexts.

At the very end of the novel, Austerlitz stands on the eighteenth floor of the southeast tower of the Bibliothèque Nationale (the *tour des lois*) with his old friend Henri Lemoine, who tells him that between where they are on the *pont de Tolbiac* and the *gare d’Austerlitz* to the north, about as far as they can see, there was once an extensive warehouse complex where, during the war,

the Germans brought all the items requisitioned from some forty thousand apartments of Parisian Jews. Enormous resources were levied to perform the looting that was carried out by just about every institution in the city, from unions to banks, insurance agencies, landlords, police, and transport firms. “In the years from 1942 onwards,” Lemoine says, “everything our civilization has produced, whether for the embellishment of life or merely for everyday use, from Louis XVI chests of drawers, Meissen porcelain, Persian rugs and whole libraries, down to the last saltcellar and pepper mill, was stacked there in the Austerlitz-Tolbiac storage depot.”<sup>56</sup> Tremendous care was taken to organize and catalogue these things, and high-ranking SS and Wehrmacht officers would come with their wives to select furnishings for their new homes. To this day, no one knows what happened to most of these objects, the whole affair literally buried under the foundations of the library in which the two men are standing.

This is a harrowing end to Austerlitz’s tale, and almost like the novel itself in miniature. So much of Austerlitz’s life has been realized in train stations—from Liverpool to Wilsonova to Antwerp Centraal—and here the station that shares his name, perhaps the only piece of himself that Austerlitz truly retains from his parents, arises at the far edge of what he can see. Meanwhile, he stands in a library, that other public institution that has been an intimate part of his life (“equally at home in the Bodleian, the British Museum, and the rue Richelieu”) and specifically the very place where he first met Marie de Verneuil.<sup>57</sup> Between these two buildings stretches something of a wasteland of the Left Bank in the ‘80s—boarded-up warehouses, abandoned dockyards, garages—where years ago Austerlitz and Marie once came upon a travelling circus. A magician performed a conjuring trick with a bantam cockerel and then his entire family, dressed in Oriental clothing with long, fur-edged cloaks and green turbans, played

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 188-89.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 282.

a haunting waltz on flute, tuba, drums, bandoneon, and fiddle, beneath stars painted on the ceiling of their tent, while a snow-white goose stood motionless at their side, “as if it knew its own future and the fate of its present companions.”<sup>58</sup> And not a hundred yards away is the Salpêtrière Hospital, the enormous complex stretching over thirty hectares that “represents at any given time almost the entire range of disorders from which humanity can suffer” and where Austerlitz recovered from the first of several fainting fits that caused the temporary but complete loss of memory and where he may have perished were it not for Marie’s patient visits and ministrations.<sup>59</sup>

Here is the full scope of Austerlitz’s life—train station, name, library; Marie, amnesia, coincidence, and inscrutable fate. His transitory being, the search for knowledge, illness, and the sorrow of a funeral dirge all converge on this bit of land. The Oriental band of gypsies—an image evoked in photographs, dreams, and mirages in all of Sebald’s fiction—here manifests in the guise of the Bastiani Traveling Circus, delivering to Austerlitz his most specific sense of fate in a recurring Sebaldian object, a snow-white goose.<sup>60</sup> As he looks from the tower of laws north past the towers of letters and of time, on toward the building of his very name, he learns that beneath it all, at the exact center point between the station, hospital, library, and the flowing river (that eternal image of time’s passage), as if substantiating the whole premise of his being, lies a collection of lost objects. This mass of Persian rugs and pepper mills, the porcelain figurines and furniture, “everything our civilization has produced” exemplifies the injustice and destruction of

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>60</sup> For example, see the third story of *The Emigrants*, “Ambros Adelwarth,” and the narrator’s visit to the New York insane asylum, Samaria Sanitorium. There he finds Dr. Abramsky with a white goose wing protruding from his coat pocket. The old man remembers the case of Adelwarth and after recounting his final days, says not a word of farewell to the narrator, but traces a gentle arch with the wing against the darkening sky.

so many, the very circumstances responsible for the unfolding of Austerlitz's life, and the full enquiry of this novel. It recalls Vera telling Austerlitz about his mother's deportation and lingering on the abrupt removal of everything Agáta once owned, "furniture, the lamps and candelabra, the carpets and curtains, the books and musical scores, the clothes from the wardrobes and drawers, the bed linen, pillows, eiderdowns, blankets, china and kitchen utensils, the pot plants and umbrellas, even the bottled pears and cherries which had been standing forgotten in the cellar for years, and the remaining potatoes . . . down to the very last spoon."<sup>61</sup>

These things do not just signify Agáta but somehow substantiate her—their disappearance asserts Agáta's forced removal more fully than Vera can herself articulate. And perhaps for the same reason that the narrator has an easier time imagining the lives of the SS officers at Breendonk, the common objects that once belonged to people who have been murdered, objects that we too have in our lives, somehow makes the unfathomable just slightly more accessible.<sup>62</sup> Sebald seems to suggest the things we leave behind—whether they outlast us or are stolen—have the capacity not only to exist outside of time, but to return to us to what is lost. This occurs not through recollection, but in the pursuit of interpretation.

Perhaps this final geographical array that Austerlitz looks out upon suggests the system and intent that substantiates Sebald's use of objects. The things that he singles out offer no simple interpretation but repeat and refine questions. Sometimes an object defines, at other times it accuses. Some things contain within themselves their own destruction, while others persevere.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>62</sup> There are further extensions of this final image in relation to cultural memory and the means of memorializing the past. In *What Remains: The Post-Holocaust Archive in German Memory Culture*, Dora Osborne argues that collections of the material remnants of the past are essential to reparative memorializing in contemporary German culture. To some extent, Sebald's final image of Austerlitz looking out over the city built upon lost objects might be considered alongside the recent scholarship on monuments of memory that can only be constructed from the material of the past.

Some things withdraw and refuse an inquiry, which in turn induces imagination and desire. And some objects, like the blue sequined shoe, are important *because* they disappear. All of these things sit at the center of Austerlitz's experience—sometimes visible, other times buried. From the vortex of such contrast arises a sense that there are answers here to questions we do not know how to ask, and that if we could only look at these objects in the right way it would reveal some tear in the world, a ripple in the curtain.

## CONCLUSION

### The Sensual Object: Material Association and Diligent Realism

At one point in his memoir, Barthes praises the unexplained “sensual object” in a text: the dish of green peas cooked in butter and a peeled orange that suddenly materializes in Goethe’s *Werther*. “A double advantage,” Barthes writes, “sumptuous appearance of a materiality and a distortion, a sudden gap wedged into the intellectual murmur.”<sup>1</sup> In the preceding chapters, I have analyzed objects across five distinct texts. While not always “sumptuous” (indeed sometimes stubbornly ordinary), in every case these objects are consequential: they validate, mirror, mean, say what words cannot convey, and guide desire. These objects—Barthes’s fresh flowers, Ferrante’s earrings, Knausgaard’s Thermos, Luiselli’s pink cowboy hat, Sebald’s porcelain figurines—create gaps in the “intellectual murmur.” In the encounter with an object, a space opens between a character and her reality, which in turn can be interpreted. This gap distorts the language of these texts. The act of writing, I have argued, comes up against the bounds of experience and memory, but also against the artifices of plot and character, and yet something still needs to be said. “Thus, sometimes,” Barthes writes, “in Japanese haiku, the line of written words suddenly opens and there is the drawing of Mount Fuji or of a sardine which delicately appears in place of the abandoned word.”<sup>2</sup>

My interest in this topic arose from an observation about a proliferation of contemporary novels that use objects as central components of their structure. These novels appear to esteem a catalog of physical items over plot and sometimes even over character. Terms like *archive* are

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 135.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

levied to imbue an object-filled text with an air of authority, and novels that *collect* small trinkets and flotsam present as especially authentic. In some works the mystery and disjointed chronology of the encounter with an object suggests intense drama, and in cultural and political journals scholars debate the *agency* of the object. Why, I wanted to know, was the object attractive to contemporary authors? And how did its appearance in these works expand or develop what has been, traditionally, only symbolic? My hope was that by investigating a few prominent examples, perhaps some further literary insight might arise. For if the object is indeed effective in the literature of this moment, then what could be said about the ambitions of contemporary writing? Might the articulation of a trend provide insight into the form as a whole?

I used Barthes as a starting point because his orientation toward objects, especially in his more personal writing, straddles linguistic limitations on the one hand and the wish (or perhaps need) to write on the other. In his autobiography, a few pages after the comment about the sardine, he admits, “Writing is that *play* by which I turn around as well as I can in a narrow place: I am wedged in, I struggle between the hysteria necessary to write and the image-repertoire.”<sup>3</sup> When he focuses on the fresh flowers or the white porcelain bowl with its imperfect glaze, Barthes brushes against the edges of the language available to him to express something he perceives to be essential. In these moments, Barthes holds out an object that may be meaningful, but declines to define that meaning as though the very *presence* of the object is what is evocative. Barthes suggests that analyzing objects corrodes their presence by converting them into signs. Only undefined flowers maintain the *potential* for the widest range of associations.

The other four authors in this study are similarly caught between the linguistic and the interpretive, intent on their art yet aware of its limitations. Objects in these texts become the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 137.

means of subtle expression that is neither limited in its significance nor overdetermined by the author. When Ferrante dramatizes a collapsing marriage, she affects emotional distress through domestic objects. While Olga manages to hold herself together, the world around her malfunctions, and we grasp her horror not because Ferrante aptly describes abandonment, but because we know the anguish of a stuck lock. Knausgaard, on the other hand, emphasizes the materiality of objects to investigate his private self. The physical object, he suggests, sustains an inviolable personal narrative within the oppressively social act of writing. Luiselli, meanwhile, brings objects to the forefront of a story she does not feel entitled to tell, and uses them to bend a political reality through the playful consciousness of children. When the binoculars turn an airplane into a spaceship, or a broken phone becomes a camera, the visceral realities of refugees and political discrimination are reframed and rendered subjectively. Finally Sebald, who perhaps most closely resembles Barthes here, uses the object as a foil for Austerlitz's desire. Sebald's writing courts what is behind the curtain of language by endowing objects with the confusion and yearning of his characters, yet leaving these objects as incomplete signifiers.

By peering at the dynamic between object and subject, I have tried to show how the object might unsettle language in just the way that Barthes suggests the sardine intrudes on a haiku, and consequently its capacity in a contemporary style of realism. In these texts, objects function as neither overt symbols nor as background scenery. Rather the physical entity carries some multiplicity, some associative potential that may or may not be relevant to the characters and their situations. These authors appear to suspect traditional plot and ornate description of being too blatantly artificial for the interiority they wish to explore. The mimetic mode with the most resonance, they seem to suggest, is one of accidental encounters and inconclusive associations. The object serves this style perfectly with its recognizable yet indeterminate

appearance. Objects are plucked from their common insignificance and made to stand for something fundamental that, if discovered, would be definitive. Perhaps the living through objects in these texts is not just a rhetorical move, but part of a larger literary endeavor: how to write reality without *seeming* to write it. There is a performance here, a kind of conspicuous displacement of the central concern of the text and in its place we find . . . a sardine.

In a 2000 essay in *The New Republic*, James Wood coined the term “hysterical realism” to describe a trend he observed in the massive novels by Don DeLillo, Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith, David Foster Wallace, and others in which the conventions of storytelling are exacerbated to a nearly absurd degree.<sup>4</sup> In these novels every character is unremittingly tangled in a web of connection that is invisible to the characters themselves but insists on “vitality at all costs” to the reader. “Stories and sub-stories sprout on every page,” Wood writes, “as these novels continually flourish their glamorous congestion. . . . The conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted, and overworked.” This criticism is centered on a perceived lack: “All these contemporary deformations flow from a crisis that is not only the fault of the writers concerned, but is now of some lineage: the crisis of character, and how to represent it in fiction.”

The works in this study are of a different stripe. Even the extraordinarily long novels of Ferrante and Knausgaard do not traffic in the congested exaggeration that typifies *Infinite Jest* or *Underworld*, but proceed in calm, muted specificity. Sebald’s intricate novels are carefully layered and associative, but poised and restrained, letting the unexplained gesture speak for itself and eschewing hyperbole. And *Lost Children Archive*, which comes closest to the crowded over-extension of hysterical realism (if we are to grant this term) with its intersecting narratives, maintains a focus on a few distinct characters and the specific parameters of their situation.

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<sup>4</sup> James Wood, “Human, All Too Inhuman,” *The New Republic*, July 24, 2000, <https://newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-inhuman>

Nonetheless, questions of representation distinguish these works. These authors are concerned with psychological dimensions, but wary of the conventional realism that defined the twentieth century. Contemporary literature no longer supports plain mimesis, and rather than try to shroud this constraint in an overabundance of plot, the authors in this study appeal to the material surroundings of their characters to field a portrait of personality, desire, and interiority. In contending with the very same difficulty that Wood identifies in Smith, Wallace, and others, the authors here have used the inanimate to gesture toward an unsayable subjectivity.

This technique develops a literary style Erich Auerbach observed in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Focusing on a passage early in the novel in which Emma and Charles are despondently eating together, Auerbach notices how Emma's despair is revealed to the reader indirectly. Flaubert does not explain what Emma feels as she feels it, nor does he grant her the means to fully grasp her own situation. Rather he "bestows the power of mature expression upon the material" of their meal, filtering Emma's discontent through the smoking stove, the steam of boiled beef, the way that Charles nibbles a few hazelnuts. Emma indistinctly encounters her own circumstances, but more importantly she "is herself seen as one seeing. . . . This ordering of the psychological situation does not, to be sure, derive its standards from without, but from the material of the situation itself."<sup>5</sup> Auerbach goes on to suggest that Flaubert's refusal to practice any "psychological understanding" of his characters and instead let "the state of the facts speak for itself," might be understood as "objective seriousness." Such a style, he writes, "seeks to penetrate to the depths of the passions and entanglements of a human life, but without itself becoming moved, or at least without betraying that it is moved."<sup>6</sup> Not only does this approach

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<sup>5</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 484-5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 490.

afford Flaubert the means of criticizing nineteenth-century bourgeois culture, but solves for doing so artfully. In the style of objective seriousness, writes Auerbach, “things themselves speak and, according to their value, classify themselves before the reader as tragic or as comic, or in most cases quite unobtrusively as both.”<sup>7</sup>

The focus on objects in contemporary novels advances this style by becoming even less overt about the psychological dimension on display and emphasizing the physicality of the object. In the paragraph that Auerbach analyses from Flaubert, the entire scene is cast in the light of Emma’s discontent; it begins, “But it was above all at mealtimes that she could bear it no longer.” As a result, the boiled beef and the smoking stove easily take on the airs of Emma’s misery. In contrast, these contemporary authors omit such an emotional framework, leaving only the object to reveal the sentiment. The “mature expression” that Auerbach notices in objective seriousness has been pushed further by the writers who withhold any opening statement about the theme of a scene, and instead allow the object alone to express and develop the full weight of the phrase, “she could bear it no longer.”

Not only does this appearance of materiality (sumptuous or not) help ground what is fictional in what is easily recognizable, it also establishes a distance between the world and a character, and into this gap flows the qualities of subjectivity. As opposed to hysterical realism, the style outlined here might be thought of as diligent realism: the careful focus on common, material objects that reveals a psychological drama by pushing it out of the frame. This expands Auerbach’s objective seriousness, offering an iteration of realism that confers on an encounter with staid materiality a wholly generative potential. The method retains a distinctly modern flavor that to some degree recalls Walter Benjamin’s characterization of history as fundamentally

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 491.

subjective. As he writes in *The Arcades Project*, “the course of the world is an endless series of facts congealed in the form of things.”<sup>8</sup> And as he posits in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” a fact is only causal once it is observed—it becomes historical “posthumously”—forcing not only a consideration of what happened, but of who is doing the looking.<sup>9</sup> The “aura” of an object suggests the facts without making absolute claims. It is at once mimetic, indicative of the “real” world, but also semiotic, offering a lexicon of association and interpretation regarding the *experience* of its encounter.

The objects here indicate the veil of language; they constitute a diligent, understated realism that pursues what is manifest in experience but not always possible in language. The object transcribes sentiment into the fabric of a text while refusing the reductive analysis of language. In the performance of the novel, the object discloses the texture of desire and the claims of the self without betraying the apparatus of the stage. It repeats the same phrase with new inflections, what Barthes calls “the enigmatic copy” that “disturbs the infinite sequence of replicas,” and gestures toward an abstract idea through what is sensual and familiar.<sup>10</sup> By itself, an object means nothing, but the moment it is *encountered*, it resonates. This, of course, is not an active quality of the object, but a condition of the human. What is latent in the object then, what draws our attention to the rippling curtain, is perhaps not so much a revelation as an affirmation, something already known but almost out of reach.

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 14.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 263.

<sup>10</sup> Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, 49, 99.

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