Like a Thing Forsaken: Beckett, Sebald and the Politics of Materiality

by

Martin Schauss

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Declaration


I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted to another university.
Abstract

This comparative study investigates representations of objects and materiality in the late modernism of Samuel Beckett and W.G. Sebald. The thesis responds to the recent proliferation of theories and literary analyses focused on objects, matter, and the nonhuman (such as “new materialisms” and “thing theory”), and specifically to what is arguably their unifying premise: the call for a “politics of materiality.” It argues that Beckett and Sebald’s works are defined by leftover things and material remainders, which express a negative, indeterminate quality that problematizes affirmative systems of relations and the recuperation of “matter” into narrative meaning. What their oeuvres share is a sense of historical belatedness and material depletion, tied to the European post-war moment and a mutual concern for issues of remembrance and recovery. Within this context, their aesthetic response to a history of violence is in conversation with both realist and modernist object categories, and poses a series of specific difficulties to object-oriented perspectives and the notion of a “politics of materiality.” Their works foreground the materiality of language, intensifying the inadequacy of mediation not just for the representation of things, but for any encounter with them. Regarding the respective author fields, the thesis contends that the focus on materiality encourages a critical reformulation of the problem of politics and history, a problem that persists through their work’s resistance towards systematisation, determination and resolution. It posits that a conception of “thingness” in their work expresses neither truth, essence, nor an ideal object, but rather a limit encounter that asks for a continual revision of historical and political signification. The thesis contributes to the recent critical recognition of a latent political potential in Beckett’s work, and disputes claims that Sebald’s novels encourage melancholic resignation in the face of catastrophe.
## List of Abbreviations

**Samuel Beckett:**
- **CIWS**: *Company/Ill Seen Ill Said/Worstward Ho/Stirrings Still*
- **CSP**: *The Complete Short Prose*
- **HD**: *Happy Days*
- **LI-LIV**: *The Letters of Samuel Beckett* vols. 1-4
- **M&C**: *Mercier and Camier*
- **MD**: *Malone Dies*
- **MPTK**: *More Pricks Than Kicks*
- **Plays**: *Collected Shorter Plays*
- **TFN**: *Texts for Nothing* (in CSP)
- **U**: *The Unnamable*
- **WfG**: *Waiting for Godot*

**W.G. Sebald:**
- **A**: *Austerlitz*
- **BU**: *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks*
- **CS**: *Campo Santo*
- **E**: *The Emigrants*
- **Eis**: *“Auf ungeheuer dünnem Eis”*
- **Ringe**: *Die Ringe des Saturn*
- **Rings**: *The Rings of Saturn*
- **SG**: *Schwindel. Gefühle.*
- **V**: *Vertigo*

**Other:**
- **AT**: Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*
- **GS**: Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*

All translations of Sebald’s *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks* (BU) and *“Auf ungeheuer dünnem Eis”* (Eis) are mine. Any other translations by me are indicated in the text.
Introduction

“… and the hat remained where it was, I mean in its place, like a thing forsaken.”

Beckett, *Malone Dies* (74)

**Toward a “Politics of Materiality”**

Drifting around town on his crutches, Samuel Beckett’s Molloy has a moment of clarity: “There are things from time to time, in spite of everything, that impose themselves on the understanding with the force of axioms, for unknown reasons” (*Molloy* 60). Taking his aphorism perhaps unduly literally, we might ask: What things? And what makes them so axiomatic? It is no exaggeration to say that things have “imposed themselves” with some force on literary studies in recent years, not least since Bill Brown’s arguably inaugural essay “Thing Theory” (2001). The same goes for continental philosophy, where “object-oriented ontology” (O.O.O.) and “speculative realism” are only two of various recent trends that theorise the self-imposition of objects and things on (our understanding of) the world. One is inclined to interject: but scholars have always analysed representations of objects in literature, and things have always formed a principal object of philosophy. What is different, however, in many recent “object-oriented” inquiries—the “new” in “new materialism”—is the privileging and mobilisation of a “force” of things, conceptualised as agency, vitality, power, creativity, resistance, or similar, within a political economy. To give one example: Jane Bennett’s “vibrant materialism” seeks to de-centre the human from politics, insisting on the agency of things within public spheres, which in turn are rethought as “human-nonhuman collectives” (*Vibrant* xix). The hope—which Bennett shares with a majority of “new materialists”—is to do away with the conception of “an intrinsically hierarchical order of things,” and to theorise an ecological-ethical space from which to combat the instrumentalisation of persons and “nonhuman nature” alike (ibid. 12). This, then, seems a far cry from the material culture studies starting to flourish in the 1980s, in which specific things such as commodities or ritualistic objects gained their meaning as identifiable signs of culture.¹ Anthropological studies that trace and unpack the use, exchange, and consumption of things, like Arjun Appadurai’s landmark collection *The

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¹ For a good overview of how that field has developed, see Hicks and Beaudry, *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (2010).
Social Life of Things (1986), are deemed to have, somehow, “left things behind” (Brown, Sense 4). There is something about things, about materiality, that cannot be reduced to culture or discourse. These new material- or object-oriented theories have not gone unchallenged in the humanities and social sciences, and this introduction will comment on some of the objections. While this thesis is suspicious of many of the claims made under the mantle of “new materialisms,” O.O.O., or other strands, it builds on what is arguably a unifying call of these diverse theories: the need for a politics of materiality.

The basic implications are rather straightforward: we need to conceive of matter, of things organic and inorganic, and of the nonhuman more generally (that includes animals) in socio-political terms. To fail to do so would be to fundamentally misunderstand how the modern world and its relations are constructed. Especially when thinking in terms of ecological crises—global warming, mass extinction of species—there is a degree of self-evidence to the proposition of a politics of materiality: we are all in it together, human and nonhuman, and hardly anyone would suggest otherwise. The most widespread, cross-disciplinary reframing of the political economy through a material-oriented lens are the various theories of “new materialisms,” which accentuate entanglement, assemblages, networks, and hybridity (and are in that sense opposed to O.O.O. and “speculative realism” where the underpinning gesture habitually consists in the abstraction of all things to objects understood as autonomous beings whose relation among each other is beyond us).2 To offer the roughest of sketches: “new materialists” like Bennett, Rosi Braidotti, or Bruno

2 Note that there is hardly a consensus on or unifying conception of “materialism,” “objects,” or “realism,” even within the respective fields of “new materialisms,” “speculative realism,” etc. The most illuminating discussions in the foundational anthology of “speculative realism,” The Speculative Turn (2011), edited by Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman, emerge indeed from disagreements, with many of its contributors not identifying as “speculative realists.” Harman, perhaps the most prominent voice of “speculative realism” (and self-proclaimed anti-materialist), accuses “new materialisms” (specifically of the post-Deleuzian feminist school) of being “too quick to decide what material is” (Response 51). For Harman, this tendency does injustice to the independence and integrity of things, and “truncate[s] the surplus or surprise found only in a reality that is not co-constituted by humans” (ibid.)
Latour, follow what is often referred to as the line of immanence—from Nietzsche to Foucault and Deleuze—rejecting the subject-object dichotomy naturalised over a long history of Western thought, and theorising an ontological interconnectedness between sentient and non-sentient, organic and inorganic, human and nonhuman bodies or actants. Any theorisation of the “political” is here immanent and affirmative, dependent on a fluid, creative interaction between equal bodies. As an example, a blackout in vibrant materialism may be recast as a political event caused by the agency of a human-nonhuman assemblage (in which electricity becomes a vital nonhuman player).

There are a range of substantive criticisms of this thinking of material life: that in this democratic, flat ontology in which everything is pluralised and equivalent, difference can no longer be accounted for; that “new materialisms” merely restate established factual connections about nature and culture; that this thinking is not helped by its rejection of critique, more specifically dialectical thought; and that removing the human from the centre of political agency is, especially regarding global warming, a big mistake. The negative, the element of destructiveness, the radically different, has no place here unless it can be re-appropriated as affirmative, as Benjamin Noys has argued: “[we] can locate affirmationist theory as the attempt to resist the via negative of Otherness” (2). Viewed dialectically, the political reorientation offered by—at least certain strands of—“new materialisms” involve in fact the very refusal of the “political” when understood in terms of radical or revolutionary activity or change (ibid. 80). The theory of Bruno Latour—perhaps the most controversial thinker of hybridity with his conception of “quasi-subjects quasi-objects” (Wf 51)—has been described by Noys as fundamentally reactionary: “a practice of tracing and sustaining connections, holding

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together ‘objects’, and attending to the materiality and density of what exists” (81).^4 This kind of “new materialism” becomes all about sustaining, holding together, about reaffirming the order of things in flux. I share Noys’ scepticism, and that which other critics articulate elsewhere. However, I want to acknowledge that these theories inspired in large parts the taking on of this project: to explore how a “politics of materiality” may be understood in a study of literary texts that accentuate precisely the negative, the irrecoverable, the ruinous and disintegrated, that insist on the impotence of the human creature, that intensify the inadequacy of language as mediation not just for the representation of things, but for any encounter with them.

For this purpose, the present thesis turns to two European late modernists, Samuel Beckett and W.G. Sebald, and the materials and objects characterising their works. It posits that the crucial materials of the two writers are leftover things and material remainders, things and matter that have been discarded or expelled on some level, that are in some way superfluous or surplus to requirements, and which for that reason “impose themselves” on our understanding with some force. These are things that appear as if salvaged or recovered from the wreckage of history—think of Winnie’s bag of utensils in *Happy Days* (1961), the bric-a-brac Austerlitz contemplates through a shop window in Terezín—but quite what their past entails remains unspoken, or unknowable. They belong to fluid categories like “stuff” or “waste,” which register a kind of refusal to participate in the dominant value-system, to bow to the human subject’s will, which in their aesthetic and socio-political ambiguity “stage” a kind of contingent disruption to modern ordering mechanisms, to the hegemonic culture to constitute itself. These leftover materialities express, then—for the human, the reader—an implicit “negative,” recalcitrant quality, to which we are drawn in turn, but which does not produce epiphanic moments or a reified, autotelic work. The aim of this “negative” material-oriented approach is to reframe the historico-political stakes of Beckett and Sebald’s two very different bodies of work through the prism of materiality.

4 In *The Persistence of the Negative*, Noys argues that the affirmationism of Deleuze, Latour and others, remains haunted by the very negativity that it tries to eschew.

The central contention in this thesis is that examining these forsaken materials in Beckett and Sebald allows us to read and formulate the very problem of politics and history in their oeuvres; what may be called the resistance of their works, best understood perhaps as a resistance towards systematisation. In other words, the reading of leftover things and materiality teases out political and historical questions in their work, but these questions are not resolved in a way that determines a political position or generalizable system of objects. We might call this Beckett and Sebald’s respective aesthetics of indetermination, which amplify—in Beckett’s case to an almost final degree—a specific problem that material studies in literature struggle with: how to do justice to the particulars of a text (regarding both content and style) while at the same time being able to account for the abstraction of the general image. This problem of the relation between the particular and the general, the singular and ideal, is rehearsed in their work through the protagonists’ desire (and failure) to understand the order of things, which—as Foucault has shown—is a historically grounded and charged concept. In Sebald’s work, for instance, object taxonomies and collections feature heavily, and as a novel, *The Rings of Saturn* has a distinctly archival and encyclopaedic quality, which announces itself from the onset as historical problem. The fragmented structure of Sebald’s text builds on the rejection of the realist novel’s drive to completion, its desire to collect its objects and position them in synecdochical relation to the fiction as a totality.

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6 The notable absence of the physical archive in Foucault's discussion serves as a point of departure for “new materialists” following his work. Even if Foucault did not, for philosophers like Quentin Meillassoux, go far enough, his writings are by others “considered the opening statements of new materialism, especially because Foucault in his later work has shown in so many ways how bodies […] and the words within which they are enveloped […] act only in entanglement with one another, and that the human being acts within the actualization and realization of these discursive forces” (Dolphijn and Tuin 88). Indeed, it is his later writings on biopolitics and biopower that seem to gain renewed attention more than any others. See the anthologies *Material Powers*, edited by Bennett and Joyce (2010), *Political Matter*, edited by Braun and Whatmore (2010), and *Resisting Biopolitics*, edited by Wilmer and Žukauskaitė (2015).

7 Hereafter *Rings*. 
Based on their aesthetics of indetermination, I will make a case for an understanding of Beckett and Sebald’s “obsolete” material worlds as spectral, or out-of-joint. “Spectral” as I use it registers, specifically, the temporal fragmentation, or non-contemporaneity, carried into the present by discarded things. This understanding draws on Walter Benjamin’s rejection of the linearity of the historical narrative, what he called history’s reified continuity or “epic element” (“Eduard” 29). For Benjamin, the obsolete commodity is powerful because, forsaken by the history of progress, it illuminates the fetish of newness, the thingification of people under the spell of things, and thus suspends the initial forgetting. Benjamin’s historical materialism is crucial for this thesis: his allegorical understanding of modern progress as decay, ruinously indexed by discarded materials, as well as what Maurizia Boscagli called his “modernist salvage-work on materiality” (41), that is to say his attempt to give objects “their due” by foregrounding (in contradistinction to many Marxist thinkers) our libidinal, everyday encounters with them (Benjamin, Illuminations 67). Thinking in terms of “spectral” matter also implicates, then, the reality of abstraction that characterises how the modern world appears, based on the commodity-logic. This is much more relevant for Beckett’s environments, seemingly irreconcilable with the social economy, than is largely acknowledged in criticism. Thinking the “spectral” helps crystallise the interrelation of material and immaterial, concrete and abstract; it shows that, rather than pursuing an ideal structure of meaning, Beckett and Sebald put their loyalty firmly with the material particular. My approach is in line, in this respect, with Fredric Jameson’s suggestion that we think of “materialism” not as a systematic philosophy, but as a “polemic stance,” “a procedure of demystification and de-idealization; or else a permanent linguistic reflexivity” (“Marx’s Purloined Letter” 36). Finally, I argue that Beckett and Sebald’s “spectral” material environments register the displacement pervasive in their work: displacement, to an extent, in the psychoanalytic-semiotic conception of meaning, energy, or intensity being transferred from one object onto another, but more strongly in the material-historical sense of dislocation of people, things and language across borders. Their “spectral” material environments unsettle, rather than confirm, a historical sense of place and time. In this way, this thesis foregrounds the leftover materials of Beckett and Sebald’s texts, which keep gesturing towards an elsewhere while frustrating symbolisation and meaningfulness. The elsewhere is not recoverable. As the narrator of Beckett’s How It Is (1961) says: “what remains bits and scraps” (3).

Note: the emphasis is on Beckett’s post-war writing.
Only bits and scraps remain—this is not only the sense one gets when looking for something fresh to say about Beckett and Sebald’s oeuvres, but precisely the foundation on which their work appears to be built. The mood of historical belatedness that defines their work as “late modernism”—of writing after the end of history (or modernity), of working from exhausted, disintegrated cultural categories—this sense seems at once to issue from, and to secure the continual survival of, the vestiges scattered throughout each writer’s “wasteland of prose” (Beckett qtd. in Brater 55). In a rare comparative reading of the two, Peter Boxall posits that Sebald inherits from Beckett a “mode of remembrance, a mode of witnessing”: “If, in Sebald’s work, the speakable and the unspeakable enter into a new kind of intimacy, it is partly because Beckett has bequeathed to him a form which summons continuity from finality, which summons remembrance from amnesia, a historical form which survives, which is born from, the death of history” (Since 130-131). Although this study largely avoids arguments about Beckett’s indubitable importance for Sebald, it fundamentally shares and builds on this affinity between the two writers, the folding of an ethics and aesthetics of the negative, the “nothing” of history after the Second World War. In this sense, I keep the question of the “human” close at heart, as Beckett and Sebald turn that question over and over from an artistic and political point of view, not least as their oeuvres emerge out of a deep sensibility for the radical dehumanisation and extermination in the Nazi concentration camps. At the root of the conception of a shared sense of historical belatedness is not the return or reduction of every expression to the Holocaust, but rather the emphasis on writing and going on despite a long history of violence which seems to have reached a point of culmination. I propose that Beckett and Sebald take the question “what remains?” literally, and hence that we need to look at their material leftovers for their “negative” engagement with the past and the condition for going on.

When it comes to Beckett, critics have long identified his post-war writing with the depletion of historical forms, not least since Adorno’s landmark essay “Trying to

9 In Sebald’s posthumously published Unrecounted (a collaboration with his lifelong friend, the painter Jan Peter Tripp, which juxtaposes poems with narrow lithographs of eyes belonging to mainly artists and writers), Beckett’s penetrating gaze comes third to last, following Proust’s, and only before those of Sebald himself and of his daughter, Anna.
Understand Endgame” (1958). Beckett’s “catastrophe,” his thematisation of the depletion of material resources—most famously in Endgame (1957), as Hamm’s household runs out of painkillers and food, and there is “literally” “no more nature” (10)—is commonly read within the larger Beckettian problematic of the lessening of language. Or put differently, the contradictory, axiomatic force of the protagonists’ possessions to remain, despite everything, in the so-called “Beckett country,” means Beckett’s things are caught between meaning and meaninglessness in a way that corresponds to the central “expression” and aporia of Beckett’s art: “The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (Disjecta 139). Many of Beckett’s leftover things seem to announce themselves as central signifiers only to accentuate the narrative void: Malone’s pencil and notebook inscribe both the possibility of writing as well as its immanent termination; Winnie’s necessaries stimulate her rituals and habits in an environment divorced from the social organisation that would lend them meaning. The complete subsumption of Beckett’s last remaining things under a reading of the aporetic language condition runs, however, the danger of ignoring the materiality of language itself as precisely Beckett’s most leftover thing. In The Unnamable (1953), for instance, as in subsequent prose works, language, the voice, the first-person pronoun, are rehearsed as things, external, often prosthetic and not belonging to the narrator or speaking “subject.” To say the depletion of material resources speaks to the language position of Beckett’s writing is not wrong, then, but it keeps us from asking a fundamental question: what happens to the status of Beckett’s material objects if language must be considered one of them?

The often-misemployed “German Letter” from 1937 marks an early attempt for Beckett to get to grips with a material conception of language: “Is there any reason why that terrifyingly arbitrary materiality [jene fürchterlich willkürliche Materialität] of the word surface [Wortfläche] should not be dissolved” (LI 518). What troubles Beckett

10 See Daniel Katz, Saying I No More: “The first-person pronoun no longer expresses a self in either its plenitude or poverty, but rather becomes itself an ‘object’ which must be endlessly reappropriated for any designation of ‘proper’ attributes to occur” (15).

11 Viola Westbrook has corrected Martin Esslin’s partial mistranslation of the letter included in the “Notes” of Disjecta. In Esslin’s translation, the sentence ran: “Is there any reason why that terrible materiality of the word surface should not be capable of being
is not the materiality itself, but the *arbitrariness* of the word surface—the arbitrary connection of sign and signified that is neither “natural,” nor “symbolic,” nor “iconographic,” as Derrida indicates (*Grammatology* 45). Critics have fittingly emphasised the materiality of language in Beckett (as well as his effort to incorporate the materiality of his respective medium: page, stage, screen, radio). Later works in particular, as Steven Connor notes, show Beckett’s “highly-developed sense of the density or materiality of words” (“Beckett’s Atmospheres” 61). This critical attention is somewhat less developed in Sebald studies, perhaps because his novels do not deconstruct the narrative position to an extent approximating Beckett's (although his “subject” hardly remains unproblematic). Nevertheless, a material conception of language issues directly from his practice of *bricolage*, which Sebald openly adopts from Lévi-Strauss. *Bricolage*, as appropriated by Sebald, refers to a combinatorial, material-oriented method free of utilitarian and above all professional logic. “The work of the *bricoleur* [is] assembled from refuse and fragments,” Sebald writes in his essay on the poet Ernst Herbeck (BU 138). Sebald’s unsystematic recourse to archival material, the incorporation of antiquated and jarring diction, the reproduction of photographs splitting up sentences; these methods speak to the materiality of language as an already splintered thing that can only be teased out from the wreckage of history. Reading his work alongside Beckett’s will allow me to make a stronger case for Sebald’s material conception of language than accounted for so far in criticism, and to show how it ties in with the inadequacy of language as historical mediation when it comes to the recording, representing, and discernment of things.

The conception arises out of a historical necessity. Thinking about objects always already involves the work of displacement and translation. The *Dictionary of Untranslatables* has four separate entries for things: *thing, object, res, and Gegenstand*. The long philosophical careers of *res* and *Gegenstand* include the histories of the other two terms respectively. In the familiar conception, *object* and *Gegenstand* are relational—oppositional, obstacles standing in front of us—while *thing* and *res* are indeterminate. Even this familiar conception expresses polysemy and unsteadiness. The history of the dissolved…” (172; emphasis mine). Esslin’s strange shift from the passive to the active “be capable of” is bothersome but not as significant as the misuse of “fürchterlich” [terrible/terrifying] as modifier of “materiality” when, in the original, “fürchterlich” [terribly/terrifyingly] as an adverb modifies “arbitrary.”
Kantian distinction between *noumenon* and *phenomenon* underlines the multidimensional relationship between lexicon, concept and matter:

The object […] retains its twofold meaning, that of thing in itself […] and of phenomenon […]. But the shift to transcendental idealism gives rise to a crucial displacement: things in themselves are unknowable for the finite subject, even for his understanding. The object in itself thus no longer indicates purely intellectual reality in contrast with sensible reality; rather, it refers now to what is relative neither to perception nor to understanding. (Cassin et al. 360-361)

The simultaneous polysemy and radical indeterminateness of the thing-lexicon issue from, and at the same time bear direct impact on, our understanding of the material world. No work puts into sharper focus the idea that language (with its slippages and displacing qualities) is the prism through which matter is apprehended *and vice versa* than Beckett’s *The Unnamable*. The manner in which the narrator takes up things at the onset of the narrative casts an ontological shadow: “And things, what is the correct attitude to adopt towards things? And, to begin with, are they necessary? […] If a thing turns up, for some reason or another, take it into consideration. Where there are people, it is said, there are things” (2). In the original French: “Et les objets, quelle doit être l’attitude vis-à-vis des objets? Tout d’abord, en faut-il? […] Si un objet se présente, pour une raison ou pour une autre, en tenir compte. Là où il y a des gens, dit-on, il y a des choses” (8). The commitment to the word “thing” in the English departs from the distinction in the French between “objet” and “chose.” While the Francophone reader might understand the narrator’s question in narrower terms, relating to the material object, the Anglophone reader is struck much more by the indeterminateness and ambiguity of the narrator’s object of thought. Polysemy and indeterminateness are always already part of the equation for matter in literature; in this sense thinking along the lines of displacement becomes necessary. Beckett’s immediate post-war audience was a French cosmopolitan audience. It would pick up on “particulars” differently than its Anglophone counterpart. Yet Beckett’s French was also a translation of his continual encounter with Ireland and its (post-)colonial history. Sebald’s German, by comparison, is not only influenced by divergent literary styles, filled with citation and tonal inconsistencies, and his expatriate career in British academia, but by multiple
regional dialects: South German, Bavarian, Austrian, Franconian. As the work of Beckett and Sebald is marked by multilingualism, linguistic slippages, and geo-political displacement, their material archives can only be read and defined along those intersecting trajectories. In other words, the displacement of language (slippages, plurality, translation) registers the “spectral” condition of their material environments, and thus requires our attention even as we turn to things.

With this in mind, I contend that the works of Beckett and Sebald prove invaluable to confront object-oriented literary approaches with the crucial problematic of how to think and account for the materiality of language. Many “new materialisms” stress the semiotic dimension of materiality, sometimes called “storied matter”: the meaning and narratives produced by material networks (Iovino and Oppermann, Material 1). Matter expresses itself and can be examined “both in texts and as a text” (ibid. 2; emphasis original). While reminding us of the importance to interpret connections between, in Sebald’s words, “apparently disparate things” (CS 210), this emphasis on the material-semiotic is also glaringly self-evident: no one would suggest that our material environments do not radiate with possible meanings and stories. Any good documentary on the global production chain of a specific commodity, for example, will “[trace] the trajectories of natural-cultural interactions” involving materials and people alike (Iovino and Oppermann, Material 6). In contrast, Beckett and Sebald’s works confront us with the problem of what it means to read and record things. The material status of language and its inevitable inadequacy as mediation in Beckett and Sebald considerably problematize any affirmative notion of access to material narratives. In keeping with Beckett’s thorough evacuation of meaning throughout his oeuvre, his things initially announce an excess of meaningfulness and signification, only to prove firmly material and recalcitrant. Sebald, meanwhile, emphasises the mute character of left-behind things; what are we to make of the object’s “storytelling” quality when Austerlitz describes an iron-cast column as “a witness to what [he] could no longer recollect [himself]” (221)? And nonetheless, the remaining materials in the literary text cannot help but make a claim to historical access, just as they cannot help but shine a light on social relations. To see how Beckett and Sebald intervene within a literary history of reading things, and to carve out a historical and political conception through their material representations, it is necessary to place this study within the growing

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number of object-focused literary and cultural studies, and indeed to cover some ground of what it means to think and read materiality and things.

**The Resistance of Things**

Object-oriented studies in literature broadly operate in one of two ways. What can be called the universalist approach attempts to determine the functions of objects in literature, or argue that certain types of objects or materialities, such as waste, have always been privileged by literature. The second methodology is a narrower focus on established literary periods, like Victorian realism or high modernism, analysing object representation with regards to specific, time-honoured aesthetic and socio-political concerns. Limited to the modern period, the latter approach can be roughly sketched as follows. The nineteenth-century realist novel rendered object and commodity culture legible, mirroring social structures. In opposition, the crisis of representation of high modernism and the early twentieth-century avant-garde reflected the inaccessible, discrete thing. Postmodernism (understood in Anglo-American terms especially) returned to production and commodity culture, but objects exist and have value only as part of an ideological system of cultural signs and images, reflecting what Naomi Klein called “the divestment of the world of things” (goods/things) in favour of images (brands/signs) (4). This narrative bears unpacking in relation to our study, which aims to problematize and open up such stable material-oriented hermeneutics through Beckett and Sebald’s “late modernist” work. Both “thingness”—understood best as a kind of limit (of language, thought, perception) or negative of materiality—and material culture (archives of stuff, everyday materiality) must be considered jointly in their post-war texts. Realism’s occupation with commodity culture haunts their work at the same time as a modernist restoration of the “thing” has failed (and in Beckett becomes a cliché). The result of Beckett and Sebald’s respective “material imagination,” to borrow

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13 Jean Baudrillard’s *The System of Objects* (1968) can be considered the theoretical landmark regarding objects and postmodernity.

14 Classification itself becomes an issue with both writers: Beckett has been branded a modernist, post-modernist, late modernist, last modernist, existentialist, absurdist; Sebald walks the line between Romantic travel memoir, autobiography, fiction, essay, and historical account.
Connor’s phrase (Beckett 8), can be described as an unreconciled modernism, thrown out into the world only to turn in on itself.

In this light, the thesis tries to explicitly avoid universal claims and recuperations of objects for a systematised order of things. A noteworthy exemplar is Francesco Orlando’s monolithic *Obsolete Objects in the Literary Imagination* (1994), which creates a totalising system formed of twelve categories of “obsolete” things that cover all modern European literature. Literature becomes the “site of an antifunctional return of the repressed,” fundamentally “inclined to contradict the real order of things” (13; 7). Orlando’s argument itself has appeal, considering his Freudian negotiation of uselessness, wear and tear, value (what he calls dignity), and other compromise-formations as they redeem the unredeemable in literature. The category of obsolescence, the refusal to participate in the dominant order, these speak to the leftover object worlds of Beckett and Sebald. A major problem, however, is not so much that Orlando’s structural assertion of “thematic constants” leaves no room for historical or political interpretations (14)—in a limited sense it does—it is that all its objects stand in metonymical relationship with the grand project of literature as a whole (non-functional, irrational, in the face of capitalist modernity). This makes for similarly sweeping conclusions, like the one offered for Beckett’s *Happy Days*: “objects remain the only presumed source of utility and the only human context; but they mark and fill the time of the very condition in which everything has been revealed as useless, of a metaphysical decontextualization more humorous than sinister” (342; my italics).

Peter Schwenger’s *The Tears of Things* (2006), notable for its open-ended selection of primary texts, seeks to conceptualise an essence of things through literature. Schwenger comes to the thing via Sartre and Lacan, prioritising perception and language for the representation of things. He argues for the enchanting call of things (to which Sebald’s protagonists and narrators regularly succumb): “For the objects of the world, no matter how physically present they may be, are always implicated with a metaphysical nonexistence, an unknowableness that is—at least for the perceiving eye—a kind of death” (97). Schwenger’s emphasis on Jacques Lacan’s Real and the limits of knowing are helpful for thinking thingness—as that which escapes our apprehension of materiality as well as our imaginary and symbolic projections onto objects. However, the prism of melancholy is turned inward in Schwenger’s study, toward an existential
subject, whereas I focus on the problem of objects’ interference within history and politics. Melancholy in the face of things is a crucial state, especially in Sebald, but the totalising claim of Schwenger’s perspective limits the scope of things.

The more well-known analysis of the “thingness” of things is that of Bill Brown, who, ever since his special issue of *Critical Inquiry* titled *Things* (2001), is credited with reenergising the interest in material objects in literary studies. According to Brown’s by now infamous Heideggerian formulation,

> [we] begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy [...]. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (“Thing Theory” 4)

But Brown’s thing ontology is more ambiguous than that: his “thing” is an all-at-onceness. This means that it includes, firstly, an amorphous, catachrestic “priority,” independent from its constitution as object, and, secondly, an “excess” of meaning, for instance “magical” properties like “values, fetishes, idols, and totems” (ibid. 5). We may position Brown at the interstices of the universalist and materialist methodologies: on the one hand, he provides a good indication of how a given literary period may be coupled with a given understanding of objects. In *The Sense of Things*, Brown argues that particular late-nineteenth-century American novels turned to objects outside commodity culture and market dynamics. For instance, he locates an aesthetic shift from commodity representation to the appreciation of thingness (the object’s excess directed against symbolic appropriation) in the transitional phase of Henry James’ writing career.\(^{16}\) This becomes, then, the story of how material culture and “thingness” are perceived as opposites, of how one artistic period turned away from commodity culture in the hope “to reify itself and thus to resist commodification” (13). On the other hand, Brown stubbornly pursues the essence of “thingness” from a Heideggerian perspective,

\(^{15}\) The chapter “Words and the Murder of the Thing” from Schwenger’s book appears in the same issue.

\(^{16}\) With *The Spoils of Poynton* (1896) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904) on either side of the divide.
which abstracts things from their historical condition and privileges art’s truth status insofar as it can help us momentarily fathom this “thingness.” However mediated our thinking of things may be by the abstracting logic of commodity culture, the “indeterminate ontology” of things is for Brown irreducible to history and culture (ibid.)—something is simultaneously prior and in excess.17 Even though his theory is in conversation with Marxist thought,18 touching on the thingification of people, Brown’s central object remains the staunchly autonomous thing.

While Brown’s “indeterminate ontology” may initially appear apposite to Beckett and Sebald’s aesthetics of indetermination, at least two sides to his “thing theory” do not sit well with our authors. One is Heidegger’s abstraction of thingness, to which I will turn shortly. The other problem is the modernist, revelatory moment of truth, the passage from insignificance (physical object) into significance (thing), which both Beckett and Sebald view with suspicion. Compare Brown’s “story of objects asserting themselves as things” with the parody of idealism in *Malone Dies*. Having misplaced the stick with which he performed various daily tasks, Malone analyses the loss:

> It is a disaster. […] meditate upon it and be edified. It is thus man distinguishes himself from the ape and rises, from discovery to discovery, ever higher, towards the light. Now that I have lost my stick I realize what it is I have lost and all it meant to me. And thence ascend, painfully, to an understanding of the Stick, shorn of all its accidents, such as I had never dreamt of. What a broadening of the mind. (83)

Beckett’s pervasive distrust of essences and absolutes shows here in his humorous debunking of disruption or separation as metaphysical inquiry.19 Beckett—more so

17 “The thing, thinging, has independent agency and voice before commodification generates the illusion of such agency and voice” (Brown, *Other* 32).

18 Especially more recent essays in *Other Things* (2016).

19 The stick in *Malone Dies* is less interesting in terms of an object/thing dialectic than the body-prosthetic it designates, flagging the unravelling of the integrity of the human body that becomes more prominent in Beckett’s subsequent works, when its surface and limits turn hazy and ill-defined. The “inclusive disjunction” (69), as Yoshiki Tajiri
than Sebald—subverts transcendental moments at every turn, evident not least in his labour of narrative negation or antithesis. It is the modernist pursuit at the heart of Brown’s theory that is rejected; for our purposes, it makes more sense to conceive of “thingness” as a limit encounter, a resistance to historical, narrative recuperation. This conception, I suggest, accommodates thinking of language and the text in thingy terms in a way Brown’s theory does not.

If Heidegger’s thoughts on the thing are informed by his revolutionary pursuit to dismantle the subject-object dichotomy assumed by the Western philosophical tradition, a comparable process underlies Beckett and Sebald’s work. Like Heidegger, both accentuate the problematic history of vision as “objective” self-affirmation of subjectivity in the world. Think of Sebald’s photographic “forgeries” that expose the reality “effect” as such, or the animal gaze which keeps returning as a limit to knowledge and self-identification. One is forgiven for dismissing Heidegger outright with regards to Sebald. After all, Sebald pays tribute to Benjamin and the Frankfurt School for helping him find his way out of the “Heideggerian fog” that shrouded his literature studies in 1960s Germany and Switzerland (Place 8). Sebald’s rejection of the subject-object divide is couched in the dialectical critique of enlightenment, and hence most immediately concerned with the notion of subjectivity qua domination. It is fair to say that the ethical-political fold of “thingness” in Sebald echoes Adorno’s Negative Dialectics most strongly:

> Whoever looks upon thingness [das Dinghafte] as radical evil, whoever would like to dynamize all being into pure actuality, tends toward hostility to otherness, to the alien thing whose name is intimated, not for nothing, in alienation. […] In thingness there is an intermingling of both the object’s

writes, defining the hybrid body in Beckett gives “the impression that what matters is interaction—not demarcation—between the outside and the inside” (63).

20 “It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining” (Molloy 184).

21 A main reason why Heidegger dominates the thought of “object-oriented ontology.”
unidentical side and the subjugation of people to prevailing conditions of production, to their own, hidden functional interrelation. (191-192)

When I speak of “thingness” in this thesis, it is generally in terms of such a dialectic at a standstill: a kind of limit in the encounter with things that gains its (negative) meaning from that encounter’s historical situation.

“Thingness” helps describe, by extension, Beckett and Sebald’s continual re-interrogation of the historical archive as the domain of the human. Peter Boxall has located the ethical potential of their (as well as J.M. Coetzee’s) writing at the boundary of the human and nonhuman/animal, a boundary challenged by what he calls the “threshold of vision,” “the point where seen and unseen meet” (“Threshold” 146). For Boxall, a kind of reaching out, a “merging of self and other” (143), occurs at the threshold of darkness/failure, and light/the visible, a creaturely encounter that constitutes a negative space for ethical engagement. “Thingness” conceived of as resistance or limit may help qualify Boxall’s point here: rather than a harmonious unity of self and other (a “merging”), we find in Beckett a continually rehearsed confusion (a “not I”) and a persistence of the limit. In a similar vein, Jean-Michel Rabaté’s conception of Beckett’s posthumanism (or anti-anthropomorphism) accentuates this limit between human and inhuman, true to Malone’s “pretty” declaration that “on the threshold of being no more I succeed in being another” (MD 19). 21 “Thingness” as a threshold at once registers a radical silence and points, contingently, to an elsewhere. The ontological questions raised by this material encounter are not my primary concern, but they matter for an understanding of relations between things, and

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22 Amended translation.

21 Rabaté, Think Pig! Beckett at the Limit of the Human (2016). See also Simon Critchley’s Very Little… Almost Nothing (1997), which sees the usefulness of nihilism in Beckett’s work in its border experience: “Rather than overcoming nihilism, it is a question of delineating it. What will be at stake is a liminal experience, a deconstructive experience of the limit […] that separates the inside from the outside of nihilism and which forbids us both the gesture of transgression and restoration. […] the task of thinking consists in a historical confrontation with nihilism that does not give up on the demand that things might be otherwise. […] such is the essential, but essentially disappointing, logic of redemption” (14).
between particulars and systems. For instance, while Sebald’s *Rings* gestures with its networks to the flat ontology described by theories of immanence and hybridity, the negativity of subject-formation *does* ground the novel, disrupting pure relationality. Both writers are interested in the nonhuman in order to test and put pressure on the *limits* of the human as a historico-political category. The subject-object dialectic that flat ontologies eschew is still residually at work; it can be located at the very “collapse of reason,” as the “human” element is reframed through the breakdown of Western rational thought and realist mimesis (Rabaté, *Think* 48). Beckett’s unnamable narrator proves especially aware of this: “So they build up hypotheses that collapse on top of one another, it’s human, a lobster couldn’t do it” (U 88).

Insofar as the resistance of “thingness” belongs to (and confirms) neither subject nor object, but nevertheless involves history, labour, worldly relations, it approximates the Heideggerian conception of the thing, as “excess of the real over the object as which it appears” (Lloyd 122). Heidegger’s thing in its elusiveness resists or refuses, as David Lloyd notes, not just representation but instrumentalisation of any kind. By drawing on the etymology of the Old German *thing*—gathering, assembly, or tribunal to deliberate on a matter of contestation, the birthplace of Western democracy—Heidegger evokes this political aspect to the dissolution of the subject-object division (“Thing” 117-118). However, his evocations of history and politics do not prevent him from abandoning them in search for “the thing.” In Lloyd’s words: “Stepping back from the actual historical circumstance that he pretended to address, Heidegger evacuates the thing at once of its obdurate resistance and of its uncanny capacity to unsettle the subject. The anticipation in which the thing ‘stood forth’ becomes the suspension in which the thing appears only in so far as it is abstracted from its condition” (125-126). Beckett’s apprehension of thingliness, as Lloyd notes, could not be further from this conclusion. Nor could Sebald’s. Whether implicated in the crisis of representation or the impossibility of restitution, thingness is that which demands reference to the historical (call it archive, condition) that it purports to annihilate. The uncanny

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24 Picked up enthusiastically by Bruno Latour in “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik” in *Making Things Public* (2005). Note also Heidegger’s insistence that, rather than etymology providing the base for his case about the essence of the thing, the etymological history, with the Latin words *causa* and *res* also implicated, *issues* from its essence.
thingness of certain photographs in Sebald’s texts, for example, marks their material inclusion as a contradictory, out-of-joint historical index within the narrative; put differently, the photo’s “thingness” registers not so much a fleeting thingly essence, as a demand for historical legibility that cannot be fulfilled (or only be read as fragments). “Thingness” becomes not only about resistance to sublimation within a Western metaphysical tradition, and resistance to instrumentalisation by a linear historical narrative, but about registering, however negatively, that instrumentalisation and the violence it entails.

I have in part followed here Lloyd’s excellent *Beckett’s Thing: Painting and Theatre* (2016), which posits Beckett’s appreciation of painting as key to address representation, expression, and theatre. I take especially to Lloyd’s argument about the ethical-political stakes of Beckett’s conception of thingness: “a refusal to offer easy consolations in the face of apparent catastrophe, but […] [also] the effort to think steadily through the implications of an era of increasing instrumentalisation and reification” (21). Lloyd agrees with the critical consensus that Beckett’s writings up to the 1940s show a post-Kantian concern with the inaccessibility of a “pure object” that informs his (and Heidegger’s) rejection of representation as “aesthetic and political category” (17).

“L’objet de la représentation résiste toujours à la représentation,” Beckett writes in his 1948 essay on the van Veldes (*Disjecta* 135). He distinguishes between two types of “resistance”: “l’empêchement-objet” [impeding-object], which he attributes to Geer van Velde (the object resists representation because it is itself), and “l’empêchement-oeil” [impeding-gaze], attributed to Bram (I cannot apprehend the object because I am myself) (ibid. 136). The resistance or inaccessibility of the object in Beckett’s own work following these essays refers not so much to a Kantian thing-in-itself, but to the

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25 [The object of representation always resists representation.] In a slightly earlier essay: “La peinture [de Bram] van Velde serait donc premièrement une peinture de la chose en suspens […] C’est la chose seule, isolée par le besoin de la voir, par le besoin de voir. La chose immobile dans le vide, voilà enfin la chose visible, l’objet pur. […] La boîte crânienne a le monopole de cet article” (ibid. 126).

26 Beckett came to somewhat regret his critical writings on Bram van Velde, the implication being that such categories as the above overly determined the subsequent reception of the painter’s work (Lloyd, *Beckett’s 9*).
fundamental dissolution of the subject, the inadequacy of representation and impossibility of expression—more Bram than Geer.

At the centre of Lloyd’s argument is that Beckett’s apprehension of painting as a thing helps him conceive in turn of theatre as a thing, with an aesthetic-ethical-political folding circling around the “empty” centre of the thingly stage: modernity’s destruction and reifying processes are not avoided but involved via negativa (222). This conception, Lloyd argues, is best understood through Jacques Lacan’s Ding, which is, contrary to the thing-presentations of the unconscious, entirely beyond language; it is a “dumb reality,” “impossible for us to imagine” (Lacan, *Ethics* 55; 125). Lacan’s “Thing” is “that which in the real suffers from the signifier,” “the emptiness at the center of the real” around which the whole desperate movement of the ego turns (ibid. 125, 121). Malone might say: “Nothing is more real than nothing” (MD 17). Beckett’s later plays, from *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958) onward, are more thingly because they no longer cohere around stable objects—“reduced images” like the tree and road in *Waiting for Godot* (Lloyd 133)—that help constitute subjectivity, emphasising instead dispersion (of signifiers and senses), and revolving around prosthetic technologies (qua mediations) and ghostly part-objects. Their characters become suspended among things, displaced by their own possessions. These plays become the domain of the gaze, Lloyd argues: “Far from the Heideggerian thing that nestles and restores the subject to ‘nearness’ and oneness, this unsettling gaze is a thing that registers the fate of the subject in a world relentlessly subjected to circulation, reification, possession and dispossession” (133). Theatre in Lloyd’s argument becomes Beckett’s “thing” precisely because it turns out to be the nothing, the lack around which, dancing, circling, subjectivity fails to be constituted, around which the world fails to be represented. Its historical destruction is nevertheless “a profoundly social act” (233): its thingification appears totalised to an audience, whose social collectivity or *res publica* translates its political charge, whose gaze is implicated in the reified, thingly catastrophe.

Lloyd’s argument is appealing—his reading of the dispersion of things approximates my “spectral” emphasis; pointing out where this thesis diverges will help sketch out the problematics to come. One could say the Lacanian approach only tangentially relates to material objects, foregrounding the breakdown in the signifier-signifying chain and moving us closer to the familiar Beckett terrain. But that is not my chief point of
departure. As he enlists Beckett’s thoughts on painting, Lloyd’s privileging of the late theatre and experiments with media helps him frame their “thingliness” as Beckett’s ultimate radical achievement, his “thoroughgoing dismantling of the regime of representation” (233), the apotheosis of his “nothing.” Depending on our terms this might well be accurate, but it is also profoundly “modernist”—the final accomplishment of the self-referential, reified artwork qua thing—and in this thesis, I seek, rather, to destabilise and problematize this sense of achievement. I accentuate, instead, the unresolved, the indeterminate quality of Beckett’s material representation—his rejection of realist mimesis, for instance, entails its spectral incorporation—and the specific socio-political character of his leftover matter and things (in opposition with Lloyd’s emphasis on the immaterial). Though I also consider Beckett’s plays, my focus is on his mid to late prose works, in part because we find here Beckett’s most persistent turn to swathes of stuff, but also because a major challenge for literary “new materialisms” lies on the page, where in comparison to other media it is more difficult to hide behind virtual and technological mediators that make connections between things appear more immediate, at once more and less “natural.” The encounter with materiality is mediated differently on the page, where we know all we get is the word’s arbitrary surface; we have to face the question of “storied matter” more literally here. Finally, the stress on technology as the prism through which to apprehend Beckett’s human thing in the era of late capitalism—crucial as it is—diminishes somewhat Beckett’s thematisation of the expelled, wandering tramp (and the class implications) who imposes himself like a discarded thing on Beckett’s most productive writing period at the immediate post-war moment. Indeed, what one could call the dwelling in things, inscribed in the phenomenology of walking or (im)mobility, characterises the material encounter in both Beckett and Sebald. With this latter point in mind, the next section prepares the ground for the socio-political implications of a “spectral” conception of materiality. What Sebald’s novels and Beckett’s post-war prose make visible is that the abstracting character of the travelling commodity goes hand in hand with the thingification of the dispossessed, displaced person.

Spectral Materials and the Human Thing

For all the differences, there are specific similarities in how the material world is encountered in Beckett and Sebald’s work, and more often than not this encounter is mediated by geo-political displacement and socio-historical expulsion. While male as a
rule, their walkers are not flâneurs, at home in the urban streets, aloof from the crowd, observing it. Where Sebald’s wanderers travel some distance at times, Beckett’s destitute move somewhat more sluggishly, to the point of crawling in the mud, of exhaustion and arrest. Movement in the work of both writers is paired with immobility. Beckett’s immobile figures often find their impairment materially intensified. Among those who still have a body, Hamm is in a wheelchair, Winnie buried in sand, Malone on his deathbed. In Rings, Sebald’s narrator suffers a paralysing nervous breakdown, while Austerlitz, Cosmo, and Ambros undergo similar episodes. The prosthetic aids that Beckett’s characters rely on for movement (bicycle, crutches…) have received much attention.\(^7\) The nostalgic preference Sebald’s narrator expresses for railway over other modes of transportation is often interpreted as a distaste for the postmodern technological condition. Beckett was an infamous daredevil driver, yet his literary worlds after WWII are largely devoid of cars, indeed of most technologically efficient means of transport.\(^8\) There are only occasional mentions of the slow, local train or the bus; horse carriages are more prominent.\(^9\) The negotiation of urban and rural environments in much of the two writers’ works informs the sense of place (read: displacement, homelessness) more generally, grounding the structure of inclusion and exclusion. The reason why Beckett’s characters walk is because as tramps they have been expelled from society on some level. Sometimes the family is explicitly blamed, at other points the homelessness is circumstantial: Watt walks when he is not retained at

\(^{27}\) Earning them tags like “stroll of a schizo” (Deleuze and Guattari, Anti-Oedipus 9) and “Cartesian Centaur” (Kenner 117).

\(^{28}\) Both writers were passionate walkers and wanderers, though neither too keen on overseas travel.

\(^{29}\) The train in Watt, and the “slow and easy” in Mercier and Camier (30). There is mention of the bus that takes the narrator to the country in “The End,” the three buses from which he is made to get off. The car features prominently in Beckett’s early More Pricks Than Kicks, as Belacqua speeds through the streets in his “swagger sports roadster” to pick up the doomed Ruby, and Lucy and her jennet are run over by a “superb silent limousine, a Daimler no doubt” (83; 103). The Morgan, borrowed for Belacqua and Thelma bogg’s wedding, contributes to an episode of physical comedy in “What a Misfortune” as best man Hairy struggles to get the “strange machine” going in front of a rapt audience (128).
Mr Knott’s or detained in the asylum. Ironically, the dispossessed tramp carries with him all his possessions; he dwells on the threshold of the socio-economic order that means to forget all about him. Austerlitz, in his secular asceticism, like Beckett’s roammers, manages with “as few possessions as possible,” relegated to one army surplus bag (A 41). The displacement of Sebald’s emigrants has more likely been caused overtly by conflict and wartime persecution, his thematisation of exile and emigration rooted firmly in the testimonial, or in a history of testimonial literature.\footnote{Sebald’s preferred word for tramp, notably, is “Sandler,” an Austrian colloquialism. It informs his rhyme of society: “Mit derlei Betrachtungen verging mir die Zeit, bis die Pendler in zunehmender Zahl durch die Vorhalle strebten und die Sandler sich verzogen. (SG 189; my emphasis).}

While one cannot simply attribute the origin of Beckett’s interest in “inhumanity” to the trauma of war (Rabaté, Think 41), the intense encounter with displacement, deportation, and disappearance throws a historically specific light on the tramp and his world. Moreover, Beckett’s sensitivity for the violence of strictly-drawn institutional and national borders drew on his Irish literary precursors, not least Swift and Joyce, within Ireland’s colonial history, and at the same time was shaped by the decolonizing nationalism turned dominant ideology in an independent Ireland. Satires of Irish myths of cultural purity and insularity pervade Beckett’s early work and keep intruding throughout his oeuvre, regularly thematised by contraception bans, bowdlerisation, excrement, and incest. If Beckett shows contempt for the more patriotic and reactionary side of Irish art (though he comes around to W.B. Yeats), Sebald seeks out Swiss and Austrian literary figures over his own “compatriots,” as he called them. His interest in diaspora and exile can be traced from the silence of his domestic, educational and cultural surroundings after the Second World War to his attacks on German repression and the abstracting qualities of Vergangenheitsbewältigung contentiously attributed to “aesthetically insufficient” post-war German literature (qtd. in Silverblatt). His “Air War and Literature” essay provides his most contended views on the danger of the erasure of vertical borders, of denying the past to survive and be rendered in the material topography. Sebald locates, quite explicitly, an ethical imperative in the engagement with the material index of wartime destruction. Crucially, this imperative forms the precondition to re-evaluate the historical thingification of the “human,” something Beckett also made clear in his rare piece of reportage, “The
Capital of the Ruins” (1946): those helping, like Beckett, at the Irish Hospital in Saint-Lô, and clearing away the debris of this French town “bombed out of existence in one night,” return home, in his words, with “a vision and sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins, and perhaps even an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again” (277-278).

Both Beckett and Sebald have an acute “sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins,” and if they embark on thinking the human condition again, this sense extends to the way modernity makes the world appear. Reading their leftover materials—whether ruins, waste, abandoned stuff—as “spectral” serves to register their fragmented relation to the historical coordinates and geo-political (and transcendental) homelessness outlined in part above, and to the reality of abstraction that characterise everyday material life. I take the question asked by Beckett’s vagabond as exemplary for the attempt to, if not fully grasp the order of things, at least locate the self in the world: “Into what nightmare thingness am I fallen?” (CSP 69). The implication is that of a material world out of joint, of the dialectic of ontological alienation as historical phenomenon. If Beckett and Sebald’s material representations intensify the spectrality—as non-contemporaneity and oscillation between material and immaterial—of things, it is because it describes the form in which the modern world cannot not appear. In Marx and Engels’ haunting words: “All that is solid melts into air” (Communist 7).

The problem, also from the Marxist perspective, is at once one of representation and of mapping (specifically of relating the material particular to the abstract system). Thinking in terms of spectrality is implied by the commodity-structure itself: instead of human social relations we get relations between things (commodity fetishism based on exchange value), as the commodity-form congeals human labour, articulating a type of forgetting or death; in a word, reification [Verdinglichung]. Drawing on Marx, Georg Lukács elaborates: “[the] basis [of reification] is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity’ [gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit], an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people” (History 83). That is the totalising gesture of reification, the spectral result of which has been called semblance, real abstraction, or capitalist realism. This process is naturalised—
Verdinglichung has become our “second nature”—simultaneously concealing the “character of things as thing” (ibid. 86; 92). In the face of these processes, materialist critique builds on the work of demystification, with Marx’s description of the commodity structure foregrounding legibility and readability: “It is value […] that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product as language” (45). While the works of Sebald and Beckett’s are more often than not described as resolutely non-political, I suggest in contrast that the spectral quality of their material worlds forces an engagement with modernity’s processes of abstraction.

The initial impression is that there is in the works of both writers a kind of surrender to an utterly reified world. Beckett’s early characters retreat into the bracketed “little world” of the mind in the face of the total thingification of a “big world” qua social sphere (Murphy 107). Later figures are mere things on a dehumanised, objectified stage. A central trope of Sebald’s novels is his characters’ melancholy in the face of a completely reified history. Nevertheless, the stubborn dedication to “bits and scraps” in the work of both articulates a labour of refusal (to borrow a phrase associated with Beckett) to subject to the totalising gaze (or system). The ceaseless return to material things and thing-like humans crystallises structural, border-crossing moments that convey cultural and geographical dislocation (regularly indicated by linguistic slippages), and trace institutional, ideological and real historical borders. Implied in this conception of Beckett and Sebald’s spectral materials is the recuperation of thingification (or reification) as a valuable conception to expose and disturb capitalist processes of abstraction, not unlike Timothy Bewes’ proposition to understand “thingitude” as “a response to the reifying effects of capitalism, a ‘poetics of objectification’ arising out of a willingness to name that process as such, and a refusal to accede to its logic” (Reification xiv-xv). In Sebald’s Rings, to take a case in point, silk and the silkworm as border-crossing materials register in turn the thingification of

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31 [unmittelbaren Dingcharakter aller Dinge]

32 The re-appropriation of reification, as Bewes notes, has a famous historical precedent in Aimé Césaire’s concept of négritude, a politically charged re-appropriation of the hegemonic powers’ reification of non-whites; Aimé Césaire’s equation: “colonisation = chosification” (Césaire 19).
people, imperialism and class struggle, the inequalities and unevenness structuring the world-system. Sebald’s novel, especially, foregrounds the relation between materials and “reading” (and writing) as a space of continual performativity; his spectral materials demand reference to the novel’s system (its ring structure), but—while emphasising the fictionality of an ostensibly “non-fiction” novel—deny the completion, or mapping, of the novel as a “whole” (ideal structure). This negative “call” of Beckett and Sebald’s things inscribes their political energy, hinting at the blind spots that cannot be mapped, those connections that exist but cannot recuperated into meaningfulness.

The understanding of materiality here has much in common with Eric L. Santner’s On Creaturely Life (2006), in which he argues that Sebald puts to work a kind of “‘spectral materialism’ that serves to register and archive a certain real whose status is, paradoxically, virtual” (52). “Spectral materialism” describes “a capacity to register the persistence of past suffering that has in some sense been absorbed into the substance of lived space, into the ‘setting’ of human history” (57). Or put differently: the thingification of a fragmented, traumatic past, crystallised in the present. Santner’s Benjaminian reading appeals because it seeks out the political, potentially positive space in Sebald’s work amid the metaphysical resignation that occupies most other critics. Santner locates this space in Sebald’s openness to “the possibility of an encounter and engagement with the creaturely dimension of our neighbour” (140), the possibility of an ethical being-for-the-Other that has to be continually carved out. The present thesis departs from Santner’s focus on melancholy and the creaturely (though both are considered), as it problematizes the privileging of melancholy as ethical subject-position, and thus as political model. Instead, tending to objects beyond their subsumption to the melancholic gaze, and to their conflicting narrative presence, opens up a material space where the political has to be continually re-inscribed.

**Reading Objects**

While this thesis puts little emphasis on literary classification itself, it draws on “realist” and “modernist” object representations insofar as Beckett and Sebald intervene and destabilise such determinate paradigms. A special position in the history of reading objects is occupied by the realist novel of the nineteenth century, at once as fascinated with commodity affluence and as totalised embodiment and reflection of it. In 1967, Guy Debord writes in The Society of the Spectacle: “The spectacle corresponds to the
historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. 

[…] the world we see is the world of the commodity” (29). The blanket commodification of life under capitalism that Debord describes can be tied to the explosion of thing culture in mid-nineteenth-century bourgeois life. The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations that took place in 1851 in Hyde Park was the first in a series of International Exhibitions that glorified commodity affluence. The 1855 Exposition Universelle in Paris found in Baudelaire an “exceptional witness” (Agamben, Stanzas 41), who brought his fantastic understanding of commodification into art and who for Benjamin channelled the essence of the nineteenth century. It also accommodated the first exhibition specially dedicated to the art of photography, heralding the radical change in the relationship between art, technology, and mass consumption. In keeping with developments, the realist and naturalist novel of the later nineteenth century exhibits swathes of commodities of all kinds. For Elaine Freedgood, the Victorian novel “is a particularly rich site for tracing the fugitive meanings of apparently nonsymbolic objects” (Ideas 4). Bill Brown writes: “the novel, in particular the realist novel from the 19th century (say Dickens, Balzac, Zola, Dreiser) dedicated itself to rendering object culture legible and to making objects metonymically meaningful” (“Matter” 62). And Janell Watson: “the heavily descriptive novel is as much a product of nineteenth-century material culture as is the bourgeois living room” (3). Literary scholarship has in the past decades turned away from dismissing the vulgar materialism of the Victorian novel and shown how it opens up the space for all kinds of object relations.

Bourgeois commodity-culture seems a far cry from Beckett’s decaying worlds, nor does it match the typical Sebaldian tropes of trauma, testimony, and memory. However, the boundary between their material environments and the bourgeois household (acting metonymically) is porous and actively negotiated. The commodity realism of Balzac as a kind of total realism of the image or spectacle (pace Jameson and Debord) finds itself

33 Debord himself does not provide a date until much later, when he specifies the 1920s (Freedgood, “Commodity” 167n3).

34 Benjamin called them “die Wallfahrtsstätten zum Fetisch der Ware” [pilgrimage sites for the commodity fetish] (Benjamin, GS 5.1: 50).

35 See Benjamin, GS 5.1: 48-49.
materialised, incorporated in thing-form, in their fictions (in different ways). The commodity, when left behind, obsolete to the mystifying forces of the bourgeois world, haunts that very system. This is what Benjamin built his *Arcades Project* on; the dialectic potential of leftover stuff. The miniature, the antique, the bibelot—Sebald’s walker encounters objects that could have been part of a World Exhibition but have been relegated to other, dustier spaces. Sebald freezes commodity affluence and fetishisation into an image or tableau: a destitute museum evacuated of visitors, a dusty shop-window to look at from the outside. Rather than following up on Beckett’s propertied world and seeing what the loss of the material possession is all about in the first place, most critics will move for the “real” Beckett of dispossessed subjectivity. But Beckett does not simply reject realist tropes and modes of representation, he guts them for his own use. Like Joyce, he is indebted to Flaubert whose works dramatized realism’s search for truth-value amid the profusion of objects and the monotonies of everyday life. While the realist social fabric of inheritance, welfare, property, job economy, in Beckett’s work has an irreality reminiscent of Kafka’s stories, the characters’ precarious interaction with those domains remains somewhat indifferent and self-aware: the bourgeois morality of the realist novel is either lacking or literalised ad absurdum. Rather than affirming the reality of his environments, their uneven intrusion makes the characters doubt the nature of object-relations. I will argue, against the dominant narrative that neither Beckett nor Sebald are concerned with the commodity logic, that the persistent incorporation of obsolescent objects in their texts serves to interrogate the social lives of things and the traditions to represent them.

I retain the notion of late modernism in this thesis because it describes, first, the tone of belatedness that marks Beckett and Sebald’s poetics (a continual return to the past that precludes its recovery), second, the historical conditions of post-war Europe—distinct from the interwar Paris of the high modernists and the “postmodernism” of

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56 A good example is Paul Davies’ *The Ideal Real* (1994), whose first chapter “Trusty Things” opens up a discussion of material objects that is then not followed up but leads into more familiar subjectivity-driven terrain.

57 See the useful history of the European philosophical lineage of “lateness” in Ben Hutchinson’s *Lateness and Modern European Literature* (2016).
American fiction— that define their (in Beckett’s case, majority of) works, and third, an aesthetic position which cannot easily be assimilated into what is the already-contested category of postmodernism, and instead plays out the ghostliness of its ties to the avant-garde within contemporary political contexts. The resulting picture is that of an unreconciled modernism, a spectral poetics that relies as much on the modernist aesthetic as it subjects it to numerous transmigrations. Less concerned with the category of the *noumenon*, the thesis emphasises the materiality of language and the “ill seen ill said” quality of modernist object worlds. If high modernism, in Douglas Mao’s words, has an “extraordinarily generative fascination with the object understood neither as commodity (Goods) nor as symbol (Gods), but as ‘object’” (4), then things in Beckett and Sebald cannot be untangled and categorised that easily: commodity, symbolism, thingness, materiality seem somehow sedimented and residual in their objects. Their late modernism queries a conventional narrative of object representation in literature: against realism’s “legible” objects (whether positive or critical), critics have glossed the “long-term rehabilitation” of objects during the height of interwar modernism (Freedgood, *Ideas* 156), and argued how “one of modernism’s major efforts was to preserve the object’s integrity and difference” (Mao 23). In Beckett and Sebald, the modernist restoration of the object has already failed. The modernist predisposition to “the physical object as object—as not-self, as not-subject” is foiled not least by Beckett’s “not I,” the externalised language subject; the “object’s extrasubjective integrity” cannot be ensured if the subject is disintegrated into materiality (Mao 4). The utopian defence of the object’s integrity from modern fetishizing processes is

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38 The commodity saturation and trash culture qua American imperialism that we find in Pynchon and DeLillo, for instance, does not fit with the leftover stuff in Beckett and Sebald’s post-war environments.

39 Steven Connor puts it suggestively: Beckett remains “awkwardly indigestible to modernism,” not least due to “the difficulty of generalising his innovations” (*Beckett* 2).

40 One can also look to the “Objectivists,” that second generation of modernist poets thinking the thing phenomenologically and in its uniqueness (as opposed to sociocultural functions like commodity fetishism). Note that Freedgood argues that the modernist rescue mission of the object from the hands of the Victorian novelists is insincere insofar as it does injustice to the realists’ complex and ambiguous depictions of material culture.
performed by Beckett’s tramps as a philosophical “old hat” made literal. Sebald, in his own way, raises the Benjaminian aura that supplements the modernist object only to disrupt its horizon, insisting, like Beckett, on spectrality, marginality and repetition. Like the high modernist, their protagonists seek relief in the object world from the social relations and ideology in place, but the outcome is ridiculed and often disastrous.

Beckett’s critical engagement and artistic debt to Proust, Joyce and Flaubert (as proto-modernist) make their object worlds more imminently relevant than, say, those of James or Virginia Woolf. The fact that Beckett was closely aware of the work of modernist “thingers” like Gertrude Stein and Francis Ponge is as important as his love for expressionist and abstract art, and his recognition of the artwork as “thing.” Beckett’s noted preference for painting over sculpture is one of the indicators why this recognition of the thingness of the artwork should not be collapsed into an uncompromised dedication to, or fetishisation of, the discrete object. Meanwhile, Sebald’s oft-noted stylistic debt to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German-language writers should not paper over his keen eye for Franz Kafka’s inhuman creature, or Hermann Hesse and Thomas Mann’s Dionysian relics. Both writers retain a modernist sensibility for the shortcomings of the senses of perception (especially vision) as the seat of empirical affirmation and subject-formation. Beckett proved his psychoanalytic understanding of the fetish object’s potential as narrative device in his early Proust study, describing the “intellectualised animism” underlying the involuntary memory to which Proust’s “entire book is a monument.” The fetish’s “mystic experience” is “the Leitmotiv of his composition” (21-23). Sebald shared Beckett’s admiration for Proust, and was similarly sensitive to the fetish’s embodiment of traumatic amnesia, its evocative expression of disavowal while preserving that which has been disavowed. The plethora of heirlooms and keepsakes in Beckett’s work

41 The overview certainly does not aim at a comprehensive picture of Beckett and Sebald’s respective influences. A study on Sebald and post-war trauma, for instance, might highlight Elias Canetti, Jean Améry, Hannah Arendt, Primo Levi, and Paul Celan, instead.

42 Freud’s fetish is not essentially symbolic; it usually works through a physical connection to the disavowed, a synecdochical or contiguous relation: “One would expect that the organs or objects chosen as substitutes for the absent female phallus would be such as appear as symbols of the penis in other connections as well. This may
suggests a fetishistic clinging on to objects connected to a traumatic event. In Sebald, this sense could not be more powerful. The relationship between Beckett’s protagonists and their objects is, however, more often that of a libidinal fixation (oral in the case of Molloy’s stones and Krapp’s banana). The connection with the traumatic event is not established in Beckett; the Proustian hope is ridiculed, often through indifference and misremembrance. In Sebald, the tragedy of the objects encountered lies in their having belonged to someone else, displacing trauma and marking the narrator’s position as a latecomer. Proust’s salvation—the restoration of the past in the present—is rejected, and spectral objects are instead perceived out of the corner of the eye—even if Sebald’s madeleine is steeped less in radical negativity than Beckett’s.43 Both engage with the unsolvable “Proustian equation” that underpins subject-object relations (and their collapse) in terms of identification, perception and representation (Beckett, *Proust* 1).44

Happen often enough, but is certainly not a deciding factor. It seems rather that when the fetish is instituted some process occurs which reminds one of *the stopping of memory in traumatic amnesia* [das Haltmachen der Erinnerung bei traumatischer Amnesie]. As in this latter case, the subject’s interest comes to a halt half-way, as it were; it is as though *the last impression before the uncanny and traumatic one is retained as a fetish*” (“Fetishism” 154; italics mine).

43 While Beckett’s Proust is better documented than Sebald’s, Franz Loquai makes a good case for Proust’s sway over *Austerlitz*, discussing Sebald’s annotations in his German edition of Proust’s oeuvre; notably, Sebald annotated Sheila Stern’s *Proust* study with such margin comments as “Aust. in Paris” and “Aust. Terezin” (“Max und Marcel” 215). Missing from Loquai’s essay is an analysis of how exactly Sebald twists and reverses some of Proust’s recurring memory motifs.

44 Hence why, as numerous critics have insisted, Kant’s category of *Ding-an-Sich* has only limited bearing on our thinking of objects in their work. Beckett’s reading of Proust is ostensibly and self-admittedly one of Schopenhauerian pessimism: “Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit. Breathing is habit. Life is habit […] the world being a projection of the individual’s consciousness […] The periods of transition that separate consecutive adaptations […] represent the perilous zones in the life of the individual, dangerous, precarious, painful, mysterious and fertile, when for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being” (*Proust* 8).
The modernist “crisis of representation,” furthermore, guides Beckett and Sebald’s thinking of the materiality of language. Thomas Bernhard (himself a “late modernist”), with his compulsive return of the suicidal person’s melancholic object and constant, layered correcting of prose, represents a considerable influence on Sebald’s poetics in this respect. Intent on silence, Beckett concedes in the “German Letter” that by “materiality of the word surface” he has in mind something like Stein’s logographic poems, which take a thing, and say it ill, mobilise various nouns (with an element of chance) and make them miss their target, in turn perhaps approximating the thing-in-itself more than those signifiers deadened by convention and habit (LI 518). Stein offers an “extremely determined non-resemblance of an object” (a tactic that Watt repeatedly employs to seek the “whatness” of a word by any other means), providing an early appreciation of language’s materiality, embodiment, and abjection (Nugent-Folan 73). Beckett proceeds to suggest that, although Joyce’s apotheosis of the word may be opposite in intention to the silence of his and Stein’s piercing of the word surface, these opposite trajectories may yet ultimately reconvene. Joyce’s importance for Beckett is too personally, historically, and artistically complex to do it justice here. Joyce’s texts already incorporate a tension between the material particular (or discrete object) and the materiality of the text: the subject swallowed up in language. As the (male) writing form gives way in Ulysses to the (female) oral expulsion of words, evacuating punctuation and structure, we can trace a line to Beckett’s initial externalisation and materialisation of the disintegrating voice in The Unnamable, and his subsequent re-embodiment of that externalised language in How It Is. If Beckett condemns his own early prose as “stink[ing] of Joyce” (LI 81) and criticises the Joycean model of epiphany (like Proust’s involuntary memory and Woolf’s moments of being), his turn away from Joyce’s aesthetic may be defined by its residual

45 In this respect, Stein’s diverted logograms pertain more to Beckett’s sensibility than Francis Ponge’s oblique look at the thing.

46 No doubt, Joyce is pivotal for any understanding of the intersection of international modernism and Irish postcolonialism in Beckett’s work. It was Joyce who introduced Beckett to the international scene in Paris (Gibson 44).

47 See Daniel Katz, “How It Is Again” (12).

48 To Charles Prentice, 15 August 1931.

49 See Van Hulle and Nixon, Beckett’s Library 74.
communication, his materials and material forms surviving residually in Beckett’s work. Note Joyce’s own problematic position within so-called high modernism, his modernist premises leading him to follow such extensive artistic tangents that he became the quintessential modernist without being quintessentially modernist. Beckett’s debt to the Joycean maximes must be seen within an uneven view of international modernism, especially if we are to destabilise the metanarrative of European modernism where Joyce spells excess and Beckett reduction.

Finally, it is important to note—because the relation between language and place is fundamental to the spectrality of their environments—that Beckett and Sebald’s “late modernisms” also build on the translation and internationalism at the heart of modernism. Steven Yao has shown how translation pervaded the entire modernist project: “the age of Modernism was, quite literally, an age of translations […] ‘Make it New’ seems in large measure to have meant ‘Make it Foreign’” (5-6). The crisis of language associated with modernism is evident in the “linguistic plurality” of Pound, Eliot, Stein, Joyce, and others, formulating the promise of “making language strange” and “de-automatising the relationship to language” (Taylor-Batty 4). Translation in critical discourse takes many different forms, not just that of the rendering of words into another language, drawing on a philosophical and theoretical lineage in the twentieth century from Benjamin to de Man, Derrida, Berman, Spivak, Lefevere, Bassnett, Perloff, Venuti, among many. Rather than being satisfied with the truism that “something is lost in translation,” these theoretical conceptions propose that translation always exceeds translation. Structurally, translation can be perceived as the displacement or transposition of signs. An English-language novel that takes place in a non-Anglophone setting, for instance; both the language and cultural context are translated by the author in the “original” for the reader. Equally, we can think of exophonic writing in terms of translation. Translation, in Antoine Berman’s words “is not a simple mediation: it is a process in which our entire relationship with the Other transpires” (287). In this sense, the exceptional language positions occupied by

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50 My translation. “[La] traduction n’est pas une simple médiation: c’est un processus où se joue tout notre rapport avec l’Autre.”
Beckett and Sebald are inseparable from the ethical encounter with the non-self and creaturely.\textsuperscript{51}

Translation perceived as a border-crossing and rapport with the Other puts pressure on the limits that demarcate claims to language and literature by way of national ideologies. These borders are shown up as “imagined,” to borrow from Benedict Anderson, unstable and uneven.\textsuperscript{52} This is in part Rebecca Walkowitz’s argument in *Born Translated* (2015), which rallies translation against notions of national ownership and representation of the literary space. “Born-translated” works, like those of Beckett and Sebald, have “translation as medium and origin” rather than as afterthought (3). In Beckett and Sebald’s worlds, language has long been strange, an automatic relationship with language is presented as historical delusion. As Beckett and Sebald emphasise the border-crossing, displaced and displacing nature of language, we can look at the slippages as a way to register the material spectrality of their worlds; Sebald’s translating citation of Nabokov, for example, who himself worked from an exophonic position of citation, incorporation and ironisation of foreign texts.\textsuperscript{53} While translation and plurality (or palimpsests) of language are not the central focus in this thesis, they form an important framework through which to approach the unfixed and displaced condition

\textsuperscript{51} To be sure, a comparative study of Beckett and Sebald could easily focus on the issue of translation alone.

\textsuperscript{52} Exploring Beckett and Sebald’s place within the wider field of world literature exceeds my focus, but the recent debate about the role of translation for world-literature studies can be kept in mind, with David Damrosch at the helm of those broadcasting the virtues of multilingualism, and tackling literary translation directly in world-literature criticism. Following Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* (2004), the relevance of translation as an object in the field of cultural production—as both product and mechanism of uneven and combined development—has received much attention. Beckett’s auto-translation stands out in that field as a gesture of radical autonomy (see Casanova, *World* 140-142), while his translations of other writers, especially for Nancy Cunard’s *Negro* anthology, mark the intersection of translation, politics, and a world literature space more explicitly (see Morin, *Beckett’s Political Imagination*, Chapter Two).

of Beckett and Sebald’s materials. They constitute the pre-condition of why an orderly world-system of objects fails to take shape: rather than “born-translated,” we might say, with Watt, that Beckett and Sebald’s ruinous texts have never been properly born translated.

Chapter Overview

I will begin with the most obsolete, “negative” matters in Sebald and Beckett respectively: ruins and waste—matters expelled from the narrative of progress and production, destabilising normative, orderly codings and threatening the position of the “subject.” Both ruins and waste stake a strong claim to history, yet articulate the resistance and erasure inherent in that claim. Though they prove inextricable from language in the texts under scrutiny, the affirmative notion of “storied matter” does not apply to them; their material “style,” I suggest, means rather that we read at once with and against them. Chapter One builds on Walter Benjamin’s allegory of the ruin to explore how Sebald’s novels draw on ruination as an inherent structuring mode, and foreground its aesthetic history in relation to a reified, natural history. The abundance of discarded matter has been criticised as a shortcut to signification playing into the hand of Sebald’s melancholic rambler, with the holocaust becoming the master signifier. Rather than following an impotent construal of a ruinous, melancholy metaphysics, I suggest that the ruin’s claim to history in Sebald’s text is an active one, that the ethical-aesthetic fold in his work can be gleaned as the rubble takes the role of witness and calls for a readership. Sebald’s work is founded on the ethical imperative to preserve and study the ruin as it indexes the limit of restitution and remembrance of those that have been erased. It is for this reason that Sebald’s melancholic walks along a negative horizon, as only under the threat of annihilation residual responsiveness and engagement survive. The chapter moves away from the question of melancholy as a political subject-position, to that of a material-driven political imperative.

Chapter Two argues (against symbolic, universal and existentialist interpretations) that the double nature of waste as lack and remainder underlies the interrogation of history in Beckett’s work. The chapter juxtaposes Watt (its waste economy) and Fizzles (dwelling in waste) to challenge non-historical understandings of Beckett’s different types of waste: abject, economic, entropic, ruinous. Beckett’s early scatology—in the Irish literary heritage—has been shown to be a satirical intervention in the building of
the Irish nation state; with *Watt* we see the gradual expulsion of this mode of “waste,” and a recognition of the novel as surplus economy. With *Watt*, Beckett destabilises the coming-into-being of the historical text as testimony, raising questions of value and legibility that his later “waste-texts” foreground so strongly. Indeed, one is wont to ask, with Beckett’s fondness for discarded things, whether his books do not become broken, too. In this sense, can the *Fizzles* be said to undermine precisely the “lessening,” the teleological movement toward the nothing of expression that critics so often see as Beckett’s final achievement? In the incorporation of matter for matter’s sake, and the refusal, until last, to sublimate the waste, we can detect the spectral historical temporalities that persist in Beckett’s late fragments.

From the waste-text, Chapter Three turns to Beckett’s expelled human waste: the tramps in his immediate post-war prose, at a European moment when the inconceivable process of recovery has not yet begun. Beckett’s *nouvelles* provide anchors to visualise the protagonists hiding in wartime France, yet are replete with Irish and German coordinates. The stories inaugurate the shift from third to first person, their narrators and their negotiation of rural and urban spaces announcing *Molloy*, and the ontological instability of the world in the trilogy more widely. As leftover non-persons—waste products of modernity—the vagabonds embody surplus and movement at the borders of the socio-economic sphere. As solitary figures steeped in complicity, misogyny, and violence, uninterested in social revolt, they nevertheless (and despite themselves) perform an inadequate political resistance, what Thomas Nail would call their “pedetic force,” a counter-hegemonic “charge of historical and social ‘chaos’” (125-126). The chapter insists on the spectral condition of Beckett’s world that leads the narrator of “The Calmative” to ask: “Into what nightmare thingness am I fallen?” (69)—a historical question that critics have little pursued. Presupposing not so much a phenomenological universal as a historical economy on whose margins the vagabond is trapped, Beckett’s spectral images interrogate ideological structures of cultural identity-formation at a time of continual re-demarcations of national borderlines. Reading the stories’ world in conjunction with linguistic slippages, commodity logic, and bourgeois tropes, encourages a formulation of the problem of politics in Beckett (as opposed to determining a political position).

54 The stories also mark Beckett’s transition from English to French, the start of what he called his “frenzy of writing” (1946-1951) (qtd. in Knowlson 358).
Chapter Four examines Sebald’s “materialist” strategies, specifically the maps drawn from the remnants scattered throughout his novels. *Rings*, I suggest, performs a kind of material (un-)mapping: its archive demands to be mapped while articulating the impossibility of registering its coordinates in an orderly fashion. As the narrator’s walk through Suffolk is interwoven with countless instances of translation, literary appropriation, estranging diction, and incommensurable comparisons, a coherent image of the novel’s “whole” or “centre” fails to form, and instead we glean how it dialectically places itself on an uneven world map of cultural production. The “narrative” webs spun by the novel’s pervasive material agent—silk—gestures toward the networks of flat ontology, as the material and its transmigratory creatures become shapeshifters of vitalist dimensions, connecting textile, fashion, technology, industry, commodity, fetish, totem, animal, and appearing as allegory, symbol, index, and narrative thread. The novel’s ring-structure ultimately breaks with such an ontology, tracing instead ruptures, residues, and contradictions within a spectral environment. The chapter suggests that the work’s ethical claim emerges from its refusal to resolve itself and knot its threads together, calling for a continual material re-engagement in the present.

Chapter Five argues that Beckett’s post-war work incorporates a literary and mimetic object-world, but that this object world is largely spectral. The dregs of bourgeois realism, sedimented in the aftermath of two world wars linger in Beckett’s environments, which remain unreconciled with themselves. The tramp’s object-encounters in the stories and novels oscillate between the realist cluttered room—the sway that possessions hold over the protagonists—and modernist objects, whose integrity, ludicrously, seems to be at stake at the very moment the self disintegrates. The chapter concludes with a look at the conundrum that Beckett faces when the spectral object needs to be transposed, in its insuperable “thereness,” onto the theatre stage. Here the paradox of the material void raised by his work is at its most visible: the nothing to which all expression tends is stubbornly, materially present. Rather than understanding Beckett’s stage as a system of objects (as the *nouveau romanciers* have done), I suggest the “thereness” of his props heightens an exhausted relationship coming on the back of a long history of making things work for us.

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55 A full investigation of Beckett’s props exceeds the purview of this study, however.
The final chapter collapses the previous readings of Sebald’s ruins and materials into the singular issue that his work raises: the hybrid text, playing off words and images. Analysing the photograph’s “thingness” and material properties, the chapter shows how Sebald’s hybrid text allows us to reframe the question of performance relating to materiality in his work more generally. There are three main claims: first, I suggest that the photograph as domestic commodity (the family album) interrogates the status of the family, highlighting its ambivalence amid Sebald’s “memory work,” destabilising it as a cipher for restitution. Secondly, the photograph constitutes Sebald’s most effective means for problematizing the historical archive as the domain of the human, allowing narrative space to the material and nonhuman. Finally, I look at photography in relation to Sebald’s “catastrophe,” showing how his images can work against the narrative, refract our gaze and force us to reinvest in things as they structure our historical understanding of “natural” and man-made environments.
Chapter One. Sebald Among the Ruins

“… a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins.”
Beckett, “The Capital of the Ruins” (CSP 228)

Introduction

In On Creaturely Life, Eric Santner emphasises the importance of “Sebald’s privileged substances—dust, ash, bone, silk, and all manner of combustion and entropy—as well as sites that draw his gaze, fortifications, railway stations, the flayed surfaces of urban space” (xx). These substances and sites express Sebald’s explorations of funereal practices, natural decay and devastation, military absurdities, urban archaeology, transient spaces, and residual traces of personal micro-histories; what Austerlitz calls “Schmerzensspuren” [marks of pain] of history (24). Santner remarks that “Sebald’s entire project is, we might say, an effort to tease out the testimony of dust and ash, to see in such material deposits the very ‘matter’ of historical depositions” (Santner 102).

The material deposit, or vestige, becomes the agent for residual restoration; it expresses the melancholic’s refusal to forget and mourn, as well as his/her politicised creativity. In Emigrants, Max Ferber sees the cast-off paint shavings and droppings, mixed with coal dust and covering the floor of his artist studio, as both “the true product of his continuing endeavours and the most palpable proof of his failure” (E 161). It is as if Sebald recast Beckett’s comments on the artist’s necessary “fidelity to failure” through leftover materiality: “to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail” (Disjecta 145). Sebald himself has been labelled a “waste theorist” who “acknowledges both the materiality of the wasted thing and its ontological instability, its capacity to speak of the past;” “Sebald’s abandoned things speak of the full magnitude of what happened” (Hawkins, “History” 161; 169). Sebald’s leftover materiality doubtless forces an encounter with the past that catches us off guard: destruction, extermination, erasure, disappearance.

56 Santner’s book builds on an ethical notion of creaturely (or uncanny) life and expressivity, which acts as “an index of a traumatic kernel around which the ‘ego life’ of the other has, at some level, been (dis)organized.” Sebald, for Santner, is “obsessed with developing the means to engage with the ‘neighbour’ in his or her creaturely expressivity, that his entire oeuvre could be seen as the construction of an archive of creaturely life” (xiii).
neglect are carried into the present. The materiality’s “capacity to speak”—the
registering of “the full magnitude of what happened”—can only be understood
negatively. Leftover matter is at the heart of the Sebaldian “attempt at restitution” (to
borrow his lecture title),\(^57\) which must be thought of not in terms of accomplishment or
success, but as a continual process of engagement. In this chapter, I take to ruins as
Sebald’s most formally and thematically inextricable material (site, text, environment). I
suggest that the politics of matter can be gleaned as the rubble takes the role of witness,
as it calls for a readership. This conception will allow us to understand the
pervasiveness of melancholy in Sebald’s novels in constructive, rather than impotent
terms. Walking along a negative horizon, a natural history of destruction, becomes a
necessity, as only under the threat of annihilation residual responsiveness and
engagement stir.

Sebald’s recourse to leftover things—detritus, abandoned commodities, ruins—is
ostensibly Benjaminian, not least insofar as it serves to disrupt the linear flow of
hegemonic historical time. For the critic, this is at once blessing and curse. Issues arise
as the not-quite-fictional novels overtly perform the critical gesture for us: the risk lies
in reducing Sebald’s aesthetic paradigms to the philosopher’s theses. To be sure, the
Frankfurt School teachings are essential for Sebald’s conception of natural history and
critique of progress, as is Foucault for his account of power and violence, while
Benjamin’s writings offer the central theoretical prism through which to conceive of
Sebald’s material remnants in relation to nature, history, melancholia, and the problem
of political response. At its best, Sebald scholarship uses the omnipresence of
historical-philosophical theses to crystallise the qualitative difference of Sebald’s literary
aesthetics.\(^58\) The danger meanwhile consists in employing the same reading parameters
for novel and theory, often concluding with Sebald’s political resignation—“his texts
are resolutely non-political” (Morgan 75)—or monitoring gratuitous comparisons:
“[Sebald] is less open to the generative possibilities of decay and change than Benjamin,
less able to imagine a new materialism” (Hawkins, “History” 161).

\(^{57}\) “An Attempt at Restitution,” collected in *Campo Santo.*

\(^{58}\) See, for instance, Ben Hutchinson “The shadow of resistance: W.G. Sebald and the
Frankfurt School.” Also Michael D. Hutchins’ PhD Thesis, Tikkun: *W.G. Sebald’s
Melancholy Messianism* (2011), not least for its Appendix reprinting Sebald’s annotations
and markings in his personal copy of *Dialektik der Aufklärung.*
The question of ethical and political possibility in Sebald is posed with urgency throughout this thesis. Santner puts it well: “Is there a conception, in his work, of what it might mean to suspend our bondage to Naturgeschichte? Or is Sebaldian jouissance so thoroughly tied up with the sex appeal of decay, so addicted to dust, ash, and bones, that there is no longer even a desire for a way out?” (134). Santner’s conclusion that, yes, there is resistance, a desire for a way out, in Sebald applies also to my argument; for Santner, “Sebald’s multiple portrayals of acts of testimony and transmission—in their very dependence on chance” open the possibility for the expressivity of the Other, what he calls “creaturely life” (140). Relying heavily on Benjamin, Freud and Lacan, Santner describes this mode as Sebald’s “spectral materialism,” which “serves to register and archive a certain real whose status is, paradoxically virtual” (52). I have no bone to pick with Santner’s convincing points: the spectrality of things—their multiple temporalities, and the inconsistencies between material and abstraction—is essential for understanding the simultaneous imperative and limit of reading residual material traces in both Sebald and Beckett’s texts. This chapter overlaps with some of his arguments; however, a chief difference is that Santner’s subject-driven inquiry into the characters’ “melancholic immersion” (62) here gives way to a reading of the ruin’s material “style” and its challenge to legibility and aesthetics. The problem of political response is traced from the ruin’s materiality as it relates to the processes of modernity, through to Sebald’s assimilation of the ruin into the fabric of the text itself.

At stake in Sebald is not so much the end of history itself, but the paradox of the very “idea of doing history,” as Mark Jackson puts it (478). The paradox of writing history is put to work in Sebald’s novels from a material perspective. Sebald’s texts time and again cast leftover matter into the role of witness, and one senses that this is precisely because their “testimony” does not unfold into orderly narratives. To speak of material “style” serves to underline that the ruin is, quite against itself, bound up in the narrative progression, at once catalysing and breaking up the negative teleology that seems to dominate Sebald’s novels. As remarked earlier, “new materialist” thought ascribes to matter a story-telling quality, reconfiguring it as “site of narrativity” (Iovino and Oppermann, “Material” 83). Boscagli proposes that “style” can give “plasticity a name and a semiotic dimension”—“Style: the way matter exists, comes into being as what Haraway calls a ‘figure,’ sensate and communicating. Style is simultaneous with matter, encoded in it” (25). Such a conception, however, is only useful if problematized by the
material’s resistance as form of expression, and only insofar as it describes the paradox (and anthropomorphism) of thinking material “expression.” With the use of “style” I seek to capture, then, a conception of “storied matter” in the negative, as the ruin’s “style” articulates dispersal of meaning and a limit of historical recuperation, while at the same time staking a claim to narrative and the historical. Material “style” is thus by definition allegorical, and in this sense (as will become clear) ruinous in itself.

Too Much Rubble

What makes the ruin so attractive is its pervasive role in attempts to make historical sense of the world. Its progressive formlessness and temporal fragmentation describe the dialectics of nature and history, material and abstraction. In his 1907 essay on the modern ruin aesthetic, Georg Simmel views architecture as the site of a genuine balance between the human mind and nature’s force (symbiotic domination). As the building crumbles, the balance established between inert matter and striving intellectuality \[drängenden Geistigkeit\] collapses (124). This shift in favour of nature is felt as a cosmic tragedy, which “makes every ruin an object infused with our nostalgia; for now the decay appears as nature’s revenge for the spirit’s having violated it by making a form in its own image” (379). It is as if nature perceived the human artwork as an act of violence in the face of autonomous cosmic laws. However, the perceived loss of human agency—and source of nostalgia—is swiftly absorbed by the ruin’s aesthetic order. For Simmel, the ruined edifice gains in meaning as the product of human artistry turns into a product of nature. Nature re-appropriates the ruin’s matter and form into meaning, and from this play of forces (human and natural), the ruin emerges as a cypher for peace and renewed balance, which itself preserves the initial (unresolved) antagonism of the human soul in the face of nature: “The aesthetic value of the ruin combines the disharmony [Unausgeglichenheit], the eternal becoming of the soul struggling against itself, with the formal satisfaction, the firm limitedness of the work of art” (384). In relation to our ideas of the past, the ruin’s aesthetic produces an image of the past—a pastness—in the present. Simmel thus stresses not so much the trace or remainder, nor indeed memory, but the spiritual totality fusing past and present into one object of aesthetic experience.

Simmel’s theory raises a number of ideas from which Benjamin and later Sebald radically depart: the dichotomy of the human mind in the face of nature, the symbolic
end of the mind’s supremacy, as well as the sublime codifications of revenge and violation. Most of all, the sublimation of the ruin into unity and totality—its concretization of a timeless myth—directly contradicts the Benjaminian understanding.

For the Benjamin of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, the ruin is an allegorical form, fragmented, full of gaps, and—significantly—non-symbolic: “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things” (178). Allegory and ruin rely on the material remnant not insofar as it relates to a totality—Benjamin rejects as an untruth the platonic “salvation” of the particular image (GS 1.1: 227)—but to time.

The experience of the symbol is an immediate, ever-changing present [mystische Nu], whereas in allegory the history of decay is presented as petrified nature [erstarrte Urlandschaft] (ibid. 342-343). The hollowed-out, leftover remnant—re-entering the symbolic realm as cipher: the baroque’s emblem or the nineteenth-century’s commodity—tracks the dialectic of natural history whereby (rather than “nature” equalling history) the reification of socio-historical processes appears timeless and natural; what Lukács called our “second nature” (*History* 86). Significantly, the ruin—like the allegorical work—is the “new” (as abstraction) which is “built” in the first place, from the abundance of historical fragments (ibid. 354). It is the role of the allegorist to recognize the politics of materiality and the arbitrariness of the meaning assigned to hollowed-out objects, to practice “allegory against myth” and politicise the eternal recurrence of natural history (Buck-Morss 183). Thus Benjamin reacts against inadequate political responses: baroque theatre was guilty of debasing nature through spiritual transcendence, while the political resignation of Baudelaire and Nietzsche ultimately “[ontologized] the empty historical experience of the commodity, the new as the always-the-same” (ibid. 201).

Benjamin’s allegory-ruin equation highlights how crucial materiality is to his sign theory. Allegory is for Benjamin a “form of expression,” which, to quote Susan Buck-Morss, “the objective world imposed upon the subject as a cognitive imperative,” rather than an aesthetic device chosen by the artist (168). Paradoxically, then, the artistic rendition of the historical imperative emerges from the muteness of the material index—its thingness—which is what defines Sebald’s ruin aesthetic: the destroyed

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59 “Allegorien sind im Reiche der Gedanken was Ruinen im Reiche der Dinge” (GS 1.1: 354).
material’s call for a readership. This is a chief difference between the allegorical work and the melancholic perspective of Benjamin’s “angel of history”:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Illuminations 257-258)

The unbroken continuity of modernity’s progress naturalises the destruction that underlies it; the abstracted image of history as an ongoing accumulation of disasters is forced upon the machine-like, thingified onlooker. Sebald’s protagonists repeatedly and self-consciously rehearse the dialectic position of Benjamin’s angel: “This then, I thought, as I looked around me, is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was. The desolate field extends all around where once fifty thousand soldiers and ten thousand horses met their end within a few hours” (Rings 125). Clear from the narrator’s assessment here is a grasp of the reality of historical abstraction (or myth). We can distinguish, then, between the ruin-allegory and a melancholic perspective that is a function of the former.

Like Benjamin, Sebald ascribes to the melancholic at once an empathetic, contemplative distance and an “immersive loyalty” [versunkene Treue] to the saturnine objects and creatures of decay (GS 1.1: 333), which is where Santner sees the possibility of an ethical reaching out. Others see here Sebald’s impotent submission to metaphysical resignation; after all, in its self-absorbed embrace and attempted redemption of dead objects, as Benjamin suggests, melancholy also involves a “betrayal” of the world of men (ibid. 334). Nevertheless, both Benjamin and Sebald insist on melancholy as a form of resistance, Sebald writing in Die Beschreibung des Unglückes that if despair [Trostlosigkeit] and cognizance [Erkenntnis] are identical, then the possibility of overcoming is nevertheless contained (12). Melancholy, Sebald
recognises (after Benjamin, and for that matter Shakespeare), accommodates the
spectral; in this sense it allows for a revision of history’s abstractions and non-
synchronous temporality. What strikes me as a more valid point of inquiry than
accusing Sebald of apocalyptic mythmaking or political resignation would be this idea
of melancholy as a privileged ethical position.

Santner frames the problem like this: is the stubborn return to the past (the refusal to
mourn, the attachment to the loss itself) an ethical posture that accommodates political
possibility\(^60\) (pace Benjamin) (89)? Or is melancholy in fact the fundamental *adaptive*
strategy (a blindness), devoid of radical energy: “really a mode of defense, [which]
involves a fundamental misunderstanding of the occasion of its affective disposition, in
effect conflating an impossible possession […] with a determinate loss (that need not
have occurred)\(^61\) (90)? Santner convincingly argues for a third position in Sebald,
resting on the tension between the two opposing stances: melancholy as simultaneously
clinging on to the lost object, enforcing “the saturnine gaze,” and ethical, validating the
affective “awakening to the answerability to the neighbor” (91). While I agree that the
“melancholic immersion” (62) in Sebald’s work accommodates a continual re-
engagement with the Other, Santner’s sketch still hinges on a kind of *deployment of*
melancholy as an (active) artistic and political position—a strategic assumption that we
find asserted in Sebald’s earlier scholarly writings,\(^62\) but which I suggest becomes in fact
distanced and dispersed (or ruined) in his novels.

This is a shift in emphasis: away from the question of agency insofar as it describes (as
in Santner’s reading) the suspension of our bondage to the “sex appeal of decay” (134),

\(^60\) What Slavoj Žižek called the “politically correct” appropriation of melancholy (qtd. in Santner 89). This is the criticism Peter Morgan aims at the “linke Melancholie” [leftist melancholy] to which Sebald, for Morgan, belongs (89).

\(^61\) Following Giorgio Agamben’s reading of Freud in *Stanzas* (20).

\(^62\) See “Vorwort” in BU (1985) and Sebald’s PhD thesis *Der Mythos der Zerstörung im Werke Döblins*, where he comments on the political functions of melancholy within a German literary history from Kafka to Mann and Grass (112). For Sebald, Döblin, like Sternheim, failed to realise a dialectical imagination and gave in to myth. As for Adorno, Kafka and Beckett’s critical strategies serve Sebald as successful counter-examples (116).
and toward the materiality of the ruin as index and “style.” I suggest it is the ruin that has imposed a demand—at once productive and negative (the limit of restitution)—through its material form. Sebald’s Erinnerungspolitik [politics of memory] is first and foremost grounded in leftover matter. One consequence of this shift in perspective is already implicit in Benjamin’s thesis: namely that the persistent negativity of the ruin-space (as that which draws the melancholic near) inscribes the melancholic gaze as its historically produced function. Austerlitz’s (and the narrator’s) melancholic condition can be described as such, a historical product of the ruin-style. Significantly, Sebald’s novels are not a systematic, totalising mirror of that “melancholic immersion;” rather, their gathering of specific ruined particulars remains just that, with no claim to a systematisable or replicable whole (or experience). In many ways, the ruin itself scatters the fossilised signs of melancholy in Sebald, fragmenting a history of symptomology. The implication of this last point is that the ethical and political power is continually inscribed as moments of performativity; the relation between the fragmented time of the ruin and the modernising surroundings requires re-interrogation in the present. This emphasis on materiality and its problematic legibility—or negative historical access—moves the focus away from the question of subjectivity and identity. It becomes less about what Austerlitz, for instance, can and cannot discern and conclude about the world, than about his encounter coerced by leftover matter and turned into ruinous language. The problem that is pushed into the domain of human political agency is how we respond to the vestiges’ spectrality, to which Sebald’s characters and novels offer different alternatives.

**Variations on a Ruin**

Sebald’s narratives are framed, deceptively, in the present, the process of composition. The inquisitions into the recent or farther past are those of the reader, traveller, or archival researcher. This is significant insofar as past catastrophes, however buried and

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63 Erinnerungspolitik forms part of the culture of remembrance [Erinnerungskultur] discourse around collective memory after the Holocaust, chiefly in Germany, Austria, Poland, and certainly not limited to those countries. The politicisation of this discourse is central to Sebald’s artistic and academic work. His most evident literary precursor in this political “struggle against ‘the art of forgetting’” might be Peter Weiss (Natural 172).
residual, are always perceived in relation to the now of narration. Palimpsestic
temporalities are inherent to Sebald’s ruin structures, but first and foremost this
narrative technique marks the melancholic encounter with destruction as a continual
re-engagement with the present. The recent history and political immediacy of ruins is
evident in Suffolk’s deserted tourist destinations, Manchester’s urban wastelands, or the
 crumbling Orfordness research site. The first of these comes on the heels of the
“hardline capitalist years of Baroness Thatcher” (Rings 41) and the financial recession
of the 1980s, the collapse of the housing bubble, and “the golden age of industrial
ruination” in Britain (Edensor, Industrial 5). Economic revival is not yet felt; the English
county appears stagnated: “Nowadays, in some of the streets almost every other house
is up for sale; factory owners, shopkeepers and private individuals are sliding ever
deeper into debt; week in, week out, some bankrupt or unemployed person hangs
himself […] and there is no sign of an end to the encroaching misery” (Rings 42). In
Emigrants, the view of 1960s Manchester has similar echoes:

In Moss Side and Hulme there were whole blocks where the doors and
windows were boarded up, and whole districts where everything had been
demolished. Views opened up across the wasteland towards the still immensely
impressive agglomeration of gigantic Victorian office blocks and warehouses
[…] that had once been the hub of one of the nineteenth century’s miracle
cities but […] was now almost hollow to the core. (151)

The historical context of deindustrialization meets the narrator’s awareness of the
ruin’s mythical aura: “One might have supposed that the city had long since been
deserted, and was left now as a necropolis or mausoleum” (ibid.). The simile and
qualification (“one might have supposed”) establish the myth as a function of the ruin
aesthetic. Specificity and context of the decayed space are retained, as is its
conversation with the circulation of capital and modernity’s ordering mechanisms. The
ruin-site serves Sebald’s walker not as a simple gateway to the past or an apocalyptic
vision, but as a spectral space where the past and the abstraction of historical time are
put into relation with the present.

64 I stick to Sebald’s spelling of Orfordness, usually spelled Orford Ness.
Walking “amidst the city’s immense and time-blackened nineteenth-century buildings,” the narrator is “amazed by the completeness with which anthracite-coloured Manchester, the city from which industrialization had spread across the entire world, displayed the clearly chronic process of its impoverishment and degradation to anyone who cared to see” (156). Manchester is literalised as a hollow core of capitalist world history insofar as its industrial quarters have been hollowed out, factories and depots abandoned, and whole areas of working-class homes razed so that “all that was left to recall the lives of thousands of people was the grid-like layout of the street” (157). The strategic spatialisation of the work force—the industries’ rows of battery ports—and the rationalisation of the urban landscape lie naked (we see a bird’s-eye view of the empty grid). The moment literalises Foucault’s assessment: “in every culture, between the use of what one might call the ordering codes and reflections upon order itself, there is the pure experience [l’expérience nue] of order and of its modes of being” (Order xxiii). The industrial ruin in Sebald’s passage exposes a hegemonic topography. It also emphasises the need for a politics of space. Both urban compartmentalisation and rural cultivation call for biopolitical analyses: “not a patch is left to its own devices” (Rings 90). They register an elimination of environment and memory in equal measure: “A dam has been built below the castle. The course of the river was straightened, and the sad sight of it now will soon extinguish the memory of what it once was” (V 42). As the waste product of these processes, the ruin articulates dispersal, destruction of value, the material reminder of modernity’s dialectic workings. It negatively contests, as Tim Edensor has shown, the processes of spatialisation, rationalisation and sanitisation of landscape: “objects found in ruins are not organized, or identified as exemplary or typical or special. They cannot be narrated and woven into orderly schemes of sequential display” (“Waste” 58). In this conception, as well as facilitating materialist and biopolitical critique, the ruins relating to industrialisation and modernisation allow the walker to glean different connections and weave new, disorderly stories.

Sebald’s ruin passages are distinguished from critique by voice and their formulaic progression. The melancholic voice that goes: “The closer I came to these ruins […] the more I imagined myself amidst the remains of our civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe” (Rings 237). The voice commenting on the erosion of Dunwich: “The east stands for lost causes […] If you look out from the cliff-top
across the sea towards where the town must once have been, you can sense the immense power of emptiness” (159). Or waking up after the Great Storm of 1987:

where the currents of air had shortly beforehand been pouring through the black mass of trees, there was now just the paleness of the empty horizon. It seemed as if someone had pulled a curtain to one side to reveal a formless scene that bordered upon the underworld. And at the very moment that I registered the unaccustomed brightness of the night over the park, I knew everything down there had been destroyed. (266)

Critics have taken issue with the metaphysical tone; in the view of some, Sebald’s “apocalyptic fantasies of destruction” (Morgan 88) threaten to suppress the difference between types of ruination—such as economic decline and wartime devastation.

To be sure, Sebald’s voice approximates the “modern” ruin to the ostensibly “natural” one, but this approximation itself stages the critique of enlightenment instrumentality Sebald inherits from Frankfurt School thought: “the process of ruination is an intrinsic component of the dialectic whereby modernity undermines itself and lapses into mythology and self-destruction” (Hell and Schönle 6). The mythological time and imagery vis-à-vis Suffolk and Manchester strengthen the sense of how the historico-political detail is assimilated by the abstracting processes of the same system that produces the ruination. Industrial decline connects to a global historical narrative, even if that narrative can only be partially gleaned in the decay. The apocalyptic teleology or Endzeitstimmung [end-of-world mood] governing the “natural” catastrophe is less easily dispelled; the sense is that the materialist explanation is not enough. A qualitative difference survives, however, as we distinguish between the powerful event of destruction, and gradual decay (or entropy). In the latter case (Dunwich, Orford), Sebald emphasises the uncanniness of walking through the space (indexing the present), as well as the link to the historical relevance of the site: Dunwich as significant, fortified port in the Middle Ages, Orfordness as secret weapons research site.65 The different times of the ruin-encounter—bodily (or phenomenological), historical, entropic—come together here. The problem itself of meaning-making, of expression and representation, emerges as the ruin’s times do not add up to one

65 I return to the Orfordness episode at length at the end of Chapter Six.
sublimated image of experience. This sense of excess, of a limit to meaningfulness, intensifies when the walker encounters immense destruction tied to a specific event. The work of compensation takes over.

Sebald remarks in an interview that his narrator, faced with the “radical contingency” of the catastrophe, can only turn to natural history—an inherently mystifying process—for an (impossible) explanation, at the moment when the history of society seems to shatter before his eyes (*Eis* 160-161). Materialising absence and lack, the ruin worsens the impoverishment of the melancholic’s ego. At the moment of breakdown of signification, the abstraction of natural history emerges as substitute meaning.

Sebald’s construction of voice and distancing and framing techniques cannot be stressed enough here. In the interview, Sebald overtly posits his narrator [Erzähler] as a protagonist, emphasising his stubborn helplessness: he does not seek sense in the past catastrophe, makes no use of possible explanations or circumstances, but remains factual and descriptive about the destruction itself. Turning the catastrophe into meaning would develop into myth, organise it neatly within a reified historical continuity (*Eis* 160). Indeed, Sebald never writes more scathingly than when he denounces Alfred Andersch’s epiphanic descriptions of destruction as sublime images (*Natural* 131). The mythological images that appear throughout his own work, Sebald

66 “der Augenblick der Katastrophe [ist] der Augenblick […] in dem Gesellschaftsgeschichte und Zivilisationsgeschichte sich auflösen und der weitere Zusammenhang, nämlich die naturgeschichtlichen Abläufe, absehbar wird. […] Das ist wohl die einzige Form, in der der Erzähler es sich erlaubt, diese Dinge zu erklären: nämlich im Sinne einer Naturgeschichte. Es ist ja tatsächlich so, daß im Augenblick des Einbruchs der Katastrophe die Zivilisationsgeschichte zerschlagen wird und zurückgeworfen wird auf die Naturgeschichte” (*Eis* 160-161).

67 The ruin can be conceived as “Leerstelle” [blank space] *par excellence*, “a site for projection, where narratives can be constructed to fill in the gaps in the material” (Ward 58).

68 Critics have all too often been content to conflate the author with his narrator in this respect, openly ignoring the signs that should disallow us to do so. Anne Fuchs, for example, in her otherwise illuminating *Die Schmerzensspuren der Geschichte*, dismisses Sebald’s fictionalising devices as simple tricks.

meanwhile insists, are precisely that: referents of specific, time-honoured historical images and forms of representation relating to catastrophe (ibid.). Such images offer no explanation, but rather act as a desperate recourse to earlier attempts at representation that offer a compensatory coherence while simultaneously accentuating the absence, or negation, at the centre of the ruin. Amir Eshel remarks appositely: “What we grapple with, Sebald’s narratives seem to suggest, is not only the catastrophic, the marked historical event, the *kairos*, but also their distance, their presentness in the form of inherited and produced images, their senselessness” (91). These are historical images incorporated into the novel as ruinous fragments—Benjamin’s hollowed-out ciphers—together with other pieces of Sebald’s patchwork. In this conception, the ruin as material presence of an absence that fails to map onto it—a positing of inadequation prevalent in Beckett—impresses itself as a problem of representation.

The “saturnine gaze” and its totalising threat become in turn a function of this problem of representation, which Sebald puts to us through various forms of framing and distancing. Consider the reported citation of Michael Hamburger’s memoirs in *Rings*: “in reality, of course, memory fails us. Too many buildings have fallen down, too much rubble has been heaped up, the moraines and deposits are insuperable. If I now look back to Berlin, writes Michael, all I see is a darkened background with a grey smudge in it, a slate pencil drawing, some unclear numbers and letters in a gothic script, blurred and half wiped away with a damp rag” (177-178). The visualisation of a naturalised abstraction in progress—of Benjamin’s angel—is presented as a meditation on melancholy. No doubt Sebald has in mind something like Adorno’s words: “The recent past always presents itself as if destroyed by catastrophes. The expression of history in things is no other than that of past torment” (*Minima* 49). Sebald self-consciously deals in the temporal dislocation inherent in the ruin’s negative abstraction; his protagonists embody the historical latecomer, not in terms of the Romantic superfluous man, but as allegorist of decay, of modernity’s natural and petrified state.\(^7\) Self-conscious not least

\(^7\) The interview specifically refers to the image of the burning cities and Lot’s wife, connecting the apocalyptic vision with that of Sodom. Note: the interviewer seems to misattribute the image to *Rings*, when it more likely refers to *After Nature* (84)—Sebald doesn’t correct her, and Amir Eshel’s essay quoted above repeats the mistake.

\(^7\) See also Schmitz, *On Their Own Terms* 306.
because a wry smile invariably accompanies Sebald’s doom-saying in his interviews, and because of the humorous relief that the often self-deprecating tone brings as his narrator registers yet another event in the “long account of calamities” (Rings 295). If the melancholic is on form, even a miserable fish supper is treated with metaphysical resignation: “a fish that had doubtless lain entombed in the deep-freeze for years […] a sorry wreck among the grass-green peas and the remains of soggy chips that gleamed with fat” (ibid. 43).

**Natural History of Destruction**

It is the latecomer position and this insistence on the destruction itself (over its meaning) that created the biggest polemic around Sebald during his lifetime. In his essay “Air War and Literature,” Sebald attacks the “individual and collective amnesia” of the German post-war writers: “There was a tacit agreement […] that the true state of material and moral ruin in which the country found itself was not to be described” (Natural 10). Preoccupied “with retrospective improvement of the self-image” of German intelligentsia after 1945 (ibid. x), the writers in Sebald’s contracted canon failed, in his view, to represent the post-war ruin without crude glossing, aestheticizing or mythologizing, and showed no genuine concern for the material destruction inflicted on the German people and cities, the rubble left after the Allies’ air raids.72 Sebald’s ethical understanding of aesthetics is in keeping with other essays in which he slams the ornamental, emotionalising descriptions of destruction by Andersch or other Gruppe 47 writers, while praising Jean Améry and Primo Levi’s candid, “lapidary” prose in the face of horror, as well as the commitment to radical negativity in French post-war writing (Natural 153-154). Giving him the reputation of Nestbeschmutzer, Sebald’s “Air War” essay itself was criticised in Germany for its “obsessive and affective tonality”73 (Fuchs, “Ein auffallend” 106) and for being guilty of historical shortcuts, for instance by failing to take into account Germany’s reunification. Fuchs states that Sebald writes as if there had been no confrontation since 1968 with the culture of repression of the

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72 Sebald picks out Heinrich Böll, Hermann Kasack, Hans Erich Nossack, Arno Schmidt and Peter Mendelssohn as those writers who “ventured to break the taboo on any mention of the inward and outward destruction,” but who “generally did so rather equivocally” (Natural 11).

73 My translation.
Schauss 59

50s (*Schmerzensspuren* 155). For Andreas Huyssen, Sebald’s “voice of a latecomer” obsessively tries to compensate for a lack of access to the experience and memory of the air war, suppressing any “strong notion of a new beginning” (154). Peter Morgan sees his work in general as expressing “extreme negativity towards his own and his generation’s place in the postwar order” (88). Both Huyssen and Morgan accuse Sebald of offering no alternative to the kind of writing he denounces and denying the reality of the material conditions in post-war Germany. For Sebald, the negative reaction to his essay (and lack of counter-examples), only provided further proof that destruction and ruination constituted a taboo in post-war Germany: “To this day, any concern with the real scenes of horror during the catastrophe still has an aura of the forbidden about it, even of voyeurism” (*Nature*’ 98).

Sebald’s essay remains crucial to understand why there is so much immediate, physical movement through ruins in his work. It shows that Sebald locates an ethical imperative in the engagement with the rubble left after destruction. The removal of the ruin—the denial of the past to survive in the material topography—is for Sebald a violent act. With regret, he looks at the multiple processes of hastened reconstruction over the decades after the war, repeatedly covering over the ruin: “possibly an extreme reaction to an extreme catastrophe” of which every trace needed to disappear (*Eis* 258). This is the law of mourning and the mourning of law: the official and willed adaptation to the reality principle (contrasting with the melancholic incorporation of loss). Loss is relegated to the memorial site, replaced by the monument, assimilated into the

74 A lengthy engagement with Sebald’s own critical thinking of *Heimat* and *Heimatsverlust*, of fascism, nationalist myth, and mass psychology, goes beyond the scope of this thesis. His close reading of Hannah Arendt’s writings on totalitarianism is often overlooked in this respect. For an assessment of Sebald’s criticism, see among others, Schütte, Uwe. *Interventionen: Literaturkritik als Widerspruch bei W.G. Sebald*, Edition Text + Kritik, 2014.

75 “Das ist möglicherweise eine extreme Reaktion auf eine extreme Katastrophe gewesen, das heißt, daß für uns Deutsche nach diesem zweiten Krieg nichts so wichtig und dringend gewesen ist, als all das zu beseitigen von Grund auf, und nicht nur einmal zu überbauen, sondern zwei-drei- oder viermal, weil was in den 50er Jahren gebaut wurde, in den 60er Jahren ja schon nicht mehr gut genug war und man nie darin erinnert werden wollte, was sich hier abgespielt hat” (ibid.).
museum—a marketization of remembrance which for Adorno itself produces amnesia. For Sebald, this kind of reconstruction and adaption spells out the reification of forgetting, the falsification of perspective, and a second erasure of the material that traced the first erasure: “From the outset, the now legendary and in some respects genuinely admirable reconstruction of the country after the devastation wrought by Germany’s wartime enemies, a reconstruction tantamount to a second liquidation in successive phases of the nation’s own past history, prohibited any look backward” (Natural 7).

The absence of Germany and its landscape in much of Sebald’s writing is notable in this respect. In an interview: “As a visitor, I am struck by the fact that in Germany the border zones, which would guarantee the non-contemporaneity of time, have been eliminated. There are no brownfields like in England, nothing simply lying prostrate, no remains from before. […] The past is constantly being eliminated” (Eis 83). And: “To me, this elimination of the past seems to have played a decisive role as a socio-psychological constituent of the German populace in the decades after the war” (ibid. 258). The sanitisation of space—the removal of border zones where spatio-temporal and semiotic disorder prosers—implies an uncanny totalising gesture. Germany’s institutional repressive mechanism is inversely transferred onto Austerlitz, who, on a rare visit to the country, remarks: “I had never before set foot on German soil, I had always avoided learning anything at all about German topography, German history, or modern German life” (222). Austerlitz’s brief, uncomfortable stroll through Nuremberg—a metonymy for the mourning of law, the institutional response to the

76 The city of Berlin’s choice to preserve large parts of the Berlin Wall, one imagines, constitutes a more adequate response.
77 The narrator’s return to W. in the Bavarian Alps, which forms the final part of Vertigo, being the major exception.
78 “Als Besucher fällt mir auf, daß in Deutschland die Randzonen, die ja eine Ungleichzeitigkeit der Zeit garantieren würden, eliminiert worden sind. Es gibt keine Industriebrauchen wie in England, nichts Darniederliegendes, keine Überreste von früher. […] Die Vergangenheit wird dauernd eliminiert.”
79 “Diese Beseitigung der Vergangenheit scheint mir als sozialpsychologisches Konstituents der deutschen Bevölkerung eine entscheidende Rolle gespielt zu haben in diesen Nachkriegsjahrzehnten.”
Schauss—ends in the realization that he “could not see a crooked line anywhere […] nor was there any other trace of past history” (223). Even his train journey through the country appears wilfully accelerated, with the usually contemplative storyteller finding little to say except for the notable observation that the castles, with their “preposterous names” “seem to be rooted in legend, and even the ruins resemble a romantic stage” (226). Viewed from behind a windowpane and going at speed, the landscape offers an anachronistic spectacle of vertiginous proportion, the sublime medieval scene completely out of joint with Germany’s recent past and Austerlitz’s reported undertaking. Austerlitz asserts once again that he fails to make the landscapes and times of his Rhine journey cohere; all he can draw on are former representations, the German landscape “as it was described by earlier travellers” (226).

The “Air War” essay further underlines that Sebald sees the perspective of a natural history of destruction, and the connected melancholic tone, as a function of the rubble, of the catastrophe’s material environment. He challenges, for instance, the materialist, Brechtian explanation of the bombing that is offered in Alexander Kluge’s documentary Unheimlichkeit der Zeit. Kluge offers a “detailed description of the social organization of disaster […] [which shows] that so much intelligence, capital, and labor went into the planning of destruction that, under the pressure of all the accumulated potential, it had to happen in the end” (64-65). But, Sebald wonders, “can materialist epistemology or any other such theory be maintained in the face of such destruction” (66)? Is the destruction not proof that the catastrophes are also beyond humanist, “autonomous history” and thought (ibid.)? Sebald concludes that, for all his “intellectual steadfastness,” even Kluge suspects that there is something beyond meaning in the destruction itself by adopting a perspective similar to Benjamin’s angel (67). When it comes to the disaster, the survival of the ruin gains in significance precisely because it shows that our humanist (or other) explanations cannot be squarely mapped onto it. There is an excess that extends from the material vestige, a negative demand that appears without sense, which in Sebald’s work inscribes continual re-engagement and re-negotiation.

The simultaneous concreteness and abstraction that we note in Sebald’s “natural history of destruction” establishes the difference in type and role of his ruination. On the one hand, the apocalyptic time that often inflects the narration emerges as
substitute meaning from the encounter with the ruin’s effacement of signification—its muteness has to be repurposed: “Allegory being the only, and powerful, divertissement that presents itself to the melancholic” (Benjamin, GS 1.1: 361).80 On the other, Sebald insists on the preservation of and engagement with the ruin’s concreteness as an ethico-political obligation that bleeds into any aesthetic response, as well as the exploration of trauma and testimony from the latecomer position. The former, then, is the abstraction of ruination (myth, history as reified continuity) whose false claim to totality leads inevitably back to the fragmented particular; the latter, the negative demand imposed by the leftover material (meaning effaced, deferred, transferred). The ruin guides Sebald’s inquiry into representation, and his folding of ethics and aesthetics. It stands at the very onset of the “attempt at restitution,” of memory and writing itself. It becomes necessary, then, to interrogate the nature of the ruin’s witnessing and testimony more closely, and to see how Sebald preserves the aporetic expression of the ruin in his language.

“A witness to what I could no longer recollect for myself”

In Memoirs of the Blind, Jacques Derrida thinks through the fold of ruin and memory. The ruin, he writes, “is experience itself” (69). Rather than indicating progressive decomposition, the aging of something once intact, the ruin for Derrida, as for Benjamin, stands at the beginning: “it is what comes first and happens to the origin […] Ruin is that which happens to the image from the moment of the first gaze. Ruin is the self-portrait, this face looked at in the face as the memory of itself, what remains or returns as a specter from the moment one first looks at oneself and a figuration is eclipsed” (65–68). Ruin is, Derrida continues, “this memory open like an eye, or like the hole in a bone socket that lets you see without showing you anything at all, anything of the all […] and with a view to showing nothing of the all” (69; emphasis original). Derrida’s ruin-style is conceivable in terms of trait, the leaving of “a mark, but one that returns never as itself” (Wolfreys 88). The ruinous quality of the visual register that Derrida emphasises is something Sebald also articulates strongly with his photographs in relation to memory, the encounter with the creaturely, and the disintegration of

80 My translation. “Ist doch Allegorie das einzige und das gewaltige Divertissement, das da dem Melancholiker sich bietet.”
subjectivity. Of interest here is the collapse of signification in the ruin's negative matter: the ruin's paradoxical “style” —the material parallel to the antinomy of allegory—its call for a readership at the limits of legibility. As with Beckett’s waste, Sebald’s ruins form the inadequacy of language from which the characters’ historical urgencies arise. The negation—the “nothing of the all”—that the ruin inscribes is the dumbness of the past—as Beckett’s Molloy says: “to restore silence is the role of objects” (10). Ruin and memory, as Holger Steinmann argues, “relate in a state of interdependence, whose emergence in Sebald’s texts is latent and manifest” (154). Like Beckett, Sebald insists on what cannot be said, the impossible language-position that Agamben attributes to the witness: “that which, in its very possibility of speech, bears witness to an impossibility of speech” (Remnants 146). In Emigrants, Ambros’ diary concludes with: “Memory [...] often strikes me as a kind of dumbness” (145)—the witness, after Levi, after Améry and Paul Celan, must speak when it cannot speak. Sebald’s insistence on the incorporation of the material erasure of the ruin—and his grief at Germany’s removal of it—has to be understood in relation to this historical aesthetic problem.

A negative witness, the ruin works indexically as opposed to symbolically. This is not to be reduced to a merely deconstructive reading; the stakes are materialist and political. Recent technologies have facilitated our sensitivity to the material agent of testimony—not just in terms of biology and geology, but also within legal and political frameworks. Coining the term “forensic architecture,” Eyal Weizman describes the collective humanitarian endeavour of translating the wartime ruin via scientific, ballistic and geological means. At once judicial practice and theoretical model, “forensic architecture” is nothing other than reading the rubble left after the destruction, finding indexical signification in different states of matter, and connecting the material remnant to a real political issue (knowing that no total image can be constructed). For Weizman, the structural engineers and blast engineers become “the interpreters of history” (111). These ruin forensics mark the second wave of the “era of testimony,” with the legal humanitarian bodies substituting the “reliable” evidence of the “material witness” for the fragile human one (112-114). Contemporary warfare and legal systems called for,

See Chapter Six.

My translation. “Ruine und Gedächtnis stehen in einem Abhängigkeitsverhältnis, das in den Texten Sebalds latent und manifest zur Darstellung kommt.”
and endorsed, the “shift of emphasis from human testimony towards objects of material evidence and forensics” (103). Rubble, dust, plumes become witnesses, as do bones, human remains into whose “morphology and texture” human life is “fossilized” (110). Clear demarcations between historical subject and object disintegrate in both process of destruction and forensic reading. Like Sebald, Weizman keeps more than one eye on the human, on voice and memory. The emphasis is on a legal shift, and implied in his method is the hope that the destroyed, posthumous witness resists or circumvents biopolitical frameworks in some ways. A new rhetoric—a “forensic aesthetics” (ibid. 107)—is produced intentionally and unintentionally around the new object-oriented jurisprudence as prosopopoeia enters the courtroom. Military forces, nation states, militia groups can now be associated with their respective signature ruins—specific types of rubble connected to specific types of traceable power and violence. The ethics of the practice are made clear as the reading of the rubble takes the side of human “collateral damage”—most often minorities or repressed people—in the face of a dominant war apparatus striving for invisibility.83

A remarkable passage in Austerlitz shows the archaeological gleaning amid the rubble at work, as Austerlitz reflects on his visits to Liverpool Street Station. From its prior life as a priory, which included a “hospital for the insane and other destitute persons,” to its present condition, Austerlitz traces the area’s past in a digressive, vertiginous and excavating manner:

> At Broad Street Station, built in 1865 on the site of the former burial grounds and bleachfields, excavations during the demolition work of 1984 brought to light over four hundred skeletons underneath a taxi rank. […] In the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the city had grown above these strata of soil mingled with the dust and bones of decayed bodies into a warren of putrid streets and houses for the poorest Londoners, cobbled together out of beams, clods of clay, and any other building material that came to hand. (130-132)

83 Chemical weapons and bombings on the Syrian population; IDF attacks on Gaza. See Forensic Architecture. www.forensic-architecture.org/
The diegetic photograph shows human skeletons lying free in the mud. The burial grounds below the station average eight skeletons per cubic meter of earth, cataloguing London’s violent eviction of the poor and chronicling the commercial rise of a city that “could hold no more” (130). The dialectical nature of the modernising project lies exposed in the non-contemporaneous space: “I could not stop wondering whether it was a ruin or a building in the process of construction I had entered. Both ideas were right in a way at the time, since the new station was literally rising from the ruins of old Liverpool Street” (136). The progressive erasure is momentarily halted, in actuality at the construction site, and in historical terms, as Austerlitz can reconnect through the material layers the violent conditions of one of London’s most deprived areas to its figuration in the present. No sublime or epiphanic image forms, but rather a spectral, palimpsestic picture of the area’s history, and the painful awareness that it cannot account for the lives it involves.84 Before Austerlitz’s famous vision or dream-state that follows—summoning the incoherent, vague memories of his foster parents waiting at the station for the Kindertransport—the erased and remaining materials in the London district point to countless other lives, beings, narratives, and possible connections.85 But Austerlitz’s investigations are also marked as specific points in time, before the 1980s, when the station “was one of the darkest and most sinister places in London,” and 1984, during the excavations. This ruin is anything but timeless; rather its allegorical nature (for re-inscription and rereading) follows from its progressive rebuilding, its continual rearrangement of materials and meaning.

Both Weizman’s theory and Austerlitz’s example highlight that reading the rubble must account for the illegible side of the ruin, the non-transparency of the inorganic material and the breakdown of meaning in the rubble. The ruin’s “style” only indexes and narrates so much. As hollowed-out ciphers (to return to Benjamin’s comparison),

84 Andreas Huyssen talks of “urban palimpsests” in this respect: Austerlitz’s historical materialist unmaking of a static, timeless image of the past, reading the city as a space of multiple temporalities and working through material layers rich with “traces and memories” as well as “voids, illegibilities, and erasures” (84).

85 “The little river Wellbrook, the ditches and ponds, the crakes and snipe and herons, the elms and mulberry trees, Paul Pindar’s deer park, the inmates of Bedlam and the starving paupers of Angel Alley, Peter Street, Sweet Apple Court, and SwanYard had all gone” (132).
material remnants are at once socio-historical hieroglyphs and silent objects. The silence of the dead in the ruin is also deafening, dizzying. The question becomes at once that of the witness (human or nonhuman) and its “speech,” and of the compiler and reader of testimony. Vestiges have to be repurposed: there is a need for translation, interpretation, negotiation, for the re/construction of a narrative (notwithstanding the danger of a fetishizing or aestheticizing recuperation of things into dominant narratives, as Sebald admits). While Sebald’s work is characterised by its renunciation of a hierarchy of witnessing, emphasising the precariousness of both human and material testimonies, this does not mean that there is no difference between them, as the material witness registers an initial absence of human vocabulary or form. Sebald notes in his “Air War” essay how “[among] the central problems of ‘eye witness reports’ are their inherent inadequacy, notorious unreliability, and curious vacuity: their tendency to follow a set routine and go over and over the same material” (80). This is not a cynical dismissal of people’s memories, Sebald writes, but a distrust in “the form—including the literary form—in which they are expressed” (81). Sebald rejects a kind of objective realism based purely on perception and memory; the problem remains with representation. Hence why the “dumbness” of memory becomes such an important trope, and why human and nonhuman testimonies are made to work together, always with an eye on their silences. The line between the narrator’s words and words reported from other sources—whether historical documents or personal accounts—are often remarkably fuzzy, so that direct quotations form a conspicuous part of the disjointed text (the tension between Sebald’s unvarying tone and unbroken paragraphs and the assembled composition). The frames, appropriation, and rewriting bury and alienate the original source text, but we know that document is somewhere to be found. The ruin as witness works differently, and it provides Sebald specifically with the negative testimony of the erased. Here, the compiler of testimonies struggles to create any kind of order and, overwhelmed by the material vestiges, turns toward timeless images, ordering themselves into a naturalised history of decay.

The prominence of depopulated, neglected environments—the variation on the theme: “nowhere […] was a single human being to be seen” (Rings 91)—in Sebald’s novels is not so much the shortcut to meaningfulness or the Sebald-kitsch some critics have noted, but the attempted reading in the object world of something that has been erased or is in some way repressed. Testament to Sebald and his characters’ acknowledgment
that this can be a desperate, futile endeavour is Austerlitz’s uncanny encounter with the cast-iron column at the Pilsen railway station, as he cannot shake the sense that this inorganic object may be “a witness to what [he] could no longer recollect for [himself]” (221). The breakdown of memory and silence of the “witness” in this passage highlight the contingency of Sebald’s ruinous space (textual and material). As Todd Samuel Presner writes, “[what] Sebald’s narrator encounters on the ground is a function of chance, the product of what happens to be left of the grandiose—and grandly catastrophic—processes of industrialization, modernization, and colonization” (203).

What Foucault would call “the inadvertent production of heterotopias” (Edensor, Industrial 62), the scattering of signs and the chance production of disorderly narratives in the ruin-space, pushes Sebald’s walker to continually re-negotiate the relation between history and material environment. The imperative to follow through on the dispersed narratives that the material leftovers register (including the dusty archive) is what keeps leading elsewhere in Sebald, grounding his border-crossing strategy, through Europe in Austerlitz following diasporic trajectories in Emigrants, along the “Silk Road” and other imperial world-trajectories in Rings. Crucial for the ruin-encounter is thus what J.J. Long calls Sebald’s “ambulatory narrative” (“Ambulatory” 130), the marriage of digression and walking. Writes Long, conjuring a counter-dominant tactic: “Digression is a deliberately uneconomic mode of narrative, which resolutely refuses the imperative to be efficient and achieve goals with maximum speed and minimum expenditure of resources” (ibid.). For Gilles Deleuze, the stylistic device of digression, so rampant throughout Beckett’s prose, “works against the determination and fixity, the teleology of meaning; it enforces an open-endedness of sense” (Lecercle 152). Digression leads to the chance encounter with the ruin-site, but is also in itself a ruinous style, breaking narrative linearity for the sake of arbitrary fragments and particulars, forming part of Sebald’s Benjaminian ethos to “brush history against the grain” (Illuminations 257).

Rather than standing in opposition, digression and chance are in conversation with the modernist anxieties of control and mastery. In Rings, these functions translate into the obsessive search for patterns among the particles and fragments scattered across its assembled ring structure. Emigrants appears to be writing through its own integral lack, refusing to clarify the connection among its fractional biographies in terms other than

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86 See Chapter Four.
motifs of decay, which underline the fragility of precisely the connections they claim to authorise. In *Austerlitz*, the chance encounter appears highly fictionalised (attracting criticism over the pretence of realism). When, after twenty years, the narrator runs into Austerlitz again, he says, aware of the absurdity: “without wasting any words on the coincidence of our meeting again after all this time, Austerlitz took up the conversation that evening [...] more or less where it had last been broken off” (41). We are told that Austerlitz had longed for a good listener so that “[contrary] to all statistical probability, then, there was an astonishing, positively internal logic to his meeting me here” (43-44). The self-contained mock-cosmological logic is not simply a humorous aside, but a self-reflexive gesture. As Timothy Bewes puts it, Sebald “threatens to impose an economy of significance, a principle of striation, upon every element in the book” (“Against” 27).

There is little reason for Sebald to fictionalise either chance encounter or the undeviating narrative (a more believable “story” would easily be found) other than to hint at the integral lack in his own fiction, its “radical contingency” and ruinous quality. In Bewes’ words, “connection turns from being the achievement of writing into a confirmation of its failure” (28). Our reading of Austerlitz’s past, his repression and subsequent memory work, can only be at a remove, contingent and fragmentary, as it revolves around historical erasure. This proximity of ruin and language in relation to memory and witnessing comes back to Sebald’s problem of ethical aesthetics, posed so purposefully throughout his work: how does the latecomer, after years of silence (owing to socio-political, domestic or individual repression), make sense of the expression of material remnants of a destructive event pertaining to someone or something else?

*Austerlitz* and the Language of Ruins

Tracing the limits of restitution, Sebald’s novels revolve around the ruins of their own composition. Sebald’s *bricolage, pace* Lévi-Strauss, is often foregrounded in this respect: the self-conscious, anthropological assemblage through unsystematic gathering, repurposing, and recycling of materials. In his essay on Herbeck, Sebald writes that the

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87 Bewes is interested in the idea of fiction (and writing) as a whole, arguing convincingly for the “nonexemplary” quality of Sebald’s works. Bewes concentrates on “incomplete” character portrayals (Bereyter, Austerlitz), with little interest in the negative, leftover materials that seem to me to carry the ruination of Sebald’s texts (in the face of a total “fiction”).
“work of the bricoleur [Bastler], assembled from refuse and fragments [...] exists [...] in time, for time and for the moment in which it [the work] is produced; it is a functioning object, which, if allocated only a heuristic purpose, contains already the ensuing destruction” (BU 138). Note Sebald’s insistence on leftover matter; the text as agent, formed from detritus, does not hypostasize myth but appears imminently in and for time (like Benjamin’s profane illumination). Sebald could be describing the deceptive intrusion of fragments—unacknowledged citation, documentation, older forms of representation—in his own work. The concept of bricolage itself is also a red herring, however, as Derrida has made clear: “If one calls bricolage the necessity of borrowing one’s concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is bricoleur” (Writing 360). By extension, if bricolage describes the only discourse available, its counterpart—an original and theological method (Lévi-Strauss’s engineer)—is only a mythical projection within bricolage and its break with historical discourse (ibid.). To say then that Sebald adopts bricolage as a kind of postmodern response to a historico-aesthetic problem does not do his work justice, but rather flattens it. There is a negativity to the ruin—not least because Sebald returns time and again to the literal site of destruction—that cannot be mapped onto the assemblage. In this sense, Sebald’s ruinous assemblages resemble what Guy Debord and the Situationists called détournement, insofar as that conception tries to account for the violence, the negation and devaluing of the images that are rearranged “in a new ensemble” (Noys 99). I do not suggest Sebald’s work is at heart

88 In Derrida’s words: “The bricoleur, says Lévi-Strauss, is someone who uses ‘the means at hand,’ that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogenous—and so forth. There is therefore a critique of language in the form of bricolage” (Writing 360).

89 For instance, Austerlitz’s erring through the labyrinthine interiors of the Palais de Justice is lifted straight (and uncredited) from Kafka’s The Trial: “corridors and stairways leading nowhere, and doorless rooms and halls where no one would ever set foot, empty spaces surrounded by walls and representing the innermost secret of all sanctioned authority” (A 29).
situationist and concerned with the piercing of the spectacle; rather, I want to emphasise the ruin’s temporal intervention, the moment of rupture.

Far from reproducing the eternal recurrence of natural history, the ruin-encounter in Sebald ruptures the historical narrative as the inadequacy of the images and forms of representations to hand is foregrounded. In a self-reflexive gesture, Sebald exacerbates the ruinous quality of the sources themselves, what Holger Steinmann called Sebald’s “Zitatruinen” [citation-ruins]. Materials are severed from the original body of text insofar as their attribution is either erroneous or missing, or they are repurposed without acknowledgment (Steinmann 152). The referentiality of the fragments that help construct his image-text is implied but disrupted, showing language reduced to its materiality. The historical document, Steinmann writes, though its testimony is intimated, is in fact “nothing more than a ruin reduced to its own pure graphicity” (155). Put differently, the document is without specific referent; its new assignment, as Benjamin says, can be completely arbitrary (GS 1.2: 350). Steinmann stops short of the logical conclusion. As he points out, Sebald salvages the old signs of melancholia—most explicitly the Dog Star in Rings—symbolising the history of decay from which the text is woven. However, with this self-conscious gesture, Sebald throws the allegory of ruins into the present of his contemporary, political concerns. The allegorical understanding of language as made up of ruins connects, in other words, with the historical conditions of language around the specific issues of erasure and repression (mass consciousness and individual) of material testimonies. With his last novel, Austerlitz, Sebald fictionalises this collapse of ruin and language most vividly.

Repression, after Freud, is coded linguistically and socially, and it is ruinous. Like the site of the industrial ruin, both surplus and integral to the city, repression produces excess content. In Jacqueline Rose’s words: “something arises in excess when there is something else you cannot bear to think about” (55). Krapp’s tapes operate this way, the play recording the silences, repetitions, and memories that he seeks to excise. As a child, Sebald explains in an interview, the rubble seemed to him the natural condition of the city, because people simply refused to comment on wartime destruction (Lubow). This refusal not only cultivates its own counter-imperative to a societal and

aesthetic blind-spot, it is incorporated as a structurally integral lack within Sebald’s language. In *Emigrants*, the narrator connects city, ruin and memory *semantically*: “ever since I had once visited Munich I had felt nothing to be so unambiguously linked to the word *city* as the presence of heaps of rubble, fire-scorched walls, and the gaps of windows through which one could see the vacant air” (30). Through Austerlitz, who avoids for most of his life the unconscious urge to dig into his path, Sebald literalises and integrates the workings of repression and failed incorporation most manifestly.

The early separation from his parents and from *their* trauma during the Second World War merge into the transgenerational lost object incorporated by the melancholic, defining his “survivor syndrome” (Schmitz 294). The architectural scholar fetishizes the late-nineteenth-century as the end of history, its ruination disconnected from his personal past, even though “the whole history of the architecture and civilization of the bourgeois age, the subject of my research, pointed in the direction of the catastrophic events already casting their shadows before them at the time” (A 104). Ruination appears here at its most symptomatic and subjectified—the allegory of melancholy—but this is specifically a result of Austerlitz’s refusal to connect the material ruins with the present.

Austerlitz’s repression—sheltered to the extreme as he owns no clock and forgoes news—ultimately leads to his feeling “that all my life had been a constant process of obliteration, a turning away from myself and the world” (123). It is as if Austerlitz himself were perpetrating a “second liquidation.” This results in “the almost total paralysis of my linguistic faculties, the destruction of all my notes and sketches, my endless nocturnal peregrinations through London, and the hallucinations which plagued me with increasing frequency up to the point of my nervous breakdown” (140). His language breakdown is represented in spatial and material terms. First through the comparison with the belated return to “an old city” (Sebald’s ruin-space) in which one can no longer find one’s way (123); then: “The entire structure of language, the syntactical arrangement of parts of speech, punctuation, conjunctions, and finally even the nouns denoting ordinary objects were all enveloped in impenetrable fog” (124). Before he buries his papers in the compost heap (one of many literalised acts of

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91 The invention of a world standard time in the nineteenth century, “the most artificial of all our inventions,” strikes Austerlitz as the ultimate testament to violent modernity’s unstoppable progress (100).
repression), Austerlitz’s crisis deteriorates: “I could see no connections anymore, the sentences resolved themselves into a series of separate words, the words into random sets of letters, the letters into disjointed signs, and those signs into a blue-gray trail gleaming silver here and there, excreted and left behind it by some crawling creature” (ibid.). Scattered before Austerlitz’s eyes are the hollowed-out remnants of his language: the unspeakable past that cannot be rendered in language externalises and materialises its ruinous form. It only makes sense that Austerlitz recognises his lifelong repression from the outside, listening to the hesitant testimony of others: “these fragments of memory were part of my life as well” (141).

Among Sebald’s novels, Austerlitz is perhaps clearest in thematising that the position of the latecomer is one continually projected into the future, by way of the ruin’s allegorical time. As Jacqueline Rose has remarked, Sebald relies on the future anterior to think the integral role of the other for any conception of historical subject-formation (56). In Lacan’s words: “I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it like an object. What is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming” (Écrits 64). Most often, the future anterior in Sebald is materialised by the pervasive ruin-time recurring in different forms: “we know by instinct that outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them, and are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins” (A 19). Benjamin’s famous dialectic—every document of civilisation is one of barbarism—echoes through these passages as King Leopold’s Palais de Justice comes to stand in for the self-congratulatory, monumental reification of an enlightenment mythologism. Similarly, Austerlitz explains how the perverse logic of fortification (what Derrida terms its autoimmunity) by nature draws attention to the fortress’ own weakest point, forecasting its ruination in the future perfect (A 15-17). In Derrida’s words: “The ruin does not supervene like an accident upon a monument that was intact only yesterday” (Memoirs 68). Rather, as we saw with Benjamin, the ruin is constitutive of the edifice and the image, part of the composition. At stake here is not an ontological equivalence between Austerlitz as historical subject and man-made structures as the symbols of ruined civilisations; rather, we can see Austerlitz’s personal and family history in light of the conflict between the aporetic
indexicality of the ruin, the petrified natural appearance of historical time, and a
mythical image of destruction projected into the future.

The calamitous trajectory of *Austerlitz* as a work of fiction repeats this reaching forward
to its own ruination—the refusal of narrative linearity and dénouement—pre-empting
successful recovery of lost time. While there are Proustian overtones as the waiting-
room at Liverpool Street Station brings back visual memories of Austerlitz’s passage to
England, Sebald’s obliteration of the memory event at the exact moment of recovery
also evacuates the Proustian restoration: “a terrible weariness overcame me at the idea
that I had never really been alive” (137).92 Austerlitz’s neurotic persistence to force the
involuntary memory (which defeats the purpose) leads to the breakdown of his senses
and thought rather than restored images from his past. Shane Weller highlights Sebald’s
comment on the dust jacket of his copy of Proust’s oeuvre: “Der Augenblick der Ruhe
in der Vollendung der Zeit kann nicht bleiben; es geht weiter”93 (“Unquiet” 65). As
with Beckett, Sebald’s debt to Proust turns into a generative negativity, negative insofar
as restitution proves out of reach, generative in that the negative has folded into it also
a continued search, the writing of “es geht weiter.”94 The ruin-time records the
simultaneous belatedness and continuation, of reading and writing as revision in the
present.

We can compare Austerlitz’s disintegrating signs to other moments in Sebald’s work:
Ferber’s debris and dust, the true product of endeavour and failure. While Ferber finds
some comfort in the material nothingness, inscribing the unspeakable of his art,
Austerlitz is threatened by the abject otherness of empty ciphers: “some crawling
creature” has excreted his words, decomposing Austerlitz’s historical subject-position
from the outside-in. Consider, too, the abject formlessness of language and matter
characterising Cosmo and Ambros’ visit to Jerusalem, whose “ravines have largely been
filled with the rubbish of a thousand years, and everywhere liquid waste flows openly
into them” (E 140). “Decay, nothing but decay, marasmus and emptiness,” Ambros’
diary reads, scorched entrails in the marketplace, devotional junk souvenirs in every

92 See also Boxall, *Since Beckett* 124ff; Loquai, “Max und Marcel;” Darby, “Stations,
Dark Rooms, and False Worlds in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz.*”
93 [The moment of quiet in the realisation of time cannot linger: it goes on.]
building, “[pulverized] limestone ankle-deep in places” (137). Ambros lists the countless churches, monasteries, and other religious edifices like empty signs without referents. Like the decayed city, the guide’s babble is an incomprehensible linguistic invention, signifying nothing. Whatever meaning the Promised Land once held is “dry stone and a remote idea in the heads of its people, now dispersed throughout the world” (142). For Anne Fuchs, the “Jerusalem-cadaver” enacts the abject end of signification, threatening the symbolic order (“Ein auffallend” 104). Precisely the transcendental and eschatological perspective that is at stake in Jerusalem—that is to say Scripture—collapses into the ruin’s incorporated accumulation of historical waste and violence. Here the ruin-allegory lies exposed, in ruins. In all three episodes—Austerlitz’s breakdown, Ferber’s studio, Ambros’ Jerusalem—meaning is dispersed, cast off, the problem of recovery externalised in the ruin encounter. Inscribing the double-bind of placeholder for meaning (natural history) and its destruction, the ruin literalises the line Sebald’s protagonists walk between annihilation and residual, belated recovery work. The reconstruction of the world (for want of a better word) through language is shown to be itself a process of ruination.

Sebald’s own style expresses the conflict between continuity and breakdown: a continual, calamitous flow of layering and rewriting threatens to bury the lost object only further, while fragmented, disruptive citation and appropriation of out-of-joint languages prevent any sense of harmony and completion. The convoluted, at times awkward prose, delaying ad absurdum the grammatical subject of the sentence, owes much to nineteenth-century German-language writers (rarely of German descent). It is a grammatical burying of the subject-quas-object as well as a piling up of leftover styles, as if Sebald were looking for his style, his sentence, his word, among the ruins of the German language. Sebald sees his method not as a pining for the nineteenth-century literary aesthetic, but as an active confrontation with its traces and residues (Eis 66). Meanwhile, the absence of paragraph breaks in Austerlitz and its page-long, labyrinthine sentences worsen the “negative gradient” or “inevitable calamity” that our experience of novels, for Sebald, naturally abstracts (92nd Street Y).

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95 Gottfried Keller, Adalbert Stifter, Heinrich von Kleist, among others.
Sebald’s photographs bring momentary respite, at the same as they intensify the sense of fragmentation. The Terezín episode—in which Austerlitz comes closest to an answer about his mother—stands out; Sebald describes a historical wasteland simultaneously indexing “the Nazis’ obsession with order and cleanliness” (Schmitz 302). “The ruin here is the reality, the reconstruction a deception,” Michael Beckermann suggests (197). In this episode, thirteen images—of walls, façades, and window displays—disrupt the syntactic flow across eleven pages, four photographs at one point interrupting a single sentence. Even words are broken up: “Several sycamores and chestnuts, their bark black-ened by rain still obstructed my view […] and a few more steps brought me out on the central square, which was sur-image] rounded by a double avenue of trees” (187-188). In the German original, the following image (of a main street and the ominous sign “IDEAL”) literalises the oppressive mood, the vertical topography of repression, and the Nazis’ attempt at concealing the extermination of Jews by splitting the word “nieder|drückend” (275). Sebald’s archives show that during layout revisions he deliberately removed any excess blank space between text and image. The effect of this erasure is not seamlessness between two ontologically distinct media but one of ruinous montage.

96 Sebald’s ruinous use of photos is treated at length in Chapter Six.
97 Note that the relationship between words and images changes in the different versions.
98 Figure 1 in Appendix (1). As critics have noted, Austerlitz often expressly activates Freud (as well as Foucault). The new national library in Paris—erected on what used to be “an extensive warehousing complex to which the Germans brought all the loot they had taken from the homes of the Jews of Paris” (A 276)—literalises the topography of official, managed repression and eradication. The irony considering the building’s function passes no one by. James Cowan stresses that very little research was published on the depot (Les Galeries d’Austerlitz) or the nearby Arbeitslager, up until the end of the millennium, when, after the Library’s opening in 1996, a small number of articles highlighted the connections (70).
99 There was generally a lot of late-stage tinkering with the position and size of the photographs, showing Sebald’s meticulous concern for the precise interaction between image and text, as well as an acknowledgment that shifts in the material presentation mean shifts in signification.
As with the accounts in *Emigrants*, the reader is always at multiple degrees of remove from Austerlitz’s memory work, kept at bay—like Austerlitz himself—by the ruinous materiality of language, which is the only access we have. The obstinate, multi-layered repetition of reported speech spells the height of distancing, accumulated language: “I was particularly anxious, Vera told me, said Austerlitz, not to miss the moment […]” (A 155). Memory is mediated, in this way, through material and temporally specific moments and appears as if it had been dug up from a type of stratified discourse. The ruinous, palimpsestic narration of *Austerlitz*, especially—with its “chains of quotations” (Boxall, *Since* 115)—is comparable to Thomas Bernhard, whom we can count among Sebald’s major influences. In the work of both, the distancing of the catastrophe is itself a catastrophe, intensifying the feeling of belatedness. Bernhard’s prose enacts a neurotic, ceaseless re-writing of the object, a continual deferral through repetition that implies a burying under the matter of language. Bernhard’s lost object is that of the melancholic narcissist; it may not actually exist as such, but it can take the shape of an out-of-tune piano or a similarly obsolete object with catastrophic intentions. His object is, however, also that of the “political solipsist,” as Sebald notes in an essay, moving from the outside in, in contrast to the function of Sebald’s negativity, whose dialectical ring structure spirals outward, inverting core and periphery (BU 103).

Bernhard’s mode of correction—the variations of a theme within and across novels, the relentless, often word for word repetition—foregrounds the manuscript-like materiality of the text at the same time as it keeps erasing. Here, Bernhard’s debt to Beckett unfolds into his influence on Sebald, as Krapp rewinds his spool once more, as the Reader repeats, for the umpteenth time: “Little is left to tell” (*Plays* 285). It is what allows Peter Boxall to argue: “Beckett helps to produce the forms in which Bernhard and Sebald stage the recovery of historical material lost in the darkness of the holocaust” (*Since* 13-14). The experience of drowning in the materiality of language at the attempt to salvage some *thing*, a personal pronoun, name, image, brackets these authors together, with the negative writing process registering the necessity of going on.

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100 The obsession with greatness and achievement in Bernhard, “a sublimated enactment of suicide,” in Thomas Cousineau’s words (45), arches back to a classical modernist paradigm somewhat foreign to Sebald and Beckett.

101 The influence of Robert Walser can also be noted here, as Sebald is particularly drawn to Walser’s asceticism paired with the attention to remaining things, the
Conclusion

The stylistic and formal discussion above shows Sebald’s attempt to find an adequate aesthetic response to a historical problem, the limits of restitution from the perspective of the latecomer, more specifically the latecomer who notices that the mute “speech” of destruction tends to be obscured by societal and institutional repression. Rather than privileging melancholy as an a priori position from which residual testimony may be gleaned and which would constitute the only ethical (and perhaps political) responsivity, Sebald’s texts incorporate material ruination as a challenge to forms of representation and recuperation. Melancholy, like the vertiginous overall impression of Sebald’s novels, emerges from the conflict between ruinous forms: the negative, erasing index, dispersing meaning and narratives, the natural petrification of historical time in modernity, the mythical, apocalyptic images of destruction—themselves gleaned from old forms—projected into the future. Ruinous language materialises in the remnants to be gleaned, at once hollowed-out and resonant, inscribing the continuation of an ethical recovery work at the threshold of annihilation. It is the ruin-space in Sebald’s work that poses the problem of rescuing meaning, as matter and language collapse. Neither the revisiting of the material ruin nor the repurposing of cultural remnants stand in service of the “new,” but rather ground the “fidelity to failure” that structures Sebald’s politicised reengagement with the past. The literalisation and materialisation of hermeneutic and critical processes in Sebald, finally, tend to an additional fragmentation—not a total system—of the historical image.

If, as I suggested, the relation between the ruins and the artwork remains one of specificity and singular response, then the collective dimension (which is where we can locate Benjamin’s most utopian thinking) seems to be missing in Sebald (as critics have regretted). However, by conceiving of the ruin as witness demanding a readership, Sebald’s leftover materials become politicised in turn: not as a blueprint, or an incentive disjecta—“ash, a needle, a pencil, or a matchstick” (Sebald, Place 137). Beckett’s Malone begs comparison, as he re-enacts the ascetic, self-correcting writer relying on his leftover tools, which in that bare space materialise that aporetic promise of salvation and disappearance, memory and erasure. Language in Sebald is something to be worked, and worked with, constantly erased, corrected, redacted, resulting in layers and palimpsests.
to follow Sebald’s singular footprints, but as staging the problem of the production and legibility of history (in which melancholy and its potential for abstraction play a role in turn). The dispersal of meaning in the ruin-site is what keeps leading Sebald’s characters elsewhere, to “brush history against the grain” and take the digressive path hinting at the lives of others, of other things. The ruin’s collective dimension survives in this way. Chapter Four will explore further how Sebald’s border-crossing approach to the vestiges contributes to his residual politics of materiality. With the end of Chapter Six, I will return to the relation between ruination, catastrophe, and the problem of narrative and political response, from the specific angle of Sebald’s photographic archive.
Chapter Two. Beckett and the Poetics of Waste

“a fart fraught with meaning issuing through the mouth no sound in the mud”

Beckett, How It Is (20)

Introduction

Things in Beckett have a penchant for remaining, fizzling residually, stirring still. They articulate a lessness, rather than a nothingness: “Scattered ruins same grey as the sand ash grey true refuge. [...] Grey sky no cloud no sound no stir earth ash grey sand” (CSP 197). Stirring still, Beckett’s “signature,” according to Derrida, may be “this remainder which remains when the thematics is exhausted” (Acts 61). While earlier interpretations have often sought universal or existential symbolism behind Beckett’s vestiges, there has in recent years been a stronger critical interest in the literal, material quality of his leftovers, and, as with Sebald, I argue that it is this material conception (“negative” insofar as it eschews determined meaning, allegorical insofar as it contains fragmented possibilities) that helps us glean historical and political readings. What I seek to emphasise is the material quality of the Beckettian aporia, of the nothing of expression that is nevertheless something. Like philosophy, history appears as refuse in Beckett’s post-war work, as “almost nothing” (to use Simon Critchley’s book title), which applies similarly to the micro-histories of individual testimony and memory. And yet, this “almost nothing” is encountered in abundance, a material void: emptiness and profusion exist in a co-constitutive state of inadequation. Not least because historical production and testimony become such a problem for Beckett, meaning and narrative coherence are constantly consigned to waste. As a result, the question of the how, of the coming-into-being of the text as text, draws on the material incorporation of a negative, destructive archive: history and culture have been produced in wasteful circumstances before being expelled, and under these conditions remain. Adorno’s assessment of Beckett’s “Kulturmüll” [culture trash] can be taken quite literally (“Versuch” 281), as any historical, political or ethical reading can only ever be “extracted” from the waste heap. Consequently, critical interrogations of the material conditions under which

102 See Peter Boxall, “There’s no Lack of Void: Waste and Abundance in Beckett and DeLillo.”
“[history] intrudes, and then takes us nowhere,” become imperative, which recent historicising scholarship has tried to account for (Kennedy, “Humanity” 188).103

Beckett’s texts—and his throwaway descriptions of them—invite the analogy with “waste” on a large scale, and, as Adorno’s phrase indicates, critics have long embraced Beckett’s waste poetics. Tending to the different manifestations of “waste,” it is easy to see why: from the ubiquity of excrement and preoccupations with urine and semen (as bodily wastes), to the wastelands and mud-lands of *Endgame*, *Happy Days*, or *How It Is*, to human leftovers in dustbins or other containers, to the discarded, broken stuff at the tramp’s disposal, to the garbage that makes up the entirety of *Breath*. Nor is it a stretch to say that “waste” designates Beckett’s privileged mode of production, as later texts, especially, ask us to consider the aesthetic question: what happens if the entire project, and any conception of value it entails, is consigned to the rubbish heap?104 I turn, in this chapter, to that question with reference to Beckett’s *Fizzles*, diminutive, abortive prose texts, which, I suggest, in their evacuation of history through materiality residually perform a type of historical protest or resistance. What I want to tease out at this point, meanwhile, are the differences in conceptions of “waste,” and how a reading

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of Beckett’s waste poetics helps complicate historico-political understandings of materiality.

First, we may dispense with universal and symbolic recuperations of “waste” as they do Beckett’s work little justice. Meta-theories of “Waste Literatures,” such as Signe Morrison’s *The Literature of Waste* or Orlando’s *Obsolete Objects*, may provide plenty of rubbish-data for thinking the cultural stakes of Voltaire’s aphorism, “le superflus, chose si nécessaire,” but they also serve up sweeping conclusions, like the following: “In Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*, all is waste, existing on multiple levels” (Signe Morrison 93). The setting of *Endgame* would here symbolise the mind in decay, “waste” becomes paradoxically total in its historical irrelevance. For Signe Morrison, the materiality of waste transforms in Beckett (as in every writer in her “waste canon”) into a metaphor that asks to be translated psychologically and spiritually, and would somehow ethically approximate us in our shared humanity. Decades of conflicting perspectives on Beckett’s works, itself full of aporias and self-doubt, push one to interject with the Beckettian axiom: “The danger is in the neatness of identifications” (*Disjecta* 19). Instead, I would contend that, if a conception of waste in Beckett is to count for anything, it is because waste negates claims to truth and sublimation. If Sebald still *gestures* at least toward a “modernist salvage-work on materiality” *à la* Benjamin (Boscagli 41), the idea of “salvage” itself is foreign to Beckett’s waste poetics, as are the effortless hermeneutics Signe Morrison evokes. Herein lies precisely the challenge Beckett can pose to “new materialist” recuperations of waste: his work presents continual, immediate encounters with waste and ways of being-in-waste that problematize, rather than facilitate, narrative or indeed historical legibility.

To an extent, all my chapters on Beckett examine a type of “waste” (Chapter Three: the vagrant as expelled thing; Chapter Five: discarded stuff). While the various conceptions are in communication, I should insist that no total, all-encompassing picture of Beckett’s “waste” forms; if “waste” is to remain a helpful understanding of materiality, narrative, historical, and aesthetic differences need to be retained precisely insofar as Beckett makes them difficult to be discerned, not least amid the grainy, residual late prose. In the present chapter, I juxtapose two distinctive (but not unrelated) conceptions of “waste” as they ground the composition of Beckett’s texts themselves.

105 Kathryn White’s *Beckett and Decay* (2009) is guilty of similarly swiping arguments.
First, Beckett’s most wasteful novel, *Watt* (1953; written 1941-45): incontinent with swathes of expelled matter (slops, food leftovers, but also words), *Watt* makes consumption, disposal, and recycling its themes and form. In its foregrounding of resources, Beckett’s “wartime” novel is unique within his oeuvre, connecting historical backdrops of mass disposability and expulsion to the deficient birth of the historical archive, as issues of witnessing and testimony succumb to the overflow of matter. I suggest that *Watt* first illustrates how Beckett thinks of the text as surplus economy, a sentiment which will define much of his later post-war prose where the textual economy has to reckon with the spectral vestiges of history. This brings us to *Fizzles/Foirades* (1976), eight compressed “stories” (rarely explored, by Beckett Studies standards), whose title casts them as short-lived, abject emissions. The impression of “waste” offered by *Fizzles* is complicated, and in a different register from the expelled refuse of *Watt*, as their narrators seem caught between material and immaterial, organic and mineral, entropic and historical. As fleeting vestiges, *Fizzles* record the “almost nothing” of history and value in Beckett’s oeuvre most radically, inciting us to inquire into how historical time has survived at all.

**Reading Waste: a History of Abjection**

Before moving on to *Watt* and *Fizzles*, it is useful to sketch out different “waste theories” and how they inform my reading of Beckett. Enumerating things at lavish length has become a self-reflexive wastefulness embraced by many object-oriented studies (denounced as a superficial academic whim by others), indicating the sway bequeathed to matter over the written word.106 But “waste” entails a lexical and semantic variability applying to classification itself.107 Its familiar synonyms, whether ontologically synonymous or not, such as “trash,” “junk,” “refuse,” “garbage,” “rubbish,” “litter,” “dross,” “dreck,” “draff,” are as a rule mass nouns, rather than plural forms encompassing separate constitutive entities. Waste is *matter*, a “style” of materiality, not a container of discrete things. While a list of stuff, such as Austerlitz enumerates in Terezín, tells by definition only part of the story, the singularity of things is removed once it becomes waste. As Maurizia Boscagli notes, *stuff* signals a border

106 See for example the opening paragraphs of Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins’ *The Object Reader*.
107 See Spelman 7.
condition, in which the sheen of the commodity has been scraped off, but we might still glean (with Benjamin) the commodity’s utopian promise (a revelatory truth-moment that Beckett might nevertheless dismiss).\footnote{In \textit{Gargantua} (1996), Julian Stallabrass insists on the “doleful truthfulness” of trash (175).} By comparison, \textit{waste} is “a full affront to ordered materiality,” articulating fluidity, hybridity, and formlessness (Boscagli 227-229). \textit{Stuff} drifts in and out of the commodity state, whereas \textit{waste} threatens to exist outside this life cycle, harbouring no overt promise of recuperation even for the “worthless” value of kitsch or junk collections.\footnote{See Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process.”} Significantly, the \textit{formation} of waste matter registers an excess that already exists “originally” in the material itself (it will become surplus, broken, etc.) and the system of production itself (which requires constant surplus). It seems that the \textit{formulation} of “waste” (qua language) functions along comparable lines. “Waste” does not refer to all the entities that make it up—because it is, paradoxically, made up of non-entities—and in this both grammatical and ontic sense, it announces an innate excess. In its formlessness, “waste” is that materiality which most corresponds to the “somehow on” of Beckett’s late prose (CIWS 81), the sense that, while there will be a last saying (and writing), this does not constitute a final, true end.

But to return to “waste” in the common understanding; although “waste” is in many ways formless, it has an inherent “storied” quality. As Suzanne Raitt writes, “[to] call something ‘waste’ […] is to invoke its history. Nuclear waste, bodily waste, and medical waste are all the result of specific processes: they gesture back to the productive economies that generated them” (qtd. in Gee 9-10). Hence the appeal of “reading” waste, which allows us to trace modes of production and consumption, and of the various relations and networks underlying these processes. It is easy to see how in the critical discourse on global warming and climate change (environmental studies, ecocriticism, bioethics, etc.), “waste” is cast as a key agent of the Anthropocene: CO2 emissions, plastic waste, deforested land, or fatbergs, index not only a modern history of capitalist overproduction and overconsumption, but also a future catastrophe and a political call to action. In postcolonial or world-literature approaches, “waste” can become a principal material for the inquiry into urban experience on the margins, as
the “core” at once relocates its mass-production to, and dumps its own waste in, the “periphery.” By comparison, in an American post-war context, “trash” (as over-saturation of the market, overconsumption and squandering of cheap goods and pop culture) became a principal emblem of late capitalist *jouissance*, and of American cultural imperialism and national identity, with Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo frequently cited as key literary figures. While “trash”—insofar as it refers to cultural *value*—evokes a completely different register than environmental waste, they are linked to planetary catastrophe through mass production and consumption. In relation to environmental and world-systems problems, “reading” waste seems more pressing now than ever (and we might find Sebald’s *Rings* more immediately pertinent here than Beckett). In this sense, the insuperable materiality of waste—its visibility and affect of disgust—relates to its political impact.

For many “new materialist” waste theories, meanwhile, understanding “waste” as a man-made effect of cultural production and consumption, while helpfully “[politicising] moralistic and oppressive appeals to ‘nature’,” is also insufficient, obscuring the immanent “powers” of waste (Bennett, 17). For the “new” or “vital” materialism of Gay Hawkins or Jane Bennett, matter plays an active part in the existence, or assemblage, of what we conventionally (mis)understand as “human” relations, agendas, decisions, and meanings. Bennett’s post-Deleuzian vitalism attributes to matter (“waste” is only one manifestation) a “thing-power” which co-constitutes our affective, bodily, political, economic, and discursive networks (ibid.) Hawkins, in a manner recalling Brown’s “thing,” insists on the disruption caused by waste matter: “catching a glimpse of the brute physicality of waste signals a kind of failure” (*Ethics* 1). For Hawkins, just noticing waste “can disrupt habits and precipitate new sensations and perceptions” (15). Both Bennett and Hawkins emphasise the empathy and ethical responsiveness encouraged by the “power” or “enchantment” of matter. While Hawkins operates on the level of micropolitics, hoping to change waste

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habits ("Styles of waste disposal [...] are also styles of self; in managing waste we constitute an ethos and a sensibility" [ibid.]), Bennett's "vital materialism" aims for a more radical, collective ecology, with its central concept of the distribution of agency literalising the idea: we are all in it together, human and nonhuman, or, in other words, we are our own waste. We might be rightly sceptical of this positive, affective vision of waste matter. I agree with Boscagli’s assessment of Hawkins’ “trash ontology” as “a form of aestheticization as purification of materiality, where the afterlife of the commodity is used to once again fetishize it.” Writes Boscagli: “We should not be tempted to poetically imagine that the thing in all its reconquered thinginess inspires us to connect ethically or emphatically with the abandoned object’s ontological essence or empirical existence” (229-230).

Beckett’s “fidelity to failure” seems radically opposed to such an affective, affirmative recovery of leftover matter. To be sure, his work dismantles that modern, binary drive toward exclusion and purification (with body and culture inextricable) which “new materialists” see as the seat of structural and environmental violence (generally following Deleuze and Foucault). However, Beckett’s work fully rejects moments of recognition or revelation whereby the hybridity of life all of a sudden becomes painfully clear, or an ethico-political affect is fostered, after we caught a glimpse of waste. In Beckett’s ubiquitous recourse to shit (which Hawkins also considers), we can see that his work, if anything, intensifies the banality of abject materiality as it connects all major facets of life: birth, love, death. Molloy’s “[first] taste of shit” (13) marks his infamous anal birth. The “expelled” narrator draws the name of his first love in a cowpat (CSP 34), and, at the edge of life, shits in his own boat: “To contrive a little kingdom, in the midst of the universal muck, then shit on it, ah that was me all over. The excrements were me too, I know, I know, but all the same” (ibid. 98). If there is an immanence and omnipresence of excrement as “waste” matter in Beckett, it seems to describe a basic economy of life. Rather than a political and historical lack, this economy registers a marginal socio-cultural position—of Beckett’s characters but also his work. “Waste” interests Beckett because it indexes how the world is policed, how spaces are cleaned up and purified (of things and people), and how the neatness of borders traces a history of exclusion. “Waste” foregrounds the question of what is off limits in society and what is not, interrogating prohibition and taboo.
It is worth highlighting how important this particular line of inquiry around “waste” (as uncleanliness, impropriety, taboo, abjection) has been in psychoanalytic and anthropological discourse. Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection, in *Powers of Horror* (1980), is often applied to Beckett’s “subject” in crisis. Abjection does not simply equate with “waste;” wounds are as crucial to the abjective crisis as bodily emissions like excrement and menstruation. For Kristeva, what causes abjection is not simple uncleanliness but that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). While abjection marks a “border,” it “is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what t[h]reatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger” (9). In the threat to the self emerges its (ambiguous) constitution, as the abject border sabotages the construction of both “I” and “not I.” Abjection rejects dichotomies such as pure and impure, morality and immorality, subject and object, and in this uncertainty it proves unnameable. For Kristeva, abjection is the true domain of the contemporary (read: modernist, male) writer, the terrain of “[great] modern literature,” which attempts to engage the unnamable borders of pleasure and pain, and, while challenging the symbolic order, can put forward the sublimation of abjection, if always without consecration (18). Her list: Dostoyevsky (loss of meaning), Proust (unnameable desire and sexuality), Joyce (sickly, unborn language), Borges (impossible symbol), Artaud (death), and above all Céline (absolute, unredeemed revulsion). Similarly, Beckett’s conflation of matter, body and language—“I’m in words, made of words” (U 104)—makes sense only through the abject equation whereby words are leftovers, materially apprehended and expelled: “As somehow from some soft of mind they

113 See also Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* (1966). For Douglas, the “danger” posed to order by dirt can lead to “a positive effort to organize the environment. […] it is a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience” (2).

114 “In a world in which the Other has collapsed, the aesthetic task […] amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless ‘primacy’ constituted by primal repression. Through that experience, which is nevertheless managed by the Other, ‘subject’ and ‘object’ push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again—inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject” (ibid.).
ooze” (CIWS 95). This accommodates the critical focus on language as dismantling an inside-outside boundary to the extent it involves a disavowed identification with a non-introjected “object” or other.

For a materialist approach, Kristeva’s focus on the construction of the self and bodily interaction can be limited in socio-political scope. And there is, especially in Kristeva’s conclusion, a drive towards universalization where abject jouissance becomes synonymous with “horror of being” (which “literature” cannot help but be intimately involved with) (208). Gay Hawkins notes:

> While psychoanalysis is useful for explaining the visceral power of disgust in relation to bodily waste […] most of the waste we encounter is not bodily nor is it experienced as abjecting. The detritus of urban life concealed in gutters or dumped on the street doesn’t destabilize the self. […] The centrality of abjection in accounts of the self-waste relation seems too ahistorical and subjectivist; too blind to the social and political frames that mediate how all waste is subject to classification. (Ethics 3)

Hawkins has a point—bodily interaction, real or symbolic, with waste is only part of the story—but she also assumes a commonplace position by glossing over the socio-historical implications of psychoanalysis.\(^ {115} \) “Our ‘psyche’ is a social space,” to quote Jacqueline Rose (63). Indeed, Kristeva follows a history of religious practices—prohibitions, laws, taboos—and relates bodily materiality to literary production, insisting on the social activity of waste. Abjection might not seem to demand historicisation in the way that, say, nuclear waste does, but as biological index, it is anything but ahistorical: referring to transgression and taboo, to our consumption habits, or to the biopolitical and linguistic structures around private and public bodily emissions.\(^ {116} \)

\(^ {115} \) In fact, Hawkins misreads Kristeva when she assumes abjection is only about the threat to self, rather than at the heart of its incomplete constitution (3).

\(^ {116} \) The debate around the so-called Tampon Tax in the UK and other countries is a good example, with feminine hygiene products not exempt from VAT, because they not classed as “essential” goods.
It is accurate to say that in Kristeva’s framework, larger socio-political developments (like fascist regimes) are always a result of abjective crises in the symbolic realm—the narcissistic self’s traumatic wound—appearing reactively, or rather latently. This is one way to explain why shit has such a strong satirical history, and why it has, in colonial and postcolonial contexts, been flung back at colonial, nationalist, and fascist regimes. Beckett’s Swiftian scatological humour has rightly been considered in light of Irish postcolonialism and anti-nationalism. For David Lloyd, “the fetishization of excrement” in Beckett spells “the index of a negative dialectic of identity,” challenging the sanitised, sterile vision of a fully integrated Free State (“Writing” 78). Joshua Esty notes: “Excremental satire […] expresses the partial misconception (or anal birth) of postcolonial nationalism” (48) (in contrast with the American “trash” identity noted earlier). Beckett’s “First Love” clarifies what he thought of the nationalist state’s priorities at the time:

What constitutes the charm of our country, apart of course from its scant population, and this without help of the meanest contraceptive, is that all is derelict, with the sole exception of history’s ancien faeces. […] Wherever nauseated time has dropped a nice fat turd you will find our patriots, sniffing it up on all fours, their faces on fire. (CSP 33-34)

In this sense, Beckett’s abjection creates an interesting counter-point to the sanitised inquiries into post-war German identity that Sebald criticised so strongly in his “Air War” essay. Beckett’s work articulates the abject negation of hegemonic cultural identity after the Holocaust that Sebald felt his “compatriots” lacked aesthetically and philosophically. Beckett’s recurrent conflation of foetus and faeces—Molloy’s anal birth—can similarly be read within this wider allegory of Irish nation-building. An early draft of Molloy included a thirteen-page, Swiftian satire of a self-sufficient excrement-based economy of Ballyba, overseen by a white-clad bureaucrat called Obidil (literally

117 “Contrary to hysteria, which brings about, ignores, or seduces the symbolic but does not produce it, the subject of abjection is eminently productive of culture. Its symptom is the rejection and reconstruction of languages” (Kristeva 45).

118 In Making Waste, Sophie Gee recently revisited Swift’s “wastelands” in light of a critique of British colonialism (91-111).

119 See Sebald, Natural 154.
and figuratively the mirror-image of “libido”) (Van Hulle, “Textual” 308). Whatever the reasons for Beckett’s pre-emptive self-censorship, the overt satirical tradition vis-à-vis Irish shit mythology largely disappears in his work from the late 1940s onwards.\textsuperscript{120}

If the satire of abjection (whether excrement or incest) became too historically specific for Beckett, too legible or meaningful, his work will persist with “waste” in a more fundamental, compositional way, in order to challenge conceptions of value, expression, and meaning. In the following section, I want to position \emph{Watt} as a transitional, singular text within this “waste” trajectory: a novel which throws its own political waste-allegory out with the bathwater. \emph{Watt} offers a conception of “waste” through the overlapping prisms of textual production, of overconsumption and expulsion relating to the socio-economic sphere (and, by extension, visions of a homogenous nation-state), and the abject body in the micro-economy (Knott’s household). The novel announces in this way both the turn to the vagabond as the main, “wasted” voice of Beckett’s immediate post-war prose, and the historical conception of the literary text-qua-waste that late works like \emph{Fizzles} embody.

\textbf{\emph{Watt}: Composition, Consumption, History}

Besides Watt himself (a rejected vagabond when not under Knott’s employment), \emph{Watt} is full of expelled or discarded matter: the slops and leftovers, the faeces with which Watt fertilises the plants in the garden. Watt’s language problem usually occupies most critics,\textsuperscript{121} but note the material surplus that it produces, “[eliciting] something from nothing” (77): a history of narrative realism (not least the Irish Big House tradition), symbolic representation, and rationalism is swallowed, metabolised, recycled. The countless permutational series (lists, inventories, mathematical games, repetitions with a difference) become the “narrative” itself as the novel stumbles from non-event to non-

\textsuperscript{120}See also Van Hulle, “The Obidil and the Man of Glass;” Magessa O’Reilly, “\emph{Molloy}, Part II, Where the Shit Hits the Fan;” Schauss, “The censor’s “filthy synecdoche”: Samuel Beckett and censorship.”

\textsuperscript{121}The philosophical \emph{enjeu} of Watt’s language games will not be further commented on here; suffice it to say that numerous, at times conflicting interpretations read the novel within or against the spirit of Cartesian Rationalism, Logical Positivism, or Mauthner and Wittgenstein’s language philosophies.
event. This double movement of textual exclusion and incorporation is literalised in
the novel’s “Addenda,” whose tongue-in-cheek footnote evokes the abject nature of
this surplus: “The following precious and illuminating material should be carefully
studied. Only fatigue and disgust prevented its incorporation” (247). The 37 addenda—
fragmented sentences, poetic morsels, which have “never been properly born” (248)—
form the text’s refuse, foregrounding the problem of value and the aporetic manner in
which Beckett handles his textual matter. On one level, the footnote follows up on
the dig at insipid anthropological practices, and the “romantic primitivism” attributed
to rural Ireland (Bixby 135), when Louit displays Nackybal to a committee of scholars.

Please study carefully! Like Beckett’s scant notes to the “erudite” and “obscure” poem
Whoroscope, Watt’s addenda might be read as a “send-up” of Eliot’s Waste Land notes
(Knowlson 112). Beyond its playful function, the appendix performs the “disgusting”
incorporation of waste and filth that energises the text’s metabolism throughout: it is
part of the body-text but we fail to make sense of its function to the body as a whole.
That Beckett at different points described the novel as “an unsatisfactory book, written
in dribs and drabs” (LII 55), “without preestablished plan” (ibid. xix), “in order to stay
sane” during the war (Knowlson 333), is then not so much a dismissal, as a faithful
portrayal of the finished (by nature incomplete) published text. Beckett’s textual
practice announces here an inadequate consolidation of language and materiality, the
incorporation of language and its discharge. But why, we can ask, is there such a pre-
occupation with incorporation, squandering, consumption, expulsion in Watt? Why is
the text’s metabolism (textually, narratively, and thematically) foregrounded to such an
extent?

We might look at the moment of composition. Beckett began Watt in 1941, shortly
after joining the resistance, but wrote it mostly in Roussillon between 1943-45, hiding

122 The first “principal incident”—the call from the Galls, father-son piano-tuners—
“[resembles] all the incidents of note proposed to Watt during his stay in Mr Knott’s
house, and of which a certain number will be recorded in this place, without addition,
or subtraction, and in a sense not” (72).

123 For a note by note commentary on the appendix, see Chris Ackerley’s “Fatigue and
Disgust: The Addenda to ‘Watt.’”

124 After all, as Beckett writes in a letter, “T. Eliot is toilet spelt backwards” (LI 421; to
Thomas MacGreevy, 9 January 1937).
with Suzanne from the Gestapo. Material resources and information were scarce, for the population of France and for the writer whose movement is drastically limited, keeping himself busy working the soil and playing chess with the painter Henri Hayden.\textsuperscript{125} The “distraction” that is the composition of \textit{Watt} defines a material situation, foregrounding its “difficult birth” as text (mirrored by the novel’s publication history) (LII 395).\textsuperscript{126} What remains for Beckett to squander and consume is, to an extent, the artistic composition process itself, at the same time as the human creature (not just Beckett) finds itself trapped in a war environment where everything around is being squandered and “consumed,” in other words laid to waste. The novel’s incontinence is not a sheltered, structural problem; rather, it establishes the relation of “waste” to the problem of testimony and historical production. For the writer with scant information about the destruction and atrocities surrounding him, and with no inclination to put his imagination to paper in a fictional war-narrative, the resources and energy become directed at the mass and density of the word surface, and turn into an obsession with the daily rituals surrounding waste: food, excrement, human, animal, text.

Depicting the composition of \textit{Watt} in this light recalls what Bataille termed the “general economy,”\textsuperscript{127} the energy of “life” whose primary object is “expenditure,” or consumption of wealth: “there is generally no growth but only a luxurious squandering of energy in every form!” \textit{(Accursed 33)}. “Waste” is at the centre of Bataille’s theory, which maintains, in the broadest terms, “it is not necessity but its contrary, ‘luxury,’ that presents living matter and mankind with their fundamental problems” (ibid. 12; emphasis original).\textsuperscript{128} If the surplus that is constantly produced for the system’s sustainability

\textsuperscript{125} See Knowlson 331-334.

\textsuperscript{126} To Con Leventhal, 6 August 1953. David Houston Jones writes that \textit{Watt} can be described as “[articulating] a troubled textual genesis” (212); this must be extended to its textual production more generally.

\textsuperscript{127} See \textit{The Accursed Share} (1949), and \textit{Eroticism} (1957), both hugely influential for Kristeva’s notion of abjection.

\textsuperscript{128} “The living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g., an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its
exceeds this system (and its growth), it must be otherwise spent; war is thus cast as a formless, mass expenditure.\(^{129}\) As production and growth create their negative—surplus and squandering—and value systems are destroyed, the material properties and conditions of this negative ask to be confronted. The emphasis on “waste”—on consumption and squandering—in *Watt* suggests similarly that textual production creates its own form of surplus energy. Indeed, Bataille read *Molloy* as a kind of radical, abject expenditure of humanity: “the formless configuration of absence” (“Molloy’s Silence” 104).\(^{130}\) Putting *Watt* in this historical context, I do not mean to suggest that Beckett sought to allegorise the workings of capitalist production or war as its catastrophic surplus (even if his continual return to people as “waste” cannot be separated from socio-historical and economic violence). Rather, I propose that *Watt* can be seen as a surplus economy from both an aesthetic and historical perspective. Its recourse to (pre-war) Irish resources—satirical traditions and traditions to be satirised—is consumed by a textual economy that seeks to both incorporate and expel these resources. These resources are assimilated by Beckett’s present-time historical problem: information, testimony, and material supplies. Scarcity and absence are turned into profusion: *Watt*’s problem of deciding between abundant, equally meaningless options and permutations. As a surplus economy, *Watt* squanders its own “waste,” evacuating its historical determination.

My reading departs in this way from most standard perspectives on *Watt*’s central economy, summarised here by Daniel Katz:

> Knott’s household has been taken for an allegory of the realm of human experience in its entirety, skeptically seen as epistemologically unknowable, as growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically” (*Accursed* 21).

\(^{129}\) In this sense, capitalism becomes “an unreserved surrender to things, heedless of consequences and seeing nothing beyond them” (126). Note that Bataille’s “general economy” refers to excess energy (related to all forms of life: capitalist, erotic, etc.), of which waste as material surplus is only one form.

\(^{130}\) The “expenditure” here relates more to the libidinal energy connected to death that Bataille formulates in *Eroticism*. For a recent re-evaluation of Bataille’s Beckett essay, see Rabaté, *Think* 12-18.
the site of a systemic breaking down of the familiar patriarchal structures of filiation and symbolic reproduction, and, more mystically, as a crystallized centering of the circumference of nothingness which habitually brackets our petty acts of interpretation in the world as we live it. (Saying 45) 

Dissatisfied with prior Oedipal and Cartesian understandings, Katz highlights the novel’s preoccupation “with law, transgression, and taboo,” a preoccupation, which within its systematic destruction of narrative progression and meaning voids “the libidinal energy that such a taboo structure should generate” (ibid. 49). He continues: “Much of the book’s discussion of taboo centers precisely on culinary ritual: […] the elaborate prohibitions regarding Mr Knott’s eating habits and leftovers lead to the absurd and lengthy investigations of the kinship structure of the Lynch family” (ibid. 61). Not least for its transitional nature (Beckett’s last English novel, already filled with Gallicisms) and difficult conception, Watt occupies a singular position within Beckett’s oeuvre, but it also offers a unique “interrogation of group or communal structures, and the mechanisms by which the sense of belonging and estrangement is built” (ibid. 66). Katz focuses on ritual and custom in terms of subject and narrative formation; the abject materiality and sheer mass of stuff that is squandered are less his concern. Keeping the important structures of transgression, taboo, and ritual in mind, I want to focus on the amassing of ingested, disposable, and discarded matter (including the incestuous Lynches), and the superfluous length and incorporation of language permutations, in relation to a history of “waste” as mass and excess matter.

131 Leslie Hill, for instance, reads Watt as a “puzzle of failed incorporation” (Beckett’s Fiction 28). His reading rests on the law of the father (master figure and ego ideal, Mr Knott, the absent body of his own secret) and utopian wish to repair, even if that whole/ideal never existed.

132 Insisting on Watt’s fear of not being punished, Katz argues that the novel rehearses the “anxiety at the potential breakdown of social signifying structure in which the father is no more than a marker, thus ‘not’” (ibid. 62). The novel’s concern with kinship and belonging stems from “the fragility of the laws which give the son his ‘place’ in the symbolic economy” (ibid. 63).

133 We might add The Lost Ones to Beckett’s rare interrogations of group collectives.
The novel devotes roughly thirty pages to the “little matter of the food and the dog” (111), mingling different types of “leftovers” (food, the Lynches, starving dogs). Knott’s leftovers are themselves the product of a recycling process in which a motley variety of ingredients are “inextricably mingled and transformed into a single good thing that was neither food, nor drink, nor physic, but quite a good new thing” (87). Watt’s long taxonomy of ingredients, at first specific and comprehensive, quickly spills over with many other things “too numerous to mention” (ibid.). The accumulation of things unfolds into non-specific matter. Watt, the hopeful modernist that he is, made “quite a good new thing,” for his master to consume, or not. Throughout, the power dynamics within the Knottian micro-economy are mediated through things (doors, a key, food, slops). These dynamics are nowhere clearer than in the disposal and recycling of faeces and leftover food: social power rests with the person (in this case the landowner) who is free to waste as much or little as he/she chooses.\footnote{This is the point Bataille makes in his “potlatch” theory, commenting on the tribal micro-economy’s squandering: “what is appropriated in the squander is the prestige it gives to the squanderer (whether an individual or a group), which is acquired by him as a possession and which determines his rank […] [Man] must waste the excess, but he remains eager to acquire even when he does the opposite, and so he makes waste itself an object of acquisition” (“Accursed” 72; original emphasis).} The relation between waste and “newness” that Watt raises with his dish foregoes modernist recuperation and value; instead words become a recycled disturbance, paradoxically surplus to the “narrative.” At the same time, Knott’s “Big House” (emblem of the landed Anglo-Irish ascendancy, and of the dominant Irish realist tradition) is politicised by its waste ecology. To power the circulation of consumption and squandering, a “thoroughly famished dog” needs to be available at all times (112). Knott’s privileged squandering—the leftovers consumed by the dogs—turns into the consumption of the dogs. The surrounding folks’ destitution fuels the Knott household’s lavishness.\footnote{Emphasising the Irish context, Seán Kennedy maintains that “Beckett’s interest in the Big House […] is in significant parts attributable to an urgent need to critique the Yeatsian conflation of ascendancy and authoritarianism as a recipe for Ireland’s ills, particularly when viewed in the light of contemporary events on the European mainland” (“Bid” 225). See also Bixby, 124-134.} The servants, all of whom could fill the boots of the tramps to follow, are utterly replaceable: any “Tom, Dick, Harry” will do (134). The “absurdity of these
constructions” defining the household’s class-based order and disposal mechanisms is grounded in a historical condition—Irish landownership and poverty—that hopes to masquerade as universal: “a chain stretching from the long dead to the far unborn” (133-134). The fact that food is the central thing being wasted plays up the role of the landowning class during the Great Famine, as critics have noted (Bixby 132).  

As the “expelled,” incestuous and degenerated genealogy of the Lynch family makes clear, Beckett considered the Catholic republican alternative no more promising (104): his drawn-out passage on the collective “Lynch millennium” (105) smears “the ban on contraception and the de Valera vision of the fecund, rural Catholic family” (P. Stewart 61). Arsène—Watt’s predecessor—becomes Beckett’s most overt mouthpiece for an Irish scatological satire that the novel also expels: the former servant leaves the narrative early on, his satirical services no longer required. He calls his own life “[an] ordure,” the whole affair of ancestry “[an] excrement,” seasonal regeneration “[a] turd” (46-47). 

Birth and death, the continuation of life, are again the domain of shit, within an Irish colonial and postcolonial context. In Watt, as elsewhere, the policing of sexual activity (or indeed uncouth art), and the discourse of racial and national purity unfold into a satirical excrementology in which societal values are upended. Tellingly, like MKTP, Murphy, and Molloy, Watt was banned in Ireland under the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act. Note how the devaluing of property (i.e. the creation of wastelands) stands at the etymological and judicial root of “waste” (vastus: unoccupied, uncultivated) (see Gee 16-17).

“Life force-feeds you your own puke” (44), Arsène offers as a metaphorical example for what is often read as the “key” to understanding the novel: the “ladder,” that is to say language, pace Mauthner and Wittgenstein.

Consider also Arsène’s bastardisation of Faust’s famous ejaculation, “die Merde hat mich wieder” (250), or the extensively described eating habits of Mary, ending in “the servants’ W.C., where a greater part of Mary’s time was spent” (54). Goethe’s Faust was a work full of wasteful material in Beckett’s opinion: “a surprising amount of irrelevance for the work of a lifetime” (LI; to Thomas MacGreevy, 7 August 1936). Note also Arthur’s recommendation of the banned aphrodisiac “Bando” (170).

Cf. Kristeva: “Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death” (71).
Publications Act. “France may commit race suicide, Erin never will,” as Beckett quips in his essay, “Censorship in the Saorstat” (Disjecta 86). At the same time, regarding the novel’s composition in the context of Vichy France and Nazi occupation (and its racial, dehumanising discourses, which Beckett was well aware of, not least from his travels in pre-war Germany), the stakes of thinking of population and communities in disposable terms could not be more immediate. The disgust and violence intrinsic to how societies and world-systems deal with “expelled” people (refugees, the homeless, and the poor) can be illuminated by how “waste” structures the social, how whole communities become troped as “filth” by ideological discourses. Indeed, in his play Eleutheria (1947; written shortly after Watt, but unpublished during his lifetime), Dr Piouk embarks on a rant about population control (44-45), aptly described by Rabaté as “[halfway] between Malthus and Sade” (Think 109). The overspill of filth in Watt serves to cement the refusal of “orduretight” morals imposed by the postcolonial, nationalist State and Church (Disjecta 84), but also to eject that political satire, or rather consume it, together with the other historical meanings amid the novel’s pervasive sense that it does not know what to retain and what to discard.

This metabolism is not so much a dehistoricisation as a recognition, at that transitional point in Beckett’s life and career, that if the “novel” is to resist traditional, assimilated, “pure” discourses, it can only do so by presenting itself—its own cultural production—as what it is: the refuse of a modernity offering a “time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins” (CSP 228). “The fragility of the outer meaning” that poses the central problem for Watt (73), as he attempts to construct “reality” from language, has rightly been at the centre of most readings of the novel; however, the sheer material mass with which Watt compensates for this fragility has gone underappreciated. There is a footnote in the novel’s second part which is emblematic of the surplus economy, showing little difference in wording and meaning to the main “narrative,” thus begging the question why its inclusion was “prevented,” deemed of lesser value, or, inversely, whether the entire text is not made up of superfluous footnotes (82). Not only are Watt’s treatises devoid of “all meaning, even the most literal,” operating according to the novel’s famous rule “no symbols where none intended,” they are also described in material terms: “purely plastic content” (73; 254). Watt’s list passages are indeed “the material conditions in which these communications are made” (75). They are at once

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141 See Chapter Three.
“in a sense not,” in a sense “nothing,” and yet physically abundant (72): the process resembles the formless, destructive expenditure of excess energy that Bataille described. Whether it is the “multitude of looks” between the academics on Louit’s panel (175), or the mathematical symmetry of frogs’ croaking (137-138), or Mr Knott’s daily habits: “Here he moved, to and fro, from the door to the window, from the window to the door; from the window to the door, from the door to the window; from the fire to the bed, from the bed to the fire […]” (203). What value or meaning do the walls of text retain? Do we read these passages in their entirety? They are not even digressive. Yet there is effect and affect in this language. We are being swallowed up by a novel swallowing its words, consumed by a novel that is consuming itself. In the absence of content, the conflict between the wall of text and the purity of syntax momentarily offers us the same mechanical, habit-driven comfort Watt is after, only for the stupor to end together with the permutation. Ironically, these passages from the manuscript would be inspected for code by the British War Office on Beckett’s return to the United Kingdom in 1945. With Watt and his reader, the civil servants wade through the abundant emissions that “witness” Beckett’s wartime effort, but speak in fact to the expulsion of meaning into materiality. The novel’s squandering stands in diametrical opposition with the scarcity of resources and information at Beckett’s disposal.

Beckett’s use of cliché similarly informs the novel’s surplus economy, as linguistic habit and overused words mirror Watt’s daily disposal of slops (is there a more wasteful procedure than habit, so often all we have?). As Elizabeth Barry has shown, Beckett plays on the cliché’s tension between “profit and loss”: “In failing to completely hide its metaphorical origin, the labour in its origin, [the cliché] is devalued in the economy of the marketplace and felt to be ‘worked’ in a vulgar fashion” (9). The cliché can be returned to its literal meaning and, significantly, its material form, the level on which Beckett’s characters encounter and negotiate language. “A cliché is a dead piece of language,” in Christopher Ricks’ words, linguistic and cultural detritus, a description that is in itself a cliché (78). In Watt, such “dead pieces” not only abound, repeated ad nauseam, but are thematically associated with “filth”: Watt is drawn to Mrs Gorman by her “smell of fish,” she to him by his “bottle of stout” (142). Like so many things, Mrs Gorman’s reputation as “the fishwoman” is repeatedly pressed under our noses until we are quite sick of it (138). Or take Watt’s pleasure at Mr Graves’ Irish brogue: “Turd
and fart, he said, for third and fourth.” (143). Bodily imagery pervades figurative language and cliché, as Barry notes (25), and it is in this sense that Beckett’s novel as cultural artefact turns itself into a wasteful, abject emission. The tension between incorporation and expulsion is mirrored by that of solidity and fluidity, death and circulation, evident also in Watt’s obsession with distinguishing between stable, inherent qualities (of a room, for instance) and unfixed objects (furniture, pictures, Watt himself). It furthers Watt’s own abjection, the phobia and failure to introject what is included. Knott’s daily-changing physical appearance spells the height of habitual metamorphosis (209-210); the material fluidity of that incontinent taxonomy exemplifies the waste novel’s performance against any sense of finitude and authority.

The problem of historical production is thrown into relief as Watt wades through the material resources at its disposal: “witnessing” and representation become matters insuperably mediated through material discharge in the novel (as) oikos. What remains a suspicion for most of the novel is reinforced by the addenda: that this text might somehow be one mass expulsion of “content.” Consider the breaks in the text indicated by question marks (102), the metafictional interventions like “(Hiatus in MS)” (238), the fact that Watt cannot remember which events truly took place and in what form, or that Sam, the “narrator,” cannot remember who said what. It should in this context not be downplayed that during the novel’s composition, Beckett had at best scant information about his friends’ fate during the war, and that later the one conspicuous absence from the wide-ranging topics in his letters is his wartime experience (though that silence was hardly uncommon). Commenting to Sighle Kennedy regarding Watt’s composition: “All I can say to help you perhaps is that it was an escape operation from the horrors of that hateful time. If they crept in it was in spite of me” (LIV 460). If Beckett’s problematisation of witnessing and testimony in many post-war texts is read from the perspective of memory and post-Holocaust representation, Watt posits the problem of witnessing in terms of immediate production and consumption (even as Sam adds, belatedly, another frame of mediation).

The contingency of the novel’s abundant “logical” sequences, Watt realises himself, must stand in opposition to determining the unchangeable nature of the quasi-

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142 On Beckett’s dismantling of binaries, see Hill, Beckett’s Fiction 24ff.
143 15 May 1977.
transcendent Knott (eternal, ideal, god-like) and his total, totalitarian establishment, to which Watt hopes, impossibly, to testify. This puts Watt in a historical subject-position that attests to exclusion (not least of his voice, his testimony). Details are left out, misremembered, made up, “incorrect” (104). Witnessing and testifying become, in themselves, surplus, as possibilities are accumulated rather than reduced:

The better to witness, the worse to witness.
That with his need he might witness its absence.
That imperfect he might witness it ill. (203)

The relation between memory and event, and between person and system, is continually filtered through the access to and retention of material resources at a historical moment that operates precisely on extremely heightened material conditions. Watt’s impossible birth as a text is in this sense inseparable from the question, “what kind of witness was Watt” (ibid). The double nature of “waste” as lack and remainder, exclusion and excess, informs our sense of history in Beckett. “Waste” continually, habitually rewrites the cultural archive, insisting that testimonial recovery work begin with the expelled, abject overflow, not the “clean” historical narrative. What finally raises the stakes of Watt’s testimonial inadequacy—beyond questions of what has been misremembered or misspoken—is its incorporation of “waste” (textual, thematic, allegorical) as mass and as “collective experience,” or more precisely the

Watt himself has thoughts on the relation between his series and empirical evidence: “Was the picture a fixed and stable member of the edifice, like Mr Knott’s bed, for example, or was it simply a manner of paradigm, here to-day and gone to-morrow, a term in a series, like the series of Mr Knott’s dogs, or the series of Mr Knott’s men, or like the centuries that fall, from the pod of eternity?” (130-131).

Watt “made no secret […] that many things […] perhaps never happened at all, or quite differently” (126).

See David Houston Jones, *Samuel Beckett and Testimony* (2011), for an extended analysis of Watt and testimony. For Jones, “[Watt] asserts its archival function in giving a home to this great swath of matter, miscellaneous both in its combination of disparate elements and in their inclusion in the narrative: the bodily and textual incorporation of matter signals the housing of testimonial knowledge in the archive” (110).
absence of gathering that collectivity into experience. This is a wartime novel that, unlike subsequent texts, dramatizes the comings and goings of resources and information on a large scale, tied to the sense (however tenuously) that this is the level on which mass-scale events consume “waste.”

**Fizzle: Writing Leftovers**

Through its textual waste, the novel genre becomes embroiled with the teleology of prose, the abject materiality of words, and the affect of reading intensified in Beckett’s late fragments. Prose, in the words of M.P. Ginsburg and Lorri Nandrea, “has no internal principle of ending” (270). Why and how does the novel “[create] a limit beyond which there is no more prose to be read” (ibid.)? Beckett’s celebrated marriage of beginnings and endings, of birth and death, is inseparable from the knowledge that the prose cannot be run out, that (to paraphrase Bataille) death speaks to the continuity of existence only insofar as it proves continuity (*Eroticism* 21). In his later fragments, as Boxall puts it, “the prose begins in the knowledge that it cannot begin, and ends in the knowledge that it cannot end” (“Still” 40). The final punctum spells an impossible expression; writing to Avigdor Arikha: “I have the impression that I must avoid the word ‘End’” (LII 650). Whatever the rationalist/nominalist problems facing Watt, the wasteful word economy announces the “worsening” that defines the ongoing prose, because the formlessness of “waste” always entails its own excess. In the language of *Worstward Ho*: “Somehow on,” words “worsen blanks,” until the “[unworsenable] void” of the “nohow on” (CIWS 81; 100). Beckett’s “nothing” (the impossibility to determine meaning in the void) accumulates a mass of leftovers to which the autotelic container for human narrative and histoire (hi-story) succumbs.

*Watt* is Beckett’s first materialisation of a broken, discarded book, a conception he will fall back on in his own descriptions of works in progress. Sending Mania Péron manuscripts of separate entries of *Textes pour rien* (1950-1952) (for feedback on the French), Beckett writes: “Ci-joint également no. 8. Le suivant est en panne” (LII 276). Critics, not least after Deleuze’s essay “The Exhausted,” have highlighted

147 4 September 1956, regarding the title of *Fin de partie*.

148 Beckett to Mania Péron, 4 August 1951. “Please find also no. 8. The next one is out of order [has broken down].” My translation. Again, to Péron on September 18, 1951:
Beckett’s accounting for the material conditions of different media (novel, short prose, poetry, drama, radio, TV). Beckett’s decision to write in French must be seen in this light, not an overcoming, but at least a reprieve from, or indeed in, another language’s materiality and insufficiency. In Beckett’s words: “le besoin d’être mal armé” (LII 462). The use of different media and the increasing brevity and gaps in his later work speak to the deep sense of inadequacy, failure and uselessness intrinsic to expression. “Waste” grounds Beckett’s project not due to its symbolism of decay, but because it offers him a way to approach the paradox of expression materially: the “fidelity to failure,” making an “expressive act” of the impossible obligation to act and express, without “expressing” it (Disjecta 145). Significantly, the inadequacy of the material (language, matter, medium) needs to be continually performed, marking not a finality but a process. Enacting, without fixing, failure and obligation, impermanence and persistence, “waste” allows Beckett to wade through that “terrifyingly arbitrary materiality of the word surface” (LI 518), to put into crisis the boundary between side-product and finished art(efact).

In a way, any act of artistic creation necessarily produces waste, but Beckett makes “waste” the principal signifier of his composition. If Sebald’s Ferber passage signals trauma and melancholy, it nevertheless shares this significant quality with Beckett’s work: the necessity of, and dedication to, “waste” as creative process. For both, leftovers inscribe the “somehow on” of the impossible expressive act (CIWS 81). With

“Mes petits textes sont en panne. Le dernier, je n’ai pas le courage de le relire. Décidément je suis dégoûté d’écrire, comme moi j’écris” (LII 297).

149 Hill, Beckett’s Fiction 132; Albright, Aesthetics 1.

150 Into the “weakness” of French (Casanova 97); as an escape from a post-Joyce materiality of language (Katz, “Absent” 8); a Cartesian self-othering (Kenner, Samuel; a doubling-up of the language-texture (Hill, Beckett’s 42ff).

151 “[The] need to be ill-equipped”—the translation unable to capture the pun on the revolutionary poet Stéphane Mallarmé. Beckett to Hans Naumann, 17 February 1954.

152 There is of course a rich history of avant-garde “recuperations” of waste, from Dada, Cubism, Pop Art to subsequent schools, challenging aesthetic and bourgeois categories and values. See John Scanlan, On Garbage (2005).
his so-called “residua,” Beckett confronts the wasteful act of artistic expression head-on, while many titles themselves—*Texts for Nothing*, “Lessness,” *Fizzles*—leave little doubt that the *production of leftovers* signify artistic creation, that throwaway, wasted effort, a fart in the wind. The question that is raised: what is the value of this artistic practice and its end product (that which is left over)? Famously dismissive of his own work, Beckett might answer abruptly: “The nouvelles are uninteresting. But I think the Textes were worth publishing,” becomes, less than one month later: “The *Nouvelles et Textes pour Rien* are out, but not worth sending” (LII 572, 583). Gontarski states that “Beckett’s fragments are in fact no longer ‘completed’ stories but shards, aperçus of a continuous unfolding narrative, glimpses at a never to be complete being (narrative)” (CSP xxv). Like footnotes or endnotes whose purpose is neither purely informational nor referential, these texts seem to have been prematurely thrown out into the world: they “have never been properly born” (*Watt* 248). At the same time, once published, they are not unfinished parts of a bigger whole, they are not *from an abandoned work*, and, significantly, not simply final *expressions* of the inability to express. “Aesthetically,” Beckett writes in a letter, “the adventure is that of the failed form (no achieved statement of the inability to be)” (LII 596). Beckett’s thingly texts do not put the “nohow on” (as final expression) to bed (*CIWS* 100), nor do they in their fragmentation gesture to a complete, ideal whole. Instead, whatever residual narrative or historical meaning these texts retain refers back to their own, vestige-like intervention.


154 That the 226 copies of the limited edition of *Stirrings Still*, signed by Beckett and the illustrator Louis le Brocquy, were priced at £1,000 indicates the cultural value of Beckett’s texts accrued during his lifetime (van Hulle, *Making* 31).


156 Beckett to Alec Reid, 17 January 1956.
In 1976, Beckett publishes *Fizzles/Foirades*, eight diminutive prose pieces, some of which appeared alongside prints by Jasper Johns and Avigdor Arikha respectively. The French “foirer” means “to screw up.” Its archaic (and intended) signification is “to have the runs/diarrhoea.” “Fizzle” carries a comparable relation between feeble emanation and failure, a marriage of expression and excrement. Writes Connor: “[Beckett] has an extraordinarily highly-developed sense of the density or materiality of words. […] The eighteenth-century word ‘fizzle’ perfectly embodies the failed emanation: an utterance that is doubly unconsummated, first of all in that it comes from the wrong orifice and secondly in that it fails to leave the body, but cleaves to it in a dankly autistic atmosphere” (“Beckett’s Atmospheres” 61-62). Beckett famously described his work as “a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended), made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin. Hamm as stated, and Clov as stated, together as stated […] in such a place, and in such a world, that’s all I can manage, more than I could” (LII 82). In *Fizzles*, clearly the joke is intended. With regards to Hamm and Clov, Beckett’s literalism is suggestive: the play constantly dramatizes the end of meaning and history, yet the players (have to) remain. When it comes to *Fizzles*, however, we can ask: what sense of being “stated” remains at all? Who or what testifies among the vestiges?

*Fizzles* seem governed, from the start, by a radical expulsion of meaning and value, remaining as wasted things that cannot be recuperated or re-enter circulation. As such they can be viewed as a continuation of *Texts for Nothing*, themselves following *The Unnamable*. Beckett to Barney Rosset: “I’ll soon be assembling a queer little book for Lindon, three longish short stories, the very first writing in French and of which one at

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157 *Fizzles* was the American title (Grove); the British edition was called *For to End Yet Again and Other Fizzles*; the French, *Pour finir encore et autre foirades*.

158 Already in 1930, Beckett described his poems as “turds from my central lavatory” (LI 32). Beckett to George Reavey: “Geer [van Velde] has les yeux qui foirent dans la sciure, something wrong with the tear ducts” (LII 376; 12 May 1953).

159 The origins go all the way back to the late Middle English for “to break wind quietly” (*OED*). On the title, see also Beckett’s letter to Jasper Johns dated 7 February 1974 (LIV 359).

160 To Alan Schneider, 29 December 1957.
least seems to me all right, and the thirteen or fourteen very short abortive texts [TFN] that express the failure to implement the last words of L’Innommable: ‘il faut continuer, je vais continuer’” (LII 457). From the “little book of odds and ends” (LII 565), the “abortive” Textes pour rien, the form of the broken, discarded series is continued. Critics have instinctively commented on this continual, chronological frame of disintegration—what Hill called the “negative horizon of expectation” (Beckett’s Fiction 121)—which works through an ever more extreme evacuation of structure and form, of philosophical and cultural categories. Its diminishing movement is captured by the dominance of aporia, by stripped-down syntax, stripped-away punctuation (save the comma), which breaks up at the same time as it forces continuation, instigating a vertiginous feeling that does not pass by the voice in The Unnamable: “the comma will come where I’ll drown for good” (128). For three reasons, however, this temporal, continual logic attributed to Beckett’s “worsening” oeuvre is also unhelpful. First, Beckett’s struggle of finding forms for “expression” is anything but linear: extreme productivity during the 50s, the subsequent back and forth between different media, between prose and drama, languages (by 1954, he has already returned to writing partly in English). To Barbara Bray: “I am in acute crisis about my work (on the lines familiar to you by now) and have decided that I not merely can’t but won’t go on as I have been going more or less ever since the Textes pour Rien and must either get back to nothing again and the bottom of all the hills again like before Molloy or else call it a day” (LIII 184-185). Second, this logic implies a teleological movement toward final, artistic achievement, and by extension the sublimation of waste, which Beckett rejects. As Hill notes, Beckett’s late prose refers to a continual process of writing remainders: “there is no dialectic of the part and the whole to differentiate between the essential and the incidental, the substantial and the residual” (Beckett’s Fiction 144). Third, Beckett’s “waste” registers an oscillating, spectral temporality, rather than a linear one,

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161 11 February 1954. This failure is exacerbated in the English translation of L’Innommable, with perhaps Beckett’s most famous alteration: the addition of “I can’t go on,” inserted in-between “you must go on” [il faut continuer] and “I’ll go on” [je vais continuer] (U 134). In the second French edition (1971), Beckett translates that English addition back into French: “il faut continuer, je ne peux pas continuer, je vais continuer” (211).

162 To Thomas MacGreevy, 6 November 1955.

163 29 November 1958.
making its protest against history anything but ahistorical.\footnote{In addition, a chronology of lessening contributes to the pervasive but largely unconvincing metanarrative of Irish modernism in which Joyce occupies the maximal language position, and Beckett responds with antithetical minimalism.} Although Beckett’s negation of value and meaning is more radical than Sebald’s, we can see here their shared mode of working through leftover materiality as a means to engage with historical recovery (or absence thereof).

This last point bears more unpacking—although Chapter One already paved the way here. William Viney argues that the defining quality of waste is its spectral, plural times: “The temporality of waste is a condition of both an \textit{a priori} emptiness and a thing that has become empty; it is both a pre-existing desert and a space that was once but is no longer inhabited, a site of origin and end” (18-19). Viney highlights a “narrative exigency” (13) by calling for a “temporal poetics of waste,” which emphasises “the fundamental and rather ancient acts of temporal separation and narrative organization that allow us to speak of waste as a category of thing felt to be untimely, untethered from the time of individual and collective projects” (23). Despite his claims to universalism (dismissing constructivist approaches as limited to the death and afterlife of commodities), Viney’s vocabulary nevertheless recalls the historical materialisms of Benjamin, Kracauer, or Bloch, who all championed splintered or non-contemporaneous historical time to challenge the naturalising, mythical time of traditional historicity. Waste’s implicit universal time should not obscure the fact that it always carries—and, significantly, scatters—historical coordinates, that it always asks us to simultaneously look at the history (and future) of its production. This is the historical paradox that Beckett’s late “residua” incorporate; their “waste” economy is occupied with the radical evacuation of value while demanding we engage with a residual narrativity.

“Waste” becomes, for want of a better word, “the world” in many late works. Referring to \textit{Molloy} and \textit{How It Is}, Rachele Dini suggests that Beckett’s “radicalism” issues from idleness and the refusal of value, which is facilitated by “dwelling in waste” (70).\footnote{Dwelling describes for Dini not so much a phenomenological condition as the abstention (or resistance) from participation in value-systems and cycles of production.}
Steven Connor puts it in different terms when he talks of the “radical finitude” of Beckett’s “material imagination” (Beckett 7-8): not only the radical decomposition of the subject, but the radical non-transcendence, the stubborn persistence with small-letter being and world (and, we might add, body). “What counts is to be in the world, the posture is immaterial, so long as one is on earth,” the narrator of TFN 4 ponders, conscious of the consequences: “land him in that shit, who never stirred, who is none but me, all things considered” (CSP 115-116). To dwell in waste becomes the problem of expression (linguistic, artistic, historical) itself, “radicalism” the refusal to look at the world without foregrounding waste: “wordshit, bury me, avalanche” (CSP 137). Beckett’s mud-novel How It Is (1961/64), with its ubiquitous scatology, semenology, and incontinence, provides the most abject translation of this imperative: “when you shit it’s the mud that wipes” (29).

The reader is confronted by a total immersion in mud and shit through a syntax and semantics of waste; textual disintegration accompanies the ebb and flow of the limits between body and world, (non-)self and language. In the mud, the military-style survival kit—sack with tins, opener, cord—inscribe the novel’s internal market economy in terms of wartime scarcity. Retention and circulation, consumption and famine, expulsion and access. In this economy, as Dini notes, Pim is “waste” twice over (87): first, he is thingified, not-quite-human, and disposable; second, he is useless because he cannot move or be made to work, meaning his residual “humanity” obstructs even his tool-being. What strikes me as grounding the “waste” condition of the characters in How It Is even more than this decrepitude is the violence, torment and torture that pervade its world. This is not the place to get into the novel’s sado-masochism (or the inseparable desire for company), but the intimation is that the violence accompanying the desire for control or domination translates into waste as

Dini overstates Beckett’s “parody” of the logic of capitalist consumption somewhat (80).

166 Writes Paul Stewart: “The being as waste equation is most clearly marked in How It Is as a relation between the figures in the mud and fecal elimination. They are likened to ‘shit in the guts’ (108) within a world of mud that is ‘nothing more than all our shit […] billions of us crawling and shitting in their shit hugging like a treasure in their arms the wherewithal to crawl and shit a little more…’ (44)” (130).

167 See also Steven Matthews’ “Bodily Histories: Beckett and the Phenomenological Approach to the Other” 139ff.

168 See Jonathan Boulter, “We have our being in justice: Samuel Beckett’s How It Is.”
both its insuperable material antithesis (disorder, collapse) and its brutal, totalitarian jouissance. How It Is makes clear from the beginning that its language emerges from under layers and layers of historical waste: “abject abject ages each heroic seen from the next” (6). The meticulous, mathematical control over words, syntax and categories that Beckett himself exerts in the late “discarded” texts (“Lessness,” Worstward Ho, but also How It Is), retains its energy and aporias—that is to say, fails to unfold into meaning and determination—because the writing conditions answer, so to speak, to the anarchy, the formlessness of waste.

In Fizzles, the condition of “waste” turns perhaps most clearly to time (in line with the elegiac tone of other late texts like Company): expression becomes a matter of literal leftovers and remainders. Beckett’s persistent return to the voice as an external, expelled thing with material properties is significant: words become both ruin and refuge, the tension, as in How It Is, between the endlessly rehearsed positions of “barely audible” and “I say it as I hear it.” Note that Beckett’s Fizzles emerge through and in places, ambiguous, simultaneously personal and universal, perhaps bodily, but places nonetheless, inhabited by a plural voice, a third person, an “I” and/or an absent or flickering pronoun: “say I no more” (CSP 233). Compare the openings of some:

“Ruinstrewn land…” (232)
“Closed place…” (236)
“Old earth…” (238)
“Bright at last close of dark day the sun shines out at last and goes down…” (240)

“Fizzle 8: For to end yet again,” home to a sepulchral “skull alone in a dark place” (243), ends the effervescent sequence with the surrounding, introjected environment in

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169 This dynamic was clearer in early drafts of Comment C’est, as Emilie Morin notes: “many deleted paragraphs revolve around food rations, marches, corpses and the birth and death of empires” (233). These drafts more strongly echo the Algerian War.

170 Beckett described that tension himself on the back cover of the Signature editions of “Lessness”: “Ruin, exposure, wilderness, mindlessness, past and future denied and affirmed, are the categories, formally distinguishable, through which the writing winds, first in one disorder, then in another” (qtd. in Ackerley and Gontarski 318).
mind: “Through it who knows yet another end beneath a cloudless sky same dark it earth and sky of a last end if ever there had to be another absolutely had to be” (246). Neither body nor voice can here be thought without place, nor the disintegration of the self, which itself relies, as David Addyman suggests, on the “indeterminacy and bottomlessness of place [which] imposes an order that cannot be integrated;” the experience is that of an “endless displacement taking place” (125). The phenomenological and sensory insecurity—vision and hearing especially—follows spatio-temporal insecurity. The discharged, “fizzling” material condition of the text grounds this instability of time and place.

Though _Fizzles_ by their title suggest an abject, bodily emission, their sense of place describes vestiges or ruination (different from the mud of _How It Is_, somewhat closer to Winnie’s mound): material traces of something that has been and remains residually. In this way, they set out historical narrativity (“narrative exigency” to use Viney’s phrase) as their unresolved problem. Time is disjointed, but not “untethered” from personal or collective histories. The narrative time of _Fizzles_ lies in the simultaneous pastness and futurity of an absent, or prior, narrativity. The pattern or mechanism of a narrative has taken place, at some point somewhere, to order and exclude: “The ditch is old” (CSP 236). The narrators already “gave up” (232, 234), their stories filled with “yets” and “stills” and “agains.” From “Fizzle 8”:

> For to end yet again skull alone in the dark the void no neck no face just the box last place of all in the dark void. Place of remains where once used to gleam in the dark on and off used to glimmer a remain. Remains of the days of the light of day never light so faint as theirs so pale. […] Grey cloudless sky grey sand as far as eye can see long desert to begin. Sand pale as dust ah but dust indeed deep to engulf the haughtiest monuments which too it once was here and there. There in the end same grey invisible to any other eye stark erect amidst his ruins the expelled. (243)

171 See also Ulrika Maude’s _Beckett, Technology and the Body_; and _Beckett and Phenomenology_, edited by Maude and Feldman (both 2009).

172 Leslie Hill puts it nicely: “[the] text is both a bodily fragment and an insubstantial trace, a mark and a self-eclipsing performance” (_Beckett’s Fiction_ 145).
A plurality of times is layered here. The personal, solipsistic time of “skull alone.” Sand, dust, desert, ruins: entropic time. The temporality of sequence (the “yet again” of the different “Fizzles”) and continual endings: catastrophic time, at once cyclical and evacuated. The historical time of “haughtiest monument” (civilisation? its calamities? the body?) and the static, arrested time of the expelled body. Narrative time: present tense, infinitive, present participle, past tense. Private author-time: the ageing, elegiac tone, last-gasp utterances. The syntactical relationship between clauses crumbles. What remains are the remains of light, day, sand, dust, ruins, the things expelled. Nevertheless, skull and eye persist, the “boîte crânienne” that forms the bedrock of Western philosophical apprehension of the object (Disjecta 126). Beckett’s disintegration of subjecthood does not come to the benefit of an immobile, pure object. Instead, the waste-text describes the very dispersion of the negative positions of object-encounters, the negation of the negating-object and of the negating-subject as categories. The voice dwells in ruins, in vestiges, and makes a dwelling out of ruinous, expelled language. Whatever iteration or permutation of the language pattern occurs is inscribed in the “same grey” of the material void.

Laura Salisbury has shown how the “skullscapes” of Beckett’s late prose relate brain (synapses) and “abjectly fecund material voids” (215): the perforating head wounds mean that language oozes out, viscously and inconsistently, prohibiting the retreat into solipsism. What consolidates Salisbury’s reading of Beckett’s language as abject materiality is its grounding in the historical and medical tied to his personal concerns, his fixation over his abscesses for instance. Significantly, Salisbury shows how historical knowledge about the impact of head trauma on speech is predicated on recent wars and soldier patients (218-223): Beckett’s explorations of material voids do not exist in a historical void. My perspective on “waste”—rather than the decayed “subject”—produces an analogous conclusion. Historical time, especially the reifying time of the archive, oozes into the aporetic negation of Fizzles: “little by little his history takes shape” (227); “I’ll put faces in his head, names, places, churn them all up together, all.  

The publication history of Fizzles shows a for Beckett uncharacteristic indifference towards arrangement, as the different editions (Grove Press; Editions de Minuit; Calder; all 1976) each present the eight pieces in a different order. There is an implication that the splintered, chaotic times of the texts carry over into their overall sequentiality.
he needs to end” (233). Similarly in *How It Is*: “others knowing nothing of my beginnings save what they could glean by hearsay or in public records” (8); “so many words ill-given ill-received ill-rendered to the mud” (118). And yet words are recorded still. The externalised death-time of the historical archive is dispersed in the memory- and word-waste, but not overcome. The unusually overt *Rough for Theatre II* has comparable historical bones: the institutional directive is to “sum up” C (that is to say, finish him off), but A knows that to “accumulate documents is not enough,” that the “bits and scraps” of testimonies will not provide the personal image with meaning (*Plays* 82-86). The official archival machinery files and rationalises the person’s “exhibits” within a total, universal system regardless of specific, irreducible content (ibid. 80). Like the painter in *Endgame*, Benjamin’s angel of history, but also the narrator of “Fizzle 8,” C “remembered only the calamities” of the “national epos” (ibid.). Only the remnants remain.

Beckett’s late, residual texts negate our sense of history only to find that the material void preserves a residual performance of historical, narrative time. Peter Boxall sees the late prose as opening the “fields of historical possibility,” writing, “[the] more powerfully the texts insist on sameness, on solitude, on the boundedness of late being, the more insistently they discover difference, multiplicity, the stirring of the new” (“Still” 46). What Beckett shows with *Fizzles* is that the more his boxed skulls protest against history, against its production, the more the “ruinstrewn land” throws about its “phantoms” (CSP 233). Because after all, there is “afar a bird;” after all, “it was he had a life” (232). From without appear, too, Jasper Johns’ etchings, abstract expressions of anarchic, elemental patterns, reliefs without individuation oscillating between the lithic and the organic. And suspended remain Avigdor Arikha’s strikingly figurative objects—coat, ruin, cane, stones, grass—engaging the text, as Lois Oppenheim writes, in a “discreet codetermination of the hidden and revealed” (175). From Beckett’s abortive, disintegrated texts, these ossified abject noises, there issues neither a transcendental *objet d’art*, nor a distinct historical object; instead material vestiges are what remains to be read, a dwelling of last words at dusk.

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174 For more on Johns and Arikha’s contributions to *Fizzles*, see Oppenheim 174-180.
Conclusion

The revelatory moments of truth, or the “new” ethical ways of relational being, offered by respective “waste theories” are foreign to Beckett’s incorporation of waste (Watt) and dwelling-in-waste (Fizzles). But this does not mean the conception of waste stays apolitical or ahistorical. In Sam’s words, “to elicit something from nothing requires a certain skill” (Watt 77). Watt works through resources, consumption, and squandering in relation to mass production—textual, historical, cultural—and mass absence (scarcity, restriction, meaning), adopting a unique, transitional position within Beckett’s oeuvre. The novel’s preoccupation with a low-class, “disposable” population satirises Catholic pieties, but it also asks the question as to the status of “human waste” in biopolitical terms, relating to Irish nation-building and the liquidation of entire demographics during wartime. Above all, the surplus economy of Watt paves the way for thinking cultural production in terms of “waste,” as the later prose texts trace the limits of historical expression in their spectral, thingly forms. The problem of historical recovery and value most radically “materialises” in these leftover texts.

Beckett’s most compressed form of the material void that nonetheless stakes its claim to the historical is the epigrammatic play Breath (1967), which “means” through its tension of being but an ephemeral “lid eye bid/ byebye” while at the same time overflowing with matter (CIWS xvii). Breath is a micro-garbology: “Faint light on stage littered with miscellaneous rubbish. Hold about five seconds” (Plays 211). It acquires a synecdochical appeal within Beckett’s corpus: “fundamental sound” (breath and cry), orally drawing in and drawn in by nondescript refuse. The contraction and suspension into materiality of Breath perhaps make it Beckett’s most typical thing: incorporated and expelled, belonging to neither subject nor object, interior or exterior, this material void characterises, but does not sublimate, at once personal failure and historical catastrophe.
Chapter Three. “Nightmare Thingness”: the Politics of Matter in Beckett’s Stories

“A table means does it not my dear it means a whole steadiness. Is it likely that a change.”

Gertrude Stein, Tender Buttons (28)

Introduction

In his 2004 book of the same name, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman coined the expression “wasted lives” to describe the exclusion, reification and disposability of “excess” human lives within a globalised, “liquid” modernity. National borders, economic markets, and ideological borders are sanitized in this narrative by the regulators of the dominant political systems, meaning the exclusion, the disposal of “human waste”: “Refugees, the displaced, asylum seekers, migrants, the sans papiers, they are the waste of globalization” (Wasted 58). Waste traces modern biopolitical systems of inclusion and exclusion, and the official “de-legitimation of the other,” of everything that cannot be assimilated (Bauman, Modernity 8). In central Europe, the Calais Jungle provided the most visible manifestation in recent years. Cross-border itineraries of waste become traceable: the flight lines of refugees—the flotsam and jetsam of global problems with local consequences—or the excess devastation as the “core” recycles (i.e. dumps) its toxic waste in the “peripheral” countries.175 Such world political actualities related to “waste” are not as remote from Beckett’s environments as we might suppose. Abjection, the question of value and rights, recuperation and recycling, poverty, dehumanisation, and social commentary all come together for instance when Molloy, like a thing discarded, loiters on the beach, an explicit fringe zone: “Some came near, to see what it was, whether it wasn’t something of value from a wreck, washed up by the storm. But when they saw the jetsam was alive, decently if wretchedly clothed, they turned away” (75). In Bauman’s essay, waste remains largely codified in a symbolic register pertaining to the de-humanisation of the expelled people in late capitalist modernity. By comparison, in the previous chapter, we saw the relation between Beckett’s textual waste and material types of waste: excrement and refuse, but

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175 “Toxic waste will always run downhill on an economic path of least resistance” (Puckett qtd. in Bauman, Wasted 59).
also mud and vestiges. In *Fizzles*, human language, voice, the body are buried in sheer, leftover materiality. And if Beckett’s waste has allegorical potential, it proves stubbornly material, refusing to be sublimated. Bauman’s essay raises another conception of “waste” that is absolutely crucial to Beckett: the expelled person, and, by extension, the expulsion of the notion of the “human.”

The explicit *expulsion* and subsequent persistence of Beckett’s paperless tramps as “waste” products is a central feature especially of the immediate post-war work, going well beyond Murphy’s solipsistic crisis or moments of Swiftian satire: “‘E don’t look rightly human to me,’ said the chandler’s eldest waste product, ‘not rightly’” (*Murphy* 47). “Waste” in this conception takes on strongly geo-political and biopolitical tones: what value is put on human lives, on (expendable) human labour? What are the ideological borders that exclude human lives or produce human leftovers? The political force of “waste”—its politics of disgust and exclusion—frames Beckett’s creatures and their confrontation with something called “life,” *bios* as historical and particular. The creaturely and naked forms of Beckett’s characters, especially, resonate with Agamben’s notion of “bare life” in *Homo Sacer* (not least the exemplary Lucky). Like Foucault, Agamben locates the absolute manifestation of biopolitical topographies in the Nazi state and the death camps, which has provided the theoretical frameworks for critics to relate Beckett’s aesthetics and his representation of “life” and personhood to the mass extermination and official terminology of the Nazi and Vichy regimes. Andrew Gibson, for example, suggests that Lucky’s outburst “is a defence of indignant forms of humanity” in the face of Vichy ideology (105). Beckett’s German Diaries (1936-37) show that his acute awareness of the Nazi machine in motion since 1933 included taking notes on the purging and internment of so-called “Gemeinschaftsunfähigen, those unfit for society,” such as beggars and prostitutes (ibid. 79). Beckett’s “wastelands” are imbued with powerful biopolitical particulars, implied in Lucky’s phrase “élimination des déchets” (ibid. 105). Like the authority of history itself, the notion of the human is in Beckett literally rubbished and “deposited” after the Second World War. That this problem of human leftovers goes to the heart of Beckett’s thinking about aesthetics is clear in the antiquated humanism of the art critic in his van Velde essay: “Avec ‘ce n’est pas humain,’ tout est dit. A la poubelle” (*Disjecta* 131). While

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176 That Beckett was disturbed by state official narratives and propaganda is by now well-established (whether Irish nationalist, Nazi/fascist, or Stalinist).
Beckett, like Baudelaire or Céline, “takes the side of the social misfits” (Benjamin, GS 5.1: 54), his weakness for the discarded life, the human déchet, is not a sentimental case of giving a voice to the voiceless. Complicity, passivity, laughter, violence, and misogyny are among Beckett’s tramp’s chief characteristics: “thoughts came to me of cruelty, the kind that smiles” (CSP 63).

In the following chapter, I look at Beckett’s tramp both as waste and as thing, concentrating on Beckett’s four nouvelles, which come at the immediate post-war moment: the start of what he called his “frenzy of writing” or “siege in the room” (1946-1951) (Knowlson 358), and the very moment where the human déchet has taken on a completely extreme world-historical meaning. The stories inaugurate a major turning point in his oeuvre: the transition from English to French as well as the shift to the first person narrator. If Watt announces the textual waste matter of later prose works like Fizzles, these stories provide the first committed formulation of the expulsion of the human as body and idea(l), expelling Watt’s “loss of species” into the world (Watt 85). We might think of this as an expulsion into materiality, into an out-of-joint material world, which comprises the indeterminate, phantasmagorical quality of thingness: “Into what nightmare thingness am I fallen?” (CSP 69).

The chapter engages with the recent political turn in Beckett studies, drawing on the contextual work done by critics like Emilie Morin (her recent, extremely thorough Beckett’s Political Imagination [2017]) and Seán Kennedy. With reference to Beckett’s post-war oeuvre, the political discussion stresses the impossibility to index stable political and historical referents. It is worth reminding that the notion of a “political

177 My translation. [schlägt sich auf die Seite der Asozialen]
Beckett” in itself is not new, even if the emphasis has become firmer. Adorno’s *Endgame* essay (1973) constitutes a kind of foundation, though, as Morin reminds us, far-left thinkers from Sartre, to Ernst Fischer and Ernst Bloch already saw Beckett’s work not as straightforwardly absurdist, but as engaging with the politics of unfreedom (9-10). The question that remains pertinent is not so much: can we determine the politics of Beckett’s texts? But rather: how do his texts—especially his post-war work—pose politics as a *problem*? We can understand the problem of politics in Beckett as the impossibility itself of the recovery of a political position, even from those texts that raise historical particulars of extreme violence on a more explicit level. Thus, while there is little sense of a determinable political position, or positive historical meaning, certain contexts are inseparable from the oppressive orders of *Molloy* or *Endgame*, or the torture scenes in *What Where* or *Rough for Radio II*: the terrors of the Second World War and its aftermath, the massacres and torture practices of the Algerian War (the reports of which very much on Beckett’s radar) as France declared a state of emergency in 1955, and not least the Cold War climate. The historical indetermination of Beckett’s work is closely connected to the difficulty of extracting an ethical position from it: an indetermination that leads Shane Weller to propose that we should instead think of an anethical space, a space in-between the ethical and unethical in which the problem survives.

I suggest in this chapter that the spectral quality of his world—non-contemporaneous, translated, discarded—allows for a reframing through and of a political material-oriented interpretation. I start by looking the narrator’s “expulsion” into a “nightmare thingness” as it announces the *The Unnamable* and TFN, while taking into account the political and historical pointers, relating to imperial hangovers, warfare, the welfare and police state. The mystifying “naturalising” character of social relations is at work in the *nouvelles*, but the failed double-expulsion of human and thing from this order, which we find as the basis of the “plot,” means that we can re-invest in the various ideological and physical borders of the immediate post-war moment. The inconsistency of these borders, I argue, emerges from the stories’ out-of-joint, or spectral, environments. Recall Santner’s take on Sebald’s “spectral materialism”: “a capacity to register the persistence of past suffering that has in some sense been absorbed into the substance

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179 See Morin 191ff.
of lived space, into the “setting” of human history” (57). In *Irish Cosmopolitanism*, Nels Pearson sees “the generative locus of Irish expatriate modernism,” including Beckett, as “*the border itself, the vexed and protracted threshold of colonial departure*” (8). Pearson understands Ireland as an unresolved origin for Beckett and fellow expatriates, which formulates an irreconcilable tension with their world modernism. We can similarly locate Sebald’s complex relationship with Germany and German heritage in the ghostliness of his prose, inseparable from a sense of *unheimlich*, unresolved origin that survives as material trace. The irrational return of the repressed, the traces of history, these certainly play a significant part in Beckett’s object worlds. But we are also asked to recalibrate, fundamentally, our conception of “materiality” from a historical perspective. In Jameson’s words (regarding Derrida’s book on Marx), “the central problem of the constellation called spectrality is that of matter itself, or better still, of materialism as such” (“Marx’s” 35). Spectrality is “what makes the present waver,” much more than just “a temporary weakness in our grip on things” (the fleeting moment in which we can perceive *thingness* according to Brown) (ibid. 38). In the *nouvelles*, fissures open up on the level of geo-political borders and nation-states, of literary aesthetics, and of language (polysemy, slippages, translation). The narrated world appears caught between the mis- and re-translation of Beckett’s German letter, between the “terrible materiality” and “terrifyingly arbitrary materiality” of the word surface (*Disjecta* 172; LJ 518). This view of spectrality is an opportunity to insist further on the significance of language conceptions, of polysemy and translation, for any “new materialist” framework in literature, as Beckett’s environments oscillate not only between the versions, but within each version itself.

**Demented Particulars: What Remains of History**

“Nightmare thingness” offers another Beckettian way of calling his environments “ill seen, ill said,” or “wors(t)ened,” or “lessened.” Rather than distancing itself from prior readings of Beckett’s out-of-joint world, this chapter focuses on material particulars in relation to historical context and language to tease out the “value” of Beckett as a late

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181 Indeed, in an early description of his *Emigrants* manuscript, Sebald refers to the phantom limb (or phantom pain) of memory, “*Phantomschmerz der Erinnerung*,” that defines the exiled person’s position. Adelwarth, M6, Manuskript Ausgewanderten, DLA (Deutsches Literatur Archiv, Marbach).
modernist for a material-oriented literary approach more widely. It is worth briefly reframing the problem of a “historical Beckett.” History exists in Beckett’s post-war work as residue, as ruins and rubble. The mass destruction and extreme trauma that defined the first half of the twentieth century and the very expression of modernity itself persist in Beckett via negativa, what Simon Critchley calls Beckett’s “syntax of weakness” (23). In a first instance, then, talking of Beckett’s spectral material worlds issues from a long lineage of ideas on Beckett and the ethics and aesthetics of the negative, or “nothing,” of history after the Holocaust.\(^{182}\) The question as to the material remainder, the thing forsaken, needs to build on the emphasis on possibility or value, minimal or marginal as it may be, that is nonetheless part of Beckett’s art. Beckett’s end of history (most evident in \textit{Endgame}), while resembling nothing like Fukuyama’s, does not eschew new beginnings.

The apparent aporia of simultaneous materiality and spectrality that this chapter describes opens up the possibility of the political that Beckett’s work only purports to deny. Commenting on Derrida’s controversial text on Marx, Jameson argues that “spectrality is […] the form of the most radical politicization and that, far from being locked into the repetitions of neurosis and obsession, it is energetically future-oriented and active” (“Marx’s” 60). Jameson’s utopianism might be extravagant for a reading of Beckett, but it nevertheless echoes with the residual, non-synchronous possibility that we may locate in Beckett’s aporia of negation and expression. Andrew Gibson has remarked that the “universal muck” (or the cruder French “merde universelle” [“The End” 98; 109]) “is never known otherwise than in and as mucky particularities” and “is never fixed and final” (16). This particularism—“what remains bits and scraps” (\textit{How It Is} 3)—is what makes the extraction of a universal or ideal philosophy of history impossible in Beckett. On the one hand, the attention to particular things and matter helps mine a sense of politics and history from Beckett’s worlds (what has allowed critics to make a strong case for an “Irish Beckett,” for instance). On the other, such particularism pinpoints precisely to the difficulty that new materialist reading strategies encounter: how to relate the \textit{minutiae}, the discreet objects and the matters of everyday

\[^{182}\]See, for instance, Simon Critchley’s \textit{Very Little… Almost Nothing} (1997); Shane Weller’s \textit{A Taste for the Negative} (2005); \textit{Beckett, Joyce and the Art of the Negative}, edited by Colleen Jaurretche (2005); \textit{Beckett and Nothing}, edited by Daniela Caselli (2010); Steven Connor’s \textit{Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination} (2014).
life, to the *systemic*, the large scale, how to read the *local* with and against the *global*. In an entry to the German Diaries, Beckett laments the reifying animistic and novelistic tendencies of rationalist historiography, “the anthropomorphisation of the inhuman necessities that provoke the chaos.” What he wants from a historical work “is the straws, flotsam, etc., names, dates, births & deaths, because that is all I can know” (qtd. in Nixon, *German Diaries* 177-178). And as straws, flotsam and jetsam, history intrudes in his work, meaning that *if it remains minute, it remains neither local nor stable*. The materialist epistemology that Beckett suggests in his diary is precisely that which does not allow a coherent picture or order to form in his work.

The way Beckett’s particularism defines the material void, the relationship between “nothing” and expression, offers a major bridge for following the trajectory from material index to historical “recovery” in Sebald. The uncanny sense that overcomes Austerlitz when he regards the iron-cast column on the station platform (221), that it may in some way know more about what happened, even in some way remember him, this sense also survives in Beckett’s stories, if only in the form of a negative. Beckett famously told his biographer James Knowlson that there was nothing ambiguous about the ending of *Catastrophe* (1982), when the Protagonist (the “human” catastrophe) raises his head and fixes the audience: “He’s saying: you bastards, you haven’t finished me yet!” (Knowlson 680). The allegorical reading—a stubborn resistance of the human-qua-thing against the dehumanising system of oppression—could for Beckett not be clearer. While *Catastrophe* is often cited as somewhat of an exception, not least because it was specifically written for a festival protesting Václav Havel’s imprisonment, it is also exemplary for the Beckettian “political” aporia: the sustained “expression” of allegorical potential standing in inadequate relation to the refusal of positive meaning and value. Far from signalling a progressive de-politicisation and solipsism, Beckett’s post-war stories announce the continual reformulation of the historical, social and political as a problem of representation, a politics of negation that the trilogy will exacerbate. To talk of Beckett’s “materialism” would be an injustice, but, as we will see, the material conditions of the tramp and his environment provide Beckett with the worldly concerns underlying his language. The concern with value, currency and property, manifest in the tramps’ material dispossession, becomes inextricable from the impossible property of language, which describes not so much a neutralising universal

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183 See Knowlson 677ff.
condition, but a re-politicisation of the stakes, of appropriation and “de-propriation” (Derrida, Monolingualism 64). The contingent condition that defines the narrators’ “nightmare thingness” is an “absolute impossibility of all purchase” extending to all manners of historical recuperation and recovery (CSP 54).

**Beckett’s Expelled**

Beckett’s stories pose material dispossession, expulsion and rejection as a precondition. The name is in the title: “The Expelled.” The story, it seems, can only begin as each narrator is “ejected” from his house or shelter (CSP 48), already far removed from the dominant marketplace and economy. In the case of “The Calmative,” the narrator has already died, his final expulsion seemingly actualised, but nevertheless compromised by his storytelling, reminiscent of the Baudelairean spleen: “I’m too frightened this evening to listen to myself rot, waiting for the great red lapses of the heart, the tearings at the caecal walls, and for the slow killings to finish in my skull, the assaults on unshakable pillars, the fornications with corpses” (61). He is the narrator closest to the TFN, can no longer tell the difference between den and ruins, and think of little other reason for stirring than having been thrown out. The expulsion is not the “drama” but the setting. The nouvelles still represent the conditions and violence of the expulsion itself, if by way of scrappy memory, while the later works proceed by fait accompli. This progression is especially noticeable in the way a text like the first TFN revisits the stories: “Someone said, You can’t stay here. [...] I could have stayed in my den, snug and dry, I couldn’t. My den, I’ll describe it, no, I can’t” (CSP 100).

Nevertheless, Beckett’s after-the-factness also already pervades the stories. Early into “The Expelled,” when the narrator is still pondering his forced removal, he recounts how the occupants of the house start cleaning after they threw him out: “A thorough cleansing [nettoyage] was in full swing. In a few hours they would close the window, draw the curtains and spray the whole place in disinfectant [pulvérisation au formol]” (49). The racial and anti-Semitic undertones of the English “cleansing” can be powerful for a contemporary reader: while Beckett was extremely sensitive to the dehumanising

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184 TNF I and “The Calmative” are further connected by the narrators’ recollection of their fathers reading them the story of “Joe Breem, or Breen, the son of a lighthouse-keeper” (CSP 103; 64).
discourses of racial purity and Nazi propaganda, the French “nettoyage” neutralises the specificity of that interpretation. The thorough cleaning with formalin (as the French specifies) of his former den also designates the tramp’s status as vermin. Kafka’s ungeheures Ungeziefer springs to mind, with Gregor similarly thrown out into a “nightmare thingness.” Beckett, his letters show, already knew Kafka’s work well, and while it adds little to suggest a direct reference, one can see Beckett’s environments as a world in which the metamorphosis has already occurred, in which the surprise held by the violent transformation has been neutralised by historical recurrence.

Just as much a fait accompli is the protagonists’ socioeconomic expulsion. They have no labour power to sell anymore. This sets them apart from earlier troublemakers: Murphy embodies multiple conflicting stereotypes of the Irish migrant labourer in London (Gibson 70-71), while Watt’s self-witnessing relies on his employment in the Knott Big House. In “First Love” and “The End,” the narrator offers his services (and inheritance) to be allowed to stay on, but is rejected. In a famous passage, a communist orator (“a nice face, a little on the red side”) identifies the narrator of “The End” as an exhibit for the system’s oppression and dehumanising processes: “Look at this down and out […] this leftover. If he doesn’t go down on all fours, it is for fear of being impounded. Old, lousy, rotten, ripe for the muckheap” (CSP 94-95). For the orator, with his misaligned Marxist compass, the beggar is not even exploitable labour power in reserve, but a doomed member of the Lumpenproletariat, those vagrants, small-time delinquents and prostitutes populating Beckett’s world.

This ersatz communist would not, as David Weisberg points out, have gone unnoticed by Beckett’s peers in Paris after the war (60), while the taking of party-political positions informs Beckett’s aesthetic only insofar as he mocks and rejects state-related ideological and moral codes. “The more the narrator’s social degradation is presented, mockingly, from a leftist perspective,” writes Weisberg, “the more the narrator mimics the middle class’s aversion to a political interpretation of poverty” (ibid.). The passage dramatizes the moral hypocrisy of the communist soapbox, as Beckett would have perceived it in France at the time, the kind of “committed” Marxism that shows no interest in representing the poorest, most destitute strata of society and those who do not share its Marxist ideals and revolutionary aims. It became clear to many at the time, Beckett

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185 See LII 22.
186 Pato Marx: “Verkommene, Verlumpte, Arbeitsunfähige” (Kapital 673).
included, that the French Communist Party did not represent the proletariat’s interests, but towed the Soviet party line, not least on Stalin’s non-aggression pact with the Nazis, and turned a blind eye to the regime’s violent totalitarianism.\(^{187}\)

Meanwhile, the reifying effects of an economy based on exchange value are driven to an extreme in the “snatches” that the narrator catches from the orator’s speech:

“Union … brothers … Marx … capital … bread and butter … love. It was all Greek to me” (CSP 94). The orator’s discourse is parsed into ideologemes that the narrator categorises under the rubric of unintelligibility. The unconditional exchangeability that equates these ideologemes (evoking the absoluteness of money-universal), unfolds into their meaninglessness. This is especially true for the English in which the narrator’s verdict—“It was all Greek to me”—emphasises the alien and foreign(-language) quality of the discourse. By comparison, the French, instead of “bread and butter,” reads “bifteck” (102), as in “gagner son bifteck”: the colloquialism for “bringing home the bacon” crosses back from the French into English (bifteck-beefsteak), while carrying a playful connotation of working class labour. The narrator’s thingification as the system of production’s negative surplus is hyperbolised in this encounter: “this living corpse,” this “crucified bastard,” is no longer “in circulation,” even for the communist politician (94-95). Molloy, Malone, Didi and Gogo await. Which means that the negation of value also carries with it exchangeability, at once pure and interrupted. Even if we shy away from cross-textual arguments on his oeuvre, Beckett’s naming of noms propres collides and colludes with the impression that they are permutations and exacerbations of the same—the same unspeakable. To one side, the impression of a progressive worsening of the same “I”, “not I,” or “he/she,” of “M”s and “M”s turned upside down “W”s, and to the other, the deceit of a hidden coherence, an autotelic body of work, a subject to be resolved. Insofar as his tramps are treated as nonhumans and have been expelled from participation in human commerce, they have lost their currency, their ability to offer something in exchange. Insofar as they are utterly expendable, they are also utterly exchangeable. This paradox describes their marginal position as both within and without

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\(^{187}\) See Uhlmann: “[The PCF] condemned the war France had entered against Germany as a bourgeois war which had nothing to do with the interests of its constituent, the worker. The PCF did not join the Resistance against Nazi occupation until Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in 1941” (103-104). See also Jackie Blackman’s “Post-war Beckett: Resistance, Commitment or Communist Krap?”
the social economy, exemplified by the fact that the narrator conceives of begging as a job—though he “did not work every day” (95).

In fact, he holds, at different points, two jobs: as beggar and as assistant to the cave dweller selling sea-minerals and vegetation. The beggar occupation has of course long been criminalised, which does not stop the narrator from taking it seriously: “I had perfected my board. It now consisted of two boards hinged together, which enabled me, when my work was done, to fold it and carry it under my arm. […] I had practically no expenses. I even managed to put a little aside, for my last days” (94-95). It is as beggar that he is confronted by the Marxist orator, who insists to his audience that their “charity” to beggars “is a crime, an incentive to slavery, stultification and organized murder” (94). Political ideology even in the name of the dispossessed supersedes in Beckett’s satire the tolerance for the dispossessed creature, articulating disgust instead. The second occupation keeps the narrator at the peripheries of the marketplace in the same way it keeps him at the peripheries of the human: in a cave, by the shore, following the calling of the mineral-state (and announcing Molloy’s mineral-like negotiation of the shorelines). Even for these leftover creatures “there is no outside to the enchantment of reification” (Boscagli 46), just as Murphy’s attempt to exist in his “little world,” apart from the “big world,” can only ever remain an attempt (Murphy 107). The socio-economic sphere rings, residually, against the most elegiac backdrops: “I saw the mountain, impassible, cavernous, secret, where from morning to night I’d hear nothing but the wind, the curlews, the clink of distant silver of the stone-cutters’ hammers” (CSP 44).

The tramps’ existence as “wasted life” indicates this negative incorporation, as Beckett’s allegorises the “useless” underclass (rejected not least via the dominant (Stalinist) version of Communism at the time). What the bifsteck-episode implies is a shunning of an environment based on utilitarian principles—according to which things fall either into use-value (“natural” relationship to things) or exchange-value (“unnatural”). Beckett’s leftover things regularly fall outside this limited understanding of socio-economic value, as possessions, like the hat or greatcoat, retain

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188 See also Malone Dies: “The hammers of the stone-cutters ring all day like bells” (117).
189 The Marxist constructivist view is often maligned for placing all man-made things within this paradigm.
residual, volatile use, while in the long run they break or become ill-fitting or, like the
knife-rest, baffle their handler. Often there is an anthropomorphic agency projected
onto their use-value: “The bicycle is a great good. But it can turn nasty, if ill employed”
(M&C 58). Or consider Molloy’s kettle logic as it breaks with a normative conception
of “use”: “I left her my bicycle which I had taken a dislike to, suspecting it to be the
vehicle of some malignant agency and perhaps the cause of my recent misfortunes. But
all the same I would have taken it with me if I had known where it was and that it was
in running order” (Molloy 59). Rather than relegating the tramp and his things to a
position divorced from the order of production, their incorporated negativity point to
principles within it beyond use and exchange. Those of “unproductive loss and
expenditure” for example, as described by Mauss and Bataille: earlier, irrational forms
of object-relations that still find their way into the dominant order today. Marx’s idea
of pure use-value, which, as often noted, never existed even in the most primitive
societies, is far removed from the de-commodified object in Beckett. One can compare
the tramp’s dismissal of the orator’s utilitarian snatches to Baudelaire’s hatred of the
“repugnant usefulness” that the commodity fetish is said to mask (Agamben, Stanzas
49), just as Beckett’s sympathy for the Lampenproletariat recalls Baudelaire’s poetic
identification with vagrants and prostitutes. Both Beckett and Baudelaire liked to
pursue the logic of the commodity to its extreme, a gesture which, for Benjamin,
reveals its fetishistic, artificial nature (GS 5.1: 51). However, only Baudelaire sought to
restore the object’s truth. In Beckett, the poet’s gaze does not survive to articulate the
distance of the thing, “shorn of all its accidents” (MD 83); instead, the prosthetic
proximity leaves both “human” creature stuck in the same mud as the bicycle.

Beckett’s fondness for the clochard illuminates his works’ roaming thing-politics. Like
his ailing body, things characterise the material reality of the tramp’s predicament, the
inverse relationship between his dispossession and the heightened significance of his
leftover possessions. As Michael Thompson put it bluntly: “apart from tramps, most
people choose not to carry all their possessions around with them” (1). Molloy’s
chainless bicycle disappears and reappears as if out of nothing, and objects derive their
value from being mere some-things: “I had stolen from Lousse a little silver, oh nothing
much, massive teaspoons for the most part, and other small objects whose utility I did

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190 After all: “All these old things have a moral value” (Baudelaire qtd. in Benjamin,
_Arcades_ 203).
not grasp but which seemed as if they might have some value” (63). In Rough for Theatre I:

A: I can’t go without my things.
B: What good are they to you?
A: None.
B: And you can’t go without them?
A: No. (Plays 70-71)

Beckett’s dispossessed exaggerate the materialist condition that defines their estrangement: thinking in terms of value means objects are not themselves but mere signs of their worth. In such moments, Marx’s damning aphorism rings true: “All the physical and intellectual senses have been replaced by the simple alienation of all these senses, [by] the sense of having [Sinn des Habens]” (qtd. in Benjamin, Arcades 209). Yet what the “sense” of having is, what possession “means” in their depleted world, is often quite beyond the narrators, as not even words, let alone personal pronouns, belong to them.

Thus, when he asks, “[into] what nightmare thingness am I fallen,” the implication is that of a material world out of joint, directing our attention toward the dialectic of alienation [of Entfremdung and Entäusserung] that is the historical phenomenon of that world. The mystical and social estrangement of many Beckett characters seems evident (as in the theological sense: “The bastard, he doesn’t exist!” [Endgame 34]). In the Hegelian dialectic, man is estranged from his essential nature that he himself created in a historical process of objectification. This spiritual process is repurposed in Marx where alienation is filtered through the history of labour (Williams 35). The nightmare is here historical: the reification of persons and social relations—even if (as Heidegger insists) Marx’s conception has its roots in the transcendental “homelessness of modern man” (Heidegger, “Letter” 165). The structures specific to Marxian alienation (the class divisions particular to capitalist production, business owner and worker; the separation between person and fruits of labour) may not map squarely onto the nightmare quality of Beckett’s stories; however, insofar as the narrators seem to have been expelled even

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191 H3a.2; emphasis original.
from the Marxist paradigm (of use and exchange) and politics (the Communist orator), the *spectrality* of a materialist sense of alienation is doubly striking.\(^{192}\) Put differently, the ghostliness that defines the increasing “nightmare thingness” of Beckett’s works registers a distinctly modern condition; the problematisation of language, representation, and narrative is also the socio-political content of his object worlds. This condition is defined by neither pro-modern nor anti-modern sentiment but by its being “never contemporaneous with itself” (Rabaté, *Ghosts* 3). The figure of the tramp helps Beckett satirise the philosophical principle—Hegelian as much as Marxian—that work, or man’s productivity, is somehow a transcendental category linked to self-fulfilment.

Note how regularly the tramp comments on his own thingification (his “second nature”). In “The End,” eulogising a stool, he literalises the still-life image as he is expelled from the “charitable institution”: “At times I felt its wooden life invade me, till I myself became a piece of old wood. There was even a hole for my cyst” (80).\(^{193}\) The narrator’s attachment to his stool resembles Marx’s famous description of the commodity’s mystical properties, the table which “not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, […] stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas” (*Capital* 42). The commodity’s ghostly character is significant. In its becoming-fetish, “[the] thing,” to quote Derrida, “is at once set aside and beside itself” (*Specters* 187). But rather than the phenomenal, sensuous object—of human, re-assuring use-value—turning, becoming spiritual fetish-commodity, the commodity character according to Derrida already “haunts the thing,

\(^{192}\) To Barbara Bray, Beckett writes in 1972 after reading Edmund Wilson’s study of Marxism, socialism and communism: ‘I hate myself now even more while less Marxist-Leninist than ever’ (LIV lxxxi). Beckett’s early encounters with Communist and Marxist thought—in Ireland but also in relation to the Soviet Republic in which he showed a strong interest—are documented by Morin in Beckett’s *Political Imagination* (Chapter One, especially 43ff).

\(^{193}\) Similarly, the tramp enquires into the thingification “perpetrated” by mimetic representation: “the faces of the living, all grimace and flush, can they be described as objects?” (“First Love,” CSP 38; see Chapter Five). If we glean anything from Beckett’s fame inside and outside of the academe today, it is that his own photogenic face is the height of marketable “objects.”
its specter is at work in use-value” (189). This spectrality is the binding socius, social relations among “men” and equally among commodities (193-194). Spectrality evokes an out-of-jointness, an unevenness with political potential or “weak messianic power” (Critchley 22), while also marking the reality of the system’s abstraction, what has been variously called, with different emphases: spectacle, capitalist realism, “real abstraction,” etc.\(^{194}\) Fundamental to these understandings is the idea that fetishism is not, in Étienne Balibar’s words, “a false perception of reality. Rather it constitutes the way in which reality […] cannot not appear” (qtd. in Macherey 24; emphasis original).

The “nightmare thingness” (as ghostly socio-economic environment) of Beckett’s stories connects to the recurring literalisation of the becoming-vegetable or becoming-mineral, marking the real oscillation between material and abstraction. It is this space of inadequation that David Lloyd locates in Beckett’s appropriation of the visual and spatial (late theatre; television): a res publica, or community, “thought through the conditions of reification and instrumentality, of dispossession and dereliction,” and founded on “the insistence of the human as thing beyond representation, suspended in its relation to the things among which it dwells” (Beckett’s Thing 22). The contradictory nature of the narrators’ “possessions,” simultaneously reassuring and comforting, evokes a perverse confrontation with reification and alienation processes. The literary aesthetic confirms social content. When we go back to decipher the social hieroglyphics that our products have become (in other words, their language), as Marx says we must, we find in Beckett a bourgeois economy in ruins, but still clung on to.

**Thingness and the Matter of Borders**

Within this “materialist” spectrality, it becomes necessary to invest in the “real” historical conditions of the narrator’s “nightmare thingness,” as they open up a discussion of the borders along which his existence as a leftover thing is policed. In “The Calmative,” the turn of phrase suggests on a primary level the estrangement from transcendental spheres, as the Cartesian’s or spiritualist’s discomfort with a Hobbesian or materialist worldview. The worldly irony of uttering these words in a church is deliberate, as the Catholic symbolic of matter impregnated with the Spirit is satirised. While the passive English (“am I fallen”) has an overt lapsarian connotation, the active

\(^{194}\) Acknowledging that one can distinguish between late capitalism and the earlier, transitional phase of Beckett’s height of productivity.
pronominal verb in the French ("je me suis fourré") is more humorous: the narrator feels this is a mess he got himself in. So much for his sense of the spirit's self-alienation; this is a material condition. Beckett's narrator relates, after hearing activity in the church: "I sprang up from the mat on which I lay before the altar […] I found myself at the foot of a spiral staircase which I began to climb at top speed, mindless of my heart, like one hotly pursued by a homicidal maniac" (68). After his encounter with the "wild-eyed" man, the narrator announces his nightmarish situation; it becomes clear that his fear of discovery signals his fear of the institutional body. The narrator himself is a de-humanised parasite in the sanitised environment of the Church, a body that cannot stand up for the brute materiality of the destitute it purports to protect. The fear of discovery that surrounds the episode betrays the historical connection between vagabondage and heresy. The vagabond was from the Middle Ages associated with heresy and rebellion, whether he (mostly a “he”) was an active heretic or not (Nail 145-147). This entailed not only oppression and persecution but also the vagabond's identification with heresy and secular non-conformity.195 If vagabondage was already a “welcome,” even actively fostered, result of market expansion, feudal and then capitalist, its identification with heresy was a similar product of the rule of law, itself guilty of producing rebels.

The passage in this sense echoes with Beckett's uncomfortable position as a member of the Protestant upper-middle classes in southern Ireland.196 While _Endgame_, for instance, has been read as an indirect comment of the Protestant Ascendancy’s culpability during the Irish Famine (Kennedy, _Beckett_ 11-13), the low-class vagrant is both a product and a

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195 Nail: “[The church] used the charge of heresy to attack all forms of social and political rebellion, which became heresy. For example, when textile workers in Flanders took up arms against their bosses, they were hanged as rebels, but the Inquisition also burned them as heretics” (145).

196 Beckett’s outsider position within a privileged Protestant minority, amid a sectarian, republican Catholic hegemony, has become a key point of departure for historicising criticism regarding the “politics” of his work, regarding the sense of non-belonging (that contributes in this narrative to his “exile” in France) and his critique of the nationalist ideology.
The “continuous oscillation” that defines the tramp’s existence as a thing constantly on the move, “disjointed from land, labor, and law,” paradoxically means that he continually tests ideological and geopolitical borders without intention or political persuasion contributing to the definition of political resistance (Nail 147). The tramp becomes, in this sense, the political emblem of Beckett’s work, dissolving “resistance” as positive, active meaning while “expressing” resistance despite himself. His “resistance” emblematises, by extension, the work’s resistance toward historical determination and “content.” Take Molloy, whose vision of his “region,” his ambiguous compliance with border police and negotiation of space more generally articulates a lopsided resistance, not necessarily conscious or willed, throwing wide open the question of what it actually means to “resist.” As a sans papiers—a “refugee”—Molloy reports that he has never left his region, drawing a parallel between the outdoors and the confines of his mother’s room, and demarcating his region according to how far his feet can carry him: “regions do not suddenly end, as far as I know, but gradually merge into another” (65). He concludes that he has never left the “Molloy 197

The fate of the Irish Big House in Beckett’s work (the Knott household, the ruin in “The End”) speaks to the same context. See Kennedy, “In the street” and “Bid Us Sigh.”
country” because it is vast, with the implication that it is vast because he has never left it. By contrast, Moran’s bureaucratic mind seeks to delineate borders as concretely as possible: “By the Molloy country I mean that narrow region whose administrative limits he had never crossed and presumably never would” (138). Beckett, writing to his German translator: “I prefer Gegend to Gebiet precisely because it is vaguer (limits never determined by Molloy) and somehow less administrative. Gebiet is a Moran word, not a Molloy word” (LII 458). Symbolic, biopolitical differences related to mapping and the nation-state pertain here, as Moran doubles up as a secret agent in a wartime context and as moral censor in an Irish context. On the one hand, as Anthony Uhlmann notes, Moran’s allusion to Goering (and by extension the Gestapo) and the hierarchy of secrecy between himself, Gaber, and Youdi, imply the surveillance structures in place in Vichy France and la guerre franco-française (40-57). On the other hand, as has been noted, Moran “bears more than a passing resemblance to D. P. Moran (1869-1936), a pugnacious journalist and propagandist for the Irish Free State” (McKee 44), dedicated to an Irish nation “more homogenous in character” and “more protectionist in outlook: to impose laws on contraception, divorce, compulsory Irish, and censorship in order to police its moral borders” (Delaney qtd. in McKee 53).

In a famous scene, we can see how Molloy “resists” the policing of moral limits by the censor as it collapses into the policing of national or geopolitical borders in the figure of Moran. Entering a town with his bicycle, dismounted, he is required to follow the legal code, present papers, justify his intrusion. His status as a thing expelled turns him into an automatic rebel, and he is consequently stopped by the constable and questioned. Molloy fits Foucault’s understanding of the tramp who attracts both the police and the social worker’s attention because he appears to them as standing outside of society and the law, in need of recycling: “work was considered a purifying ethic reforming the morally corrupt whose sins were seen to stem from idleness” (as opposed to socio-economic expulsion) (Uhlmann 56). As a faithful member of the Lumpenproletariat, however, Molloy refuses his recruitment as labour power in reserve, and indeed, like the narrators of the nouvelles who are shrugged off when they propose to make themselves useful, there is a recognition that he is beyond recuperation. The

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198 To Erich Franzen, 17 Feb. 1954. Editors’ footnote: “‘Gegend’ (area, without specific borders, as geographic or topographic space); ‘Gebiet’ (area, with borders and limits, often abstracted, as in political jurisdiction or professional expertise)” (LII 460).
navigation and policing of borders, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, of
sanitisation and neutralisation, rely here fundamentally on the reification of the human
creature. Molloy shows himself unable, though not unwilling, to cooperate and provide
any of the requested information. Uhlmann notes that, “rather than ignorance being
tamed and used as a tool by order” (as with Moran), through Molloy, “ignorance
overcomes and dissolves that order. [...] He cannot follow orders; this is not
necessary because he does not want to, he is simply unable to” (50). Nevertheless,
Molloy’s resistance is not fully unintentional, displacing rather the meaning of
“intention” though his stupidity, or bêtise. He admits: “To apply the letter of the law to
a creature like me is not an easy matter. It can be done, but reason is against it” (21).
His insight speaks to a kind of self-fashioned performance of stupidity in the face of the
law and reason. When pressed for his papers of identification, Molloy hands the
constable the only papers he carries with him, bits of newspaper he uses to wipe
himself (earning him the trip to the station). The identity document within the context
of border control has been replaced by excrement, the allegorical counter by the abject
index. To recall Kristeva, the instability of Molloy’s self through the arrival of the non-
self can be carried over into the conceptualisation of a homogenous national culture (as
allegorised through Moran’s moral censorship). Molloy’s “resistance” then is really
his appropriation of his dehumanisation and expulsion as a wasted thing, not so much
a conscious tactic as an embodied, abject ignorance, as he throws his bodily waste back
across the biopolitical and moral borders.

We can ask what kind of sense of place and nation emerges from these highly
politicised encounters—the narrator in the church, Molloy at the police station. Patrick
Bixby talks of Beckett’s “no man’s land,” suggesting: “[Beckett’s] form of unwriting
does not [...] abandon all relations with a material political geography for an extra-
ideological textual space,” but instead “marks the haunting return of pastness and
placidness in traces that cannot be completely elided even by the space-clearing
gestures of his unwriting” (174-175). While Bixby focuses on Beckett’s dismantling of

199 Recall the shit-based economy of Ballyba (Chapter Two).
200 It bears recalling that the Irish postcolonial moment, in both nationalist and anti-
nationalist form, is inseparable from a rich vocabulary of “soil.” Bixby notes: “as early
as the Act of Union, Irish cultural nationalism had sought to reterritorialize the
colonized subjectivities of the Irish people through the concept of ‘the soil,’ that deep
Irish national sentiment, Nels Pearson similarly argues for a pervasive but unresolved origin in Beckett’s stories, an Irish context that can never be simply eschewed: “numerous details of the topography, dialect, and culture strongly imply the environs of greater Dublin in the 1920s and 1930s while its coastal scenes imply the seaside Protestant suburbs of south Dublin” (117). Both Bixby’s and Pearson’s illuminating studies cannot help but overdetermine the Irish context of Beckett’s prose, proving largely disinterested, for instance, in French as the primary language of the post-war texts and in their immediate Francophone audience and intellectual milieu. For the spectral indeterminateness of Beckett’s landscapes surely can only be historical insofar as it expresses the conflict of coordinates, including a “time-honoured conception” of France “in ruins” (CSP 278). If the crossing of thresholds is mediated by biopolitical transactions, the notorious history of France as a “police state” adds further context, as Beckett regularly refers to gendarmes, policemen, or military personnel. Critics like Uhlmann and Gibson have rightly highlighted the spectre of modern warfare, espionage, and totalitarianism haunting the vocabulary of the trilogy. Consider also how the frontiers’ material structures are at once military and ruinous. Like Molloy, the narrator of “The Calmative” enters a city with ramparts and a checkpoint-like gate: “Cyclopean and crenelated, standing out faintly against a sky scarcely less sombre, they did not seem in ruins, viewed from mine, but were, to my certain knowledge” (CSP 63). While the streets of the city are unpopulated, the narrator is reminded “that the houses were full of people, besieged, no, I don’t know” (76). As with so many details of the post-war work, such particulars recall the everyday reality of Beckett’s life in occupied France while unravelling under the narrator’s failing memory and crisis of naming. The ghostly city that the narrator of “The Calmative” enters through the pastorally named “Shepherd’s Gate,” with its trams and buses, running, “but few, slow, empty, noiseless, as if under water,” evokes a distinctly post-catastrophic scene (64). The narrator repository of Irishness” (170). “Soil” becomes equivalent in nationalist anti-colonial discourse with unity and emancipation. More generally, “soil” is both materially and semantically connected to territory, property, and dis/possession, as the etymology of “feudalism” translates as “soil-bound value” (Nail 60). “Soil” then also grounds—in disjunctive relation to its republican recuperation—historical master-serf subjectivities, emblematic in an Irish context of the landed ascendency.

201 A favourite exclamation of the narrator is “Exelmans!” in reference to the French soldier (CSP 80).
Schauss overcomes his reticence to fill us in on more than just a “few remarks,” so that the emptiness and stillness of the city—it might well be night-time—is repeatedly asserted (ibid.). Shadows, ghostly cyclists, fleeing prostitutes: what remains of the modernist cityscape are its nightmares, its delinquents in spectral form.

The implications of these descriptions, of what Marjorie Perloff called “Beckett’s brilliant indirection, his ways of not-saying and yet saying,” for a French audience at the time of the *nouvelles’* publication (1955) cannot be ignored (100). Perloff insists on “a basis in everyday reality under the Occupation” in Vichy France (97). The materiality of borders, linked to destruction, the reality of checkpoints and curfews, could hardly be more relevant to the Europe around Beckett’s “frenzy of writing.” Consider the practicalities of Molloy’s day: “Morning is the time to hide. […] Yes, from eight or nine till noon is the dangerous time. But towards noon things quiet down, […] there have been a few survivors but they’ll give no more trouble, each man counts his rats” (67).

As for the continual crossing of material and moral borders, one only has to think of the repeated re-demarcation of national borders and the parsing of Germany into four occupied zones. The mass displacement of people, for purposes of flight or extermination, bore strongly on the contemporary imaginary as the perils of movement—of deportation and repatriation alike—were clear to everyone. Beckett’s close friend Alfred Péron died in Switzerland, on his return journey, shortly after his liberation from Mauthausen in 1945 (LII 16). Beckett himself repeatedly complained to the Irish Legation about his inability to travel freely in “Free France” (ibid. xvii). From Roussillon, he writes to Cornelius Cremin, the First Secretary of the Irish Legation in Vichy: “Have had prolonged interviews with the local Gendarmes […]. My history almost day by day from my first setting foot in France. They can’t believe that I can be called Samuel and am not a Jew. Yesterday they took away my identity card I suppose to see if it had not been tampered with. My movements are restricted in the extreme, radius of ten kilometres about” (LII xvii). Another, subsequent appeal reinforces the sense of Beckett’s acute involvement in and concern with the bureaucracy of movement, restriction, identity, and interrogation.202 At the same time, his immediate

202 “But with regard to this constant prying into my identity, my past movements, my present movements, my means of existence my mode of existence, why I am called Samuel, etc., etc., when all my papers are perfectly in order, when since arriving in the ‘free zone’ I have neglected none of the formalities of declaration, registration, etc.,
post-war work coincides with de Gaulle heralding a heroic and mythic united France. As Uhlmann notes, what the Third Republic, Vichy government and post-war governments (Fourth and the Gaullist Fifth Republic) all had in common was an appeal “to the notion of La France, to the unchallengeable good of the French nation state to justify the actions of their governments” (103). The same nationalist vision and moral order that Beckett knew all too well from his country of birth. His tramp becomes a foreign body in both national discourses.

As Beckett starts writing in French and turns to the first-person narrator—handing over the reader to his historical “knowledge” and memory—value becomes radically evacuated from narrative and “meaning” (a process begun with Watt but benefiting strongly from the language switch and first-person voice). This applies to realist representation as well as “the modernist literary aspiration to articulate the autonomous voice of individual experience” (Weisberg 87). If historical content—entering allegorically and in a way despite itself—is denied value in turn, it is, however, always insofar as it informs an environment in which the human thing is denied valued. Molloy and the other narrators’ “nightmare thingness” describes this inadequate relationship between Beckett’s negative narrative mode and the various possible historical contexts: an Irish colonial history of mass expropriation, criminalisation of “delinquent” tenants and land “wasters,” controlled starvation, and Malthusian politics,203 a fervent Irish republicanism tied to the powerful Catholic Church of Ireland, an immediate post-war moment in central Europe of mass deportation, extermination of the infirm, and redrawing of national borders, as well as a dominant mythical appeal to the moral good of French nationhood. It is through the thingification of Molloy and company, through their thingly remaining within this spectral environment, that Beckett can register not only a ubiquitous historical violence and expulsion, but also the limit of how much can be integrated by the violent structure. The narrators’ “nightmare thingness” marks this

imposed on foreigners in this country, when my only offence, I mean that of having clandestinely crossed the line of demarcation, has been judged in the police-court of Apt and presumably purged by the payment of a fine of 400 francs, and when all this has been made clear time and again and apparently accepted as satisfactory in the course of repeated interrogations, I feel obliged to appeal to you to intervene” (LI xviii).

203 See Nail 114-119.
limit between historical meaning and its radical negation, a refusal to be systematised and instrumentalised into a linear historical narrative while consistently jolting at real historical and geopolitical demarcations. At the same time, Molloy and company—their resistance lying outside societal parameters of intention, participation, and refusal—take the place of historical content itself: ejected, objectified, negative in the face of sublimation.

“cette horreur chosesque”: the Purchase of Translation

As I will further pursue in Chapter Four, the spectrality defining our understanding of materiality in Beckett and Sebald’s late modernism is inseparable from translation and multilingualism, literal and cultural. The inadequate, displacing nature of language is inextricable from the residual and material way we conceive of the historico-political space in their work. In Beckett’s stories, the phrase “nightmare thingness” provides an evocative example. The French original, even more reminiscent of Baudelaire, reverses the relationship between language and matter, matter and world: “Quelle est cette horreur chosesque où je me suis fourré?” (55). What stopped Beckett from translating this into “thinglike” or “thingly horror”? The inversion of adjective and noun means that the French determines the narrator’s world as immaterial—vision-like, “in a skull” (CSP 70), thing-like only in semblance (a sceptical idealism)—whereas the English determines the world as inescapably material (whence its nightmarish quality). The philosophical indetermination that arises for the tramp’s world in translation may matter little with regards to the individual text, yet it signals the inadequate relation—or collapse—of language and matter that a material-oriented approach needs to take into account. Translation and Beckett’s bilingualism play a key role in registering the problem of politics that we have been tracing, displacing the already unstable cultural referents once over. In her recent book, Emilie Morin formulated this argument eloquently: “Conceptualisations of politics as a totality that functions dialectically and involves

204 It is not like the French “ chosesque” was lexically sounder. This story was not translated by Richard Seaver. Beckett offered Seaver the task of translating “La fin,” but revised the translation heavily together with Seaver who would also go on to translate “L’expulsé.” The joint exercise can be seen as being less about correcting Seaver’s rendition of the original French, than revising the original itself (Seaver 105).
shifting patterns of legibility are particularly pertinent to the diverse European moments to which Beckett’s work of displacement and translation is sutured” (7).

Perhaps the most groundbreaking chapter of Morin’s contextual study shows how Beckett’s translations of other writers, especially his work for Nancy Cunard’s Negro anthology, mark the intersection of translation, politics, and a world literature space. While his involvement in translating unambiguous and radical négritude essays and poetry is in itself noteworthy, the more striking aspect lies in his stress on the political and economic tendencies of the writing. The translations are not neutral and transparent. For instance, in his translation of Benjamin Péret’s essay, Beckett “grants added significance to Péret’s depiction of colonial trade, and alters the text slightly to draw attention to the strategic use of starvation and forced labour” (Morin 99). Translations of other essays accentuate the structures of colonial authority and claims to legitimacy. Beckett even politicizes the terminology of essays on sculpture, which did not in fact deal with racial politics directly, giving a different slant on aesthetics and commitment than the one commonly associated with him. A similar impulse marks his translation of Rimbaud’s “Le Bateau ivre,” which “voices a stronger and clearer indictment of colonial rule than in the original; its opening stanzas carry a more ominous tone, assimilating colonial trade to a physical strain or burden that will eventually be removed” (ibid. 97).

As concerns national borders in Beckett’s own work, his reader is accustomed to intrusive cultural and linguistic markers in otherwise decontextualized settings. In the stories, wartime and immediate post-war European borders are suggested, time-honoured in that sense, only to be dismantled and scattered. The role of language in the inconsistency and playfulness of Beckett’s world is undeniable, extending to cultural and geographical referents in the nouvelles and trilogy. Throughout one finds

205 See Morin, Chapters Two and Three. Morin also shows how some of Beckett’s translations for Octavio Paz’s Anthology Mexican Poetry “strengthen a historical dimension that is only half-stated in the original poems, and bring together coded signifiers of colonial conquest and imperialist custom” (27).

206 Beckett had made a habit of speaking of the four stories in one breath, as “a book of long short stories” ready for publication (LII 55). In 1977, John Calder did finally publish all four stories as Four Novellas. The running order upon collected publication—
Anglicisms in the French and Gallicisms in the English. The texts undermine their own authority this way; Sam Slote notes, for example, that the parrot’s bilingual swearing in the French *Molloy* destabilises its own claim as original version because it implies the translation of a (non-existent) preceding English version (209). Another example is *Premier amour*, in which we are told that neither Loulou nor the narrator are French or francophone, whereas the English completely leaves out any reference to the characters’ (non-)belonging to the text’s language. While the question of geographical and historical location remains largely indeterminable, self-conscious or contradictory cultural traces proliferate, especially in the original French. The inconsistency of the index speaks of a politics of inclusion and exclusion, of material splinters shot through a historical time evidently on its last legs.

The formative importance of Beckett’s travels in 1930s Germany has been acknowledged in criticism; the reappearance of German coordinates throughout Beckett’s work (including the poetry) will remain central to the inclusive disjunction of political meaning (especially regarding propaganda and censorship), interpolated with the residual tension between French and Irish (and British) nation states. Malone recalls: “Tiepolo’s ceiling at Würzburg, what a tourist I must have been, I even remember the diaeresis” (MD 63). That moment (in which Malone identifies with Beckett the diary writer and art critic in 1930s Germany) is followed by the ejaculation “Up the Republic!”, begging the question for the reader: what republic? Ireland, France, Germany, Spain? James McNaughton has noted insightfully that the slogan does not so much describe Beckett’s political identity as an analysis of political polysemy and “the inertia that besets cultural and political thought, a lesson learned […] from Beckett’s experience in Free State Ireland” (“Politics” 57).

“L’expulsé” first, then “Le calmant,” before “La fin” in *Nouvelles et Textes pour rien* (Les Éditions de Minuit, 1955)—is at the same time indicative and treacherous, with Beckett withholding *Premier amour* (written in-between “L’expulsé” and “Le calmant”). The latter was published separately in 1970 alongside *Mercier and Camier*. As with the trilogy, we should be wary of proceeding by way of implied continuity or consistency.

207 See among others McNaughton, “Beckett’s ‘Brilliant Obscurantics’: *Watt* and the Problem of Propaganda.”

208 ‘Up the republic’ was the IRA rallying cry during the civil war and was later adopted by de Valera’s party. See McNaughton, ibid. 57-58. “¡UPHEREPUBLIC!” was
the place names Lüneburg heath (50) and Ohlsdorf (27), and the “Stützenwechsel” (rhythmic alternation of columns) of the Saxon church (68) add ambiguous German coordinates to the stories from in and around Hamburg, where Beckett arrived by boat in October 1936 for his prolonged stay.²⁰⁹ Lüneburg and Ohlsdorf reach into the more remote parts of the narrator’s memory, and it is uncertain how far he has come since. Beckett himself would do a lot of solitary walking in the strange city of Hamburg and visit numerous churches (Knowlson 231-232). He kept extensive diaries during his stay and made tentative plans for a longer work entitled “Journal of a Melancholic.”²¹⁰ As Mark Nixon finds, a lot of details, in “First Love” especially, correspond to his diary entries (German 115).²¹¹ Lüneburg heath (in the north of Lower Saxony), which Beckett had visited during that time, now evokes the WWII battlefront, the site of partial surrender of the German forces in the northwest conflict regions on May 4th, 1945; the nature reserve also enclosed the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. What constitutes a broken biographical index forms within the context of the stories’ world and publication a highly evocative, paradoxical historical backdrop.

Morin has shown how the “texts by Beckett that allude most clearly to the murky period of political transition in France after 1944 are those that were most ruthlessly modified in translation” and revision (144). Morin has in mind Mercier et Camier—Beckett’s first French novel, written in 1946 but only published in 1970, severely shortened and emended in the unappealing process of translation—and the play Eleutheria—written in 1947, posthumously published and translated. Numerous references or idioms in Mercier and Camier evoke the Nazi occupation, French collaborationism and resistance: names like Clappe²¹² or Gast, the spy-like Mr Conaire and his singular toilet humour: “In Frankfurt, when you get off the train, what is the

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²⁰⁹ See Knowlson, chapter 10.
²¹⁰ See Mark Nixon, German Diaries, chapter 7, 110ff.
²¹¹ See also, ibid. 209n10.
²¹² “Klappe!” in German translates as “shut up!”
first thing you see, in gigantic letters of fire? A single word: HIER” (40). Like the stories, the novel puts wartime and immediate post-war notions of geographical and cultural frontiers to the test, while its Irishness is largely added in Beckett’s 1970 translation (Kennedy, Preface viii). The characters’ “journey” constitutes the novel’s first paragraph: “Physically it was fairly easy going, without seas or frontiers to be crossed, through regions untormented on the whole, if desolate in parts. Mercier and Camier did not remove from home, they had that great good fortune” (3). Despite their “journey,” they do not leave home; the crossing of borders is retracted. The regions remain “untormented.” By whom? They are “desolate.” In what way? The narrator continues: “They did not have to face, with greater or lesser success, outlandish ways, tongues, laws, skies, foods, in surroundings little resembling those to which first childhood, then boyhood, then manhood had inured them” (ibid.). Again, a sealed-off cultural region is evoked only for Mercier and Camier to be later confronted with foreign tongues. “He takes us for globe-trotters,” says Mercier as an innkeeper speaks, “in a tone of tentative complicity,” the German word for comfortable, “gemütlich” (33). Did the innkeeper mistakenly identify a fellow collaborationist? Beckett had always been generous with foreign language quotations, including German, most notably in the poems and early prose. While these earlier manifestations are in the vein of modernist multilingualism, either humorous or classical or both (and often incorporated in dialogue), the foreign words of the post-war prose, like other historical referents, add to the countless particulars haunting the urban and rural wasteland in the absence of geo-cultural demarcations, with resonances of wartime invasion, occupation, persecution, and ruination.

The peculiar conception and publication history of “The End” adds to the complex picture of translation and historical referents at play. The first part of “Suite” (its original title) was published in *Les Temps Modernes* alongside a report on the Nuremberg trials and an essay on the controversial involvement of Marcel Petiot in the

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213 “HIER” (German for: here) refers to the location of the “conveniences” whose relation to Frankfurt is playfully suggested as somehow metonymical (ibid.). The “letters of fire” take on a historical and catastrophic tone, conjuring the continual air raids by the Allied Forces on Frankfurt-am-Main, with its medieval city centre completely annihilated.

French resistance. Sartre’s post-war “canard” (LII 34) published fiction, testimonies, essays and personal accounts of the bombings, camps, and resistance groups, with a particular enthusiasm for fragmented forms (Morin 139-140). Considering the monthly’s topics and genres, the initial publication and subsequent rejection of the story’s second part shine a light on its ambiguous political intervention with historical markers. Beckett’s spat with Simone de Beauvoir surrounding the editorial decision is well documented, his letter reading: “Vous m’accordez la parole pour me la retirer avant qu’elle n’ait eu le temps de rien signifier” (LII 40). The ambiguity of the French double-negation (ne rien) recalls Beckett’s exchange with Duthuit about the impossibility of expressing nothing: you took away my speech before it had the time not to signify anything. One can sense Beckett intimating that his story will always only signify nothing in the company of the engaged literature and expressive testimony that Sartre and de Beauvoir’s communist commitment favoured. Morin highlights that “Suite” implies the homecoming of a survivor (“un absent”) more firmly than the later version, describing “in detail his bare skull and his infected wounds” and recalling “symptoms of malnutrition” (169). Whereas the shelter’s handout of a deceased man’s clothes in “La fin” is suggestive, in “Suite,” the fumigated clothes and their absent owner recall deportation and extermination more forcefully (ibid.). Significantly, “Suite”

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215 To Simone de Beauvoir, 25 September 1946. “You are giving me the chance to speak only to retract it before the words have had the time to mean anything” (LII 42).

216 Jackie Blackman suggests that Eleutheria’s Dr and Mme Piouk may be veiled caricatures of Sartre and de Beauvoir within the play’s satirical commentary on (French) Communism at the time; a commentary that itself provided a reason for Beckett’s withdrawal of Eleutheria, incompatible with his move away from theatre as “a moral institution in Schiller’s sense” (80-82; the quote is Beckett’s).

217 In “Suite,” the narrator’s cash allowance is described as “frais de route,” a “term historically used to designate the retribution of the expenses incurred by soldiers, released prisoners or convicts” (Morin 170). Beckett rids “Suite” of other clunky uses of the word “route” before it becomes “La fin,” so it is hard to tell if the excision of “frais de route” speaks to its historical resonance. The memory of London’s “quartier Euston-King’s Cross-Islington” does not find its way into the final version either (Beckett, “Suite” 111).
constitutes the very moment of transition from English to French. As the tugging and pulling at European borders (wartime and aftermath) manifests through culturally unstable words and things in the *nouvelles*, so do the stories form the very materialisation of Beckett's language transition and self-translation.

This cultural displacement is inextricable from the tramp's material and social condition. Money is strangely traceable: from small inheritances to pennilessness to the allowance issued by custodians (lost in a scam). Most of the time, the narrator finds himself in a condition he defines as “the absolute impossibility of all purchase” (CSP 54), which he says forces a person to become active. The class of the moneymakers that the narrators encounter is evident: Lulu, the prostitute, a cabby, drug dealer, swindler from Greece/Turkey, and a man with an ass selling “sand, sea-wrack, and shells to the townsfolk” (87). In Beckett’s words: the “same deadbeats” (LII 48); remains of the realist financial-motive protagonist. The problem of cash occupies the tramps and defines them as such. While the monetary currency in the stories remains firmly British/Irish, even in the French. Quite counter-intuitively, talking money in the French runs something like: “Un shilling, dit-il, six pence” (CSP 63). This means that in 1946, right after the war, two years after the Bretton Woods agreement

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218 Beckett wrote roughly 28 pages in his notebook in English, before drawing a horizontal line about a third down the page and writing the rest in French (Van Hulle, “Publishing” 74; Knowlson 358). The transition occurs during the passage in which the narrator recounts receiving a pair of dark glasses and Geulincx’s *Ethics* from his tutor (CSP 91).

219 “[L’]impossibilité absolue d’acheter” (*Nouvelles* 26).

220 To George Reavey, 15 December 1946.

221 The narrator of “The Expelled” ruminates on his destitute situation: “It is rare […] when you are completely penniless, that you can have food brought to you from time to time in your retreat. You are therefore obliged to go out and bestir yourself, at least one day a week. You can hardly have a home address under these circumstances, it’s inevitable. It was therefore with a certain delay that I learnt they were looking for me, for an affair concerning me…” (CSP 54). Receiving a small cash inheritance from some source or other, the narrator enters, for a brief time, the realm of contingent possibility of purchase. The story ends with him choosing not to repay the cabby’s hospitality with a banknote.
and the foundation of the IMF, Beckett’s narrators summon coordinates from Hamburg and Lower Saxony (traversing potentially an unnamed Dublin and its environs), deal in British coins,\textsuperscript{222} and all this in a new-found French prose. (The implication is not that Beckett had heated debates about the IMF at his local. And one might add that the German Northwest that Beckett had visited became the British Occupied Zone until 1949.)

The inconsistency of currency means that not even price can define the social value of the remaining commodities floating around. Tellingly, the “calmative” is, for want of money and refusal of trade, purchased with a chaste kiss, on the head. Money—social value—is yet another sign that has forsaken the commodity. Of course, the materiality of money itself is fundamentally paradoxical and troublesome. Whatever physical or virtual form money takes, its existence in the market is intended solely as universal equivalent, or phenomenal form of exchange value. Money turns up as an autonomous, pure form of mediation. Despite its phenomenal form of coinage or bills, the significance of money as a substance declines, and appears in that way transparent;\textsuperscript{223} whatever relations it ties together are levelled. In the nouvelles, however, money seems to perform an interruption, or a confusion of coordinates. Its ontological flatness is exacerbated to the extent that it becomes uneven, and strangely politicised. We are surprised at the fact the tramp has any cash left as it is; its provenance shrouded in shady inheritance or allowance affairs. In the French, the currency makes money appear not only out of place but downright useless, a thing among things, as its signifying function is dislocated to an elsewhere. Money becomes universal equivalent insofar as it appears from and disappears into nothing. The question, more so in the French than the English: what is the exchange value of money, the value of value? The cipher of total abstraction that fails to form a universal from particulars: “Union … brothers … Marx … capital … bread and butter … love” (CSP 94)? The “absolute impossibility of all purchase” in a society where utilitarianism has turned in on itself, where use and exchange are mere clichés (54)? The absoluteness of exchange, the flatness of money, is pushed at once to its extreme and interrupted by the inconsistencies of linguistic, cultural, and geographical referents: foreign signifiers

\textsuperscript{222} The Reichsmark, the currency in Germany from 1924 to 1948, had a Pfennig, penny, but no shilling or six pence.

\textsuperscript{223} Simmel already remarked this in \textit{The Philosophy of Money} (1900), chapter 2.3.
become foreign currencies in Beckett’s spectral world, registering both the residual possibility of historical recuperation and the impossibility of its purchase, the negation of historical value.

The question of value regarding Beckett (and his own “autonomous” position in the marketplace) has often been formulated as follows: what can be positively recuperated from Beckett’s radical negativity? The later fragments inspire us to find emancipatory possibility and residual value in their complete eschewing of value in all its manifestations (including non-value). The nouvelles pose the problem of value in very real terms, with their thematics (poverty, vagabondage, social exclusion) complicated by a displaced and translated index, materialised in part by the interruption of money. Commodities, the “social hieroglyphic[s]” that Marx describes, demand to be indexed on Beckett’s European post-war map, only to frustrate that attempt (Capital 45). The nouvelles perform the problem of indexing or mapping social coordinates amid historical abstraction. We are walking, together with the tramp, toward the world of Endgame, a play marking “the phase of completed reification of the world” (Adorno, “Trying” 122). The value of Beckett’s art, in that fully reified and alienated world, marks the collapse of language into materiality (and vice versa) that the content of his œuvre would itself be grounded in.

**Final Expulsion: Language Dispossessed**

In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida offers a political understanding of this “impossible property of a language” and the spectral, prosthetic qualities of speech (63). Such an understanding, Derrida says, “must not lead to a kind of neutralization of differences;” on the contrary:

Where neither natural property nor the law of property in general exist, where this de-propriaion is recognized, [...] it becomes more necessary than ever occasionally to identify, in order to combat them, impulses, phantasms, “ideologies,” “fetishizations,” and symbolics of appropriation. Such a reminder permits one at once to analyze the historical phenomena of appropriation and to treat them *politically* by avoiding, above all, the reconstitution of what these phantasms managed to motivate: “nationalist” aggressions [...] or monoculturalist homo-hegemony. (64; emphasis original)
The ethical and political stakes pertaining to the linguistic dispossession of Beckett’s tramp inform the “nightmare thingness” that defines his material life and its literary representation: if the tramp’s multiple expulsions and his continual encounter with borders formulate a stubborn resistance vis-à-vis culturally and morally homogenous nation-building, we can similarly see the dispossession of language—the tramp’s language and the splintered, irreconcilable linguistic pluralism of the stories—in terms of political expression and resistance. Later texts like Rough for Radio II, Rough for Theatre II make this gesture more overtly, thematising political repression through the violence of language: torture to extract testimony and denunciation, or torture through testimony and denunciation (RfTII). The Algerian War offers the most vivid context, as critics have recognised, with both plays written around 1960 (published in 1975/76) and Beckett closely following the conflict at home and abroad.224 As the plays feature “political euphemisms and [imagine] protective hierarchies and administrations keen to legitimate their practice” (Morin 224), Derrida’s own linguistic position as an Algeria-born Jew, in which his argument on language and property in the (post-)colonial context is grounded, becomes all the more prescient.

Already in the stories, the material dispossession of Beckett’s tramps is inseparable from the property of narrative and language that characterises the later prose so strongly, a correlation indexed not least by the remains of bourgeois cliché and realist description.225 While in earlier interpretations, dispossession was chiefly seen as a cypher for Beckett’s deconstruction of language and identity, the political implications of this marriage of dispossessions have rightly received more attention in recent criticism. Outside the church, the narrator’s desperate medley of bourgeois judicial and devout idioms captures a lifetime of clashes at the margins of the institutional body: “Pardon me your honour, the Shepherd’s Gate for the love of God” (CSP 69). Like Lucky’s “for reasons unknown,” the different permutations of this phrase throughout the story voice the narrator’s efforts at interacting with the social realm.226 Weisberg describes the scene as “a grotesque affront to bourgeois standards of propriety and

224 See Morin 220ff.
225 See Chapter Five.
226 In TFN, the expelled lexicon is attributed to the ghost-like Mother Calvet, “murmuring and ejaculating, Your highness! Your honour!” (CSP105-106).
self-respect, yet locked into the ‘tone’ of ‘polite conversation’” (55). The tramp’s living conditions have an explicit impact on language:

I was so unused to speech that my mouth would sometimes open, of its own accord, and vent some phrase or phrases, grammatically unexceptionable but entirely devoid if not of meaning, for on close inspection they would reveal one and even several, at least of foundation. But I heard each word no sooner spoken. Never had my voice taken so long to reach me as on this occasion. (CSP 41)

Indeed, towards the end of “The End,” the narrator comments on the social limits of his ultimate expulsion: “You become unsociable, it’s inevitable. It’s enough to make you wonder sometimes if you are on the right planet. Even the words desert you, it’s as bad as that. Perhaps it’s the moment when the vessels stop communicating, you know, the vessels” (97). In anticipation of his suicide, the narrator has retreated from the comfort of treating words like things and things like words, as he did before: “words to carry away with me to my refuge, to add to my collection” (65). Remembering the earlier discussion of moral and national borders, then, we can see how the tramp’s exclusion from normative, bourgeois discourse (and his attempt at a residual rehearsal of it) is informed by a larger political framework whereby nationalist discourses—Irish, French, German, Spanish—are grounded in the violent marginalisation of the other’s language. The tramp is caught, yet again, between resistance and complicity.

Beckett’s auto-translation performs a kind of deprivation or negation, denying at once its own historical “purchase” and the narrators’ historical inclusion through language. To finish, I want to return to the realist, themes of welfare and social order that were broached earlier, as the English translations of the stories eliminate parts of the more overt social commentary. “[Âme] bourgeoise,” for example, is translated as “mean soul,” neutralising the class idiom (23; 32). The welfare state, most of all, plays a more prominent role in the French, keeping the question of the politics of inclusion closer to heart. Whereas the narrator of Premier amour is on the lookout for “asiles” (22), in the English he is merely seeking “cover” (32). The first meaning of “asiles” would be night shelter, though mental asylum may also be suggested, especially against the wider
background of the Beckett country. In “Le calmant,” the narrator considers asking a policeman for the way; later he tells himself to wait for a Samaritan, a policeman, or indeed a “salutiste” (69)—French for a member of the Salvation Army, that institution of unimpeachable Victorian, protestant heritage (“soup, soap, salvation”). In the English version, there is no waiting for institutionalised help. The French can be said to posit the “charitable institution” more firmly.

The alterations are attributable to Beckett’s noted uneasiness over representing overt political environments; at the same time they reveal a sensitivity towards a latent social politics that, all the while, distrusts, if not outright rejects, the embrace of any philanthropic body politic. The ethics of charity in Beckett never settle, his characters finding themselves caught between resistance and complicity, passive acceptance and violent uprising. A lot depends on whether the charity fulfils their idiosyncratic needs; the narrator’s chances at having his epitaph of choice engraved are slim “unless the State takes up the matter” (CSP 26). It is important not to overdetermine the political meaning of the original French, but the same is true for Beckett’s somewhat neutralising revisions. Beckett’s texts were rarely set in stone, even after publication, as some famous revisions during rehearsals reveal. In Fin de partie, the menace of a potential stranger and survivor is connected to violence and extermination, and thus politically coded. HAMM: “Eh bien, va l’exterminer! […] Quelqu’un! (Vibrant.) Fais ton devoirs!” (101). The English translation cuts the deliberation over the small boy, the menace hinted at in the mention of the gaff. As a rule, Beckett’s emendations meant cuts and contraction, rather than additions, and it is due much more to these revisions than to a progressive lessening in Beckett’s oeuvre that the politico-historical dimensions are shaken.

227 The broader meaning of refuge is in the French somewhat precluded by the definite plural. The asylum, in keeping with Beckett’s fondness for marginal, incapacitated characters, constitutes an early fascination, appearing in “Fingal,” and playing a major part in Murphy and Malone Dies. While asylums have long offered rich, gothic inspiration for writers, its cultural capital has waned in the latter 20th-century imaginary; it is therefore notable that both Beckett and Sebald still thematise such archaic, cruel spaces of integrated exclusion. “Asile” was also French Resistance slang for a secure hideout, terminology Beckett may have been familiar with from his own involvement (Morin 142).
The *nouvelles* predict Molloy, who will reflect on nature of liberal philanthropy with some Nietzschean distrust, specifically on the Salvation Army as its historical embodiment, on the welfare state as the extended arm of the criminalisation of vagabondage:

> [...] when social workers offer you, free, gratis and for nothing, something to hinder you from swooning, which with them is an obsession, it is useless to recoil, they pursue you to the ends of the earth, the vomitory in their hands. The Salvation Army is no better. Against the charitable gesture there is no defence, that I know of. You sink your head, you put your hands all trembling and twined together and you say, Thank you, thank you lady, thank you kind lady. To him who has nothing it is forbidden not to relish filth. (21)

Both Molloy and social worker’s approaches to charity are deeply pragmatic and utilitarian. Compare “The End”: “I am greatly obliged to you, I said, is there a law which prevents you from throwing me out naked and penniless? That would damage our reputation in the long run, he replied” (CSP 80). The narrator’s sham offer to make himself useful is met with knowing nonchalance. Would they like the money they gave him in exchange for a prolonged stay? The reply: no, this “is a charitable institution” (ibid.). The poignant compromising that takes place between the narrator and Mr Weir exposes official interpretations of need, good will, help, and charity.

Unlike Beckett’s later translations of “*Le calmant*” and *Premier amour*, the translation of *Molloy* does not flatten such historical negotiations. It is telling that even though

228 “If they believed you were really willing to make yourself useful they would keep you, I am sure” (ibid.) In “Suite,” Mr Weir’s mention of kitchen work puts the fear in our narrator. The prolonged, humorous interchange in “Suite” retains even more of the satire of philanthropy of Beckett’s earlier prose.

229 In “Ding Dong” Belacqua fends off a woman selling “[seats] in heaven;” she is wearing outsize footwear from “suffragette or welfare worker” surplus (*MPTK* 38). In “Dante and the Lobster”: “Buttered toast was all right for Senior Fellows and Salvationists, for such as had nothing but false teeth in their heads” (6). Morin highlights Beckett’s distrust of the liberal humanism of UNESCO (122-124).

230 With Patrick Bowles in 1953-54.
Beckett specifies that the two stories form part of “the beginning of the French venture” (CSP xxii), the later revisions create more distance to the immediate post-war reality of the stories’ conception—as if enacting a historical self-deprivation or dispossession. The result falls into what Shane Weller called “anethical” translation: “In its anethicality, translation would take place in the meantime between theory and practice, between the poetic (Dichtung) and the sacred (heilig), between difference and reconciliation” (Beckett 56). The negation of Beckett’s translation, “the attempted reduction to nothing of [the] other […] in the name of the other” (ibid. 79), does not follow on the heels of a prior affirmation or value, but instead lingers in the in-between of ethical and unethical, marking the limit, or failure, to establish that difference. The problem of politics and ethics of Beckett’s border crossing environments—the complicity and historical deprivation—is sustained by his self-translation.

Conclusion

The stories, in the face of the totally reified society, refuse the attempt to “represent” it, registering instead the specificity of the tramp’s situation and using cultural slippages to disturb the total claims of modes of representation and of the political ideologies surrounding him at the time. The tramp’s worldly thingification is thought in its crystallised, systemic moments, in the shape of things that map the crossing of institutional and ideological and real historical borders; those moments where the total image threatens to annihilate the singular and specific, but falters at the latter’s labour of refusal. Beckett’s immediate post-war prose allows us to think class and class representation in these terms as Beckett stages frequent confrontations between the tramp (as waste) and political institutions and structural violence (church, police, charity, party politics) through local encounters.

Works like Beckett’s stories prove nothing to “new materialism” in literary studies; instead, they ask us to reinvest in a variety of connections. What constitutes “material” should not be too hastily determined; this problem can be ontologically understood, but, more politically immediate, it refers to value systems, processes of abstraction, and language. Works foregrounding the thingification of the human creature to that of Beckett’s extent challenge a thing-oriented approach to reconfigure its claim to a politics of materiality, by interrogating the reification of social relations as well as taking seriously the issues of inadequate representation and expression that configure these
relations. The tramp’s material conditions, down to his final possessions, refer to an elsewhere, spatially and temporally splintered. This conversation between the particular and the system is uneven and continually in shift. If a politics of things should be put forward, it can only be with respect to that relation. Seeking security or comfort in the determination of the history of things, whether possessions, regions, language, or institutions, fundamentally overlooks the shifting borders and multiple times of an artwork and the states of exclusion to which it speaks.
Chapter Four. Mapping Matter: Silk and Systems in *The Rings of Saturn*

... a small circle of mourners, which from a distance resembles a black velvet caterpillar ...

Sebald, “On 4 June 1904” (*Across* 104)

Introduction

This chapter enquires into the relationship between material particulars and systems in Sebald’s singular chef-d’oeuvre *The Rings of Saturn*. The novel’s epigraph lays out the “ring-structure” that self-consciously grounds its form and production: “The rings of Saturn consist of ice crystals and probably meteorite particles describing circular orbits around the planet’s equator...” In an interview, Sebald explains further: “It is possible [...] in concentric circles to move continually outward, and the outer circles determine the inner ones” (qtd. in Hutchinson, W.G. 30-31). The ring-form describes then a circular but also materially fragmented (“meteorite particles”) way of drawing connections between past and present, local and global, periphery and core. The novel foregrounds patterns (rings, quincunxes, webs, tapestries, mazes, taxonomies, encyclopaedias) in its form and content, dramatizing (its own) archival practices as a historical problematic. Eschewing narrative linearity and plot, it explicitly rejects the drive to completion (of literary realism); privileging fragmentation and ruination, it refuses to place its materials in synecdochical relation to the “fiction” viewed as a totality. All the while, it is important to remember that Sebald’s novel is also distinctly

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of its post-recession moment in 1990s semi-rural England, even as it is occupied with questions of colonialism, fascism, monarchical regimes, natural history, literary and cultural production, exile, and a host of other matters “world historical.” The walk and immediate local surrounding—the border-crossing negotiation between the walker-narrator’s gleaning (or negative recovery) and world maps—are key to a political understanding of Sebald’s endeavour, not least because they ground a notion of presentness. This chapter begins by investigating how we may understand the “mapping” that is undertaken in *Rings*, analysing the walker’s practice in relation to the map as a modern abstracting mechanism and repository of “knowledge.” Within the literary world map that emerges—full of translation, appropriation, and misnomers—*Rings* asks us to evaluate world historical forms of cultural production. Significantly, it pushes us to confront the question of how its gathering and appropriation stand in relation to the ethical thematics of unobtrusive encounters with the other. Centring around the shapeshifting material of silk, which as “narrative thread” runs through the novel, tracing socio-historical developments and registering matters of abstraction, fetishisation, and reification along the way, the chapter suggests that the novel’s ethical claim lies in its refusal to resolve itself, in the indeterminatedness of its material world. While *Rings* gestures more than any of the other works in this thesis to a flat ontology of co-constitutive entanglement between human and nonhuman, dismantling hierarchies of significance and meaning, the novel ultimately foregrounds fleeting moments of negativity, of irresolution and breakdown, under which such hybrid networks collapse.

**Maps, Translation and the Space of Literature**

What would Sebald make of Google Street View? Is walking off the grid these days a more radical move than in the early 90s, considering our ubiquitous access to precise maps and GPS location? In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald’s narrator hikes, criss-crossing like his stories, through the countryside of Suffolk, sometimes climbing fences, like an obstinate schoolboy, when other paths may have been available, always on the lookout for the next hedge maze. A biopolitical tactic in the eyes of many critics, going “hand

232 De Certeau: “a tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. […] it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. […] a tactic is an art of the weak” (37). Sebald’s walking would in a de
in hand with a poetics of digression” (Long, Image 19). While the narrator uses maps at times (233; 250), the stress is on the empty spaces, emblematic of Sebald’s exploration and attempted recuperation of what has been omitted from—as well as buried in—the records. Consider Michel de Certeau’s words on the map’s character of abstraction: “The map, a totalizing stage on which elements of diverse origin are brought together to form the tableau of a ‘state’ of geographical knowledge, pushes away into its prehistory or into its posterity, as if into the wings, the operations of which it is the result or the necessary condition. It remains alone on the stage. The tour describers have disappeared” (121). Sebald’s fragmented, non-linear narratives act as de Certeau’s tour describer returned, un-mapping, temporally reorganising the blank spaces, in the face of a reifying history of forgetting. If Fredric Jameson identified our postmodern condition as synchronic—“dominated by categories of space rather than […] time” (“Postmodernism, or The Cultural” 200)—then Sebald emphasises the diachronic, the spectral and splintered *longue durée* nature of our material surroundings.

If nowadays mapping has become privatised, it is by no means more democratised. How detailed Google’s map is of a given location partly relies, for example, on the presence of multinational brands, like Starbucks or McDonald’s. Sebald’s work follows an impulse to map a history of mapping, sensitive to that technology’s uneven biopolitical and colonising functions. Pilfering the peculiar language of *Heart of Darkness*, the novel’s central chapter retraces Conrad’s stations, associating, like Marlow, the map’s enchantment with childhood, the drive for adventure and exploration. Cartography as a colonial practice connects with industrial and urban development—railway, roads, towns—and as the white man’s unrestrained imagination and fixation that attributes animalism and hyper-sexuality to African culture. Inscribed in the idea of empty spaces on the map, without borders but with animals the size of multiple countries, is the violence that continues to issue from the subsequent artificial

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Certeauvian understanding be a spatial practice of resistance and a pedestrian “speech act” that creates new, unexpected meanings (97).

233 On the other hand, state institutions that used to control mapping, such as the military, now have to pressure digital app companies so they do not publicise secret locations.

234 See *Rings* 117-118.
and externalised partitioning of the continent. The map tells a story, but not one written by the people it represents. Yet Sebald, as his narrator dwells on the hold of the map’s “mysteries” over his alter ego’s younger self, does not condemn the map’s enchantment itself (V 219-220). Numerous actual maps are offered as documentation in all his novels, poorly scanned and roughened. The intent is not to disenchant the map for good. Instead, a certain performance is ascribed to this thing’s enchantment, its fetish of scale. In his talk “An Attempt at Restitution,” Sebald posits mapping and geography as the origin of his reading career. The particular kind of thinking, discovery, and recording that mapping represents for Sebald from a young age connects to his conception of reading, gathering and writing: the production of a disjointed map like Rings. Like rationalist or natural historical taxonomies, maps hold a double-edged sway. We may enquire then as to what kind of map or mapping Sebald’s own work puts forward.

In 1983, Jameson suggested that the “structural coordinates [of the capitalist system] are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable for most people” (“Cognitive” 278). Capitalism’s strategies of abstraction in the “postmodern hyperspace” mean the individual body fails “to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and to map cognitively its position in a mappable external world” (Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer” 15-16). Even the reality of alienation that the modernists experienced in the urban environment no longer coincides in the late capitalist phase with that urban environment. It has been relocated, shipped elsewhere, to the periphery or the virtual.

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235 See also the misleading distortion of the pervasive Mercator world map (which, by proportion, shrinks the Southern hemisphere).
236 The map of Orfordness in Rings, of Bishopsgate and of the Saarlouis and Breendonk fortresses in Austerlitz, the narrator’s schooldays map of S in Emigrants, the atlas page of rivers and mountain peaks in Vertigo…
237 He first learned to read with a card game based around city names, Sebald says. “The Cities Quartet marked not only the beginning of my career as a reader but the start of my passion for geography, which emerged soon after I began school: a delight in topography that became increasingly compulsive as my life went on and to which I have devoted endless hours bending over atlases and brochures of every kind” (CS 207-208).
The resulting “incapacity to map socially is as crippling to political experience as the analogous incapacity to map spatially is for urban experience” (“Cognitive” 283). The break from modernity to postmodernity that Jameson makes here dissolves on closer inspection, giving way to a question of degree: between the relocation of the conditions underlying Western alienation to the colony and the relocation to the even more disconnected periphery and virtual spaces. For Sebald’s characters, the coincidence of necessity and incapacity to map cognitively manifests as vertigo, a “temporary inability to think” paired with the crushing identification with Benjamin’s angel of history (Rings 187). Austerlitz’s hysterical symptoms issue from his incomplete subject formation, the refusal to map the self in place and time. Cognitive mapping is at once imperative and intolerable, an aporia that underlies Sebald’s conception of natural history. On this level, the material-driven, plotless web of Rings attempts to map its “narrative” spatio-temporal moment within the history of modern imperialism. But Sebald’s novel as map also remains absolutely singular, making no representative and abstract claims. Its archive is anti-hierarchical and deterritorialized, resisting—like Kafka’s minor language—assimilation into official, state-driven modes of representation. In this sense, epistemological claims, and the Utopian promise, of Jameson’s “cognitive mapping” are ultimately viewed with suspicion in Sebald’s aesthetic.

In “Modernism and Imperialism,” Jameson posits that “cartography is not the solution, but rather the problem at least in its ideal epistemological form as social cognitive mapping on the global scale” (158). The map’s ideal epistemological form realises the spatial abstraction of world-systems, concealing the uneven and combined nature of

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development. Jameson argues that modernist “style” was the cosmopolitan avant-garde’s response to the spatial disjunction (and implied crisis of representation) of imperial experience, the meaning-loss inscribed in the dislocation of large segments of socio-economic system to the colonies. Modernism’s “new spatial language […] becomes the marker and the substitute […] of the unrepresentable totality,” incorporating the limits, gaps, and hesitation of political perception into its style (163).

This political accounting for otherness within the system, according to Jameson, never quite manages to include the “radical otherness of colonial life, colonial suffering and exploitation” (157). The “style” of Conrad, Forster, and Woolf is here a shortcoming, against which Jameson situates the absence of style in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, whose absolute “linguisticality” issues itself from the imperialism history of its marginal, colonised space (166). History itself is already “part of the urban fabric” of Joyce’s Dublin (ibid.). Jameson’s analysis can lead to a crucial knot in Sebald’s novel: how to map the imperialist world-system from the historical fabric of its core without papering over the local or assuming colonial experience. Like Sebald, the narrator is both foreigner and latecomer (and his home nation’s perceived lack of imperial history formed part of a nationalist complex with devastating consequences). He does not set out to present an absolute answer, but takes seriously the imperative that the modernist’s incomplete map has bestowed on him: the rejection and dismantling of modernity’s structures of knowledge, constructive of modern subjectivity, and of the hegemonic, imperialist archive as the repository of historical exclusion and deceit, in favour of continual border crossings and “translations” that account for the limitations of perception in the metropole, or “core.” It becomes a singular performance, working within the map’s abstracting logic, and pitting literary forms and content with and against a real material index.

Perhaps our alarm bells should ring when we see how the reception of *Rings* indulges its appeal to the cartomaniac’s impulses; this becomes clear in projects such as Rick Moody’s map of the novel, Barbara Hui’s online “litmap” using Google Earth, and Grant Gee’s documentary *Patience (After Sebald)* (2012), which follows the narrator’s footsteps as persons known and unknown to Sebald comment on his person, work, and sway. Passionate readers find themselves encouraged by the novel to hike along its

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239 Figure 2 Appendix (2).
240 barbarahui.net/litmap/
itinerary, even though Sebald’s trip did not quite follow the timeline and trajectory in question (Schütte, W.G. 123).241 Viewing with suspicion scholars who trace Sebald’s journey blindly, Helmut Lethen writes: “By following Sebald’s labyrinthine corridors, the expanse and emptiness of East Anglia that he archives fell into oblivion” (26).242 Sebald’s material archive is at stake—a faithful duplication commits a further abstraction, generalising the singular, unobtrusive moment and specific language into a universal blueprint that no longer matches the initial ethical impulse. What are we to do with the largely neutralised male gaze of the narrator’s walk, for instance? If in Open City, Teju Cole interrogates what it is like for a middle-class black man to walk the streets of New York, Sebald rarely touches on gender or race politics of the ambulatory “tactic” itself, although we do find the narrator’s keen sense for his own intrusion and disconcerting presence as a male stranger with a foreign accent. A universal, undifferentiated recuperation of his walking tactic into discourse is then little but a sign of unchecked privilege.

In real terms, his “pilgrimage” through Suffolk has become a veritable pilgrimage for readers of all kinds to revel in nostalgia for someone else’s experience.243 The fetishisation of the Sebaldian mode carries an eerie sense of doubling in the object world: his traveller is struck most by abandoned, displaced things, mute in themselves but gesturing toward the sedimentation of socio-historical processes. Meanwhile, the Sebald tourist seeks that same “authentic” object, which is however unrepeatable; s/he by-passes the history of displacement and neglect that makes the thing so powerful for Sebald’s walker, and invents a new, ready-made Sebald souvenir. Peter Fritzsche is not

241 The fact that Sebald always planned to write about his ambulations along the coastline de-romanticises the mode somewhat; he sought to write a series of ten travel articles that he would sell to the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (ibid). See also Sebald’s travelogue of East Anglia from 1974: “The carved wooden angels of East Anglia: Travelogue 1974.”

242 My translation. “Indem man Sebalds labyrinthischen Gängen durch die Archive folgte, geriet die Weite und Leere East Anglias, die er archivierte, in Vergessenheit.”

243 The “phenomenon of Sebaldtourismus” contrasts with the distinction between traveller and tourist in Sebald’s writing (Long, “Anti-Tourist” 85-86). Vertigo has some damming portrayals of “[h]olidaymakers,” while the narrator identifies himself as a “foreign correspondent” to receptionists (93; 192).
alone in criticising the privileged nostalgic mode that the Sebaldian “tactic” entails for
critic and fan alike:

What is dangerous about this proposition of a postwar present rich only with
prewar debris is that the only way to relieve the disenchantment of the present
is to collect the debris of lost lives just like the collectors of the nineteenth
century assembled their botanical specimens, architectural drawings, and
encyclopedia articles which drift in and out of Sebald’s books. The ruin of the
past becomes the tasty morsel of the present. (298)

In bestowing on his readers a different kind of map, stimulating, global yet locally
traceable, Sebald leaves behind an enchanting thing whose critical and political
properties are best served by sensitivity to that enchantment.

It is a treacherous balancing act. In his demystification of nostalgic objects (the
Jerusalem souvenirs, the Somerleyton miniature), Sebald strays remarkably close to his
own nostalgic refusal of history: Sebald kitsch. It is the problem of the latecomer,
always somehow on the defensive, which in turn Sebald addresses: “The old-
fashionedness of the diction or of the narrative tone is therefore nothing to do with
nostalgia for a better age that’s gone past but is simply something that, as it were,
heightens the awareness of that which we have managed to engineer in this century”
(Silverblatt). “Always historicize!” Sebald might say, especially when trying to make
sense of the present. This means that the nostalgic, anti-historical style of things needs
to be reckoned with, if with an element of distrust and irony.244 Rings is arguably his
most successful work in terms of following through on the tension between the
reifying systems of abstraction that governs these object relations, and the fragmented,
inconsistent, and inconclusive reading and writing of these material connections. It is a
performance caught between stasis and mobility, continually disrupted by the necessity
to make sense of our perception of and relation with things.

The truth-claim that Sebald’s novels defy easy categorisation is adequate only insofar as
it is founded in the limited groupings of the contemporary cultural marketplace.

Walking, journeys (preferred mode of transport: railway; less frequently car or, god

244 See Long, “W.G. Sebald’s Miniature Histories.”
forbid, airplane) and emigration or exile form the conspicuous foundation of all his works, even the posthumously published fragments in _Campo Santo_ telling of a trip to Corsica. Sebald conspicuously enters the literary heritage of Bruce Chatwin and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s eccentric travel meditations. The English edition (and other translations) omits the novel’s original subtitle: “eine Englische Wallfahrt.” The ramble relates to the spiritual and sacred, but above all to recovery—in terms of physical and mental health, but also memory. The narrator’s walk is undertaken with therapeutic intent, but also leads to the subsequent mental breakdown. The writing process is marked, in the text, by “almost total immobility” (3): “I couldn’t move for a long time because of a slipped disk. So I lay prostrate, crosswise, on the bed, forehead on a chair next to it, and wrote on the floor” (_Eis_ 122).

245 Markus Zisselsberger’s edited volume _The Undiscover’d Country_ (2010) is devoted exclusively to Sebald’s “poetics of travel.”

246 See Sebald’s essay on Rousseau in _Place_, and on Chatwin in CS. In an interview, Sebald notes the importance of scientific research to his conception of walking: “The walker’s approach to viewing nature is a phenomenological one and the scientist’s approach is a much more incisive one, but they all belong together. […] I tend to read scientists by preference almost, and I’ve always found them a great source of inspiration. It doesn’t matter particularly whether they’re eighteenth-century scientists—Humboldt—or someone contemporary like Rupert Sheldrake” (Silverblatt).

247 Judith Ryan comments: “Places of pilgrimage, whether literal or metaphorical, are a way of mapping a world that is constantly threatened by decay and destruction” (57). They are also places with idols and relics, material icons referring to an immaterial entity and governed by law and faith.

248 In Gee’s documentary, Robert Macfarlane remarks that the English (Romantic) walking tradition can be understood in terms of recovery, whereas the American equivalent anticipates discovery (of self). Macfarlane’s brush is deliberately broad. _Austerlitz_, as a counter-example, joins recovery and discovery.

249 Compare with the ideal writing condition in _Vertigo_, contrasting with Sebald’s normally painstaking relationship with composition: “I sat at a table near the open terrace door, my papers and notes spread out around me, drawing connections between events that lay far apart but which seemed to me to be of the same order. I wrote with an ease that astonished me” (94).
At the onset of the composition of a novel “about” walking and travelling lies immobility (just as *Austerlitz*, a novel “about” memory work, is defined by paralysis and amnesia). Compare the ironic manipulation of *katabasis* in *Molloy*, perhaps Beckett’s most spirited dismantling of the “journey to the self” trope. Both starting (narratively) and ending (diegetically) in his mother’s bed where he is pressed to compose his testimony by a captor, *Molloy* stumbles, in circles and with increasing exhaustion, from the heart of the country to the coast. If the journey as narrative figure of self-discovery (*pace* *Bildungsroman*) was troublesome for modernists like Conrad and Woolf, Beckett drags it quite literally through the mud. Already in the German Diaries, he quips that life is more a “notwendige Bleiben” than any kind of journey (qtd. in Knowlson 247), a sentiment crystallised in his sympathy for the sluggish Belacqua, and in Beckett’s “investigation into the possible meaning of ‘on’ and ‘onwards,’ progress and stasis, […]” and finally better and worse” more widely (Katz, *Saying* 160). In a comparable vein, we see Sebald’s fragmented ring-structure pulling the journey and recovery tropes away from rationalist, human-centred control, despite the book’s autobiographical aura. If the exiled Rousseau’s “chronic need to think and work” made of him a natural historian dedicated to the “demanding rationalistic project involving the compiling of lists, indices and catalogues” (*Place* 55), our narrator’s unsystematic journey is rather an admission that the anthropocentric historical and literary archive only exacerbates malaise, anxiety, and amnesia in our abstracted global reality.

The term “*Beziehungswahn*” [delusion of reference] is often used to describe Sebald’s mode of contingency and chance networks in relation to mental health and psychotic disorders. The word suggests the lack of subjective control over objective processes. Melancholia may be a response by the subject to his/her modern condition, but it is no precondition for the connections themselves; rather it is only the precondition of the specific creative, ruinous performance in the novels—not spelling out a blueprint for

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250 On the connection between *katabasis*, digression, and narrative teleology, see Katz, *Saying* 165ff.

251 Paul Sheehan explores how Beckett’s particular brand of anti-narrative in the trilogy goes against the human- and subject-driven foundation of the *Bildungsroman* (150-179).

252 See Körte, Schütte (*W.G.*), Fuchs (*Schmerzenspuren*), Hutchinson (*W.G. Sebald*). “*Beziehungswahn*”—from psychiatry—is most commonly understood as a syndrome of schizophrenia.
an ethical engagement with the world. “Beziehungswahn” in *Rings* names the singular attempt at orientation in the world-system, an attempt itself central to the psychological strain: “Anxiety is perhaps the dominant mood of today’s efforts at cognitive mapping” (Toscano and Kinkle 240). The individual anxiety springing from the pressures of late capitalism is in turn passed off by that system, as Mark Fisher writes, as “a natural fact, like weather” (19). Psychological stress is privatised as something that simply happens to people, rather than as political notion. Hence the double breakdown: first, the depression prompting the narrator’s walk; second, the mental collapse a year later. The performative translation—the novel’s most external ring—is not only a therapeutic measure, but also the attempt to politicise the individual’s chaotic mapping and its possible aesthetic form. At no point do Sebald’s unsystematic patterns form a unified answer; they continually refer back to the problem of systems. Long describes this irresolvable conflict well: “[*Rings*] contains the possibility of meaninglessness or incoherence, and yet it also represents the intrusion of a technology of modernity into the very fabric of a text that seeks to resist it” (Image 19-20). This negative determination is framed within literary convention, in the contents page, typical of the travel narrative. Although the index lists the novel’s different stations and materials, it provides no clear idea of the narrative (the foot journey), and the accumulation of entries read more like a “collection of oddities” (*Rings* 36), artefacts of anthropological interest.\(^{253}\) If there is an endgame, if this archive externalises the author’s death drive, its literary map turns in on itself.

The novel’s central problematisation of systems is conceived through the material of silk, the most explicitly literary material that could intervene at the collapse of cognitive mapping, tied closely to the writing process.\(^{254}\) Literalising the literary device of *Leitfaden* to the point of cliché, the silk thread fossilises its historical symbolism. Our conception of storytelling is rooted in the idea of spinning and weaving: the word “text,” from the Latin *textere*: “weave”—later *textus*: “tissue” or “style of literary work” (*Concise ODE*). *Rings* literally picks up the thread of its predecessor, *Emigrants*, which ends on the ekphrasis of a photograph showing three weavers in the Polish ghetto of

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\(^{253}\) Figure 3 Appendix (3).

\(^{254}\) Consider Benjamin’s aphorism “Work on good prose has three steps: a musical phase when it is composed, an architectonic one when it is built, and a textile one when it is woven” (*One-Way* 61).
Litzmannstadt: Nona who spun the thread of life, Decuma who measured, Morta who cut (237). The mythological, storytelling overtone to weaving in *Emigrants* emerges out of and against the unequivocally historical picture of relentless Nazi bureaucracy and wartime economy. Though Sebald forgoes the explicit pun, the German for spinning—“spinnen”—can also denote the state of madness (consider Empress Tz’u-hsi’s mad silk reign), which, *pace* Foucault, lies outside the official archive-map. As if it had evacuated the human from his/her own archival domain, the pervasive, nomadic nonhuman agent (silk/the silkworm) weaves together personal narrative and storytelling, modern histories of technology, industry, warfare, genocide, a history of mental health (and its institutions), and the possibility itself of human subjectivity in the disciplinary apparatus. What is at stake here? The novel’s ring structure and plotlessness mean that silk cannot lead us along a teleological narrative path, instead locating the “inevitable calamity” of the linear narrative in its multiple fractured times. The leitmotiv—fetish-object of the literary space—cannot fulfil its normative function, standing in for its own absence instead.

*Rings* internalises mapping as a problem for world literature, on a political level connecting local and global coordinates, on a historical level of archival mechanisms, but also on the level of artistic canonicity and heritage. It formulates a challenge to the systematisation of reading practices and the smoothing over of translation. One could

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255 The picture is taken by the Ghetto’s chief accountant Walter Genewein, aiming to capture the exemplary efficiency of the Nazi enterprise.  
256 Note the Foucauldian connection between rational non-reason and the irrational reason of the archive and its mechanisms, which persists throughout Sebald’s work. The dominant, rational language of psychiatry, according to Foucault, is not in communication with mental illness itself, erasing the very silences of non-reason on which it is founded. In Sebald’s German copy of Foucault’s *L’histoire de la folie à l’âge classique*, the following passage (here in the English) is highlighted: “The language of psychiatry, which is a monologue of reason about madness, has been established only on the basis of such a silence. […] I have not tried to write the history of that language, but rather the archaeology of that silence” (x-xi). Deutsches Literatur Archiv (DLA), Marbach.  
257 See Sebald’s 92nd Street Y interview.
object that Sebald’s own canon is, bar a few exceptions, Eurocentric and male. However, we may be better served by examining the novel’s unsystematic rewriting of a dominant field of cultural production. While Beckett often gives other modern writers a satirical nod, Sebald writes authors and artists into the text as (more or less) non-fictional characters. With his palimpsestic intertextuality and ruinous citation, he seems to wear his “influences” on his sleeve like a prototypical postmodernist. The binaries between innovation and citation, between progress and stasis, however, do not hold. Sebald’s citation of Nabokov in *Emigrants*, for instance, at once textual, visual, and historical, is not so much a play of surfaces as an attempt to tap into a network of citation, translation, and exophonic writing as it shaped, contingently, the narrative of literature. Problematizing automatized relationships with language, Sebald’s texts inscribe a cultural history fundamentally multilingual and translated, often with a direct conflict between disenfranchisement and canonisation.

Sebald’s literary canon is made up of exiled and displaced, often queer writers, victims of political persecution—in *Rings*, for instance, Chateaubriand, Casement, Conrad, Hamburger. As the English translator of Paul Celan, the Austerlitz-like Michael Hamburger invokes a web of translation and language politics, from Celan’s absent Romanian to his appropriation of the German perpetrator’s tongue within a French environment, to Hamburger’s adopted English. We get Edward FitzGerald’s story, his introduction of Omar Khayyam’s *Rubaiyat* to the West, with the problem of attribution adding to a ruinous map where global literatures, translation and histories exist as superimposed and politically inextricable. From the Southwold reading room—watching a documentary half-asleep—the narrator jumbles together fact and fiction around the exophonic, “Stendhalien” Korzeniowski/Conrad. Unlike in good modernist

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258 His UEA syllabi of recent European or German literature, for example, show a consistent absence of women writers (see Catling and Hibbitt 133-139).

259 The “Selwyn” narrative makes reference to Nabokov and includes a photo of the writer, while the problem of authenticity in relation to biography, documentation and citation is rehearsed in a manner following Nabokov’s autobiography *Speak, Memory*. See Öhlschläger, 40ff.

260 In *Sebald’s Bachelors: Queer Resistance and the Unconforming Life* (2013), Helen Finch has argued convincingly that Sebald’s critical canon reveals instead an interest in queer masculinity.
fashion, his immobility and sleep produce no long stream-of-consciousness, but what he “since tried to reconstruct from the sources” (104), the conditions of the composition-process unromantically clear. A modernist canon despite itself. Sebald is not simply paying lip service; with nonchalance and audacity, classics of literature— dear to his heart, no doubt—are rewritten and recontextualised. The unavoidable fetishisation of the artwork as cultural capital with national ownership becomes repurposed amid Sebald’s appropriation, displacement and translation.

While not the punk plagiarism of, say, Kathy Acker aiming at a phallogocentric lineage, Sebald’s rewriting is founded on ruination and contingency. In a letter to his translator, Michael Hulse, he admits: “I often change [quotations] quite deliberately. The long quote, for instance, in which Apollo describes Vologda was substantially rewritten by me. […] I therefore now changed your version, which goes back to the proper source, so that it follows more closely my own (partly fabricated) rendering of the passage. There is a great deal in the text that is simply made up” (qtd. in Hulse 200). Hulse remains baffled. How does the novel’s anarchic rewriting sit with a thematic so intent on ethical and unobtrusive encounters with the other? Sebald translates the exophonic Conrad into German, using bilingual sources, changing language and facts to suit his narrative, and later, regarding his work’s translation into English, refuses to go back to the original source text, and instead translates the translation once over. Like Beckett, Sebald uses the English translation of his works to “correct” his own originals, admitting that he finds stylistic problems in them. Entire paragraphs are rewritten this way. Sebald interrogates our parameters for authenticity; which Conrad, which Sebald are we reading? Rebecca Walkowitz calls this Sebald’s “unassimilation,” which “does not return names to an original state of propriety: rather, it displays the history of translation, it uncontracts that history, by situating individuals, places, and even novels within several national, subnational, or transnational traditions” (*Cosmopolitan* 160).

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261 For more on this, see Lynn Wolff, *W.G. Sebald’s Hybrid Poetics* 224ff.

262 Walkowitz argues: “Sebald uses Conrad’s critique of Belgium in *Heart of Darkness* to establish an expansive critique of Britain in his own novel. If Conrad is critical of liberal nationalism, as Pericles Lewis has shown, Sebald goes further in describing the illiberal actions that liberal nationalism has helped to obscure” (*Cosmopolitan* 168-169). Walkowitz traces how Sebald first integrates Marlow’s language, describing “black shadows” [Schattenwesen] worked and starved to death, then re-inscribes the colonial
Sebald’s novel projects expelled, ruinous language onto a disjointed world map; it rejects the archive as a tomb of modernity. Writing to his publisher, Sebald puts his foot down on the idea of including “patronising” footnotes: “The “foreign” words are, after all, part of the character of the text.” Punctuated by recognisable, inconsistent citation and translation, foreign or estranging word choice, long scientific (often erroneous) lists of things, Sebald’s “plagiarising,” web-like yet ruinous text must be seen as thematising a wider, ethical problem of how language enters the world.

Coming from an in every way privileged position, what can warrant the repurposing (and taking possession) of the lives and works—even the suffering—of others? Sebald could not be more aware of the precariousness of the ethical thresholds along which he moves. How intrusive is his approach? When the artist Frank Auerbach objected to unconcealed biographical references in the original edition of Die Ausgewanderten, Sebald retreated immediately, removing two images and changing Auerbach to Ferber—but clearly, he had not asked for consent before publication. And what of Sebald’s nuanced criticism of orientalism? How come the narrator uses, however sparsely, words like “oriental men” (Rings 81) and “Neger”? Sometimes the narrator is clearly

critique of Belgium’s history into Conrad’s biographical narrative, notably changing “black shadows” to “black bodies” [schwarzen Leibern] (ibid.). Note also how the English translation brings the choice of words closer to Conrad’s; “Schattenwesen” (146) initially translates Marlow’s insistence on the slaves’ unearthliness, rather than his repetition of “black” in that passage.


Even in essays, Sebald mistranslates proper nouns in favour of a punning connection. See Place 181n9.

Published by Andere Bibliothek, the original Ausgewanderten contained a portrait by Auerbach and an image of “Ferber’s dark eye” (E 178). See also Angier “Who Is W.G. Sebald?”

[morgenländisch] Sebald deliberately sets a scene of cultural tohubohu here, in which The Hague is contrasted with the emptiness of Suffolk, and from which the narrator emerges utterly bewildered. The description of “oriental men” is interpolated together with “the Bristol Bar, Yuksel’s Café, a videoboetiek, Aran Turk’s pizza place, a Euro-
ventriloquizing an antiquated (often regional) Western viewpoint—as per the American GIs in rural Bavaria: “as for those negroes, no one knew what to make of them” (E 70). Why he would talk of a “Negerfamilie” driving next to him in upstate New York is less evident—except perhaps to consolidate the year of the narrative as 1984 (Ausgewanderten 154). In Schwindel. Gefühle, the narrator uses “Neger/Negerfrau” in a way that conjures a Manichean—and clichéd—history of allegory and mythology around blackness as the colour of death (and grief) (267; 283). That these racial clichés are no faux pas or sign of casual xenophobia should be clear; yet the word-choice remains an issue. Even if in West Germany the gradual disappearance of “Neger” in politically correct spheres occurred belatedly compared to the Anglo-American world, Sebald’s ex-patriate position and his academic and creative interest in precisely such issues must prevail here. Few critics have remarked on this peculiarity—Schütte argues that the “offensive” words are calculated stumbling blocks, showing Sebald’s preservation of outdated vernacular and provincialisms, as well as a critique of the political limits of “political correctness” (”Sebalds Neger” 5). I agree especially with Schütte’s first point—whereas Sebald must have admitted the limits of his own political critique (if it was one) during the closely monitored translation process: except in the instance of obvious ventriloquizing, the English tries to neutralise “Neger” as “black.” In the context of Sebald’s explorations of colonial and orientalist discourse, we are evidently meant to pause at these racial words and clichés and invest in their history. However, the fact that Sebald refuses to do the critical labour for us in the most estranging instances also hints at a point outside the discourse of ideology, a point from which our uncanny discomfort emerges. Our inability to precisely locate the reason for and place of these linguistic stumbling blocks makes clear that the reality of the historical violence for which they are stand-ins is also beyond our archive, that our rationalist repositories of knowledge can only purport to sufficiently account for violence, power, and destruction. This limit is what the ruination, the indetermination, of Sebald’s networks dramatizes.

sex-shop, a halal butcher’s, and a carpet store” and a “pimp in a white suit [and] a ludicrous Tyrolean hat” (80-82).

267 E 105; V 244; 259.
Compare the recuperation (via an educational brochure) of Nazi jargon—or ideologemes, empty ciphers qua ideological unit—which marks the proximity of language and violence:

Unter Bezugnahme auf den vom Führer auf dem Reichsparteitag 1936 verkündeten Plan […] heißt es da […] daß, dementsprechend, vermittels des vom Reichsminister für Ernährung und Landwirtschaft, vom Reichsarbeitsminister, vom Reichsforstmeister und vom Reichsminister für Luftfahrt verabschiedeten Seidenbau-Aufbauprogramms eine neue Anbauperiode in Deutschland eingeleitet worden sei… (Ring 345-346)

Nine (!) instances of “Reich” appear here in two untranslatable sentences. Austerlitz similarly stumbles over the Nazis’ bureaucratic, rationalised propaganda-state diction: “Begriffen wie Barackenbestandteillager, Zusatzkostenberechnungsschein, Bagatellreparaturwerkstätte, Menagetransportkolonnen…” (A 338).268 The incongruous incorporation of materialised, void language inextricable from real historical violence characterises a ruin-text not intent on reconciling itself. To be sure, these passages imply a critique of ideological discourse; what they also make evident, however, is a discrepancy between the void materiality of the words (as stumbling blocks) and the impossibility of our deconstruction of ideological discourse to account for the actual historical horror that took place (and may take place again). It is for this reason that Sebald allows himself to appropriate, for instance, Jean Améry’s description of his torture at the hands of the Nazis in Austerlitz, the same novel that reprints Nazi jargon: certain things—not metaphysical concepts but material realities—are beyond discourse. The repurposing and translation places language as a thing among things, foregrounding its intervention in the negative, its refusal in the face of the definitive, unified text or archive.

The foreignising, re-translating, re-writing language of Sebald’s novel registers the spectrality of Sebald’s disorderly “map,” rehearsing the tension between material particular and a total image (qua fiction) that fails to form. As literary materials are reorganised alongside leftover “pieces” of language, connecting to histories of power

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268 Here the English translation admits defeat, rendering the German words in italics (233-236).
and violence, Sebald’s ring-novel stages its involvement in its own cultural production. We may draw on Adorno for a thought on this dialectical image: “Although the magic fetishes are one of the historical roots of art, a fetishistic element remains admixed in artworks, an element that goes beyond commodity fetishism. Artworks can neither exclude nor deny this; even socially the emphatic element of semblance in artworks is, as a corrective, the organon of truth” (AT 227-228). The artwork, Johanne Malt expands, needs to incorporate its fetishism “into its own form, laying bare its mystifying processes without attempting to shed them” (110). On an ambitious scale, Rings replicates a cultural world-map incorporating as many fields of production as possible, and dialectically locates itself within it. The result is not a synchronic, timeless space, but instead a ruinous, spectral image that refuses to be resolved. Time and again, the work reflects on its own melancholic predispositions, its unsystematic connections and systems of production. And the glue (to mix metaphors) that holds together what cannot be held together is the novel’s privileged fetish object, silk.

**Silk and the Nonhuman Archive**

Silk, as mentioned, helps us think through Rings as a system of networks self-consciously involved in its own literary field of production. As an animal-material agent that relies on metamorphosis and transmigration, tracing Sebald’s map, silk seems to be exemplary for the hybrid network-actors that “new materialisms” champion. Within the unruly topographies and inconsistent echo spaces of Rings, silk is apparently never “itself,” always involved with other materials, drawing new connections. Seen through the prism of Thomas Browne’s mystic ontologies, the webs that structure our first encounter with silk in the novel resemble, for instance, what Donna Haraway calls “diffraction”: “patterns [recording] the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference. Diffraction is about heterogeneous history, not about originals. Unlike reflections, diffractions do not displace the same elsewhere, in more or less distorted form, thereby giving rise to industries of [story-making about origins and truths]” (qtd. in Dolphijn and Tuin 52). Diffraction—like other “new materialist”

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269 Malt looks to fetishism for a conception of surrealism as political art. If the surrealist gesture was to divorce the object’s fetishism from the commodity sphere and transpose it onto the body material, the surrealist artwork still remained (perhaps despite itself) in dialectical conversation with the commodity fetish (Malt 6).
notions such as entanglement, assemblage, intra-action—insists on the mutually constitutive nature of things (human/nonhuman), and rejects essentialism or any kinds of grand narrative of origins. Compare Browne’s quincunx, the pattern he attributes to the natural order of things: “Browne identifies this structure everywhere, in animate and inanimate matter: in certain crystalline forms, in starfish and sea urchins, in the vertebræ of mammals as the backbones of birds and fish, in the skins of various species of snake, in the crosswise prints left by quadrupeds, in the physical shapes of caterpillars, butterflies, silkworms and moths…” (Rings 20-21). Anchored here is a relation between matter and patterns that resonates with ecological thought of human-nonhuman entanglement. The novel’s own intricate webs and coordinates are framed as an ethical-aesthetic response to “the principal chapters of the history of subjection” (Rings 13), positing the subject-object split as a violent model for understanding the world and our place in it, naturalised by a long history of Western thought. However, while Sebald—if less drastically than Beckett—dismantles this split, extending to the writing and connecting process itself, no image of pure hybridity, of a harmonious merging, replaces it.

I suggest that while silk becomes Sebald’s most hybridised actor—hinting at the flat ontology and nomadic bodies of “new materialisms”—it ultimately only proves further that Sebald deals in negativity, alterity, and indetermination. For in Sebald’s rejection of hierarchical, ontological separations, the vision of hybridity unfolds promptly into a horror of comparison—historical violence does not map onto the system. For all its relational and metaphorical activities, silk intensifies—especially when we look at the novel as a disjointed gathering of materials—the breakdown of relations, offering a frozen image of this breakdown in its singularity as animal or material object at a given moment, always a refracted object perceived and written aslant. Sebald ultimately

270 Quoting Browne’s concluding sentences, Sebald allows the metaphorical language of spinning and thread to resonate within this relational framework: “We are unwilling to spin out our waking thoughts into the phantasms of sleep: making cables of cobwebs and wildernesses of handsome groves” (Ringe 32). Browne also gets the final word of the novel, not without another reminder that he was, indeed, the son of a silk merchant.

271 The passage on Rembrandt’s Anatomy Lesson at the novel’s onset (12-17) is generally viewed as setting the tone for the novel’s pervasive critique of Cartesian dualism and instrumental reason.
eschews neither dialectical critique nor the possibility of radical difference (which is threatened by a total system of pure mediation). What Sebald’s novel pursues, I suggest, through this staging of the conflict between the entangled system and its breakdown is not so much a radical epistemological pessimism, as a continuing interrogation of the historical archive as the domain of the human. If there is perhaps an overall dialectical image that emerges, it is negative, spectral, fragmented with itself, and precluding sublimation.

Throughout the novel, sericulture, the silkworm, its product and commodity biography, become “a paradigm of the transition from nature to industry” (Sebald, E116), at once allegory, index, and play on words. It is true that silk is “yet another allegory of natural history on a global scale: of globalization as the ultimate form of Naturgeschichte” (Santner 113), but it is also at once more singular and multifaceted than that. As material and animal form silk (trans)migrates: it is commodity, fetish object (in various iterations), instrument of power, and political subject; it even acts as prosthetic/extension of the human body. Silk leads the walker-reader from 2700 BC China to seventeenth-century France to eighteenth-century England to Nazi Germany, accommodating readings of the interconnectedness between things, human and nonhuman, within a longue durée history. But its “literary webbing” poses a problem: if silk calls attention, not to itself as discreet object, but as a model for reading—a novel’s narrative structure as well as the socio-historical narratives of material and animal (textile, clothes, technology, industry, commodity fetish and sexual fetish, totem…)—then the novel already performs the critical gesture for us to an extent. Again: mapping silk seems to be like following Sebald’s footsteps through Suffolk. Sebald’s novel asks us to invest, rather, in how it deals with historical forms of representation. The pervasive notions of metamorphosis and metempsychosis are key here—and the reason why Sebald’s novels in general are riddled with Lepidoptera—inscribing the relationship between material and abstraction (or transcendence), and signalling that

272 “ein Paradigma des Übergangs von Natur zur Industrie”

273 Metamorphosis and metempsychosis are also the terms Marx uses for commodity fetishism (metamorphosis) and the creation of value: “While productive labour is changing the means of production into constituent elements of a new product, their value undergoes a metempsychosis. It deserts the consumed body, to occupy the newly created one” (Capital 138).
the questions of meaning and ontology seem to always be transported elsewhere. In its accumulation and refraction—narrative, historical, ontological—throughout Rings, silk puts into relief the inadequacy of our categories.

Thus, silk in its various shapes emerges as central to socio-anthropological research and transcendental thought (Browne), and mythological storytelling\(^{274}\) (Borges); it is the fabric of mourning and passing (of transmigration)—for Browne, in the tales of Konrad’s parents (106-108), and of Chateaubriand and Charlotte (253); it is the powerful material instrument for execution—the “silken rope” (262); the symbolic material of imperial wealth and orientalism in the nineteenth century (“the birds of paradise and golden pheasants on the silken tapestries” in Somerleyton [33]; “a glass case containing […] colourful silk bows and tiny stuffed humming-birds” in a colonial Brussels hotel [123]); the maternal or female-coded memento or clothing item (the silk handkerchief of Hamburger’s melancholic grandmother [181]; the Ashbury sisters’ sewing designs [212]). Silk is here decidedly non-fashionable. Benjamin was obsessed with fashion precisely because it went out of fashion almost instantaneously, its magical display qualities giving way to the ruinous, allegorical character of the abandoned commodity. To that moment when the stamp of exchange-value has faded and we can read the social hieroglyphics. Sebald’s silk decidedly turns against the spell of the always “new,” forming instead a spectral anthropological image of death. It also operates at the intersection of different fetishes: ritual/faith, totem, libido, commodity. Rather than demystifying the fetish here, Sebald’s text follows its demand to be read, delving into a history of enchantment.

What all three major conceptions of the fetish—Marxist, Freudian, spiritual—have in common is the transferring of a human relation onto a material thing that obscures or hides it. While in Marx, the commodity-fetish is a specifically modern problem, a quality of capitalist exchange value, the idea itself of the fetish emerges as a pre-modern

\(^{274}\) Joyce’s playful evocation in Ulysses of metempsychosis as a key to unlock his mythical transposition might hint at yet another self-conscious literary ploy on Sebald’s behalf. The silkworm moth in Rings also summons Goethe’s Faust’s two souls speech: “The caterpillar now stops eating, runs about restlessly, and, seeking to leave the low earth behind, strives to gain greater heights, until it has found the right place and can start to weave its cell from the resinous juices produced in its insides” (275; italics mine).
The fetish enters the historical narrative as a problem of the religious symbolic order, pitting metonymy against metaphor (its semiotic dimension), at the same time as it traces imperial, cross-cultural trajectories and power dynamics that structure early capitalist relations with other systems (political dimension). Just as the pidgin word “fetisso” occupied an interlinguistic and intercultural space, the fetish poses cultural translation and confrontation as its precondition, registering a border-crossing history of power and violence. Yet, the fetish—as opposed to the idol—has an “irreducible materiality” that stands in contradiction to the signified human transcendence (Pietz 7). The fetish’s history of migration and translation, its dislocation of the libido and/or labour process, all become the function of its materiality. The political potential—and this is the impression silk carries throughout Sebald’s novel—can lie precisely in its final refusal of sublimation, and thus its continual demand for the relationship between material and abstract to be traced.

The novel quite distinctly places silk at the interstices of morals and ethics and their politicisation. As it indexes biopolitical developments and the instrumentalisation of nature, silk also acts as a stand-in for the male heterosexual (read: normative) imagination that contrasts with the queer bachelor gaze of Sebald’s characters (as Helen Finch has noted). Ancient Chinese sericulture became associated with the female and domestic spheres, with shelter, care and bonding. A more blatantly sexualised and fetishised coding follows in the tractates of Bavarian agriculturist Hazzi: “the social improvement of the fair sex and all other members of the populace who were unaccustomed to regular work” (290). At least, Hazzi had the grace to dispel the most objectifying male fantasies, “such as that the best place to hatch silkworms was in hotbeds or the bosoms of young girls” (291). Meanwhile Sebald juxtaposes, “in good Foucauldian fashion, a monarchical and a governmental approach to the development of a German silk industry” (Long, Image 14). Silk inscribes the sovereign’s power over

275 On the complicated birth of the fetish, see Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish.”
276 “Together with the unravelling of cocoons and the weaving and embroidering of the materials, this [domestic silkworm culture] was to become the principal occupation of all the succeeding empresses, and passed from their hands into those of the entire female sex” (276).
life and death,277 and its relation to madness and barbarity: the suicide of Hung Hsiu-chuan in nineteenth-century China—“his bloated body held together only by the silken robes of imperial yellow”—followed by the Taipings’ ritual mass suicide (141). The Dowager Empress’s insatiable and murderous “craving for power” is also presented through her relationship to silk and sericulture (149). Harbouring two chief passions—silkworms and “lifeless things”—Tz’u-hsi has “a daily blood sacrifice offered in her temple to the gods of silk […] lest the silkworms want for fresh green leaves”:

Of all living creatures, these curious insects alone aroused a strong affection in her. […] These pale, almost transparent creatures, which would presently give their lives for the fine thread they were spinning, she saw as her true loyal followers. To her they seemed the ideal subjects, diligent in service, ready to die, capable of multiplying vastly within a short span of time, and fixed on their one sole preordained aim, wholly unlike human beings, on whom there was basically no relying (150-151).

The explicit anthropomorphisation of the silkworm unfolds into the total thingification of Tz’u-hsi’s human subjects who in their unreliability for self-sacrifice are only made more expendable still. Yet, as sovereign power seeks absolute instrumentalised obedience, the text accommodates a jarring expression of love toward the nonhuman creature, a willing vulnerability and exposure toward the other.278 For all the biopolitical and historical tracing of the Silk Road, we are led to an ethical impasse not dissimilar to that of Sebald’s plagiarising and estranging word-choices: surely, within the Empress’s

277 To let live and take life, as opposed to the make-live-and-let-die of biopolitics.
278 Contrast the episode with that of the melancholic Catherine Ashbury and her penchant to pronounce rather Sebaldian sentiments: “It seems to me that we never got used to being on this earth and life is just one great, ongoing, incomprehensible blunder” (220). Sitting against a mulberry tree, she absent-mindedly utters: “at one point we thought we might raise silkworms in one of the empty rooms, But then we never did. Oh, for the countless things one fails to do!” (221). One easily imagines a potential description of Catherine’s creaturely serenity, the femininity the narrator may have attributed to it, the therapeutic qualities—a typical Sebaldian “what if” scenario—so it is telling that this remains absent, leaving the micro-ecology and poetics of the Ashburys’ private space grounded in the real and testimonial.
reign of horror, her openness toward the creaturely cannot result in an ethical equation. The image certainly cancels out the standard narrative in which creaturely or neighbourly sympathy for, and identification with, the nonhuman—so strongly associated with Sebald’s work—provides a model for ethical being-for-the-other.

Another passage in the novel helps problematize this case: the herring, another animal-commodity whose choice of sea routes still baffles scientists to date.\textsuperscript{279} The relation between silk and fish is violent and poetic: “These nets were made of coarse Persian silk, and dyed black, since experience had shown that a lighter colour scared the herring off” (56). With both migrants, Sebald interrogates the limits of human and nonhuman social spheres. At stake are the social morality of animal cultivation and exploitation, the location of power and pain. As Hans-Walter Schmidt-Hannisa argues, Sebald demystifies the practice of rationalist equations that objectify and appropriate “nature” as separate from culture, resulting in the delineation of boundaries that morally justify exploitation and violence. For Schmidt-Hannisa, Sebald’s “respect for the animal’s ability to suffer becomes the point of departure for a non-anthropocentric, pathocentric ethics” (33). If only we paid close attention, we would see that the herring does express despair with a gesture: once dead, “it begins to glow” (\textit{Rings} 58). While empathy for the animal’s perspective is ethically significant, it is the unknowable, the unthinkable that poses simultaneously the justification for horror and brutality, and the ethical foundation to stop that process.\textsuperscript{280} While Sebald’s ethics of non-identity is partly communicated through the treatment of the nonhuman, it also constitutes a departure, founded on irreconcilable indetermination: the simultaneous possibility and impossibility of the animal’s suffering (as a human category). Sebald’s ruinous systems do not rehearse the analytic, deontological argument whereby human moral consideration bestows the individual animal with value. In the latter, subject-object distinctions are upheld, the ethical assumption resulting in an equation in which X equals being-for-the-herring/silkworm. The naïve stability of such a position is similarly expressed at the end of Beckett’s “Dante and the Lobster”: “She caught up

\textsuperscript{279} See also Sebald’s essay on Tripp’s mackerel, where he wonders why fish are symbols of death and of fertility alike (CS 212).

\textsuperscript{280} The poet Zbigniew Herbert has a delightful line on this: “Fish can’t express their despair with a gesture. This justifies the blunt knife that skips along their spine ripping the sequins of scales” (145).
the lobster and laid it on its back. It trembled. “They feel nothing’ she said. […] Well, thought Belacqua, it’s a quick death, God help us all.” The final line, responding to Belacqua’s thought, stands alone: “It is not” (MPTK 14). The belated after-the-factness of the last sentence problematises what is ultimately a stable subject position: that of having overseen and taken control of another’s suffering and death, shaken only by the introjected feeling of discomfort.

Sebald’s herring unsettles the ease with which such a subject-position might be occupied by not being itself: while we assume the accompanying line-drawing represents a herring, it is more likely a type of cod (credited with feasting on the herring’s spawn). What Sebald avoids is positioning the human as the moral arbiter-subject. Subsequently, the horror of mass trawling unfolds into a horror of comparison: the echo between the picture of the “morning catch of herring, Lowestoft” (71) and the double-spread showing a mass of human corpses among trees interrupts a sentence on the liberation of the Bergen Belsen camp (78-79). The reader has let her/himself be led by a narrator/writer, however momentarily, into comparing the fishing industry with the Holocaust. The inversion of human and nonhuman between the photographs is striking: the vertical figures of the fishermen among the amorphous mass of fish signalling the vertical trees amid the shrouded bodies at, presumably, Bergen Belsen (there is no caption). The narrator’s treatment of the herring industry, as critics have noted, not only shows a semantic register normally reserved for descriptions of human massacres and catastrophes, but evokes an uncanny echo of the concentration camps, asking us to retrospectively attune our reading: “the railway goods wagons take in this restless wanderer of the seas and transport it to those places where its fate on this earth will at last be fulfilled” (54). A flash of Sebald’s critique of instrumental reason and the subject-object or human-nonhuman split, whose fundamental logic facilitates violence

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281 Figures 4 and 5 Appendix (4). The herring caption is cropped out in the English edition, leaving the reader to assume the species of fish. The caption and the rounded corners of the photo indicate its “authenticity” as postcard in the German original, and distinguish it more firmly from the educational film that initially prompts the narrator’s discussion of the herring.

282 In the German edition, this verticality is emphasised by the absence of horizontal and presence of vertical margins, whereas the Vintage English edition stretches the picture horizontally.
and enmity towards the other. Does Sebald here eschew all hierarchy of significance? Bewes, I think rightly, notes (without reference to the herring case) how Sebald’s works dramatize the utopian ambition that human, animal, vegetable, mineral “are all granted an equal and undiminished right to exist” (V 73), without ever realising that ambition (“Against” 21). Again, I would suggest, Sebald’s attention to the indeterminate, the spectral—a kind of thingness—at the limit of ethical “knowledge” is crucial. If we are willing to entertain this analogy between herring and Holocaust victim, the novel never establishes it consistently, placing it within an unresolved web of connections from which historical violence emerges as a kind of excess.283

The picture of the mass grave, not least due to its peculiar, anti-anthropocentric framing, evokes landscape photography rather than documentary evidence: the human remains hidden, to be sought out. Adrian Daub notes that the picture little resembles the photographic evidence from the Bergen Belsen liberation, and might well show Birkenau (318). We are dwelling in Sebald’s most suggestive “echospace,” in which meaning is continually deferred between the objects (Patt 57). The chapter’s curation of pictures is melodious—seascapes, fish, human bodies—the mood of entropy and destruction pervasive. That the subsequent document—a newspaper clipping—appears to be Sebald’s forgery, as Daub shows (324), aside from blurring fiction and non-fiction, documentation and simulation, finally signs off the extermination camps as a transgenerational lost object for the German Nachgeborener.284 Inside this “echospace,” however, the cryptic Holocaust cannot be isolated as human, or indeed purely historical, within the topography of melancholy. The photographic, counter-indexical weaving in this chapter instead traces a continual displacement and even negation of the object itself. None of the images can function as a nachträglich index for the other. The effect retains something of the wandering herring’s collective, nonhuman aura.

283 Will Self suggests that “[implicit] in Sebald’s work is the idea that human mass-murder is only a suicidal form of the holocaust we are perpetrating on the natural world” (112). I think it would be apposite to say that the novel at once sustains and denies this implication.

284 The “conspiracy of silence” in the immediate post-war years, according to Sebald, whose exposure, aged 17, to a Bergen Belsen educational film gives him his own trauma, and the source for a lifelong commitment to aesthetic restitution (qtd. in Wachtel).
Inscribed in the creaturely encounter is the creative breakdown of critique, even as a flat inter-constitutive ontology does not follow. As with the literary material of the silk thread, it is the section’s spectral perspective and unresolved aesthetics that keep a self-declared human gaze from stabilizing in the face of the nonhuman.\footnote{Note also how Sebald plays with semantic coincidences, referring for example to people with ichthyic names: “de Marinière” (56), “Herrington and Lightbown” (59).} If the impossible connection between herring and Holocaust were made explicit by the narrator, it would collapse, precisely because it relies, to paraphrase Bewes, on the fissure or spectrality that provides the image of writing or composition itself in Sebald (“Against” 27).\footnote{Disappointingly, Bewes’s analysis of Sebald’s “non-exemplarity” does not offer a reading of Rings, which would have allowed him to move away from his character-driven analysis—a focus which leaves one wondering to what extent it is ever common in modernist or late modernist writing for a protagonist to be “exemplary” in relation to a fictional “whole.”} Put differently, if writing (by way of silk) is initially presented as a positive process of drawing connections, it registers in fact the countless chasms and breakdowns in its webs. The lingering image of the horror of comparison springs from its indetermination and the unspeakable violence it can only index, as we find it hard to accept that we cannot quite distinguish between historical categories in the amorphous pile. Compare Beckett’s unnamable narrator, “stamping under foot the unrecognisable remains of my family, here a face, there a stomach, as the case might be, and sinking into them with the ends of my crutches, both coming and going” (U 35-36). We may ask the same question: “in the world of nature, the world of man, where is nature, where is man?” (ibid. 103).

As one of the final silk-images, Sebald offers the vision of a symbiotic, co-constitutive production process literalising the reification of labour power and the human body in the disciplinary apparatus:

a great number of people […] spent their lives with their wretched bodies strapped to looms made of wooden frames and rails, hung with weights, and reminiscent of instruments of torture or cages. It was a peculiar symbiosis which […] makes more apparent than any later form of factory work that we
are able to maintain ourselves on this earth only by being harnessed to the machines we have invented. (282-283)

We know this description from Marx: “In the factory we have a lifeless mechanism independent of the workman, who becomes its mere living appendage” (Capital 261). Rather than merely ascribing this passage to deep-rooted distrust of modern technology in Sebald’s work, one can pause and imagine a post-human, hybrid body, and its prosthetic relation to technology, which is presented as both means and ends: we “invent” technology which defines our humanity (our being on earth) in the first place. This immanent image of hybridity and interconnectedness is, however, not quite sufficient to account for the spectral times of this passage, which is haunted by things that are not present. The symbiotic loom conjures the machine Kafka’s penal colony—alluded to earlier in the novel: Orfordness resembles “a penal colony in the Far East” (233)—displacing the deterritorialised image into a narrative of exile, torture, sadism, nationalism and the military apparatus. In the picture accompanying the description, the ethnicity of the weaver is impossible to make out in the deliberately poor reproduction, but he is not white. There is again, a melancholic, future anterior time at play here as the image, through its evocation of colonialism, of uneven and

287 Sebald did have an infamous aversion to all technologies digital (using his typewriter and refusing to communicate via email with his students). In this respect, critics often contrast him with his theoretical ancestor Benjamin, whose understanding of the dangers of technological advancement did not deter him from believing in the emancipatory powers of mass technology for society long-term.

288 In Rosi Braidotti’s terms, the nomadic, plural body is not anthropocentrically defined but becomes “a surface of intensities and an affective field in interaction with others” (Dolphins and Tuin 34).

289 See Latour: “We never tame technologies, not because we lack sufficiently powerful masters, not because technologies, once they have become ‘autonomous’, function according to their own impulse, not because, as Heidegger claims, they are the forgetting of Being in the form of mastery, but because they are a true form of mediation. Far from ignoring being-as-being in favour of pure domination, of pure hailing, the mediation of technology experiments with what must be called being-as-another” (“Morality” 250).

290 Figure 6 Appendix (5).
combined development, of genocide and racism, predicts the novel’s last photograph, in which three Indian men (echoing the three women weavers of the final paragraph in *Emigrants*) present, stoic-faced, three mandala-like arrangements of silk cocoons to the camera. The uncanny quality of the photos—the deathly impression that there is something unknown, irrecoverable (see Chapter Six)—supervenes at the moment when we might have thought an immanent, hybrid picture of animal-man-machine would arise. Coming in-between these two photos is a two-page spread from an eighteenth-century silk samples catalogue (“leaves from the only true book which none of our textual and pictorial works can even begin to rival” [286]). These are the novel’s most material photographs, the texture and smoothness of the fabric almost tactile, implying a residual yet insuperable difference between modes of production of writing and weaving.

The novel’s final chapter attempts—and unavoidably fails—to knot the *longue durée* story of silk together: restricted for thousands of years to China, the silkworm made its way (in the friars’ sticks) to Persia and Europe. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, French and English agricultural innovations and reforms include sericulture, leading to the grand-scale uprooting of native trees for the sake of the mulberry trees necessary for the silkworm’s cultivation. Henry IV has a political feud with his agricultural and economic advisors. Silk becomes a political, biosemiotic tool, with fears it would “promote the insidious corruption of the urban classes through luxurious living and all that went with it—laziness, effeminacy, lechery and extravagance,” accelerating the “general decline in moral standards” of the French upper classes (279-280). The unfixed, migratory materiality of silk (and the corresponding animal creature) meets political state power, infrastructure, and social relations (gender, family, labour, community, commodity culture). As a major player in modernity—“that whirlwind of new worlds” (Latour, “Morality” 250)—silk and its natural-material networks structure decisions and intersections conventionally attributed to human agency alone. Silk enters the novel not as a metaphor for globalisation but as a shapeshifting participant—which reflects back, in turn, on our understanding of production (economic but also historical and cultural). In Germany, a belated nationalist sericulture follows: mass planting of mulberry trees, new silk laws and tax, the industry’s prompt collapse and the ensuing eradication of the trees. Silkworms become the Reich’s ideal “object lesson for the classroom,” used “to monitor productivity and selection, including extermination to
pre-empt racial degeneration” (294). The subtexts of Darwinism, epigenetics, and biopower (the state’s regulatory mechanisms applied to mass population posited as political problem) are methodically outlined. Pace Foucault, the Nazi regime embodies here the culmination of disciplinary and biopolitical state power into its most absolute form. Another untenable comparison emerges as the multiple cycles of “the entire killing business” of the silkworms shown in a Nazi educational documentary stand in for the Nazis’ instrumentalised death machine (ibid.). The silk itineraries may connect a chain of atrocities as well as human rituals, object-relations, and so on, but it also, ultimately, collapses under its own literary, critical, and even didactic weight.

Conclusion

Sebald’s silk Leitfaden pre-empts many of the critical, hermeneutical manoeuvres, as the novel reflects on its own fictionality and place within cultural production. The migrating translations and intertexts continuously redirect the spectral object, marking a simultaneous singularity and complicity on an uneven world map. Amid the fragmentation and indetermination of the novel’s webs and its rejection of a linear, teleological narrative, one may ask: what image of silk does emerge then? It certainly does not map a “global commodity chain,” the term coined by Hopkins and Wallerstein to “describe the network of labour and production processes that lead to a finished commodity” (Toscano and Kinkle 191). The conception that most approximates Sebald’s silk-map is, I think, Benjamin’s dialectical image at a standstill:

What distinguishes images from the ‘essences’ of phenomenology is their historical index. […] For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time. […] It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the

291 Racism being the sometimes-overlooked third dimension of Foucault’s biopolitics. See Foucault, “Society Must Be Defended” 260.
present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [bildlich]. (Arcades 462-463) 

Benjamin’s image is synchronic and diachronic at once, a constellation rather than a unit, a momentary flash rather than an epic or mythical vision—registering, significantly, the fleetingness of the image’s legibility. The brief arresting gestures intervening in the calamitous sequence of events in Sebald’s novel resemble this conception, connecting local and global, material particular and abstraction, in an unrepeatable presentness that is crucial for the political potential of the text (as opposed to limiting his texts to a stubborn melancholic gaze backwards). If there is a frozen, dialectical image of silk in Rings, however, it also diverges from Benjamin’s conception in significant ways. The redemptive truth, in its illuminating power, that Benjamin locates in the image does not find its way into the novel. Nor do the epistemological promises of Jameson’s “cognitive mapping.” As we saw, Sebald deals in untruths as much as authenticity. Part of his work’s ethical claim must be seen in its refusal to resolve, to follow through on a given connection, to assert fundamental truths. The messianic reconciliation with the object world that motivates Benjamin is not quite Sebald’s concern. Rather, it is the spectral, uncanny moments of resistance within the many webs and connections that the novel values—a kind of thingness, or limit encounter, not metaphysical or ontologically distinct, but deeply wound up in our violent human and nonhuman history. These thingly coordinates on the spectral map of The Rings of Saturn constitute its ethical demand for a re-reading, re-mapping, re-encountering in the present.

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292 N3,1.

293 In his talk on restitution, Sebald appeals to just such an image, which he describes as a nature morte of “apparently disparate things”: “Why did it seem […] that the network of lights glittering in the darkness was like a constellation of stars spreading all over the world, so that these Stuttgart stars are visible not only in the cities of Europe and on the boulevards of Beverly Hills and Buenos Aires but wherever columns of trucks with their cargoes of refugees move along the dusty roads, obviously never stopping, in the zones of devastation that are always spreading somewhere—in Sudan, Kosovo, Eritrea, or Afghanistan?” (CS 210-211; my emphasis).
Chapter Five. Stuff: Objects, Literature and Beckett’s Post-War Room

“There is a certain belligerence in a room in which a woman has never set foot…”
Djuna Barnes, Nightwood (71)

Introduction

Building on the analysis of dispossession and dislocation in Beckett’s environments, we can trace the displacement of commodity culture in his work, which will allow us to analyse the complex relations between literary object structures. Beckett’s texts feign an obsession with possession and inheritance of objects that evokes the bourgeois realist novel of the nineteenth century, a literary heritage both apposite and opposite to his sensibilities. The privileged commodities and themes of realism remain in the stories in ossified form, no longer in possession of their enchanting power but solid enough for the narrators to continually stumble over them. Like Julie Bates’ recent Beckett’s Art of Salvage (2017), this chapter presents a more myopic focus on Beckett’s material objects (quite different from Bates’, which emphasises the fictional object as codified by biographical detail). Drawing on the post-war prose and drama, the chapter steps into Beckett’s “realist” commodity and domestic spheres, starting with Balzac’s cluttered room as it inexplicably finds its way into his work. The dregs of bourgeois realism, stubbornly material, sedimented, linger in Beckett’s spectral material world. This chapter follows Beckett’s object as it morphs into quite a modernist thing, independent, stubborn, monadic, but finds that this thing, too, keeps fizzling between valued companion and obtrusive remainder. The modernist thing has been deadened; it suicided, to use a Beckett favourite. The implication is not so much that Beckett responds to a (non-existing) stable modernist conception of an ideal thing-in-itself, but that he reworks the cliché of a “modernist thing,” that objects in literature have, if anything, become even more destabilised as they passed through the hands of Flaubert, Joyce, and others. I make the case for an ultimately unreconciled object world, in literary and philosophical terms, concluding that Beckett’s work helps the “new materialist” literary analysis to destabilise object categories across traditions, rather than affirm them. Looking at Malone and Winnie’s “collections” of things, the chapter ends with a reading of inventories and the peculiar “thereness” of Beckett’s props: the
Beckett, Balzac and Realism

Beckett’s material worlds are in unreconciled conversation with both realist and modernist practices of representation. They provoke and then upend the legibility of the realist novel’s commodity culture, while their modernist parody has disintegrated into a “nightmare thingness”: any utopian defence of the discrete object’s integrity and thingness from modern fetishizing processes becomes just another “old hat.” Rather than endorsing a philosophical position toward the object world that may offer an alternative to the commodity cycle and its abstracting effects, Beckett leaves object-relations unreconciled, displacing, as we saw, the cultural index attached to things. The modernist attunement to the “antifunctional return of the repressed” that the literary object embodies according to Francesco Orlando continually unravels as epistemological framework in Beckett’s oeuvre (11). There is no payback in Beckett for the dereification of the object often ascribed to high modernism (I paint with a broad brush, here; what may be true for the Joyce of Portrait does not hold necessarily for the Joyce of Ulysses or Finnegans Wake). Retaining the socio-political stakes of Beckett “nightmare thingness” is a way to avoid determining his “modernism of the object” along conventional parameters: the modernist fetishized things, excised from consumer culture, “to be saved from the fate of the mass-produced object” (Brown, Sense 8). All the while, the unravelling of the self-consciously forceful isolation of things in Beckett hints at the inconclusive character of object-relations within modernism itself: the

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294 The irony is that today the bowler hat has come to stand-in (as signifier/advertisement) for surrealism (Magritte) and the theatre of the absurd (Beckett) in the cultural marketplace.
evacuation of realist “content” in favour of “style” inevitably leads back to the banality (and cliché) of everyday material life.²⁹⁵

I seek to question then an all too common narrative of literary objects, such as the following:

[…] objects after realism go into long-term rehabilitation. Virginia Woolf famously accused realism of a humdrum materialism better suited to the representational practices of ‘Government officials.’ Samuel Beckett’s Molloy refuses to describe the room he finds himself in, as if evoking material things would only increase the alienation from which he, and we, suffer. The objective correlative, the ‘objectivity’ of Imagism, the ideas in things, the wish to remove the subject from tampering with the object—there is a sense in many modernist slogans and texts that objects have been exploited, misused, and misunderstood. (Freedgood, Ideas 156-157)

If Elaine Freedgood is right here to insist that accusing the realist novel of commodity triumphalism is reductive,²⁹⁶ then neither should Beckett or Woolf be sent on a rescue mission for some ideal or idealised object in itself. Nor will it do to collapse and unify a modernist position in relation to objects, with little regard for the difference between Stevens’ snow man, Williams’ dictum “Say it, no ideas but in things,” Duchamp’s “Fountain,” or Cubism’s *papier-collés*. Woolf’s sensitivity to things registers not so much a rehabilitation of the object for its own sake, as a “substantive change in values,” in Mao’s words, vis-à-vis bourgeois commodity culture: “[A] transformation of basic assumptions under which the relationship between art and wealth, once taken for granted, becomes the object of a fascinated mistrust, and under which leisure-class consumption in general becomes guilty and suspect as it has never been done before” (31). Meanwhile, Freedgood’s observation about *Molloy* misses the point; Beckett’s mid-

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²⁹⁵ Writes Katz: “if a book is ‘about nothing,’ then language is no longer a vehicle simply and transparently expressing an idea or subject. […] language ‘as such’ inevitably becomes language as it is used—the empirical praxis of usage and thus context” (*Saying* 129).

²⁹⁶ See also Freedgood’s vigorous defence of Dickens’ materialism in “Commodity Criticism and Victorian Thing Culture.”
period narrators precisely seek affective and narrative comfort in evoking everyday material things—“What a rest to speak of bicycles and horns” (Molloy 13)—while later ones relish the object’s company amid the pénombre. Beckett, writing to Günter Albrecht in 1936: “It is a different pleasure to be dealing only with things, however a pleasure nevertheless, even if finally a very dangerous one” (LI 410).

What characterises Beckett’s object-worlds (especially after Murphy) is not a willed withdrawal from things, so much as a recognition that we—or the misspoken, catachrestic “I”—cannot not be among them, not that language, perception, and reason offer an insufficient account of (unknowable) things, but that even they have a material and thingly character. This implicates, too, our well-honed modes of representation.

Beckett’s post-war work takes place in a commodity world where the transactions motion toward meaninglessness, or have been pushed to the fringes, where notions of use- and exchange-value are ridiculed, upended. We find that the traditionally realist tropes relating to the bourgeois marketplace, inheritance, and welfare stop “working” for the reader, as metaphor, symbol, metonymy, fetish, in the way Beckett’s use-objects often stop “working” for the protagonists. The nouvelles at once provoke and frustrate the tracing of the “social life of things,” those economic dynamics alongside the drifting path of the vagrants who themselves are very much interested in the biographical trajectory of things.

The residual narrative of the social encounters underlies the principal narrative of dispossession and abandonment. The narrator of “The End” is given the old clothes of a deceased man by the workers at the shelter that expelled him. They refuse to quite fit; his old clothes have been burnt.

The replacement clothes smell of sulphur. Again, contamination and disinfection define the social interaction. Later we learn that his tutor left him his glasses, together with a copy of Geulincx’s Ethics, which after Murphy we have to associate in Beckett with the value of nothing: Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velix. The glasses receive a detailed description; then: “I should never have mentioned them” (CSP 92). Twice, with the gifts and the phial

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297 Amended translation.

298 Various ways to approach the life trajectory of things are offered in Arjun Appadurai’s influential volume The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective (1986).

299 See also Molloy (41): Molloy demands his clothes, is told they were burnt, demands them again, is told they are at the dryers.
passed down presumably from “The Calmative,” the narrator wonders at the near-magical reappearance of these objects: “I thought Mr. Weir had confiscated all my belongings” (89; 92). Compare Molloy: “I found my bicycle (I didn’t know I had one) in the same place I must have left it” (12). Somehow, always, things are still there. Somehow they are re-possessed, (mis-)recognised. And the narrators are not, as is the case in later texts, averse to describing their possessions or other things. They will, however, make sure the literary convention of description is signalled as such: “How describe this hat? And why?” (CSP 48). Molloy will inherit that trait, remarking on his chainless bicycle: “To describe it at length would be a pleasure” (12). Malone describes Macliam’s ill-fitting greatcoat and hat at length. So why this “craze for explicitation” when it comes to their belongings (Plays 299)? Is it to underline the paucity of possessions available to the vagrant? The amplified, upturned use-value that he attributes to them? The narrators’ handling of “description” suggests that amid Beckett’s condemnation of nineteenth-century mimesis, there remains an unresolved confrontation with it. Like Molloy, the stories are somewhat less grounded in a collapse of expression than later works. Despite arriving on the heels of Watt’s problem of grasping and naming the “pot,” their narrators are content to take the presence or absence of things as more or less empirical. They have come to terms, somewhat, with description’s inability to deliver the object, and are not yet as exhausted as later narrators.300

The question regarding possession, which occupies Malone so heavily, is in the stories more firmly grounded in the social, even as the material world refuses to offer a realist picture: “All that composed a rather liquid world” (CSP 97). In “The Expelled,” the narrator’s “ejection” itself is framed by his desire for description:

I have always greatly admired the door of this house, up on top of its little flight of steps. How describe it? It was a massive green door, encased in summer in a kind of green and white striped housing, with a hole for the thunderous wrought-iron knocker and a slit for letters, this latter close to dust, flies and tits by a brass flap fitted with springs. So much for that description. […] The curtains were in unexceptionable taste. Even the smoke rising from

300 Compare Text For Nothing 1: “I’ll describe the place, that’s unimportant. The top, very flat, of a mountain, no, a hill, but so wild, so wild, enough” (CSP 100).
one of the chimney-pots seemed to spread and vanish in the air more sorrowful than the neighbours’, and bluer. (CSP 49)

The moment of self-inflicted description captures a threshold, the denial of mobility and access to the social and domestic spheres. The door as a liminal thing, “massive” with a “thunderous” knocker, is unmovable. View of the inside of the household is obstructed by “unexceptionable” bourgeois taste. An aura of tragedy and anguish, of family drama, crosses from interior to exterior, in the ephemeral form of smoke. The realist tableau seems set, a still life cut out from material life, except all the necessary narrative drama, dialogue and character portraits are missing. Much of the “content” of the nouvelles gestures toward the prototypical realist novel: vagabondage, inheritance and wills, the question of property ownership, recurring commentaries on commodities (especially furniture), welfare systems, charity and philanthropy, abject poverty, prostitution. Oscillating between irony and compassion, the concern with these themes in Beckett’s post-war prose jars with the common conception of the de-socialised, de-propertied “Beckett country.” The socio-economic circles in which Beckett’s narrators move are not that obscure at all, and neither are their literary circles. Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Hamsun, Céline, Joyce are among those transitional forerunners (all dear to Beckett in their way) exploring precarity and lower middle-class life through a nuanced understanding of material culture, their novels often teeming with stuff.

Considering the singular position Beckett occupied for the aesthetic theory of both Lukács (in the realist corner) and Adorno (modernist corner), it is notable that another of their model figures should play such a peculiar role for Beckett himself: Balzac, whose position seems diametrically opposed in terms of aesthetics and cultural production, and whose fully furnished realist novel and near-monomaniac fetishism of the object makes of him the ideal case study for literary “new materialism.” For Walter Benjamin, Balzac was the first to speak of the ruins of the bourgeoisie (GS 5.1: 59). Bill Brown notes that from a hermeneutic perspective Balzac can be said to have “taught us to decipher objects for the social histories within them”301 (“Matter” 62). Beckett had

301 Brown attributes this insight to Jacques Rancière, though I am sceptical about that attribution. Rancière’s argument in The Politics of Aesthetics is more concerned with the collapse of history and its materials than with a hermeneutical gesture reading the historical “within” objects (Rancière 33).
studied and lectured on Balzac at Trinity College, and later read his biography. His familiarity with the *Comédie humaine* and its foible for describing things is well-documented; he combed his way through the “Balzac gush” while humorously asking whether the bathos was not meant in parody (LI, 145; 245). Calling Balzac a “Stock Exchange Hugo,” Beckett describes his feat of finishing *La Cousine Bette* as “[incomprehensible]” (ibid. 250). The European literary tradition and its depiction of the social history of material life would remain a well to draw from for Beckett, or in the strictly “realist” case of Balzac, Dickens, and company, an undead tradition to disembowel. As with Joyce, Beckett’s incorporation of realist cliché (regarding both language and tropes) follows on the heels Flaubert, who in Elizabeth Barry’s words, already “[destabilized] the authority of the public voice of narrative realism by deftly interpellating the clichés of the most vulgar and obtuse of his characters into it” (18).

Realist literary conventions are manipulated and subverted most directly in Beckett’s earliest fiction. *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* contains a lengthy passage about Balzac’s “falsity”: “To read Balzac is to receive the impression of a chloroformed world. He is absolute master of his material, he can do what he likes with it, he can foresee and calculate its least vicissitude, he can write the end of his book before he has finished his first paragraph, because he has turned all his creatures into clockwork cabbages” (119-120). Balzac’s controlled dramatic life trajectories are notorious; Adorno speaks of “marionettenhafte Züge” [marionette-like traits] (*Noten* 142) and Brecht of Balzac’s “monstrosities” (“Against” 78). As Beckett renounces the “falsity” of authorial control over plot and character in the guise of the real, his go-to is the

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302 See Knowlson 55; Ackerley & Gontarski 37; LII 247.

303 Before moving on to read Jane Austen, who would, he says, have “much to teach” him (ibid. 250). To Thomas McGreevy, 5 Dec. 1932, 8 Feb. and 14 Feb. 1935 respectively.

304 This particular lineage regarding the use of irony, cliché and *idées reçues* has a strong history in scholarship, not least since Hugh Kenner’s *Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians* (1964). See also Barry, *Beckett and Authority*; Katz, *Saying I No More* (Chapter Five, “Narcissistic Echoes”). Ezra Pound stated early on: “Joyce has taken up the art of writing where Flaubert left it” (403).
metonymic, stereotyped Balzac. Barry has shown that his early characters measure themselves against the stock types or “clockwork cabbages” of realism. Beckett’s narrators take issue with the clichéd, archetypal demeanour of a given protagonist, or ensure their actions are not mistaken as part of a cause and effect plot-device (such as the financial motive-protagonist). Murphy, Barry suggests, can escape literary conventions because, as a professed “strict non-reader,” he is unversed in them (41). Beckett’s early fiction dabbles in modernist parody, a directness of subversive form that will wither as his work matures. He not only ridicules the bizarre realist pretence to authentic and truthful representation, but questions the realist novel’s fundamental appeal to the domain of the human: “Why human comedy?” (Dream 120; emphasis original). Clearly there is nothing human about it. For Lukács, and Adorno for that matter, this is precisely the beauty of Balzac’s novels: their concrete, precise but highly illusory sheen conjures the alienation, the naturalised reification process and class history of the total bourgeois society—“Realismus aus Realitätsverlust” [from loss of reality to realism] (Adorno, Noten 148). As a consequence, we can posit that the

305 The parallels between Godot and the eagerly awaited Godeau from Balzac’s play Le Faiseur prove “too striking” for many critics to ignore, as Balzac’s play ends with the words: “J’ai montré tant de fois Godeau que j’ai bien le droit de le voir. Allons voir Godeau!” (qtd. in Esslin 29). In Malone Dies, the change from the Louis family name in the French to Lambert in the English plays on Balzac’s Louis Lambert, whose similarly incapacitated narrator likes to delve into metaphysics and mysticism; Malone later offers a punning rejection of the artificial intricacies of Balzac’s plot: “all this ballsaching poppycock about life and death” (52).

306 See Barry, Chapter 1: “Cliché, Consensus and Realism” (30-64).

307 For example, in Malone Dies, “the attempt by the Saposcats to evaluate their son’s development on the bourgeois scale of economic value is derailed by the specificity of their comparison” (Barry 48).

308 Lukács’s high esteem for Balzac is famous (and often turned against him). For him, Balzac subordinates description to, or puts it into the service of, narrative, the dramatic element, in order to show the how of capitalism, not simply the what (the “ballast” [128] to which, Lukács says, Flaubert, Zola and the naturalists are dedicated). The reader, through the characters’ lives, experiences events, rather than being relegated to a mere observer (“Narrate” 116-119). Adorno’s appreciation of Balzac is equivocal; Balzac, the businessman, is too complicit. Nevertheless, Adorno writes, and its romantic, and
possibility of Beckett’s tramps’ resistance to the realist “clockwork cabbages” is constituted by the reality of their material situation on the margins of the social: they insistently displace the edges of a total society that relies (as Balzac also realised) on its masking character. The sedimentation of realist tropes and conventions—the intrusion of thing-like, impotent modernist parody—in the post-war prose formulates itself an important part of its socio-political content.

Stuff and the Bourgeois Room

The relationship between realist representation and commodity culture offers a way into the desolate, alienating rooms that we find in Beckett’s prose. Murphy signals that the bourgeois commodity and its description will always summon Balzac’s spectre: “The room was large and the few articles of furniture it contained were large. The bed, the gas cooker, the table and the solitary tallboy, all were very large indeed. Two massive upright unupholstered armchairs, similar to those killed under him by Balzac, made it just possible for them to take their meals seated” (39). The modernist aversion to realism’s (and naturalism’s) cluttered novel appears to collapse into the narrator’s distaste for it. As if describing one of Balzac’s bourgeois households, the narrator of “First Love” comments: “Such density of furniture defeats imagination” (CSP 39). He promptly evacuates Lulu’s room. So what is the place for the commodity in Beckett’s environment? Its etymological derivation may itself have strangely Beckettian connotations. Inscribed into the benefit or profit of the “commodity” are convenience, welfare, suitability.309 As the narrators rid whatever room they stay in of all furniture archaic pre-bourgeois elements notwithstanding, “Balzac’s entire Comédie Humaine stands revealed as an imaginative reconstruction of the alienated world, i.e. of a reality no longer experienced by the individual subject. Seen in this light, the difference between it and the modernist victims of Lukács’s class-justice is not very great; it is just that Balzac, in tune with his whole conception of form, thought of his monologues in terms of the plenitude of real life, while the great novelists of the 20th century encapsulate their worldly plenitude within the monologue” (“Reconciliation” 163).

309 n. early 15c., “benefit, profit, welfare;” later “a convenient or useful product,” from Middle French commodité “benefit, profit,” from Latin commoditatem (nominative commoditas) “fitness, adaptation, convenience, advantage,” from commodus “suitable, convenient” (see commode) (OED).
except the bed, they seek comfort, convenience (in a kind of anti-bourgeois sense that is often read as quietist). No commodes please. At the same time, paradoxically, “old trusty things” and their description offer momentary respite from the world’s “nightmare thingness”: “I saw the familiar objects, companions of so many bearable hours” (39; 79). Pre-established familiarity appears to be the condition for things offering comfort; hence the appeal of the heirloom. Still, as Paul Davies notes, the “silently indicated unimaginable hours” are always around the corner, unwelcome change pre-inscribed in their charade of constancy (28).

The affective realism of description and familiarity in the post-war prose departs from Watt’s “need for semantic succour,” the quest for comfort through the naming of things (83). The rift between signifier and thing signified is nonetheless never bridged: “there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names” (Molloy 29). The allure of comfort offered by “old trusty things” at times bears striking resemblance to Beckett’s own nostalgia for the page-turner; to Tom McGreevy: “I have done nothing at all except booze my heart quiet and gallop through Bérard’s Odyssey. He certainly makes it easy to read, and I really recovered something of the old childish absorption [sic] with which I read Treasure Island & Oliver Twist and many others – free of all pilfering velleities” (LI 90). Beckett is sensitive to the fetish powers of the *Bildungsroman*, its humanist promise to cover loss, to conjure the memory of the child (gesturing toward the subject’s return to the womb and mineral state). The comfort offered by things and the escapist, well-oiled narrative is one way to understand the thing-like intrusion of realism in Beckett’s texts: the same affective, or phenomenal, subject-object relationship is replicated, especially insofar as it describes its own collapse. The thingification of a *comédie humaine* in Beckett’s mid-period prose materialises the spectral incorporation of the rejected aesthetic. It announces the emphatic resistance of his later works to narrative as something emerging from human subjectivity, when, in Paul Sheehan’s words, “[narrativised] subjectivity is wrenched out

310 The infamous pot; the “pillow of old words, for a head” (117).
311 22 September 1931.
312 The comfort arising from the collapse of subject and object may also be understood in keeping with Kathleen Woodward’s application of Winnicott’s theory to Malone’s exercise book, describing the collapse of two transitional objects: the child’s first not-me possession and the dying’s last not-me possession (150).
of its human-shaped literary vessel and transplanted to something inhuman” (161). This “human-shaped literary vessel” remains, meanwhile, in the stories in the form of a thing (after all, the vessel embodies the prototypical thing-shape since Kleist and Heidegger), a “familiar object” or indeed a broken “communicating vessel” (as the narrator defines words and the speaking “subject” in “The End” [CSP 97]). Not only do the stories already dramatize a material conception of language and forms of representation that will intensify in later works, but there is also a residual sense of the fetishisation of established modes of representation.

The narrative of “First Love” appears particularly mediated through objects: the narrator is easily moved by things and, it seems, little else. It is on occasion of Lulu/Anna’s muff that we are informed of this: “It was things made me weep. And yet I felt no sorrow. When I found myself in tears for no apparent reason it meant I had caught sight of something unbeknownst. So I wonder if it was really the muff that evening, if it was not rather the path, so iron hard and bossy as perhaps to feel like cobbles to my tread, or some other thing, some chance thing glimpsed below the threshold, that so unmanned me” (CSP 36). There remains little room for ambiguity here. The muff acts as euphemism and innuendo (“below the threshold”: both below the belt—unter der Gürtellinie—and out of sight) and as fetish (the displacement of the maternal phallus facilitated by its contiguous placement). The object of desire is enriched by clandestineness, concealment, and the chance element involved, the fear of castration duly recognised by the misogynous narrator trained in psychoanalysis. The metonymical relationship between this fetish and the story’s Oedipal narrative becomes itself a cliché, as it is obvious not only to the reader but to the narrator himself.

Meanwhile, at the story’s onset stand the traditional realist tropes of family death and inheritance woes. Against his father’s wishes, the narrator finds “[his] room locked and [his] belongings in a heap before the door” (28). The narrator surveys Lulu’s rental

313 The image leaves an impression on him as he reiterates: “Of my scanty belongings they had made a little heap, on the floor, against the door. I can still see that little heap, in the kind of recess full of shadow between the landing and my room. It was in this narrow space […] that I had to change, I mean exchange my dressing-gown and nightgown for my travelling costume, I mean shoes, socks, trousers, shirt, coat, greatcoat and hat, I can think of nothing else” (28-29).
“room with horror,” before removing the furniture: “There were hundreds of pieces, large and small, in the end they blocked the door” (39-40). The cluttered realist space of the imagination needs to be emptied. Lulu might “live by prostitution” (43)—the ur-hieroglyph of wage labour and reification, and hence Baudelaire’s central object of poetic identification—but she attempts to maintain a sense of oikos: “All family possessions, she said” (41). The narrator imagines her close-stool, her grandmother’s “period piece,” dismissing it all as “family junk” (41; 43). The French “capharnaüm” consigns Lulu’s possessions to the waste heap, recoverable only by Baudelaire’s scavenger (or what Yenish communities called Lampenkrämmer) (Nouvelles 50). This commodity “excess” as we know it from representations of nineteenth-century bourgeois households results in headaches for Beckett’s protagonists. Meanwhile, description, it appears, favours the tramp’s chattels personal: things that still occupy a position of use (bicycle, hat, greatcoat, stick…), that materialise somatic proximity and prosthetic play, things whose presence complicates the tramp’s “dispeopled kingdom,” his own marginal relation to the social (CSP 31). Excess of commodities clutters up thought and proceedings, hinders speech and movement. As the narrator tries to escape the realist oikos formula—“What finished me was the birth”—things get in his way one last time: “A mass of junk barred my way, but I scrabbled and barged my way through in the end, regardless of the clatter” (45). Material comfort spells out a “nightmare thingness” for the narrator that he is only too happy to escape. In the sense that he rejects the bourgeois norm (material and literary) even within the lowest and most precarious class domain, his resistance remains within the material culture that is interrogated, rather than, as is often maintained, outside or divorced from it.

Note that in keeping with frugality and privacy, Beckett is fond of representing possessions as one heap (Malone) or bag (Winnie) or sack (Mc&C, How It Is). The signified social precariousness and forced asceticism may be seen in a historical wartime context—especially the nervous utilitarian object lessons of How It Is: “empty them out in the mud the tins put them back one by one in the sack impossible too weak fear of loss” (4)—or a more broadly socio-economic one (while Beckett’s own frugalness offers an unsatisfactory biographical explanation). As ownership of objects is drastically limited, their proximity and consecration are heightened in the heap. The emblem of Balzac’s usurers and misers (Gobseck, Pons…) is the treasure, as Marx

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314 See Buck-Morss, 184-185.
already noted, which, sealed away from the cycle of accumulation, characterises the foolishness of the protagonist lacking in business acumen.\textsuperscript{315} Beckett’s dispossessed creatures by comparison—chiefly Malone and Winnie—hold on to their little treasure not out of miserliness, but because there is no cycle to re-enter, to exploit. Julie Bates has framed Beckett’s material treasures to “storytelling objects” (186): the consecration of a remaining narrative force that emanates not from the artist-subject but from material compulsion.\textsuperscript{316} In such a conception, however, they strike me as purely citational, indexical, rather than narrative. A prompt, at best. The treasure functions also as an exacerbation of the characters’ socio-historical predicament in the material world [Dingwells]: the sacralisation of a small amount of possessions—into the sacred narrative of myth—that defines the treasure brings with it an ironic reversal as its owners are fundamentally dispossessed from the start. Unlike the loss of the treasure that, at the end of a narrative, comes with moral baggage—for Balzac’s Sylvain Pons or Henry James’ Mrs Gereth—the dispossession and exclusion from the marketplace inscribed in the treasure contains in Beckett’s world no revelatory narrative.

The value and valuing of the “treasure” contrasts, then, with the value (economic and moral) dramatized in the realist space. Here Lulu’s sofa predicts Molloy’s maternal bed, her lower-class room Louise’s bourgeois house, cluttered and estranging. Molloy offers a surprisingly rich description, which, again, offers some comfort: “Nothing was being left to chance. I recount these moments with a certain minuteness, it is a relief from what I feel coming” (36). The room is “chock-full of pouffes and easy chairs, they thronged all about me, in the gloom. There were also occasional tables, footstools, tall-boys, etc., in abundance. Strange feeling of congestion that the night dispersed” (ibid.). Again, the contradictory experience of comfort and discomfort mark a room whose contents and properties keep changing: “at each fresh inspection it seemed changed […] The boughs themselves seemed to shift” (42). Deprived of his clothes and hat, Molloy takes his anger out on the furniture. With one crutch, he “began to strike the

\textsuperscript{315} See Adorno, \textit{Noten} 148-149.

\textsuperscript{316} Bates highlights the particular castaway and imprisonment structure of \textit{Malone Dies} and \textit{Happy Days}, comparing what she calls the “storytelling objects” of Beckett’s characters to those of Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, Solzhenitsyn’s Ivan Denisovich, and Antonio Gramsci’s prison letters.
pieces of furniture […] not very hard, just hard enough to overturn them, I thrust at them, I lunged […]. But recalling who I was I soon threw away my crutch and came to a standstill in the middle of the room, determined to stop asking for things, to stop pretending to be angry” (41). Molloy, recognising his compromised position, helps the hand clean up and straighten the furniture. Had he the strength and mobility of his predecessor from the nouvelles, the damage doubtless would have been greater. The “nightmare thingness” of the “Molloy country” is expanded in its indefinable, shifting demarcations: “It was I who was not natural enough to enter into that order of things, and appreciate its niceties” (42). What is “natural” is bourgeois commodity culture, the world of nice things, the permanent historical state of alienation. Molloy, thinglike and valueless in the face of the magical properties, has become used to this side of material dispossession: as a fringe-figure thrust in the position of the prostitute, he can only comment on the unnaturalness of the naturalised condition. In this passage, Molloy appears as a perverse inversion of Flaubert’s Félicité, the servant in “Un Coeur Simple,” whose cherished bibelot, the taxidermied parrot Loulou, connects the story to Lousse’s household and her parrot (as well as Loulou/Lulu in “Premier Amour”). The “simple” spiritual sanctuary that Félicité fashions in her room from various religious relics, keepsakes and kitsch (including said parrot) creates a classical Flaubertian “nothing” based around material “content,” while at the same time contrasting with the material profligacy of the upper classes (vis-à-vis her mistress but also the earlier contes).

The commodity panic and “violence” committed against the material interior in Beckett is anchored in his characters’ recognition of the socio-political and symbolic force of things, the unnatural dynamic between possession and dispossession. It speaks in this sense of an active resistance (despite themselves). That resistance takes place not least on the level of representation, and in this sense Flaubert’s “nothing” is important: the incorporation of “content” as cliché, as when Madame Bovary explicitly repeats, in Katz’s words, “the subject matter and structure of the kind of novel Flaubert was attacking most savagely” (Saying 129). I want to briefly consider the emptiness of this

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317 In “Premier Amour,” Lulu pronounces her name Loulou as she is not French. In Molloy, Lousse’s parrot (pace Félicité’s Loulou) swears in English and French; he must have belonged, Molloy reasons, to a French sailor before he belonged to an American sailor before Lousse got him.
“content” in Beckett through Adorno’s reading of Kierkegaard’s nineteenth-century bourgeois intérieur (for Adorno the crucial image of Kierkegaard’s philosophy). The intérieur materialises Kierkegaard’s notion of “situation” (the material equivalent of spiritual inwardness): the indifferentiation of subject and object, and of history and nature. The experience of this furnished space is a simultaneous loss and production of meaning:

The contents of the intérieur [metaphorical and real] are mere decoration, alienated from the purposes they represent, deprived of their own use-value, engendered solely by the isolated apartment that is created in the first place by their juxtaposition. [...] [The intérieur] unifies the imposture [Trug] of things in the form of a still life. Here, in the image, lost objects are conjured. The self is overwhelmed in its own domain by commodities and their historical essence. Their illusory quality is historically-economically produced by the alienation of thing from use-value. But in the intérieur things do not remain alien. [...] Foreignness transforms itself from alienated things into expression; mute things speak as ‘symbols.’ (Kierkegaard 43-44)

The irreality of the tableau that is drawn up is emphatic with the German “Trug” [deception]. The socio-historical alienation that produces the semblance [Scheincharakter] of commodities—referring to its participation in the process of reification—is re-written in this private space into “the semblance of unchangeable nature” (44). Or in Benjamin’s words: in the interior, the private individual “gathers the far-off and the past” (GS 5.1: 52).

318 Adorno highlights the social-historical character of Kierkegaard’s melancholy at work in the cluttered room: the semblance of eternity that marks the transience of all semblance, the siren call of Benjamin’s (and Sebald’s) allegory of ruins. The legibility of things remains significant, but this illusory image, this

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318 My translation; “versammelt er die Ferne und die Vergangheit.” See also Arcades, Konvolut I: das Interieur, die Spur, in which Benjamin quotes extensively from Adorno’s Kierkegaard study (13,6; 13a). Benjamin talks of “the masquerade of styles” [Maskentreiben der Style]: “The holders of power in the bourgeoisie no longer necessarily exercise this power in the places where they live (as rentiers), and no longer in direct unmediated forms. The style of their residences is their false immediacy. Economic alibi in space. Interior alibi in time” (218; 13,4).
symbolism of things, here differs from Benjamin’s utopian understanding of the muteness and “speech” of objects: Benjamin’s abandoned objects themselves are mute—what is legible (for the keen-eyed observer, the detective of Poe’s stories) are the traces they leave of their socio-historical phenomena (Buck-Morss 14).

The objectification of social contents into universal meaningfulness and expression (the semblance and symbolism of Kierkegaard’s rooms) haunts the interiors of the fully-furnished realist novels in every corner. For Adorno, only few writers recognised the extent of the objectivity of the bourgeois space; rare were the novels that, like those of Dickens—whose writing (like Kierkegaard’s) did not completely eschew the pre-bourgeois baroque—became “a means of dissolving the very bourgeois world they depict,” novels in which “social criticism converges with the representation of objective factors [Wesenheiten]” (Notes 172). We might be surprised at the juncture of Adorno, Kierkegaard, Dickens, and Beckett’s confrontation with the bourgeois room, but if we remember how Adorno canonized Beckett’s aesthetic, the knots may be untied: in Adorno’s reading, Beckett’s theatre gutted and turned inside-out bourgeois form; the autonomy of his art lay in the incorporated renunciation of realism’s social content [Inhalt]. In the post-war prose, we can see this gesture at work through the literalisation of realist “content” and its subsequent evacuation. The domestic interior characterising the descriptive novel of the Victorian era returns in Beckett’s work, albeit as ossified aesthetic content, its commodity-power (like that of the dominant novel itself) unfixed. Recall, finally, the narrator’s surprisingly detailed description of the private estate that will provide his port of departure: “This estate, the main entrance to which opened on a narrow, dark and silent street, was enclosed with a wall, except of course on the river front, which marked its northern boundary for a distance of about thirty yards. […] A kind of parade ground was also to be seen, where soldiers played football all year round. Only the ground-floor windows—no, I can’t. The estate seemed abandoned” (CSP 95). The storytelling prowess of the narrator finds its limits at the moment of historical remembrance; he is not Hamm, not a thespian. His testimony, in the anticipated company of such historical texts, stops short at the moment of consumption. The pulling and tugging at description, definition, literary possession, that Malone and later narrators will push to an extreme as it devolves into the inadequacy of expression, is already historically and aesthetically anchored in the nouvelles. After the earlier characters have put their energy into description, and found
that it did little to ease their material discomfort, to deliver their objects, their heirs have grown wary and weary under the weight of literary consumption.

**From Realism to Modernism? Inheriting Objects**

Discernable in Lulu/Lousse’s room is then a double sedimentation: of history’s reifying and alienating processes and of a symbolic expression (and literary tradition) that naturalised—and made comfortable—experience. It is easy to see Beckett’s characters as overcome by the “big world”—by history or any sense of historical subjectivity—and seeking refuge from it. The easy way out is to literally rid the space of its insufferable symbolism; in this lies a recognition which, to paraphrase Benjamin, the nihilism at the heart of bourgeois comfort denies (GS 5.1: 286). In that regard Beckett seems profoundly modernist and anti-materialist, there is no attempt to seek “the meaningful ‘stuff’ behind” the clutter of the bourgeois room (Freedgood, “Commodity” 166). But behind the decoration lie no authentic or absolute truth claims, nor a claim to the Sublime. It is, on the contrary, the remaining, inconsistent “order of things,” the mythical narrative and historical expression of things, that the self-conscious narrator finds overwhelming. Hence why Molloy rephrases the Proustian sentiment occupied with perception and the life of things: “Il y a quand même de temps en temps des choses qui s'imposent à l'entendement avec la force d'axiomes, sans qu'on sache pourquoi” (82). Compare Proust: “Peut-être l'immobilité des choses autour de nous leur est-elle imposée par notre certitude que ce sont elles et non pas d’autres, par l’immobilité de notre pensée en face d’elles” (6). Like Proust’s narrator, Molloy tries to get to grips with his environment through the prism of perception, consciousness and uncertainty. Only the agency of the relation, the imposition, is reversed: where Proust’s narrator is looking to find his bearings through familiar things, proceeding by way of contingency (more like Sebald), Molloy feels

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319 12.6.
320 “There are things from time to time, in spite of everything, that impose themselves on the understanding with the force of axioms, for unknown reasons” (Molloy 60).
321 “Perhaps the immobility of things that surround us is forced upon them by our conviction that they are themselves and not anything else, by the immobility of our conception for them” (6).
exposed to axiomatic things that impose themselves, almost mathematically, “in spite of everything” (as the English adds).

Beckett’s oeuvre is scattered with such Proustian moments; at first often parodied, in the later works they become stale, stubbornly unresolved. The entire premise of *Malone meurt* appears filtered through a Proustian lens, from the site of narration (bed, room, alone), to the self-reflexive storytelling and hypotheses about the surroundings, right down to the mirroring syntax of the opening sentences; Malone: “Je serai quand même bientôt tout à fait mort enfin” (7); 322 Proust’s narrator: “Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure” (3). 323 What are we to make of Proust’s influence when Malone wants to tell the tale of a stone, but never gets there? We cannot attribute to Beckett a linear, uncompromised break from the realist material world that instead values discrete moments of epiphany or being, or autotelic, monumental unity. With the rubble of commodity culture representation scattered throughout his post-war environments, Beckett’s protagonist literalises a modernist gesture in his worldly interactions, ridding spaces of the decorative, only to highlight its stubborn presence, and turning that gesture itself into an aesthetic “old hat.” The imposition of the material object emerges in the face of the not-itself that is part of it, rather than from a distinct ideal realm. If the object resists as symbol, or defies the readability of the realist novel’s equivalent, as it does in Beckett, then that can only be with the symbolic character at play, or with an appeal to reading. “No symbols where none intended” can only work as a final sentence if the reader feels inclined to look for intended symbols (*Watt* 254).

In the overall introduction, I touched on Malone’s parody of idealism by way of his “Stick, shorn of all its accidents” (83). Another famous encounter with an object’s “thingness” occurs in *Molloy*, as an unidentified item Molloy steals from Lousse 322 “I shall soon be quite dead at last in spite of all” (3). Note that the opening of *MD* most strongly echoes Céline’s *Mort à Crédit*. Contrasting Beckett’s tramps with Céline’s Nietzschean misanthropes opens up a comparative world beyond the purview of this study—Beckett’s work shows a compassion that has more in common with Flaubert and Joyce (not least in relation to *bêtise*). Ruby Cohn drew an early parallel in *The Comic Gamut* (1962) highlighting the influence on Beckett of Céline’s “slang-ridden spoken French” (99).

322 “For a long time I used to go to bed early” (3).
becomes the object of intensive contemplation. He draws a meticulous sketch of the “strange instrument,” which “resembled a tiny sawing-horse” (63), and explains:

I could never bring myself to sell it [...] for I could never understand what possible purpose it could serve [...] [For] a certain time I think it inspired me with a kind of veneration, for there was no doubt in my mind that it was not an object of virtu, but that it had a most specific function always to be hidden from me. I could therefore puzzle over it endlessly without the least risk. For to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker. (63-64)

Critics have rightly noted that the Kantian Ding-an-sich, while humorously insinuated, is not what is at stake here; what “enthralls Molloy [is] the perception it affords him of his own ignorance, the breakdown of his own ratiocination” (Barry 62). The puzzle is indeed worldly, for Molloy’s blissful state relates to the man-made object’s function. While Malone will later reveal the object’s identity as a “knife-rest” (87), stilling the reader’s curiosity, I would suggest that the functionless object is also strangely compromised already in Molloy. This is not to say that the reader should infer the identity of the “knife-rest” via Molloy’s description; rather, at play is the passage from bourgeois function to its decontextualized emptiness in the tramp’s hand. The knife-rest and its function are socially codified, a staple of the gentry and ruling classes from the late-seventeenth through to the early-nineteenth century (in Ireland as well as France). It is then precisely the kind of empty class-signifier whose function can only be beyond the tramp’s comprehension and social position.

While Beckett’s works are regularly described as reified and thingly, and the objects populating his later works especially can appear monadic and lithic (in other words worldless), integrity and unity are not really his concern in and of themselves. Here he still owes much to Joyce, who both elevates and ridicules the object’s aura: “Any object, intensely regarded, may be a gate of access to the incorruptible eon of the gods. Do you not think it, Stephen?” (Ulysses 423). Towards the end of Portrait, Stephen formulates his aesthetic theory (after Aquinas) of apprehending the thing, first in its wholeness (integritas), then its multiplicity (consonantia): “Having first felt that it is one
thing you feel now that it is a thing” (242). From this combined apprehension, the artist may conceive the radiance, “whatness of a thing” (quidditas). If Stephen is rehearsing a “modernist” interest in the object’s integrity, then remember how highly compromised he is, famous among his classmates as a scholastic rhetorician. “Bull’s eye!” Lynch retorts to each of Stephen’s definitions. This is “modernism” parodying its own commitments. The humour of the passage deftly subverts philosophical and aesthetic revelations of essences and absolutes attributed to the object, and, read through the prism of Stephen’s theorising, the artwork. Beckett, in turn, approaches this particular modernist cliché itself as if it were a thing already discarded but still lingering, waiting to be put to death.

Emblematic for this irreconcilable lateness, the compromised spectrality of Beckett’s object-world is his heirloom—paternal hat and greatcoat, discrete mnemonic objects, maternal bed—traditionally carrying strong hermeneutic and narrative resonance. The heirloom is at once caught between commodity cycle and consecration as souvenir-collectible, and an object of mourning, carrying the ghost of the lost. It is also, in Beckett, a thing inherited from literary legacies. The hat, especially the iconic bowler, is passed on from text to text as from father to son.324 The unnameable identifies Malone by his brimless hat, conceding that it might be Molloy wearing Malone’s hat: “Oh look, there is the first thing, Malone’s hat.” After all, “[where] there are people, […] there are things,” things requesting an identity (2-3). The bowler becomes Beckett’s “ur-object” (Kennedy, “Humanity” 189), with a variety of socio-political connotations. Julie Bates offers a compelling tripartite reading of the bowler as, first, a stand-in for paternal conformity and conservatism in an Irish Protestant context, second, Beckett’s misappropriation of the modern slapstick tradition, and third, the literalisation of rationalist, pragmatic thought (to be ridiculed) (27-47).325 The bowler was thus

324 “First Love”: “I wrote somewhere, They gave me … a hat. Now the truth is they never gave me a hat, I have always had my own hat, the one my father gave me, and I have never had any other hat” (CSP 34). In “The Expelled”: “my father said to me, Come son, we are going to buy your hat, as though it had pre-existed from time immemorial in a pre-established place” (48). In “The Calmative,” the narrator refuses to trade his hat, with vehemence.

325 Waiting for Godot stages the most overt marriage between the stubbornly protestant, middle-class signifier—the “iron hat,” implying patriarchal, classist rigidity—and the
shorthand for different types of established behaviour, most significantly perhaps in 1920s and 30s Ireland when it came to represent the Protestant middle- and remaining upper-classes, and republicans used it to portray loyalist snobbery in newspaper caricatures: “This was a time when the kind of hat one wore said something about the kind of Ireland one hoped for (Kennedy, “Humanity” 190). For Beckett, then, as Bates rightly notes, “the bowler was a loaded symbol and held a very particular set of personal and social meanings” (33), one that could be re-appropriated as a show of resistance, not only against Protestant, patriarchal norms by bestowing it onto the tramp, but, in the same gesture, against republican nationalist ideologies. For what the repurposing of the slapstick trope brings with it is cultural and literal repetition, the wearing and tearing of the signified, as the hat is continually passed around and passed down. For example, the narrator’s absent father that is inscribed on the hat’s surface is not Simon Dedalus or Kafka’s stern paterfamilias; he is a man who saw it fit to bestow onto his son a hat that fit, more or less. In the prose, the identity (and model) of the hat is often called into question: the narrator of “The End” mentions he wears a kepi, so he can salute “in military fashion” (connoting the French Army), only to conclude he must be mistaken (CSP 83). The hat’s gesture toward historical and personal/family trauma—war, birth, death—is at once overriding and beyond recuperation.

The hat as Beckett’s prototypical, axiomatic thing is at the same time overdetermined, not least after a long history of scholarship. Consider Lucky’s famous speech—“that casual quip and brutal denouement” in which for a generation critics “resides the entire paradigm of absurdity” (Ackerley and Gontarski 148). Speech, thought, reason, those faculties that form at once the very definition and the last bastion of “the human,” should by all logic recuperate the humanity of the otherwise utterly thingified slave Lucky. Instead, the order to use his human speech faculties animalises him—“Think, Pig!”—and his inhuman discharge of words is credited to his hat: “He can’t think without his hat” (WfG 35). The rhythm, form and content of the speech oscillate appropriation of slapstick and physical comedy (as Didi and Gogo pass their ill-fitting hats back and forth in the manner of the Marx brother’s Duck Soup).

326 Here Kennedy is more on point than Bates (who holds on to the various meanings), comparing objects like the hat to symptoms for repressed, irrecoverable historical materials (“Humanity” 198).
between dislocated citation and sheer materiality, Latin metabolised into animal sound:
“quaquaquaqua” (36). Rationalist thought gains a material, prosthetic form: Lucky’s
thinking hat, summoning the “thinking cap” (or “smoking cap”)—the cliche in
literalised form, deadened. Beckett recuperates and bastardises the nineteenth-
century bourgeois staple of gentlemanly grandeur, while simultaneously objectifying
and pre-empting the modernist language position onto the stage: Joyce’s “dumb speak.
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the string twisted itself about his neck, but not at all, for theory is one thing and reality another, and the hat remained where it was, I mean in its place, like a thing forsaken” (MD 74). Who is being forsaken here? Tramp or hat? The thing’s temporal fragmentation, its refusal to carry with it the mythical time of the symbol, is articulated as material excess: the forsaken, indivisible remainder, at once revealing and unrevealing of its social relation.

It is useful to examine the literal understanding of Beckett’s heirloom further. As an “old trusty thing,” it distributes, or enfolds, different times and temporal trajectories (as well as libidinal energy). Beckett’s paternal greatcoat has traditionally been read as a memento of the father’s death, the Oedipal relation enacted in the bodily proximity and the completed act of passing down. Bates observes that the greatcoat, after its prominence in Beckett’s prose in the 40s and 50s, is stowed into the back of a wardrobe during the 60s only to re-emerge in the late prose where it “becomes a poetically charged icon of loss, a metonym for mourned loved ones and past lives that haunt Beckett’s later writing” (89). It is fair to say that Beckett’s “icon of loss” only exists residually, worn out by repetitious naming and misidentification and misappropriation. The tramp’s heirloom puts itself forward as a mnemonic object, but only to advertise the breakdown of the fetishistic relation, or rather the forgetting that is the chief function of the mnemonic object in the first place. If the souvenir performs a narrative of origins, miniaturizing history, then the inscribed problematisation of origins, even birth, in Beckett, means his mnemonic object can only lead the characters down a cul-de-sac, something the tramps are aware of: “To restore silence is the role of objects” (Molloy 10). Rather than summoning the memory of the father, the greatcoat and hat restore the silence that carries the father’s spectre into the present. This exhaustion of the mnemonic heirloom is tragically enacted as the narrator happens on his son: “He took off his hat and bowed and I saw he was as bald as a coot. […] He went bustling along his duck feet, bowing and scraping and flourishing his hat left and right. The insufferable son of a bitch” (CSP 87). The reiteration of the object’s familial origin, paired with doubt or forgetting, re-enacts one of the recurring leitmotifs of the realist novel—human relations laid bare in the mysterious object—only with its content and meaning hollowed out; “the joke dies too old,” as the narrator of How It Is puts it (31). Despite the recurring problem of origins, the narrators’ possessions carry little of
the mystery of Wilkie Collins’ Moonstone or the consecration of Balzac’s promiscuous bibelots or the explosion of insignificance into significance of James’s golden bowl.

Beckett’s prose revises in this way not only the realist object culture but also a particular modernist interest in memory objects, as glossed here by Boscagli (thinking chiefly of Proust and Woolf): “A somatic discernment of the past in the stuff which remains in the present, a new experience of temporality in the unruly object: these are the stakes of the early twentieth-century crisis of representation in its bearing upon the notion of history” (186). In his Proust essay, Beckett suggests that Proust’s “entire book is a monument to involuntary memory and the epic of its action”: the “madeleine steeped in tea” (21). Beckett counts eleven such fetish objects that function as “the Leitmotiv of his composition,” highlighting the narrative function and contingency of the mnemonic object that interrupts habit at the same time as it is facilitated by it: its “accidental and fugitive salvation” (ibid.). Beckett retains only the accidental and fugitive, within an axiomatic cloak, riddling the object-relation of salvation. In the essay, Beckett shows his understanding of the “grotesque fallacy of realistic art—‘that miserable statement of line and surface’” (57) and of the concrete, embodied Idea that distinguishes Proust from Baudelaire’s abstract symbolism (60). We see Beckett depart from the “ideal real” that is the essence of Proust’s involuntary memory to the “ill seen ill said” of things, embodying the dispossession intrinsic to the fetish-relation (55).

Molloy’s hat, inherited from his earlier incarnation rather than his father, retains not the idea, the discernment of the past, but sheer, inconsistent concreteness and perverted use-value. Bookending his journey, Molloy’s hat confirms, if nothing else, the state of


331 For Boscagli, Proust’s memory relates to a matter of bodies without objects, whereas for Woolf memory is a matter of objects without the body where materiality and nature replace subjectivity (190). We find such a dualism in Beckett, to be sure, only in parodied form.

332 “The identification of immediate with past experience […] amounts to a participation between the ideal and the real, imagination and direct apprehension, symbol and substance. […] the experience is at once imaginative and empirical, at once an evocation and a direct perception, real without being merely actual, ideal without being merely abstract, the ideal real, the essential, the extratemporal” (ibid.).
not being dead: “the hat, a town hat, an old-fashioned town hat, which the least gust would carry away. […] It is fastened, it has always been fastened, to my buttonhole, always the same buttonhole, at all seasons, by a long lace. I am still alive then” (10). Finally: “I kept losing my hat, the lace had broken long ago, until in a fit of temper I banged it down on my skull with such violence that I couldn’t get it off again. And if I had met any lady friends, if I had had any lady friends, I would have been powerless to salute them correctly” (91). The habitus that the narrator of “The End” found so insufferable in his son has emptied into a double negative in the “Molloy country,” the powerlessness to enact it and the very absence of the social.

Like names, objects travel across texts in Beckett’s oeuvre. According to Bates, they carry “with them echoes of former appearances, thereby establishing a resonance that is not bound to their function in a single text, and which enables them to operate as recurring manifestations of Beckett’s evolving literary imagination” (119). We may ask, however, whether the point of the “former appearance” of things is not precisely that its specificity matters so little to the protagonists, that they fail to remember, or want to forget—and does not this absence behind the resonance energize Beckett’s object-relations? From this perspective, the resonance, the identification of present with past, is bound precisely to the thing’s function in a single text, the foldings of its different personal-historical times, its “former appearance,” bound absolutely, frustratingly within the “nightmare thingness” of its world: “It [the hat, brimless] is perhaps the only object in my possession the history of which I have not forgotten, I mean counting from the day it became mine” (MD 78). Beckett denies the Proustian recovery. When the unnamable narrator’s gaze—if one can speak of gaze—falls on the “first thing,” Malone’s or Molloy’s hat, this does not establish continuity, but the breakdown

333 As Gulliver in Lilliput (Ackerley and Gontarski 247).

334 Bates’ thorough examination of the different forms, functions, and connotations of Beckett’s privileged things (she isolates 14 key things) provides useful references and textual analysis. However, Bates’ insistence on things as stand-ins of biographical memory fragments unduly determines and fixes them. Certain objects, in her reading, stand for instance for irrecoverable loss, others for the act of writing. The traditional gendered attribution of maternal and paternal object as well, even as it captures Beckett’s bastardization of the Oedipal complex, relies too heavily on positive identification and uncompromised mnemonic potency.
between past and present appearance (2). Until late, the bowler survives, at once bourgeois relic and thing—surplus to itself:

I can also just discern, with a final effort of will, a bowler hat which seems to my sorrow a sardonic synthesis of all those that never fitted me and, at the other extremity, similarly suspicious, a complete pair of brown boots lacerated and gaping. These insignia, if I may so describe them, advance in concert, as though connected by the traditional human excipient, halt, move on again, confirmed by the vast show windows. (TfN1, CSP 134)

**Last Things: Lists, Pebbles, Props**

As Jean-Michel Rabaté enquires into the spectres of literary inheritance, he notes that “the concept of aesthetic experience presupposed by both Joyce and Benjamin falls into the category of haunting, which is produced less by the loss of an object than by the awareness that it was always, in its ravishing uniqueness, destined to have been lost” (*Ghosts* xxi-xxii). This is the cryptic trauma of disappearance at the centre of Joyce’s “epiphany” and Benjamin’s “aura.” It is the indeterminate ontology that draws Bill Brown to the “thingness” of things. Beckett’s post-war work is marked by the sense of surprise that, somehow, despite their loss, things remain, “stirring still.” The pebbles, knife-rest, hat, linger: “The things too must still be there, a little more worn a little even less, many still standing where they stood in the days of their indifference” (CSP 105). As Beckett produces ghostlier works, the presence of things paradoxically intensifies, just as disembodied voices proliferate within an ever more material, embodied prose.\(^{335}\) In Beckett’s spectral environments, things are never *in themselves*. They are both solid and fluid, “there” and ghostly. As soon as their integrity is signalled, it is compromised. If, in Mao’s words, “one of modernism’s major efforts was to preserve the object’s integrity and difference” (23), then Beckett’s things encroach on the human and the “human” encroaches on things to sink such object-

\(^{335}\) The “haunting” in Beckett’s later, “ghostly” prose and drama depends on the coincidence of presence and absence, material and immaterial, the fundamental aporia of Beckett’s void; in *Footfalls*, for instance, the never-properly-born girl asserts in her cryptic half-voice: “I saw nothing, heard nothing, of any kind. I was not there” (*Plays* 243).
categories into the ruins. Most of all, the state of disintegration in Beckett is itself haunted, as if inherited from prior generations, prior texts. This state describes neither a metaphor for literary heritage nor a case of a radical break with modernism, but instead an encounter with the persistence of spectral things. If objects served the realists to write and resolve the human condition, and the modernists may be seen to reveal a reconciliation of representation in crisis, then both modes inform Beckett’s work simultaneously, and, ultimately, negatively. However, this is not so much Beckett’s critique of two aesthetic categories as a recognition that neither had an unproblematic relationship with the object in the first place. Beckett’s spectral object worlds ground, in this sense, the wider aesthetics of indetermination characterising his work, emphasising the refusal to systematise his works, or to form an autotelic whole. In this final section, I want to return to this question of systems that occupied the preceding chapter on Sebald’s networks: how to view the singular, the material particular in relation to the “system,” to the finished body of the work. To do so this final section looks, first, at the preoccupation with inventories and lists that Beckett’s characters habitually show, and second, at Beckett’s object as it is “freed” from the text (pace Derrida) or page, and moves onto the theatrical stage.

Inventories and lists are recurrent forms in a lot of material-oriented criticism, a strategy to convey the contingency, connections, and sheer mass of things as they construct contemporary life and cultural systems. This is in many ways the cumulative, empirical and materialist epistemology, dedicated to understanding the world through particulars, which writers like Joyce and Beckett (and Sebald for that matter) seek to upend after the incessant descriptions of mundane objects in realism and naturalism. However, they are not immune to its comforts; what they reject is the production of a totality through the mass of heterogeneous materials, instead parsing down historical experience, or being, to the very particulars on which it hinges. We might compare *Ulysses* “Ithaca” chapter to Malone’s inventory; the catalogue (as epistemological archive) relates in both texts to the pre-emptive completion of the narrative. Less concerned with the modern anxiety of control, of the subject defining itself in and against a world in rapid progress than, say, Woolf, Joyce employs earlier models to interrogate how particulars, the everyday habit, and especially language (fail to) locate the self in the world. It becomes all about an archival epistemology of coordinates and details. Joyce’s formal experimentation—his resort to medieval encyclopaedic practices
and the catechism mode in “Ithaca”—mobilises “demented particulars” (Murphy 9) within a highly regulated, institutionalised, but also embodied vocalising system. The humour and depravity that Joyce and Beckett derive from lists, catalogues and inventories follows a long tradition of satirists from Rabelais, to Swift and Sterne who recognised the format’s comic potential when bulked up with esoteric or redundant information (Murray 167). Meanwhile Flaubert’s unfinished *Bouvard et Pécuchet* is generally regarded as a precursor to Beckett and Joyce’s dismantling of encyclopaedic epistemology. His novel was grounded in the recognition that bourgeois material culture was a historical product of enlightenment epistemology (with Diderot’s encyclopaedia and the Paris arcades and exhibitions providing the inextricable landmarks in the French cultural marketplace), a recognition the novel’s plot dramatizes in the form of the protagonists’ domestic museum. Elizabeth Barry writes: “[the] encyclopaedic style of *Ulysses* shares something of the deliberate failure of Flaubert’s novel, whereby exhaustive method becomes in the end simply exhausted structure” (21). The tone of compulsion and confession that offsets the mundane details, often erroneous mathematical permutations, and indexing (lists within a list; budget of the day à la *Walden*) in Joyce’s chapter, propels forward the narrative dénouement or eschatology, as if Bloom’s life, like his day, could be thus quantified in principle and redeemed by a kind of excess materialism once and for all, before the voice is ceded to Molly.

If Beckett’s asceticism leaves his characters with only a small number of objects whose presence is heightened in a bare environment, they nonetheless inherited the stripped-down ordering mechanisms by which they try and fail to make sense of their world from earlier models. It will not do to diametrically oppose the maximalism of Joyce’s chapter with the reduced form of Malone’s list, for instance, as the nervous drive that defers the catalogue in fact similarly problematises the recruitment of material particulars for the epistemological archive. Both Molloy and Malone promise

336 *Mercier and Camier* is regularly cited as a nod to Flaubert’s novel as the characters bicker over definitions and modes of procedure (like all of Beckett’s pseudo-couples). Beckett’s letters throw in doubt how much he had actually read of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. To Barbara Bray, 7 Jul. 1965: “Abandoned B. et P. [? quel pion]” (LIII 671).

337 For a detailed historicisation of Flaubert’s museum artefacts, see Watson, Chapter 4: “Flaubert’s “musées recus”: Bouvard and Pécuchet’s consumerist epistemology.”
inventories of their possessions before it is all over, more for their own peace of mind, it would seem, than their readers’. For Malone, the inventory is “a thing” which he “must leave to the very last moment, so as to be sure of not having made a mistake” (5). He sort of delivers, restricted by his senses as well as his definition of what constitutes a possession. In light of inherited objects, Molloy and Malone’s planned listing of things pertaining to their person—their life’s index—recalls the testament in its pragmatic patriarchal function, while the matter of heirs remains notoriously tricky. It is a final act that follows Molloy’s principle: “To restore silence is the role of objects” (10). Beckett signals the material redemption implicit in the catalogue to let it spill over and peter out (the redemptive tone characterising “Ithaca” is likewise comical, rather than actualised). At first Malone invokes the inventory as a kind of rolling of the credits or appendix, but its value is quickly defined as essential. It would be brief, “clear, without being finical” (unlike Watt’s, Sterne’s, or Joyce’s), but there is a dilemma: be true to his romantic imaginary and leave the inventory until last (“All my life long I have dreamt of the moment when, edified at last […] I might draw the line and make the tot”), or adhere to reason and speak before it is too late (“can I really resign myself to the possibility of my dying without leaving an inventory behind”) (5). With his legacy at stake, Malone later accelerates his original programme, interrupting Macmann’s tale mid-sentence: “Quick quick my possessions. Quiet, quiet, twice, I have time, lots of time, as usual. My pencil, my two pencils…” (75). The enumeration of possessions delays the inevitable end of the narrative as much as it summons it, as Malone keeps shifting the parameters for inclusion and organisation. A conflict emerges here that is somewhat unique to Beckett’s work in the way it understands language as material: the upended “archival” structure, as it relates to epistemology, narrative, history, collapses into a compulsive being-in-things, or being a thing among things, that characterises especially the later “Beckett country.”

While Malone’s frustration is in part aimed at the empirical system of enumeration itself, with all its teleological promise, the problem of possession itself pertains very much to language: the rift between the possessive and first-person pronouns, and property as defined socio-economically. Writes Daniel Katz, “The problem is not

338 “Doubtless I shall speak of them [hat and greatcoat] later, when the time comes to draw up the inventory of my goods and possessions” (Molloy 10).

339 “Present state, three stories, inventory, there” (5).
whether the pots ‘really belong’ to Malone or not—‘Malone’ here is not even capable of the self-identity that would be prior to any claim of agency” (Saying 15). As with Winnie’s citations in *Happy Days*, the impression persists that there is little difference between Malone’s stories and Malone’s things: both serve pleasure-seeking functions, neither oblige much. As the inventory itself becomes a narrative object, the text catalogues stories. Peter Boxall notes that “*Malone Dies* is itself constantly engaged in a process of self-editing, of self-correction. As Malone writes, so he amends himself” (Preface xiv). By the same token, his things revise themselves, passing in and out of the purview of his possession, appearing and disappearing. Malone “cannot account in any other way for the changing aspect of [his] possessions” than admitting that some are familiar to him and some not (MD 79); he cannot, in like manner, account for the changing nature and subject of his stories. Things undergo the same weakening as Malone and his stories, despite ordering and testimonial attempts. The pencil turns into its own eraser.340 Malone’s mnemonic, or narrative, things, like his notes, “have a curious tendency […] to annihilate all they purport to record” (88).

On one level, the insistence on silence and negation works in the context of historical and aesthetic resistance in the face of instrumentalised reason. Beckett responds to the modern archive’s rationalist, historical claim by emphasising its prosthetic and material nature. This is clearest in *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958), in which memory and testimony, language and voice, are externalised, transmitted, and compromised by the technological device qua mnemonic prosthesis. As Krapp listens to the testimony of his 39-year-old self, he fast-forwards and rewinds, records silences, forgets to press record at other points. The production of Krapp’s “subjectivity” through the prosthetic archive is grounded as much in the replay as in the recorded silences and the apparatus’ material properties. Albright speaks suggestively of Krapp’s “hypertape”: “the prerecorded soundtrack exactly as the audience hears it, full of discontinuities, loopings-back, even, at the end, an erasure, […] Krapp’s gesture of throwing his newly-recorded tape away” (*Aesthetics* 94).341 The play’s archival failure is registered in its

340 “Far from ever possessing any satisfying stability, any palpability, the pencil is only an occasion for its own concealment, its own vanishing” (Albright, *Representation* 159).

341 For David Houston Jones, *Krapp* responds “to the problematic legibility of history which specifically relies upon the archive as form and idea. The archive demands reference to history and yet […] enforces a stubborn materiality” (123). Robert Reginio
inability to distinguish between surplus and indispensable. In the end, the “tape runs on in silence” (Plays 20). In other plays, archival mechanisms are exposed for the violence they do to the singular and individual, for the historical forgetting that they promote. The archival mode, relating pleasure principle and death drive, can easily be directed outward, pleasure becoming sadism; the institutionalised summing up of C in Rough for Theatre II, for instance, whereby A and B seek to encourage C’s self-defenestration. Or, as Tyrus Miller shows, in What Where: “[Bam’s] ritualized imagination of interrogations, his mathematically permutated attempts to torture his way into embodied being [define his what, his where], reveal that he is less a subjectivity, a ‘character’ than a label for a system from which subjectivity has been evacuated” (Singular 209). Purity of order and information remain for Beckett (as for Sebald) tied politically and historically to torture, violence and power.

The violent scenes at the end of Malone Dies form no exception in that respect. Nevertheless, the particular language condition and the collapse of the archival structure point to another mode of being, a being-in-things and as thing, not in terms of completion (or self-collection) but in terms of embodied remaining. Think of Winnie’s existence in the mound, alleviated only by her possessions: “I take up this little glass, I shiver it on a stone – [does so] – I throw it away – [does so far behind her] – it will be in the bag again tomorrow, without a scratch, to help me through the day” (HD 22-23). We could describe the relationship between Malone or Winnie and their possessions in terms of Baudrillard’s notion of “visceral intimacy,” if only in the suggests that Krapp’s tapes are “an archival project that eventually seems an impediment to ‘be again.’ An archive can enable repetition—the ‘again’ in Krapp’s imperative ‘be again’—but it cannot vouchsafe being itself” (117).

This then paints a very different picture than the dramatization of an ironic Cartesianism that Kenner attributed to Beckett’s “stuff” vis-à-vis Flaubert and Joyce: “[Flaubert] knows very well why he has included every scrap of what he has included, and every syllable. He terminates the evolution of the house of fiction […] [Joyce] glimpsed the paradoxical possibility of the novel, as it grew more highly mechanized […], with the comedy of utterly inevitable coincidence […]. And Beckett’s comedy, if it can deal with everything it touches because it operates solely with the laws of thought, by the same token can really deal with nothing, because thought is not prior to things, and things escape” (Flaubert 106).
negative (28). If “visceral intimacy” is grounded in transition, assimilation, and identification, the intimacy and proximity in Beckett describes breakdown, failed assimilation and misidentification. The way things come and go, are possessed and divest themselves, keeps the transition active, undermines the “subject’s” identification at the same time as it is the only marker of their presence in the world. That things undermine order does not completely obliterate what little respite they offer. David Lloyd locates a shift when, with Krapp’s Last Tape, Beckett turns to visual and acoustic technologies and prosthetic devices to radically shatter the image of the human in the world: “Krapp appears not so much extended into his world by things as suspended among them” (Beckett’s 134). Earlier plays, writes Lloyd, do not yet “fundamentally displace the subject from its centrality in the world arrayed around it” (ibid.). Indeed, many later plays become ghostlier and more virtual and technologically mediated. This tendency is often seen as the apotheosis of Beckett’s labour of negation, an extreme “solution” to problems of anthropocentric mimesis and expression, while Lloyd suggests we understand this work “as an allegory for the fate of things, including human things, in the era of late capitalism” (ibid. 143). To be sure the shorter, the ghostlier and the more disembodied the plays become throughout the 60s, 70s and early 80s (with Catastrophe [1982] the exception that confirms the rule), the more any conception of the “human”—and of theatre as a “human” domain—is decentred and reified. However, this view can also overstate the immaterial in Beckett’s work, as Lloyd’s problematic for instance centres on the Lacanian understanding of the Thing and thingliness as the emptiness of the Real. The emphasis on the “subject’s” suspension among things—on the level of signification and meaning—as the Beckettian apotheosis obscures somewhat the dwelling among things that grounds his work, not least in its glorious attention to the mundane practices of handling, carrying, using material objects.

It is notable, for instance that in their spectral environments, Beckett’s protagonists become increasingly drawn to “hard, shapely objects,” “little portable things in wood

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343 I find Baudrillard’s term suggestive, but we do not need to subscribe to his neo-Marxist binary of a Natural order of things (visceral) and a functional, objective order (signs).

344 Recall the discussion of Fizgig in Chapter Two.
and stone” (ibid. 76). Prototypical things. The more worldless, the better.345 Things whose monadic unity offers shelter: “his eyes would search out the rock, not the haphazard in its shadow of that unstable fugitive thing, still living flesh” (Molloy 7). Things to satisfy one’s oral fixation, to indulge in pre-birth nostalgia for the return to the mineral state. To mix with abjection, test the body’s erogenous zones: the relish of disgust and refusal to choose one mode of being over another.346 The stone becomes the last talismanic possession: “I had nothing with me but my stone” (CSP 67). Bloom’s black, shrivelled potato, petrified.347 Macmann is dispossessed of his. Malone’s overtly narrative object is a stone, about which we never find out: “If I went on to the stone? No, it would be the same thing” (MD 42). Memories of handling the solid are among the few remaining: “I loved to fall asleep holding in my hand a stone, a horse chestnut or a cone” (ibid. 76). There is comfort in the “impression that they too needed” him (ibid.). Scholarship at times adopts the same elegiac, pre-birth nostalgia tone as Malone, especially when recounting Beckett’s childhood fondness for pebbles.348 Benjamin Keatinge highlights the “Universal stone” of Ill Seen Ill Said (CIWS

345 The stone is Heidegger’s example for a thing without world, “weltlos” (“Ursprung” 31).

346 See Connor, Beckett 35ff. Consider the comparison between Molloy’s sucking stone episode and Roquentin’s disgust at holding a pebble in Sartre’s Nausea (1938). Molloy describes “two incompatible bodily needs, at loggerheads” (74): the equal distribution of the pebbles (number and weight) among his pockets and their methodical sucking. One need: the obsessive-compulsive permutations (also the bastardisation of an imperial, class-related signifier: the counting cricket umpire). Other need: oral fixation and the body-abject; the comfort of the indeterminacy by which subjectivity is no longer up for debate (in contrast to Roquentin’s compromised subjectivity through abject materiality [cf. Sartre 22]).

347 Bloom does not leave the house without his talisman: “Potato I have” (59); “It is nothing, but still a relic of poor mamma […] There is memory attached to it” (502). Compare Mr Rooney’s “a thing I carry about with me!” (Beckett, Plays 38).

348 As a child, Beckett “would wander off alone along the beach or stand motionless gazing out to sea. […] He recounted how he used to take stones of which he was particularly fond home with him from the beach in order to protect them from the wearing away of the waves or the vagaries of the weather. He would lay them gently into the branches of trees in the garden to keep them safe from harm” (Knowlson 29).
72), noting the mythical, transcendental time of the mineral. Quite against itself, by virtue of centuries of writing on “true stone” (ibid.), the mineral has proven to be its own storied and storying matter, long since forming the bedrock of philosophical enquiry. Philosophers kicked it to assert reality, perched on it to think. Like waste, stone has a cultural history. It archives extinction and continuation, conveys not only the “resolute onwardness of Beckett’s characters,” as Keatinge writes (337), but the resolute onwardness of the world of things. The dematerialized voice is not written into stone in an attempt at mythologizing; stone echoes a history of myth. The retreat from the world—“I might have been reduced to the society of nice people or to the consolations of some religion or other” (MD 76)—cannot be fully actualised even in the most heartfelt embrace of lithic, “worldless” thingness.

I invoked the spectral solidity of the stone to put into relief the specific problem that faces Beckett with the thing on the theatrical stage, when his objects no longer appear as insuperably compromised by language as in the prose. As his stage becomes emptier, impossibly expressing the void of expression, the “thereness” of Beckett’s props (as it is often called) asserts itself more strongly. Beckett’s props are “more self-consciously present as props than most” (Hardy 152), expressing a “nauseating ‘thereness’” (Sofer 15). The critical conception of the object’s assertion resembles Alain Robbe-Grillet’s definition of the nouveau roman: “the world is neither significant nor absurd. It simply is. [...] Around us, defying the mob of our animating animistic or domestic adjectives, things are there” (21-22). As if recalling Molloy’s pronouncement on self-imposing things, Robbe-Grillet advocates a more solid and immediate world in literature: “So that it were first of all by their presence that objects and gestures impose themselves, and continue in turn to dominate…” (23). Pure phenomena stand in opposition, for Robbe-Grillet, to an anthropocentric universe of signification, indicating inaccessible

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349 “Speculative realists” are no exception: “By invoking an imperium-toppling pebble to emphasize the power of the nonhuman, [Graham] Harman participates in a long tradition of mining the philosophical from the lithic” (Cohen 4).

350 My translation. “Or le monde n’est ni signifiant ni absurde. Il est, tout simplement. [...] Autour de nous, défiant la meute de nos adjectifs animistes ou ménagers, les choses sont là.”

351 My translation. “Que ce soit d’abord par leur présence que les objets et les gestes s’imposent, et que cette présence continue ensuite à dominer…”
noumena instead. Beckett, while positively inclined towards Robbe-Grillet’s *La jalousie*, commented to Barbara Bray: “It is systematic Sachlichkeit [objectivity], which of course has nothing to do with realism. What worries me is all [Robbe-Grillet’s] own theorising, but the result belies it and is I think very imp[ortant and remarkable]” (LIII 222). A sweeping, committed theory of objectivity is not Beckett’s thing, relying too strongly on binary (“systematic”) models, and a domination of one form of being (“l’empêchement-objet” in this case) over another. It is true many of Beckett’s use-objects are recalcitrant, refuse to operate within the parameters of *habitus*. It is also true that many things, like Krapp’s tape recorder, do *work*.

What Beckett seeks to counter with his props is the sense of how easily the handling and manipulating of the inanimate thing can verify a steady subject around which things gather. If repetition, erasure, self-correction, indetermination inform the spectral object, then the prop’s material presence is in danger of confirming the “subject” on stage. Already with *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, we can see Beckett’s response as he turns to the “thereness” of the tree and dustbins and the handling of the spyglass or toy dog to allegorise the “inhumanity” of the characters’ circumstances, not least by allowing the objects to form their own clichés. Things are thrown against void, minimal backgrounds, most blatantly perhaps in Jocelyn Herbert’s abstracted set designs. The

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352 26 March 1959.
353 It is perhaps this systematic encounter with objects that leads Beckett to mock Francis Ponge as “notre grand chosier” [our great thinger] (LII 120; to Georges Duthuit, 1 March 1949).
354 Beckett is said to not have been very comfortable with props, but then that goes for most theatrical elements. Why would his anxious precision regarding movement, handling, cadence, etc., not extend to props? See his letter to George Devine from 4 September 1962, for instance, concerning the set of *Happy Days* (LIII 498-499).
355 Herbert: “George Devine wanted to get away from swamping the stage with decorative and naturalistic scenery […] Props suddenly became very significant: every book, lamp, chair or table—possibly the only visual elements in a scene. […] Perhaps it was the beginning of what I call ‘considering the actors as part of the design’; considering where the actors will be on stage and what they will need as the basis of the design; not creating an elaborate picture and then sticking the actors in it” (qtd. in Margolies 96).
abundance of decorative stuff in realist and naturalist theatre has been evacuated, as the ensuing semblance of authenticity and temporal depth and linearity. One way to remove the “subject” from the centre consists, for both Herbert and Beckett, in thinking of the actor as part of the set. Another is to suggest the object’s animate or magical properties. Consider *Act Without Words I*, for instance, in which different objects—carafe, scissors, rope—are lowered onto the stage and teasingly snatched away as the protagonist hopes to utilise them (not Beckett’s subtlest play). In *Rough for Theatre II*, the desk lamp sabotages the official evaluation of C by going of an on.

Winnie’s pistol appears somehow always at the top of her bag, while she ponders the vitality of her belongings: “It’s things, Willie… In the bag, outside the bag… Ah yes, things have their life, that is what I always say, *things* have a life… Take my looking-glass, it doesn’t need me” (32). When her parasol spontaneously decides to combust and the earth, “old extinguisher” that she is, absorbs the fire, Winnie is unsurprised (21).

From the “life” of Winnie’s things we can glean how “new materialist” conceptions of matter as “agents” of performance and becoming have impacted theatre studies. The stage puts on show the animation and interaction between things, real and in connection to the human, evoking the immanence and affirmation championed by “new materialisms.” Schweitzer and Zerdy’s recent volume on theatrical objects, for instance, foregrounds “the agency of nonhuman entities [to challenge] the way theatre and performance scholars think about the literal and material structures […] that support us” (6). After the semiotic-driven, dematerialising theatre criticism of the 90s, a sense of familiarity that remains: “Old earth, no more lies, I’ve seen you” (CSP 238).

the creative and speculative nature of “new materialism” finds vibrant possibilities in on the stage (as within the wider purview of performance art) that has been reinvested with its insuperable materiality and where the object becomes, quite literally, recast as an “actor.” We might detect in Beckett’s later plays, especially the overtly mediated ones, a suggestion of hybridisation and material “vitality” in tune with the ontological entanglement and even the speculative nature of “new materialist” theory. If in Not I, for instance, Beckett parses the body into discreet erogenous parts, it is not to represent a fully functionalised system of sexual signs, but to freeze, for a moment, the coming-together of materialities (language, body, objects). A cohesive or immanent picture of hybridity or entanglement, however, does not form—indeed, the negative of formation that characterises Beckett’s work till last keeps an affirmative picture of human-nonhuman interplay at bay. As Not I evokes parapraxis, the confusion of organs and senses, Mouth imagines the body as a machine, while language and the Auditor and our external position evoke mechanisation; yet at the same time, the stream of words and the image of the mouth inscribe an abjection and sexuality pertaining, insuperably, to the body.358 The play marks, as Yoshiki Tajiri writes, a “simultaneous separation and fusion” of the body synaesthetic-prosthetic that is typical for Beckett (91). The emphasis is not on fusion alone, or on discreteness alone, but on their inadequation, their unresolved collapse into one another. Beckett’s concern, yet again, is a material threshold, not an equal diffraction of meanings.

In Happy Days, the “life” of Winnie’s things registers a different relation between body, object, and world. The play exemplifies that we are always already among things, on Beckett’s stage, but that it is an exhausted relationship. In part because the prop is never innocent, as Sofer notes (173). If it is more real on stage (there), its cultural history, that is to say its narrative (temporal) and symbolic sway, is not only unavoidable, but complicit. These are not structural, empty categories but historical forms with content. Fertile ground for Beckett, as the tramps’ hats (vaudeville) or

358 See especially Chapter Two and Three (40-100) in Tajiri who sums up: “[Beckett] used audio and visual technologies to explore the auditory and visual senses in their prosthetically heightened and isolated states. On the other hand, his art shows a deep concern with synaesthesia as part of the formless body” (91).
Winnie’s pistol (Chekhov) prove. In Daniel Albright’s words, Beckett’s prop “waves in the spectator’s face the aborted fetuses of symbols” (Beckett 53). The self-cancelling or emptying of bourgeois forms on Beckett’s stage speaks to a “thereness” that is not primary, that is not, as Sofer suggests, the representation of “‘nonlogical’ phenomena before they have been ‘distorted into intelligibility’” (15), but a marker of their afterwardness, their belated, inherently inherited character. Whatever narrative or cultural value may be attributed to them is always already compromised. Winnie’s cultural paraphernalia—prayers, songs, and literary citation—are inextricable from her everyday utensils: toothbrush and toothpaste (flat tube), mirror, handkerchief, parasol, lipstick, medicine bottle (empty), revolver. As Albright notes, “the purse-bag and the quotation-bag operate identically” insofar as Winnie can draw on them for her social rituals and habits at the same time as their functionality is drastically diminished (Beckett 71). Winnie’s automatized interaction with her weakly mnemonic things is caught somewhere between exacerbating and mitigating her situation. The time of her timeless world is organised by the splintered repetition of her object habits: “Oh this is going to be another happy day” (9).

If the ritual and superstition characterising Bloom’s potato as talisman mark it as a stubborn thing and structure of old in a new world in Ulysses, the things in Happy Days are so worn-out we wonder whether those rituals and habits are not what constitutes our worldly dwelling in the first place. Beckett’s production notes emphasise the Brecht-like wear and tear of Winnie’s props: “The toothbrush has few hairs. Only fragments of a label remain on the toothpaste. The medicine bottle too has a damaged label. Winnie’s handkerchief, Willie’s boater and newspaper are all yellowed” (Gontarski 22). Any inclination of Brechtian Gestus, however, collapses with Winnie’s belongings: we do not find out how she got to this or that (for the audience) climactic and socio-historically revelatory moment. As Gontarski points out in his manuscript

359 “Beckett dangles the possibility of suicide before his characters. […] The stage pistol, which conventionally turns chromos into kairos (as in ‘night, Mother), is here displayed as a fossil left over from the play of predictability” (Sofer 188-189).

360 Albright continues: “So strongly do Winnie’s quotations behave like solid objects that Beckett, in one case, even elided the distinction between quotation and object: [quoting Beckett] ‘The revolver is called “Browning—Brownie”—not because there is a weapon of that name—but because it is always uppermost” (ibid).
study, Beckett lessened and “vaguened” both the play’s historical specificity and object-encounters (as he is wont to do with his post-war work). In early drafts, Willie read the news—“Rocket strikes Pomona, seven hundred thousand missing”—explicitly defining the mound’s scorched earth as post-apocalyptic (qtd. in Gontarski 40). Earlier drafts implied Willie's suicide wish more clearly, too, while an alarm clock still regulated Winnie’s daily routine (instead of the anarchic bell) and her bag had dozens of miscellaneous contents that were never shown (ibid. 37-39). The manuscript and production notes amplify what is residually recorded in the finished play: the dramatization of the relation between our object-rituals and personal, cultural and historical times.

Like Krapp’s banana, Winnie’s objects of desire (and anxiety) survive, but only in worn, ossified form, marking not the dismissal of the fetish-relation as much as its failure to translate into social content, into a meaningful world. The play materialises habit—“the ballast that chains the dog to its vomit” (Beckett, *Proust* 8), the *jouissance* that consolidates our reality principle and ideological norms—and throws it onto the mound, dissolving its promise of self-fulfilment. If Emma Bovary’s libidinal attachment to accessories and romance novels registered the displacement of her bodily desire, and Félicité’s collection of relics served to gratify a spiritual wish, then Winnie’s libidinal interactions with her possessions seem trapped between nostalgic ritual and the wish for conclusion. To speak of the “thereness” of Beckett’s props describes here the attempt to inscribe the object’s leftover body within the spectral environment. In the waste, discrete things become surplus to themselves. The play’s decontextualisation of the reified habit, its belated activation in the mound, means that the doubly fetishized object of desire (as neutralized commodity and memory relic) also harbours the residual promise in its world. If only a negative promise of an ending, as Willie crawls up the mound toward the pistol. Albeit in a petrified, shopworn manner, Winnie’s stuff accommodates this residual possibility despite our historical recourse to the human archive. Her bag of things spells out neither transcendence-in-death nor total obliteration; instead, it re-inscribes, continually and residually, through the differentiation of individual space and time, the singular possibility of love in mourning: “I used to think … [Pause.] I say I used to think there was no difference between one fraction of a second and the next. [Pause.] I used to say … [Pause.] … I say
I used to say, Winnie, you are changeless, there is never any difference between one fraction of a second and the next” (HD 35).

**Conclusion**

Beckett’s props embody the evacuation of mimetic and ideal categories in the knowledge that habits and historical relations abandon not even the most leftover things: there remain patterns of legibility, the workings of memory, the inherited parameters of mimesis, representation, and above all their inadequacy. Waste—the mound, whether regarded from an eschatological, Dantean, or nihilistic perspective—continually rephrases the threat of annihilation in the tension between punctuated time (Winnie’s bell) and seamless temporal multiplicities. In this wasteland, discrete things remain unreconciled, demanding attention, preventing recovery, at once forsaking and binding the human in the world. The sense of exhaustion and belatedness comes after a long history of making things work for us, whether through handling, description, sublimation or other means. The spectral character of Beckett’s object worlds disrupts, if momentarily, the calamitous linearity of this anthropocentric history. Things forsaken in the mud, their dislocated animism and disrupted imagination, constitute and arrange the conditions from which language and the world can be thought still, despite the best efforts of historical violence and erasure. This explains why, even in Beckett’s final works, the voices cherish the company of last things: “The odd sound. What a mercy to have that to turn to. Now and then. In dark and silence to close as if to light the eyes and hear a sound. Some object moving from its place to its last place. Some soft thing softly stirring soon to stir no more. To darkness visible to close the eyes and hear if only that. Some soft thing softly stirring soon to stir no more” (*Company* 11).
Chapter Six. Through the Lens: Sebald's Para-textual Things

“Do you remember / how curiously grey”
Sebald, Unrecounted (21)

Introduction

Sebald’s subversive recourse to photography is most often read in the context of trauma, the lacunae of history and memory, not least because photographs and the family album constitute the prerequisite for the ethical performance of postmemory.\textsuperscript{361} Forgery, deception, misattribution, misidentification, obfuscation, offbeat framing and composition, exposure, poor lighting and overdevelopment, material deterioration, erasure—all part of Sebald’s repertoire. “With them,” says Lise Patt, “he rewrites Barthes’s (traumatic) punctum in a post-traumatic idiom” (51). The incorporation of images contributes to the ethico-aesthetic fold of his oeuvre. This chapter will not purport to offer a comprehensive picture of Sebald’s photographic method and archive.\textsuperscript{362} To some extent, the two main qualities of Sebald’s practice are taken as given: a) the melancholic, libidinal charge of his image-text, related to loss, trauma, memory, affect, and (non-)belonging; b) the splintering, counter-hegemonic performance of Sebald’s photographic archive within the reified forgetting of historical time. This chapter briefly re-addresses these grounds as they spell out—both clearly and ambiguously—Sebald’s ethical-aesthetic salvage work. The fact that the photograph is simultaneously material object and screen (or transparent surface of representation) defines the analysis from the start. While I touch on the canonical discussions of photography’s structural properties within literary scholarship, there is no lengthy Barthesian analysis (or similar). Instead, the chapter pushes the discussion to political possibility within the material echo space of Sebald’s image archive, moving


\textsuperscript{362} The critical attention Sebald’s pictures receive is, it goes without saying, considerable. Among the many excellent readings, Lise Patt’s beautiful edited volume Searching for Sebald: Photography After W.G. Sebald (2007) stands out for its thoroughness, breadth, and creativity. See Appendix (6) for a selection of critical essays on Sebald and photography.
from the enclosed space of trauma and family, to the creaturely encounter and the question of the nonhuman, to the larger domain of ecological thought.

There are three sections: first, the distinctly modern historical archive of photography as it contributes to the commodified domestic sphere. I suggest that the family album interrogates the status of the family within Sebald’s ethical labour of restitution; inscribing the semblance of the family as a sacralised, sheltered sphere, the family album facilitates its simultaneous commodification and dispersal. Second, the chapter examines Sebald’s photographic practice in line with his wider interrogation of the historical archive as the domain of the human. This section allows for another look at Sebald’s creaturely encounter, positing a conception of thingness as a shared line of unknowing. While a kind of vitalist, nomadic flow between human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic, is intimated here, the photograph’s surface and material properties (and its reference to the visual) ultimately register the negative limit of this ontological distribution. The third and final part looks at Sebald’s images in relation to “catastrophe” and questions of the ruin ecologies in *Rings*. I suggest that the fissure between narration and image—as both pull in different temporal directions—asks us to reinvest in our historical understanding of natural and man-made environments. Rather than offering simply another apocalyptic vision, this fissure leaves the question of futurity wide open.

While analysing the photograph’s thingness and material properties, the chapter’s overall aim is to show how Sebald’s hybrid text reframes object relations more widely. Performance and contingency are key, as the photographic medium evinces the materiality of the books themselves: from edition to edition, not only do the layout and size change, but also the quality, detail, grain, resolution, and framing. While these changes complement Sebald’s recourse to contingency as a mode, they also constitute a challenge insofar “as they refuse to participate in the metaphysical hypostatization of language that characterizes his work on the semantic level” (Strathausen 485). Photographers and photography scholars are accustomed to encountering different versions of the same photo in catalogues, exhibitions, etc., taking into account the medium’s, and its reality’s, malleability. In literature, this transformative aspect can
strongly alter relationships between text and image, communicating, through the photograph’s inherent pliability, a material performance quite independent from the narration.

Memory, Trauma, History: the Image-text

While Sebald’s image-text proceeds differently in each work, the narratives of *Emigrants* and *Austerlitz* invest most heavily in photography itself. In the former, family portraiture and the urban ruin predominate, and the Nazi forgery catches our attention. The treatment of photos in *Austerlitz* is remarkably theoretical and explicit, as if the characters were reflecting on Sebald’s previous works. Whereas *Vertigo* and *Emigrants* make private non-fictional truth claims through their photographs—stating: “I have been there” or “this real person was there”—*Austerlitz* emphasises the gap between fiction and truth claim—stating: “he, the fictional character, has been there”—incorporating the photos diegetically as proof of Austerlitz’s photographic hobby. *Rings* (like the vignettes of Stendhal and Kafka in *Vertigo*), meanwhile, operates on the historical level, stating: “it happened” and “see for yourself.” The ratio between reproductions of photographs and of other media (painting, sketches, illustrations) varies. Only a third of the images in *Vertigo*, for example, are photographs, considerably less than in *Emigrants* (Patt 24). On the level that we read Sebald’s novels as hybrid (non-)fictions, the distinction between the diegetic/biographical treatments of the photos might appear somewhat immaterial. However, the ethical question that I already raised regarding Sebald’s “plagiarism” and the herring passage in *Rings* emerges in different form here: if Sebald is “true” to his subjects in the first two novels, what are the implications of the inauthentic repurposing of photos, the “identity theft,” in *Austerlitz*? What happens to the “real” as it is put into the service of the fictional? These questions influence the readings of *Emigrants* and *Austerlitz* as the family and holiday snapshots of the former stake a claim to their own historical production, and the uncanny disjunction between the “real” (and its death) and the fiction of the latter opens another spectral space that refuses to resolve itself.

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363 Patt’s expansive volume includes a useful comparison of the formatting of images between different editions and translations.
Sebald’s arbitrary amassing of photographs and images over the years opposes him to the collector in the strict sense. Instead, his practice resembles Benjamin’s salvage work amid the refuse of history: a selective, citational counter-ruin to the hegemonic archive. The contrast between wanderer-narrator and tourist establishes the images as documents and coordinates, rather than souvenirs—they might document, however, a memento: Ambros Adelwarth in Arab costume (authentic). Sebald’s fondness for the disposable camera and indifference toward film type and high-end technology oppose his practice to ideas of primacy, control and precision; in various interviews, he touches on the encounter between his photos’ precedence (source material for the writing process) and secondariness (“a kind of shorthand or aide mémoire [...] documents of findings” [qtd. in Scholz 106]). His unsystematic, amateurish habit is, however, anything but foreign to artistic practice. His search refuses the artist-centred command over technology that many photographers of the post-war years (like Walker Evans) also forwent. Emphasis is placed on chance, selection and bricolage, and on the unknowable, the sense that rationale eludes artist and onlooker alike. The idea of letting the material “speak” that underlies the “new materialist” principle—almost tautological with regards to images—applies here to that which the photograph does not, cannot say, to something irretrievable, but something that is nevertheless productive, if only of a negative. Sebald was on the lookout for what Barthes called punctum, the tear in the code, the ruin, the accidental “sting, speck, cut, little hole” that holds him, pierces the mask, and mobilises the flight of meaning (Barthes 27). That  

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364 Sebald often commented on his “unsystematic searching” underlying both his research practice and gathering of photos (Cuomo). The DLA archives show that the number of photos Sebald considered for his novels, especially for Emigrants, vastly exceeded the final selection (generally of around 70 plus). The images, as Sebald was at pains to remind, formed part of his source material and research for the novels. Sebald admitted that there was no grand overall plan when he first starting using images in S.G., that it was “in the first instance for [his] own satisfaction” (92nd Street Y).  

365 See Wachtel.  

366 Comparable to photographers and all kinds of cross-media artists like Joseph Cornell, Joseph Beuys, Tacita Dean, or Anselm Kiefer.  

367 There is a recognition in Sebald that, as Bruno Latour argued, morality is not something applied to technology, but inscribed in it from the beginning (see Latour, “Morality”).
fleeting instant in which the “Real” flickers through, undoing, to borrow Lacan’s terms, the *grimace of reality*.

In pitting his uneven, deceptive use of images against the linear time and orderly archive of history, Sebald pre-empts the spectacle of democracy, the collective and egalitarian promise of photography. In *Emigrants*, he reproduces a Nazi propaganda photo, which Ferber’s uncle had identified as a fake—the narrator duly fact-checks the accuracy of his claim (184).  

Sebald, in an interview: “I thought very consciously that this is a place to make a declaration. It couldn’t be more explicit. It acts as a paradigm for the whole [Nazi] enterprise. The process of making a photographic image, which purports to be the real thing and isn’t anything like [it], has transformed our self-perception, our perception of each other, our notion of what is beautiful, our notion of what will last and what won’t” (Lubow). The ideological mobilisation of the photograph’s truth claim underpins Sebald’s critique of a hegemonic history fixing socio-cultural strata. Sebald’s photographic method thus works against its own intrinsic mechanisation and militarisation, a method running parallel to the defamiliarising grammar and syntax of his prose, stemmed against the systematic normalisation and automatisation of language.

The flipside of Sebald’s practice—and this perhaps neutralises archival attempts to determine exactly where and how his images are fraudulent—is the emphasis on *l’effet de réel* of the photo (Sebald was fond of Barthes’ phrase). Photography is in Susan Sontag’s words “natively surreal,” quotational, always “a reality in the second degree” (40). A collection of photos can produce “an exercise in Surrealist montage and the Surrealist abbreviation of history” (ibid. 68). In historical materialist terms, the fetish of the photographic object is in dialectical relation with the reification of historical time into a “spatial continuum” (Kracauer 49). Conversely, the photographic archive establishes a kind of democracy of spectacle, or (less coded in the plane of pure signification) the democracy of the irreall and uncanny. While Sebald’s photographic legerdemain became more pronounced in the final two novels, the eerie effect of his

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368 See Figure 7 Appendix (7).

369 The later essays also destabilise images as archival documentation or reportage (foregoing captions, disregarding accuracy and exposition) (see *Natural and Place*). See
image-text was always a dominant feature, doubt and uncanniness characterising the reader’s image encounter in some form from the start. This is because the photograph’s “testimony bears not on the object but on time” (Barthes 89). Its time is “nostalgic,” its art “elegiac”: “All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability” (Sontag 11). But it is also undeniable that the spooky photograph of Austerlitz as a little boy, clad in white, profits from its decontextualisation, its displacement into a more evidently fictional environment: the fact not only that a real boy stands in for a fictional character, but that the reader can doubt the author’s acquaintance with the child. Whereabouts unknown. How does this “identity theft” sit with the ethics of restitution?

Meanwhile, the mass production and throwaway, waste-like quality of the photograph (the paradox of its impossible duration) evokes the emptiness behind the nostalgic, elegiac play that Sontag mentions, and is the true domain of the melancholic. The photo’s death is *flat*, a platitude, as Barthes writes, and, regardless “[whether] or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe,” every photograph “contains this imperious sign of my future death” (96). In Kracauer’s words, its “ghost-like reality is unredeemed,” because “the photograph gathers fragments around a nothing” (56). We saw this future anterior time and the disintegration of subjectivity in relation to the ruins in *Austerlitz*—the photograph’s allegorical death both intensifies and punctuates (momentarily) the ruinous time. Sebald’s choice to work in black-and-white signals the “Grauzonen” [grey areas], the threshold between life and death so often conjured by the melancholic’s thought—the final expression of the “*Toten- und Trauerbuch*” [book of the dead and of mourning] that is *Emigrants* (*Eis* 174, 115). The worsening techniques of Sebald’s practice, beyond their uncanny effect, conjure ghostly figures in a literal sense; for instance, the near-translucent girl in the front row of Bereyer’s classroom (E 47).

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370 Sebald reveals in an interview that, yes, this is an authentic child portrait of his colleague, the scholar of architectural history who provided one of a number of blueprints for Austerlitz (*Eis* 198).
Yet Sebald’s materialisation of “ghostly evidence” (Diedrich 257), if finally unredemptive, is nevertheless productive, serving to re-punctuate people’s lives within a non-linear historical time. Although the photograph reifies, even blocks memory in the common sense (Barthes 92)—as a symptom of memory loss—it also signals a return of something lost, as Austerlitz’s photo of his mother exemplifies. At times, Sebald’s phrasing tends toward the redemptive, or restitutive. Old photographs “demand that one addresses the lost lives which are represented in them,” and their appropriation is legitimate because “writing ought to be […] an attempt at the saving of souls, in a completely non-religious sense, needless to say” (92nd Street Y; emphasis mine). The ambiguous moral stakes of appropriating photos of others—often unknown people—unfold into the ethical imperative energising his work: the attempt at restitution, which necessarily falls short. Maya Barzilai insightfully argues that Sebald’s prompting of the act of recollection (however fraught the outcome) owes not so much to a seamless integration, a taking possession of the photographs by the narrative, but to the very lack of adequate means of integration between text and image (206-207). As such, the disrupted indexicality (or perceived “null point of indexicality” [Patt 47]) of many of Sebald’s pictures indicates their presence as symptoms of one form of trauma or another (rather than as aide mémoire or as historical/narrative documents). This is especially true for Die Ausgewanderten, in which Ferber utters the self-reflexive statement: “Die bruchstückhaften Erinnerungsbilder, von denen ich heimgesucht werde, haben den Charakter von Zwangsvorstellungen” (266).

Austerlitz’s own photographic practice can be read as compromise formation, at once remembrance and forgetting (Tischel 33). Sebald’s ruinous photographic memory work describes both its failure and compulsive return. The family album in Emigrants unfolds into a “transmission of a task” by a prior traumatised generation (Fromm xvi), the task’s simultaneous imperative and impossibility nurturing the narrator’s melancholy.

As with Beckett, critics pull and tug at the demarcations of the “success” (artistic, ethical) of Sebald’s “failure.” Long disagrees with Barzilai, stating that to only

371 See Barzilai 216; Tischel 33.
372 Without the index of the photographic event—“the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now”—ever being fully removed (Benjamin qtd. in Pinney 8).
373 I quote the German because the English neutralises the Freudian overtones: “The fragmentary scenes that haunt my memories are obsessive in character” (181).
“emphasise photography’s status as a vehicle of unassimilable trauma in *Emigrants* ignores its function within the narrative economy of Sebald’s text. […] the narrator’s engagement with the photographs represents an attempt at narrative recuperation that succeeds where the protagonists fail” (*Image* 117). The fact that roughly ninety per cent of images are authentic in *Emigrants* supports Long’s argument. Significantly, memory in Sebald remains strongly tied to the visual register; for instance, Henry Selwyn’s mind’s eye—the repetition of “I see” and “I can still see” (*E* 19). The therapeutic recourse to visual narrative fails the characters in the novel, but points toward the restitutive integration of visual material into the narrative. For Long, Sebald’s language and the relationship between photographs can determine, even rehabilitate the meaning of the incomplete photographic archive, and salvage something permanent (123-125).

However, any harmonious relationship between narration, thematics, and photographs crumbles under the weight of Sebald’s ruinous writing of local and global histories, not least if we consider the novel’s fourth chapter, which blends two family histories into one and pushes the family album into calamitous fictionality. This is postmemory work at its most performative, as *Emigrants* offers little sense of completion or restitution. But this depends on our parameters. Long talks of “patterns of constancy” (127) that occur within a kind of echo chamber (or *Dunkelkammer*) of the novel, but it strikes me that “patterns of return” is more accurate: always spectral, speaking of an other, an irretrievable limit or contingency, and not ultimately a suturing-in of the narrator himself (as Long suggests). There is here no overcoming the thingness of the photograph indexed by its material embodiment and contiguous being-against the text—the Zwang. This is something that Sebald cherished: the temporal ruin marking the contingency of the restitutive act of narration. Rather than embracing an apocalyptic pessimism at the expense of the “hidden order” that Sebald hints at according to Long (ibid.), we detect a measure against the fetish of narrative

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374 See Wachtel; and Sebald, *Eis* 98-99. This percentage, whether accurate or not, will lessen considerably in the two subsequent novels. In *Austerlitz*, the ratio between found photos and those taken purposefully is about 50/50 (*Eis* 204).

375 Long: “Those photographs whose function cannot be understood in terms of narrative linearity can be recuperated as images that refer to other images within the text in order to construct a metaphor for the thematics of the verbal narrative” (126).

376 Carol Jacobs’ use of “Bestäubung” (cross-pollination) is also helpful, emphasising the erratic, dust-like nature of the connections between different ghosts (28).
completion. Sebald’s “hybrid poetics” (to use Lynn Wolff’s phrase)—the non-sublimated intimacy between annihilation and salvation, between literature and historiography, materialism and design, speakable and unspeakable—do not culminate in radical negation as the true end of history, but neither can material incorporation be described in terms of consolidation. Like Watt’s textuality, the archive-narrative of *Emigrants* speaks of un-sublimated erasure and excess. Sebald’s way—paved, as Boxall suggests, by Beckett’s “means of going on”—leads to a “new beginning” that is not so much a successful restoration as an ethical work in progress (Since 131).

The residual index of the ruin allegory is arguably most apparent in Sebald’s citational use of photography. Christiane Weller provides a good picture: the interruption of narrative, through ruinous citation and/or image, as in Benjamin, constitutes itself the historical object. Sebald’s salvaged photographs—counter to their original nature—act as material mode of “Eingedenken,” the objectification of the past in the experience [Erfahrung] of the present based purely on contingency and Nachträglichkeit (belated action or choice, subject to modification) (Weller 500). They now stand in contradistinction to the souvenir, which as a secular relic complements Erlebnis (Buck-Morss 189). The possibility of restitution may be formulated thus: “The actualisation of this web of connections gestures toward redemption, without catching up with it” (Weller 502). The photographic archive is here anything but an act of overcoming (that worst of crimes according to Adorno); instead, it is the acknowledgement that messianism does not spell out a utopian arrival, but the radical possibility of the here-and-now. In his idiosyncratic way, Sebald discusses the affect of this “Eingedenken,” the suspension, punctuation, that images bring to the novel format: “They hold up the flow of the discourse, and, as one knows as a reader, one tends to go down this negative gradient with a book that one reads towards the end. So books have almost by definition an apocalyptic structure. [Laughter.] And it is as well therefore to put weirs in here and there who [sic.] hold up, you know, the inevitable calamity [More laughter.

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377 Benjamin: “history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance [Eingedenken]. What science has ‘determined,’ remembrance can modify” (Arcades 471; N8,1).

Sebald grins.)” (92nd Street Y).\footnote{Schauss 229} It would be difficult to mount a defence of Sebald’s negative writing on this grin alone, underappreciated in scholarship, but it might just be possible, insofar as it is an act of communication and a reaching out, a horizon, in the face of the “inevitable calamity.” Amid this simultaneously disruptive, restorative image-work of Sebald’s text, the next section focuses on the everyday quality of his photographic archive: the family album, holiday snapshot, the everyday memento. The banality of our photographic practice as seen in The Emigrants and the ambivalent position the “family” occupies in its shadow are often overlooked in favour of the ubiquitous themes around trauma.

**The Emigrants: Family Albums and Holiday Snapshots**

Photography has a long history within materialist criticism, stemming not least from the attention it received from Baudelaire, Kracauer, Benjamin, and Bourdieu. From its inception, photography entered into conflict not so much with other forms of art as with another trade: professional (especially miniature) portraiture.\footnote{It first found its way into the world exhibitions in Paris alongside other “assorted products,” before it was afforded its own exhibition space (Benjamin, *Arcades* 684).} It first found its way into the world exhibitions in Paris alongside other “assorted products,” before it was afforded its own exhibition space (Benjamin, *Arcades* 684).\footnote{Photography coming into its own (the object’s liberation from its aura) meant mass reproduction and consumption, wherein Benjamin saw its potential of collective politicisation, specifically its mobilisation by avant-garde montage practices.} If Sebald is often said to lack this dimension of Benjamin’s politics, his position is vindicated by post-war decades during which neither photography nor film materialised into a collective technology for working class emancipation. In the mid-90s, the height of Sebald’s output, an estimated

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\footnote{My transcription. Sebald has moved on from his earlier one-sided description of photography in the 1984 essay on Stifter and Handke’s dialectics of eschatology, in which he distinguishes between ekphrastic description as *Eingedenken* and photography as the promotion of forgetting (BU 178).}

\footnote{See Benjamin, “Little History of Photography” 514-515.}

\footnote{Y6a,2.}

\footnote{As well as its danger: politics rendered aesthetic, the propaganda strategy of fascism. See Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”}
sixty billion photos were taken every year (Stallybrass 13). Consumption, trash, uselessness become the everyday properties of photography. So even if Sebald’s indexical salvage work can be compared to Benjamin’s convolute, one cannot overlook the contemporary affect and *habitus* of this technological intrusion. There is then a tension in Sebald’s appropriation of photography. On the one hand, he redeems the lost family portrait by re-embedding it within family narratives from a deferential distance. On the other, removed from the domestic bubble and shown to an unfamiliar audience, the family album is exposed by socio-historical and anthropological interest (which in turn at once validates and distances the redemption). Christopher Pinney has argued in favour of historicising the changing relations between photographic apparatus and *habitus* in the twentieth century in order to better grasp the relationship between photography and manifestations of power (colonial power especially).

Sebald’s hybrid image archive allows for something of the kind, not only introducing the snapper of post-industrial landscapes to global fault lines, but confronting us with the family album as a socially regulated, reifying form.

The family photo album, like the handheld Kodak, is a staple of the twenty-century bourgeois household, a fact Sebald keenly repeated. The earliest developments of photography as a technology of mass reproduction were already framed within “the

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383 Different estimates for 2017 put that number at just shy of two trillion (with smartphones and digital media being the obvious facilitators). Categories like family or holiday album (private), model photography, commercial and advertising photography, design and architecture, pornography, etc., have become fluid with the advent of apps like Instagram and Snapchat. We have witnessed the final de-materialisation of photos by the perma-transient virtual space (if one accepts the material distinction for argument’s sake) into one big network of code—which we might define as ontologically flat, or abstract, but forming, overall, what Timothy Morton calls a hyperobject. I would contend that our current relationship to photographs on screen only amplifies the spectral, melancholic quality of Sebald’s black-and-white image-text.

384 See “Camerawork as Technical Practice in Colonial India” and “Seven Theses on Photography.”

385 The material form of the family album has given way in the twenty-first century to a much more rhizomatic omnipresence, with its digitisation and virtualisation, its dramatic escalation and dispersal.
ideology of the modern family” (Hirsch, *Family 7*). As photography becomes a primary domestic actor, especially with children involved (note the transgenerational structure), it demarcates the difference between private and public sphere. Performing its family function, photography is deeply ideological, contributing to the formation and confirmation of class and identity: normative (normalising and regulatory), ceremonial and ritualistic (solemnising socially regulated life events), chronological, monumental, nostalgic, and re-affirmative of the domestic group or cult. Sontag notes how photography as a family rite actually enters (and defines) modern life at the moment the nuclear family disintegrates (6). On one level, photography intervenes as a modern ideological countermeasure to re-inscribe family integration. However, the occasioned, posed family shot—the “familial gaze” (Hirsch, *Family 10*)—ultimately intensifies the disjunction, not least by displacing, in Susan Stewart’s words, the absolute singularity of the family through the very staging and adherence “to a well-defined set of generic conventions” (49). Few objects make a firmer promise of proximity and belonging than the family album, a promise that in turn doubles down on the dispersal and absence at stake.

*Emigrants* performs this archive of a global familial dispersal in all its ghostliness and melancholic charge. The Ambros Adelwarth narrative follows the family portrait from the Bronx to Bavaria, to Jerusalem and back to Long Island. Laid bare within the scattered narrative is the album’s wish for unity and integration, which is not only a social regulation but inscribed in the photographic technology from the beginning. As with many of Sebald’s materials, the album becomes the prompt for embarking on the journey toward restitution (E 71). Weaving these coordinates together within the narrative does allow the family album to turn around on its own index of erasure, which, as Long remarks, “goes some way towards compensating for the rupture, displacement and bereavement” (*Image* 122). However, ultimately, Sebald returns to the double movement: “looking at the pictures in [Bereyter’s album], it truly seemed to me […] as if the dead were coming back, or as if we were on the point of joining them” (E 46). Contrasted with the photos of derelict industrial estates—and while Sebald is not contemptuous of the photographic ritual itself—the family and other group portraits speak of their artificial, ritual form. As Feiereisen and Pope note, *Emigrants* mainly presents us with photos of stasis, buildings, and object lessons, yes, but mostly posed portraits: “a halting of life before the photograph is taken” (175). While his melancholic
cannot help but register the *memento mori*, Sebald also delivers an examination of middle-class *habitus*, a social history of the embrace of the posed photo’s interruption and inauthenticity (which accommodates the feigned unawareness of the lens).

Suspicion regarding the family album comes from its technological and ideological concurrence with processes of oppression and destruction: the perpetual seclusion of the private sphere from the public sphere by ideological means. The photographs of the smiling couple, Paul and Helen, “glossed in the album with a double exclamation mark” (E 48), stand in for the promise of the future (family and career). Below, like an extended caption: “All his prospects blurred;” Helen and her mother in all likelihood deported to a camp (49). There is no need for *three* contiguous photos of the happy scene (lest we accuse Sebald of a Hollywood-type prelapsarianism) other than to capture, as if on film, this solemn, ritualist practice, and to mark the Bereyers’ place in the world as an everyday “middle class” family (their class identity explicitly foregrounded four pages later; 52). Sebald’s memory work not only relies on a complicated relation between image and text, and on its own tactics of de-authentication, but on that staged, nostalgic form which traces the object of representation’s and technology’s cultural character. His revisiting and recuperation rest on a historical logic of the family (as) commodity; the particular nature of the photograph and album literalises the petrified state of the dialectical image that interests Sebald. In the service of a regulatory norm, the album inscribes the semblance of the family as a sheltered sacred sphere—it becomes a sign of commodified life in turn. As *Emigrants* traces Jewish diaspora and extermination (before and after the Holocaust), it becomes clear that the family album signals the fundamental historical discordances underlying Jewish assimilation into German, Austro-Hungarian as well as Anglo-American bourgeois life. Its normative, normalising function is put in stark contrast with the ghettos and pogroms. A similarly contradictory image of commodification is at work when Austerlitz contemplates the bibelots in Terezín,

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386 See Figure 8 Appendix (7).

387 For this reason, Sebald’s work is at times accused of nostalgia, that inauthentic desire, “hostile to history and its invisible origins,” in Susan Stewart’s words (23). Any close attention reveals that rather than succumbing to nostalgia’s temptation, the narrative keeps drawing attention to its social workings, and instead upholds a historical position.
fragments, as Fuchs writes, “of precisely that middle class-liberal culture […] with which the assimilated Jews in the West have identified since the 19th century” (Schmerzensspuren 62). 388 Austerlitz’s work of restitution leads him not to the memory of lost lives but to the deep wound of Jewish assimilation. Helen Finch has shown, further, that in the face of the incongruities of Jewish assimilation (a major concern in Sebald’s early scholarship), Sebald turns to queer masculinity and bachelor figures also as a resistance toward the regulatory and patriarchal claims of the bourgeois household (20). For a novel teeming with family photos, it is remarkable that its male subjects stand outside this domestic sphere (even Selwyn is estranged from his wife). What we recognise, then, is that for all the domestic, bourgeois claims the photos in Emigrants purport to make, they in fact destabilise the recuperation of the snapshot as a heteronormative vehicle.

We leaf through the album with the narrator and witness its removal from its primary, private context, as it is interspersed with other materials. In the family album, the photo is at once metonymy and synecdoche. Metonymic like a souvenir, it references an elsewhere in space and time, signifying transcendence. Unlike the souvenir-object, which is often non-representational of the referent, the photo indexes that elsewhere. It is synecdochical with regards to the album as whole, one among many chapters of a private life history. The album’s historical re-construction justifies the photographs’ co-presence. This synecdochical relationship collapses as Sebald buries single photos within his ruin-text. 389 For example, the narrator relates to the reader how Aunt Fini relates how Uncle Adelwarth related of his time in Japan. We see the photograph of what looks like Kyoto’s Golden Pavilion (one of a number of landmark photos), and are led to believe that this was the “wonderful house set in a lake” that Adelwarth’s Japanese acquaintance owned (E 79). A tension persists between the distance in this narrative integration and the immediacy of the photographic object. This is, further, the transition from family portrait—gaining its value from the person pictured—to the souvenir photograph: the fact that countless high-quality representations of the temple


389 The folders of Die Ausgewanderten at the DLA archives show a great mass of family photos, only some of which found their way into the text.
exist does not matter to the tourist and does not preclude the picture’s inclusion in the album. The index is of the photographic moment and the nostalgia of having been there. As with any souvenir, the narrative of Adelwarth and Cosmo has to be provided separately, a narrative that, despite all its anxieties and eventual tragedies, also tells of privilege and riches, not unlike so many nineteenth-century Russian tales of superfluous men. As Adelwarth poses in full Arab costume, hookah pipe in hand, family portrait and souvenir coincide, but most of all, we get an object of desire: through the prism of tourism and orientalism, the gaze and fantasies of the lover (his Jewish master Cosmo) are revealed.

The point is not that by salvaging varied types of photos from the bourgeois family album, Sebald either undoes or perpetuates that potent material sign of the domestic ideology’s commodification. Or that he laments the evident reification of intricate life moments by the pre-emptively nostalgic family snapshot. Rather, his text allows for the family photo to account for its own fetish character within the palimpsestic structures of historical writing and forgetting. The identification of the Golden Pavilion, for instance, entails an alienation effect, tied to the implication that this is the home in which Ambros and the “unmarried gentleman” formed an intimate, sexual relationship (79). The temple is followed by partial shots of the Brooklyn Bridge and Chrysler Building (84-85). The latter affirms the family’s historical involvement with the height of modernism, signifying the Art Deco style; however, we require neither to conjure a mental image of these sights and are left with the impression that these pictures could stem from any available archive/database. Here, we re-enter a somewhat postmodern abstraction of the American dream: highly symbolic cultural objects whose connection to real lives seems to always elude, but also signifiers that, within the family album, are re-appropriated by the history of Jewish and non-Jewish mass immigration in New York. The family photograph is often seen as countering the reifying force of the ubiquitous historical photograph, the cultural forgetting that develops alongside the endless repetition of the same familiar, unexamined images of the past, “what Aby Warburg saw as a broad cultural storehouse of ‘pre-established expressive forms’”

390 See Susan Stewart, On Longing 137. If the narrator is eager to distance himself from the commodity culture of tourism, so is Ambros when he complains of “souvenirs and devotional objects in almost every building” in Jerusalem (137).
(Hirsch, *Generation* 39). In *Austerlitz*, such pre-established metonymic forms—belonging to the cultural sphere rather than preceding generations—facilitate forgetting, as Marianne Hirsch argues (ibid. 42): “Our concern with history [...] is a concern with performed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered” (A 72). The “truth,” however, is in Sebald not simply found in the family photo that contrasts with a cultural storehouse; instead it is just as complicit in the perpetuation of reifying historical narratives and can, hence, be used to reveal such processes in turn.

As much as Sebald’s engagement with the image hinges on his privileging of certain kinds of aesthetics (their ethical and non-violent responsiveness, culminating in Ferber’s art studio), the bulk of the pictures finding their way into *Emigrants* belong to the dominant historical mode of mass consumption. What the disparate, unravelling family album underlines is the benefit of reading Sebald’s photos beyond their interiorising (melancholic and counter/mnemonic) dynamics, to read their history in terms of everyday object-relations as they cross between private and social spheres.

*Austerlitz* and “the nature of discrete things”

Sebald’s images are often said to fulfil a discursive function, working on the same ontological plane of signification as the text. If one considers the photograph as negotiating the limit between thing and material object, however, its unstable material threshold does not fit with discursive categories. As Sebald reproduces *reliquiae* like his passport, are we looking at the passport, the original photograph of it, or the image in the text? What about the printed scan of a photographic reproduction of a famous painting? What is the object at hand? There are various ways of thinking about the “thingness” of the photograph. Bill Brown modifies Barthes’ *punctum* to show how, in

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391 Hirsch insists on how Charles Sanders Peirce’s tripartite sign theory attributes to the image not just indexicality but also the iconic element. Because of this combination (and their authority), images assume symbolic status (or should it be metonymic?) and thus the second generation only inherits a very small number of images from a vast archive, which “[shape its] conception of the event and its transmission” (*Generation* 37).
the photographic encounter with the discrete material object, an “other thing” emerges: a kind of breakdown in the subject-object categories and relation, a thingness “[persisting] beyond the object’s destruction” that was at the heart of the surrealist’s thinking of the “crisis of the object” (Other 82). We may also consider the tension between the “micro-event” of the photograph’s making and the “historical event” it purports to capture: corps and corpus in Barthes’s language (Pinney, “Seven” 3-4). The indexical failure—the photographic “lie”—relates to the latter (whose quality is iconic, in Peircean terms); the former Barthes describes as “the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the Thiis” (4). Consider the pictures of the leftover items in the Terezín bazaar, those “objects in which melancholy is crystallized” (Sebald, Place 168).

In the photo’s double freezing—the still of a still life—our gaze is refracted by the material properties of the photographic moment: we cannot focus on (or bring into focus) the objects libidinal or mnemonic excess. We see the trees, houses, and even the snapper’s head (merging Austerlitz and Sebald) in the reflection of the windowpane. Sebald often insists on the particular affect, the timeless, eternal aura of the bric-a-brac divorced from commodity circulation and notions of currency. Yet by preserving the chemical process and surface materiality, highlighting the “absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency” of the photographic instant, he moves that timelessness into a fragmented present. The photograph’s thingness can in this sense be understood as its non-contemporaneous gathering. Through the continual dismantling of the photograph’s privileged but superficial access to the object in Sebald’s work, the question of thingness falls at once within and without the melancholic’s purview. At stake is not so much the thing-in-itself, as a shared line of not knowing, which draws the possibility of an ethical space in Sebald’s texts. I suggest that this not knowing is not an end but a continuous performance at the boundary of the human and nonhuman, part of Sebald’s dismantling of the historical archive. The photos in Austerlitz provide an opportunity to reinvest in the limits of restitution and the creaturely encounter in relation to its fictionality—gesturing back at the spectral image of silk (and herring) in Chapter Four. While the encounters with other lifeforms entertain an entanglement and symbiotic mutual recognition—such as “new materialisms” might posit—the materiality of photos (like the animal gaze itself) registers the negativity or limit that characterises the encounter.

392 See also “Death draws nigh, time marches on,” Sebald’s essay on Gottfried Keller (Place 95ff).
Together with the recovered picture of a childhood Jacques, the photo of Austerlitz’s mother Agáta builds the foundation of the novel’s fiction: all narrative paths seem to start and end here. Its discovery may be attributed more to libidinal desire and a kind of aura (the “anonymous actress”) than to genuine recognition (253). The longed-for find interrupts Austerlitz’s narrative, his search abruptly ended by photographic proof of—what exactly? Her face (a slice of it), nothing more, all other details having already been inferred. The fiction’s most meaningful photograph is at once the most meaningless, ruinous, the mask of an actress and the limit of photographic epistemology. This is certainly no family photo; rather, a fictional maternal object in the photographic gaze. As the half-formed photographic archive is “bequeathed” to the narrator, the fiction reaches another incongruity: would Austerlitz really part with this all-important picture? The ghostly uncanniness of the portrait, together with that of the white-clad boy—our young Austerlitz—simultaneously relates to the fictional characters and a real “someone else”: a confusion of identities much more troubling than in Sebald’s earlier texts.

The reader is tempted to categorise the photo of Agáta with the four pairs of eyes at the novel’s onset, and ask, with Beckett’s narrator: “the faces of the living, all grimace and flush, can they be described as objects” (CSP 38)? The photo may momentarily serve Austerlitz’s quest, but constitutes no falling-into-place for the reader, expressing instead the object’s impossible recuperation. In a novel that in the eyes of many critics is heavy-handed and reframes Sebald’s ubiquitous concerns through lesser means, this moment signals a remarkable undoing of its own positive identification and restoration. Despite the photo’s comparative clarity to the preceding film still (251), the eye may not see a human face, but only a material imprint—a flash of light—on the darkness; a mask. In his manuscript notes to Vertigo, Sebald notes that the realist impulse to represent what lies in the immediate field of vision—as opposed to the margins or borders (that which the eye perceives as blurry)—when followed through,

393 See Figure 9 Appendix (8).
394 In Wittgenstein’s words, it negates and withholds: “a picture does not always live for me while I am seeing it” (205*).
395 A notable quality of the German-language scholarship, seemingly less patient with the melodramatic tone of Sebald’s most aestheticized fiction.
arrives at an opaque, “black image.” What underlies the compulsion to conjure the mother once and for all through the duo of images is a kind of ekphrastic fear, to use W.J.T. Mitchell’s term, where anxiety stems from the collapse into one another of the verbal and visual representational registers. We see the intimacy between Austerlitz’s chronic linguistic paralysis and the picture’s negative expression, reflected by the historico-philosophical motif of failing eyesight. Not unlike the mirrored face in Beckett’s *Ghost Trio*, Agáta’s face surrenders to a grey rectangle “frozen in a permanent alienation, in disarticulated disequilibrium” (Boxall, *Since 83*). At this ostensibly cataclysmic moment, Hamm’s words come to mind: “You cried for night; it falls: now cry in darkness” (*Endgame* 49).

The thingly, non-penetrable gaze is often read as Sebald’s thinking through being-for-the-other. The problem of photography relating to the domain of the human is raised around Austerlitz’s own amateur practice:

my main concern was with the shape and the self-contained nature of discrete things [*Verschlossenheit der Dinge*], [...] it never seemed to me right to turn

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397 See John Sears, “Photographs, Images, and the Space of Literature in Sebald’s Prose” (208ff).

398 Compare Beckett’s emphasis of the “smooth grey” when he turns to the medium of the camera with *Ghost Trio*—the grey surface of the TV screen and the host of grey rectangles (floor, wall, door, mirror) (*Plays* 248). In Badiou’s parlance, the grey is the counterpoint to the *cogito*; but Beckett’s non-dialectical *pénombre*, this “dim—the grey-black that localises being—is ultimately nothing but an empty space,” the absence of the event (54). For Peter Boxall, Beckett and Sebald’s grey rooms demarcate the ghostly threshold between voice and materiality, interior and exterior. Elsewhere, Sebald imagines this threshold as a ghostly non-place [*Niemandstand*] (*Eis* 174).
the viewfinder of my camera on people. In my photographic work I was always especially entranced, said Austerlitz, by the moment when the shadows of reality, so to speak, emerge out of nothing on the exposed paper, as memories do in the middle of the night, darkening again if you try to cling to them, just like a photographic print left in the developing bath too long. (76–77)

The uncharacteristically clumsy translation captures the compromise formation rather well: the photograph is like a suppressed memory is like a photograph. The impossibility of closing the wound. Note Austerlitz’s dedication to discrete things and the still life. Whereas his wariness of photographing people has melancholic resonances—the absence of a metonymic family album for the orphaned Austerlitz—the “discreteness” of things helps interrogate the formation and breakdown of categories. Our translation performs interpretative work here: “Verschlossenheit der Dinge” literally translates as things that allow no access and, despite Sebald’s best efforts, carries a somewhat Heideggerian echo. Terezín’s photo series of doors—resembling a photographic essay—literalises the barrier: the unspeakable and unseen\textsuperscript{399} is shut away. The English “discrete” and “self-contained nature” is less ambiguous still, strongly recalling the Kantian paradigm. However, \textit{Verschlossenheit} also suggests taciturnity, adding an anthropomorphic agency that, even if not pertaining to this passage, runs through the novel. The four photos in question are not still lifes or object lessons; none show a discrete thing in the common understanding.\textsuperscript{400} They are four small, tile-like squares, whose claustrophobic framing presents their objects as abstract textures. The “discrete things” are the photos themselves. The thingness of the visual object-surface is its barrier. While—as elsewhere in the novel—the photos come to literalise Western philosophy’s recourse to vision/the eye for thinking objectivity and the subject in relation to the object,\textsuperscript{401} they formulate the breakdown of that relation and identification through an object that remains “ill seen ill said,” and by drawing attention to the material screen of the perceiving technology.

\textsuperscript{399} “Nicht-Zeigbaren” (Tischel 43).

\textsuperscript{400} See Figure 10 Appendix (8).

\textsuperscript{401} See Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison’s \textit{Objectivity} (2007) for a comprehensive philosophical review of the “blind sight we call scientific objectivity” (16).
Austerlitz’s photographic ethos influences the reader’s understanding of the photos that do show people and living beings. The first photographs are the narrowly framed eyes of a raccoon and owl from the Antwerp Nocturama, juxtaposed with the eyes of Sebald’s painter-friend Jan Peter Tripp and of Ludwig Wittgenstein (neither of whom are identified other than by profession). All the narrator remembers is that some of the animals “had strikingly large eyes, and the fixed, inquiring gaze found in certain painters who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us purely by means of looking and thinking” (4-5). From the outset, Austerlitz asks us to interrogate the meaning behind photos. The relation between text and image is in this instance neither ekphrastic, illustrative, nor ambient or impressionistic. These are images looking at us, penetrating us. An uncanny tone is set for what is to come: various encounters where the relationship between viewer and photograph, human and nonhuman, subject and object, animate and inanimate, is shaken or reversed. In these early pages, Peter Boxall writes, the gaze of the animal, like that of artist and philosopher, remains unreadable and carries with it the unthinkable. This “threshold of vision,” to quote Boxall, “might offer some access to the mind of the other, might offer us some kind of passage across that breach of incomprehension that exists between us and them, but it does so only by bringing that breach to the surface of the page, by giving Berger’s ‘abyss of non-comprehension’ a kind of frozen form” (“Threshold” 132). Berger’s phrase finds its way into the novel as Marie urges Austerlitz to photograph a small gang of staring deer.

Manifesting a material limit, the photos in Austerlitz demand that we invest in the categories of human, animal, thing and our forms of representations that have traditionally affirmed and reified those categories. Sebald’s creaturely encounter and his rejection of speciesism fit, as Boxall has shown, within that particular late modernist

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402 See Figure 11 Appendix (8).

403 Consider Wittgenstein: “[…] we regard the photograph, the picture on our wall, as the object itself (the man, landscape, and so on) depicted there. This need not have been so. We could easily imagine people who did not have this relation to such pictures. Who, for example, would be repelled by photographs, because a face without colour and even perhaps a face reduced in scale struck them as inhuman” (205*).

404 “[Marie] said that captive animals and we ourselves, their human counterparts, view one another à travers une brèche d’incompréhension” (264).
lineage seeking to communicate nonhuman subjectivity and break with humanist categories: Kafka, Beckett, Coetzee (each informed by political environments of institutionalised exclusion, humiliation, dehumanisation, and extermination of different groups). I agree with Eric Santner that “Sebald’s multiple portrayals of acts of testimony and transmission” open “the possibility of an encounter and engagement with the creaturely dimension of our neighbor” (140). It is arguable that the reverse—Sebald’s material-oriented aesthetics, his pressure on speciesist thinking and human-nonhuman distinctions—forms the very precondition for the acts of testimony and transmission which include, but are not limited to, the human. The photographic rectangle (its surface or transparency) plays an important part, suspending the intimations of anthropomorphism. It maintains and makes immediate a non-sublimated tension between the thing’s unknowable otherness and the penetrative trajectory of the transgressive, mutual gaze; not one-sided, from subject to object, but a triangulated community, between the four pairs of eyes on the page, the narrator, and the reader. The ethical space persists within that tension, neither in the domain of the pure unknowable object nor of pure relationality. The concern is both ontological and mimetic. Through these early photos, Sebald picks up the question that runs through Rings, which brackets him with other writers of ecology: “how to conceptualise nonhuman agency. As the inhabitant of undeniably real worlds, alien to us and not fully comprehensible, the animal’s gaze into the human realm may seem profoundly to shake it, refusing it the illusion of totality or of self-evidence in its modes of coherence” (Clark 191). The “gaze to cross the species barrier” (Boxall, “Threshold” 128) that

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405 Sebald himself comments on Kafka’s sensitivity to the uncanniness and erasure inherent in photography, accounted for also by the Jewish-orthodox image ban (Eis 173). Sebald repeats Kafka’s connection between technical reproduction and “the impending mutations of mankind […] mutations in which he probably saw the imminent end of the autonomous individuality formed by bourgeois culture” (CS 163). In his copy of Deleuze and Guattari’s Kafka, Sebald particularly highlighted passages referring to the becoming-animal of the human (as well as arguments on Kafka’s Pragerdeutsch). Deutsches Literatur Archiv (DLA), Marbach.

406 Note, too, the particularly artificial, anthropocentric miniature world of the Nocturama as spatial mode of representation and relationality.
catalyses *Austerlitz* forms part of the wider network of spectral images structuring the transmission of testimony and history through material and nonhuman actors.\(^{407}\)

The photograph as limit materialises the “as if” condition that describes the novel’s tension between the failure of human memory (and search for testimonies) and the “anthropomorphic” idea that objects can somehow remember us, that memory is not relegated to the mind, but somehow external. Recall the chance recovery of Austerlitz’s eerie child photograph: “One has the impression, [Vera] said, of something stirring in them, as if one caught small sighs of despair […] as if the pictures had a memory of their own and remembered us, remembered the roles that we, the survivors, and those no longer among us had played in our former lives” (182-183).\(^{408}\) Or recall how Austerlitz’s uncanny encounter with a cast-iron column conjures a kind of traversing across established ontologies: “its scaly surface seemed almost to approach the nature of a living being” and “[it] might remember me and was […] a witness to what I could no longer recollect” (221). We saw in Chapter One how the vestiges call for a gleaning of residual testimony in Sebal: indexical, material—distinct from a poetic attribution of “memory” to the object. In a first instance, the recurrent anthropomorphisation of “memory” objects in *Austerlitz* relates a melancholic symptomology. Kouvaros rightly notes a “loss of subjective primacy” in these passages: “The past is rendered as a procession of details whose contingency overwhelms the processes of memory […] It

\(^{407}\) Sebald never writes *across* the species barrier in the sense of appropriating the animal’s or thing’s perspective. Unlike some nature writers, Sebald did not take Thomas Nagel’s challenge “What Is It Like To Be A Bat?” literally. His acute sense of language prevents him from conveying the phenomenological “field of significance or network of meaning within which a creature experiences or orients itself” (Clark 195). For some less enthusiastic critics, there nevertheless emerges a specific Sebald animal: “It is sad, being a W.G. Sebald animal. You are always oddly human, oddly Jewish. You are always depressed, or in agony. You are never a happy pigeon, or a contented herring. This desolate bestiary is there […] as an index of seriousness” (Thirlwell 351).

\(^{408}\) Contrast this with the narrator in Breendonk: “how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is […] 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” (24).
is at this point also that memory breaks away from its relationship to conscious remembrance and [...] takes on the status of something that strikes us from outside, from the world of objects, things and images” (189-190). This externalisation of memory signals an “as if” formation underlying melancholy itself (the Proustian mémoire involontaire conspicuously absent). The ambiguity lies with perception and consciousness, not with the object itself—Bram’s “empêchement-œil.” Rejecting the object’s meaning, as Peter Schwenger writes, we reject ourselves; our “connection [...] is at the same time a sense of sundering, of loss at the very moment of apprehension” (7). There is a breakdown here in the visual, appropriative relation where the object’s “gaze” translates the subject’s appropriation of the object: “Physical things in the world may be enlisted in a narcissistic project of self-constitution, making the subject into the seen and therefore ratifying its existence in the world” (ibid. 48). In Lacanian terms, this breakdown can give way to the fleeting appearance of the Real, which helps untie the knots in the signifying chain underlying Austerlitz’s symptoms.  

Regarding the representational place of objects in our normative imaginary and within Austerlitz’s personal narrative, this might be a satisfactory reading, but it also universalises Austerlitz’s object-encounters (into a general function of melancholy) and leaves little room for differences between materialities.

I want to suggest that the recurrence of the anthropomorphic “as if” position carries the unshakable sense in Sebald that there is a distribution, or transferral, of historical significance across human and nonhuman; not in the sense of eschewing difference or granting things an “agency” they do not possess, but in the sense that the threshold position (most manifest in the photo) continually shakes up categories and references their socio-historical constitution. Time and again, Austerlitz returns to poetic moments of vitalism, prosopopoeia, ontological entanglements, with a strong sense that production of the historical archive suffered from its speciesist hierarchy. As Austerlitz repeats “Alphonso’s botanical and zoological disquisitions,” a performative pulling at human-nonhuman categories occurs (93): do moths dream? Does the non-sentient? Phrases like “perhaps a lettuce in the garden dreams as it looks up at the moon by night” are not serious propositions so much as a reminder of how recent, incomplete,

409 «Sometimes it seemed as if the veil would part [...] but as soon as I tried to hold one of these fragments fast, or get it into better focus [...] it disappeared into the emptiness revolving over my head” (A 219).
and limited scientific knowledge is, and that it has taken advantage—but benefited little—from Cartesian dualism (94). The entire passage on the Andromeda lodge is a commentary on natural science’s imperative to account for its gaps and limits; the presence of Darwin (as acquaintance of the Fitzpatricks) introduces the socio-theological schism—the incompatibility of natural science as it removes both God and the human from the centre of things. Nevertheless, Sebald remains suspicious of the transformation of natural science into a dominant, instrumentalised archive. It is not so much the taxonomic impulse itself as the desire to own and concretise that destroys the hybrid and symbiotic interplay of ecosystems:

[Alphonso] used to walk beside the chalk cliffs […] admiring the endless diversity of the semi-sentient marvels oscillating between the vegetable, the animal, and mineral kingdoms, the zooids and corallines, sea anemones, sea fans and sea feathers, the anthrozoans and crustaceans over which the tide washed twice a day while long fronds of seaweed swayed around them… (88-90)

Such a passage borders on so-called vitalist sentiments, a vital materialism that depends on a distribution of the sensible (to appropriate Rancière’s phrase) or “distributive agency” in which life flows between animate and inanimate (Bennett, *Vibrant ix*). We noted a similar implication of ontological interconnectedness with regards to silk in *Rings*. Unlike Timothy Morton, however, Sebald is not saying the cast-iron column is *like* a sentient being. The difference between these passages and vital materialism’s positive naivety is that Sebald never purports to transcend the conscious, aesthetic, and onto-theological constraints from which he works. Hence his recurrent, Beckettian

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410 Coole and Frost speak of “choreographies of becoming” of matter, a “monolithic but multiply tiered ontology” with “no definite break between sentient and nonsentient entities” (10).

411 Not least owing to his background as a Romantic scholar, Morton relies heavily on simile as a technique to shift anthropocentric discourse. See, for instance, “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry.”

412 Just as Bergson, unlike Deleuze, Bennett, and Morton after him, does not explain away human consciousness, but accounts for its central role “to thinking the vitality of things” (Cole, “Call” 113).
return to not knowing, the insistence on the limit. The contemplations in *Austerlitz* remain framed within a demystifying materialism that seeks to account for the different cultural-political systems that have long facilitated our inadequate thinking of subjectivity and the nonhuman. The performance or enchantment happens at the level of representation but is nevertheless guided by the contingent and the material. Entanglement in Sebald is at once a matter of nature and culture, mutually constitutive, and a dispersed practice of writing and reading. It is somewhat closer to those eco-feminist understandings of materiality that take the deconstruction of logocentrism into account. In such a conception, knowledge is ethically and aesthetically inflected; it is in Barad’s words “about accountability to marks on bodies, and responsibility to the entanglements of which we are part” (Dolphins and Tuin 52). The failure to remember, think, and express, inseparable from the restitutive attempt at the heart of Sebald’s project, can be seen as the writing of this accountability to hidden, lost material traces and interactions. The photos in *Austerlitz* ultimately, materialise the tension between the limits of the creaturely and thingly encounter, and the possibility to imagine an equal distribution of significance and vitality.

To close this section, I want to look at Sebald’s writing on painting, as we find his (like Beckett’s) most explicit reflections on the object here. This, after all, is where the performance of materiality and mute speech of objects can be perceived most strongly by the human gaze. Transcending the limitations of the reifying practice of the photorealist school, Sebald writes, Jan Peter Tripp’s still lifes speak of a “radical objectivity” “far removed from the world of events.” They show “only the motionless objects […] left to bear witness to the former presence of a strangely rationalistic species” (Place 157-158). Rather than subjugating objects to the artist’s mastery, Tripp’s tableaus are concerned “with the autonomous being [Dasein] of things” so that, in turn, we “find ourselves in a subordinate and dependent position” (158-159). The things that remain, “bear their experience of us within them,” allowing for a belated reading of an irretrievable mutual history (159). This initial reversal and ultimate collapse of the subject-object relation depends not so much on Tripp’s talent for hyperrealistic representation, but on his “third dimension,” understandable as the threshold between surface and depth, and life and death (160). The difference between Tripp’s paintings and photography, according to Sebald, lies in “the proximity to

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413 Amended translation.
death” that, while constituting the subject of painting, is photography’s obsession (164). Sebald maintains a roughly Benjaminian opposition between the painting’s aura as object and photography’s liberation of the object from its aura.

Sebald never quite relinquishes the ontological difference between photo and painting in his criticism or prose (or poetry). 414 Writes Anne Fuchs: “While the photographs tend to explore the relationship between history and trauma by inviting an investigation of their representational status, works of fine art in Sebald’s prose often provide a therapeutic haven of contemplation, a counterpoint that enshrines moments of transcendence” (“Sebald’s Painters” 168). Fuchs describes a kind of sublimation through allegory removed from the present but nevertheless tied to the artwork’s relation to the material world of things. Crucially, this positively epistemological, Hegelian subject-position also becomes untenable, especially after After Nature and Vertigo, when paintings are as a rule addressed ekprastically (without the image being incorporated). It is true that his narrators seek moments of respite, and that the “cultural enquiry” of the present, narrative time disrupts nostalgic retreat (ibid. 183).

Fuchs argues that Sebald’s cultural engagement and aesthetic sensibility “[run] counter to the everyday rationality that governs modern life”—that privileged, Adornean position. However, the mediation and hybridity so important to Sebald’s work—whether the mass representation of the artwork through its photographic reproduction or the multiple framings and “as if” positions distancing the ekphrastic narration—destabilise the subject-object split (in relation to the artistic gaze) more fundamentally than Fuchs acknowledges. What the encounters with Ferber’s palimpsestic, matter-oriented art or Tripp’s still lifes make clear is that this is never a unidirectional gaze, but very much a refracted, ruinous condition, that “curiously grey” room, at once communication and breakdown of relations. 415 Portraiture turns into an act of

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414 Although, as Clive Scott notes, the photograph as material object adopts the same ruinous values as the things that make up Tripp’s still lifes (212). For Sebald, Tripp’s things are more or less Proustian, marking the quotations of remembrance, quotation-as-remembrance, within the shrine of lost time (Place 169).

415 “[Ferber] felt closer to dust, he said, than to light, air or water. […] he never felt more at home than in places where things remained undisturbed, muted under the grey, velvety sinter left when matter dissolved, little by little, into nothingness. […] I often thought his prime concern was to increase the dust” (E 161).
excavation, annihilation, erasure, while the “facial features and eyes […] remained ultimately unknowable” (E: 162).

In another essay, Sebald muses over a Tripp diptych showing a glazy-eyed mackerel opposite a pair of closed fists (in the first, the mackerel is presented on open palms, in the second, on an otherwise empty plate). The various peculiarities and cultural connotations of the mackerel/fish lead Sebald again to the absence of knowledge and meaning, captured by the caption “Endgame”—[Endspiel]: “Wie sich die Dinge in Wahrheit verhalten, das freilich steht auf einem anderen Blatt. Keiner von uns weiß letztlich, wie er dem anderen auf den Teller kommt oder was in der geschlossenen Hand seines Gegenübers an Geheimnissen verborgen ist. […] blind und dumm blicken sie uns nur an, die Dinge […] und verraten uns nichts von dem Geschick unserer Gattung” (CS 213-214).

The various theo-mystical systems—ichthys-ism, ichthyomancy—are interpretative models that break down here. The familiar coordinates—animal, gaze, the unknowable, the thingness of the artwork—resemble the characteristics of photography in Austerlitz. Taking Jameson’s cue, Sebald historicises the hermeneutic aesthetic and ecological culture encompassing the painted mackerel. Through the gap between thingness (as material) and world (as culture), to simplify drastically Heidegger’s assertions, arises Tripp’s work of art. Only, Sebald emphasises the impossibility of accounting for the gaps appearing in the total abstraction when we try to restore this history, while also committing to the ruinous mode of apprehension. To paraphrase Fuchs, Sebald’s memory work is the

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416 “Scomber scombrus oder die gemeine Makrele.”
417 I retain the German because, unlike Bell’s translation, it touches on the active part things play [sich die Dinge in Wahrheit verhalten] and relates the human back to its genus or species [Gattung]. The English reads: “The facts of the matter, of course, are different. None of us ultimately knows how he may end up on someone else’s plate, or what mysteries are hidden in that other person’s closed hand. […] for such things only look back at us blind and dumb […] and tell us nothing of the fate of our own kind” (177-178).
418 The title of the first painting—“The Unwritten Commandment” [Das ungeschriebene Gebot]—strongly implies the Christian symbol.
419 Tripp’s shoes raise lots of questions, but also, in contrast to van Gogh’s, “give nothing away” (Place 170).
performance of an essentially [wesentlich] aesthetic, produced form of Eingedenken, drawing on contingent and divergent correspondences (Schmerzensspuren 71). This is only possible in the apprehension of an uncanny primacy of things—Sebald draws on Merleau-Ponty’s regard préhumain (Place 159)—that is nevertheless historical, a knotting where the aesthetic can never untangle from the material, nor the human from the nonhuman.

**The Rings of Saturn: a Picture of Nature**

The challenge of the creaturely encounter occupies a place within the larger aegis of ecological engagement in Sebald’s work. Time and again, Sebald confronts the instrumentalising categorisations of natural history in relation to environmental catastrophes. I investigate in this section how the use of photography enters into the discussion of nature, ecology, and catastrophe in Rings, acknowledging this question could easily occupy a whole chapter in itself. We can start by noting a trend. While Sebald’s integration of images is commonly related back to Alexander Kluge and Klaus Theweleit,420 with their insistence on history and trauma, his own international influence seems predominantly to beget the uses of photography in novels centred around walking and the environment (urban, rural). Teju Cole’s *Every Day is for the Thief* (2007) and *Blind Spot* (2016),421 Dušan Šarotar’s *Panorama* (2014),422 Esther Kinsky’s *River* (2014), Sara Baume’s *A Line Made by Walking* (2017) all have to contend with the comparison to Sebald in the opening lines of most Anglo-American reviews. Clearly, the way in which photographs anchor and index the “fieldwork” done by a writer appeals. The walker’s photo can let the place in time “speak,” providing or demanding its own narrative in conversation with the text. The bigger the gap between narration and image, the more evocative the echo space in which the photo’s organic and

420 See Schütte, W.G. 8.

421 Cole’s breakthrough and most overtly Sebaldian novel, *Open City* (2011), does not contain pictures, though walking forms, again, the heart of the narrative. This novel, perhaps more than any other, may be held accountable for the diffusion of the term “Sebaldian” as a descriptor for hollow pastiche.

422 Šarotar’s title a nod, no doubt, to the first novel by the Auschwitz survivor H.G. Adler, whose remarkable account of the Theresienstadt ghetto is also taken up by Austerlitz.
Inorganic matter can connect. In this sense, the screen of mechanical reproduction can supersede the writing process as principal semiotic space, not only because it appears as a less heavily mediated translation of the environment (though not neutral), but also because it is less steeped in Romantic contemplation and other nature-writing traditions that prioritise the subject’s position and gaze. Thus, the depopulated documentaries of England’s wastelands by Patrick Keiller or the *Nuclear Landscapes* of American photographer Peter Goins are often mentioned at the crossovers of materialist and ecocritical theory. I argue in this final part that Sebald’s use of photography is both in harmony and at odds with his narrative ambulations through Suffolk, the Orfordness episode offering Sebald’s most emphatically hybrid natural/manmade ruin. From this conflict arises a present and political possibility that is not simply assimilated by the narrator’s melancholy and apocalyptic visions. I suggest that this “catastrophic” fissure in the narrative hints at a space of political (human) commitment: it marks the tension between Sebald’s dialectical view of nature and culture (“nature” as a socio-cultural product), and the performative space where that reading collapses, where the difference of “nature” survives.

We can pose the ecocritical question of an ethico-politically meaningful way of representing nature and raising ecological issues in art. For instance, is Sebald guilty of the “elegiac, neo-pastoral mode” that Raymond Williams accused twentieth-century countryside literature of, or does he put the finger on the silencing/appropriating of the environment that has been a quality of Western discourse (qtd. in Ryle 49)? The narrators summon the former mode only for the larger project to thoroughly dismantle it: nature in Sebald, as Greg Bond notes, does not offer alleviation or a “corrective for what is awry in society” (38). The phenomenology of walking as it contributes to the historico-cultural understanding of local/global place in Sebald is well-trodden ground. The way photography relates to it less so. The photograph instantaneously draws us

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423 There is a tension between the ontological flatness suggested in *Rings* and the irreducible difference between the media of text and photography. Both media call for a readership but photography alone asks us to consider two different, yet inextricable objects.

nearer the walker/narrator/author. It delivers immediate documentation, a visual index of place (the photographic moment), and a material anchor that (interrupting the text) acts as a form of address to the reader. We are not visiting an imagined space but the real thing, together with the walker. However, this index unfolds just as quickly into a spatio-temporal disjunction: the time of the photo’s taking breaks with the time of writing, and often with the time of narration. If the photograph shows a place remote from the walk, as it regularly does, yet another trajectory needs to be reconciled. In *Rings*, the meaning of “environment” is not limited to the immediate surrounding or the photographic index: it is always entangled and extends to ecology and current crises of our world-systems. The photograph can freeze this narrative superposition of local and global. However, it does not obscure the contingent connections between local environment and border-transcending issues such as the fate of the global dispossessed and stateless, deforestation, or the rapid depletion of natural resources. The gap in the photographic encounter, negating interpretative determination, performs the problem at the heart of thinking systematic thing-relations that takes into account the nonhuman and inorganic. The incorporation of the photographic materiality poses the problem of materialist politics in a performative manner.

Let us take a close look at the example of Orfordness, a cuspate promontory home to an abandoned secret weapons research site, in the novel’s eighth chapter. In line with the critique of instrumental reason, the narration follows the militarisation of landscape, even before we arrive at the bunkers. The narrator describes the equally depopulated post-tourist environments of Bawdsey and Felixstowe, whose heyday was marked by mutual Anglo-German investment in the tourism industry and late imperialist commodity decadence at the onset of the twentieth century, spinning an ideological web of economy, politics of warfare, and taste. After WWI, the big estates were militarised or turned into various institutions and asylums, or left to crumble. As the narrator continues along a wood that still shows the destruction of the 1987 hurricane, he is caught out by storm, gusts blowing about the dust and impairing his senses. When the storm clears, he listens to an eerie silence, the sun “hidden behind the banners of pollen-fine dust” (229). Never one to pass up a good post-apocalyptic setting to call upon natural history, the narrator likens himself to “the last survivor of a caravan that had come to grief in the desert” and suggests that this dust “will be what is left after the earth has ground itself down” (ibid.). That in some way we are helping the
earth grind itself down is evident in the way this natural event is bookended by military context. From the ruined ramparts of Orford Castle, the narrator surveys the square gardens and the Fenland: Sebald’s typical picture of cultivated, tabulated landscape. Again, he turns to militarised landscapes: the Martello towers erected during the Napoleonic Wars and the eighty-yard-high radar masts built in the 1940s. This is our pathway into the Orfordness military site, where, rumour has it, all kinds of biological weapons experiments were conducted and a petrol pipe system set fire to the sea. Any evidence was removed from the official files released some 75 years later. The foreland no longer completely off-limits by the time of the narrator’s second visit, he finds a local Charon to ferry him over; he chalks down the locals’ indifference to the “god-forsaken loneliness of that outpost in the middle of nowhere [Nichts]” (234). We are in the novel’s most affectively powerful landscape. At first, the narrator has “not a single thought in [his] head,” walking through a seemingly perfect hybrid of natural and man-made wasteland: “With each step that I took, the emptiness within and the emptiness without grew ever greater and the silence more profound” (ibid.). The initial affective experience speaks of emptiness, silence, nothingness: the ruin’s material-semiotic style. The narrator crosses paths with a hare, identifies with the “curiously human expression on its face that was rigid with terror and strangely divided,” and recognises himself in the animal’s eyes, “[becoming] one with it” (235). Again the ocular encounter speaking to a mutual frozen, rigid powerlessness in the face of empty, inexplicable things.

Only when the narrator gathers himself, half an hour later as he encounters man-made structures, does he pursue the translation of the landscape into a natural teleo-historical narrative: from a distance, the bunkers become ancient tombs of prehistoric civilisations, burying the powerful and their riches; from up close, they are the future become present, the last “remains of our own civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe” (237). We can follow the transference from one sense of muteness or illegibility into another: the narrator fills the emptiness with prehistoric and metaphysical allegory, a kind of overcoming of the environment’s index. The landscape’s recent military past collapses under the narration. The narrator compares himself to the clichéd trope of a future, alien visitor, for whom the artificial contraptions among the natural environment remain an enigma. The narration is

425 Compare Peter Goin’s description of his photography work on the Marshall Islands: “When you look at these bunkers, they now become to me these ruins of our
overtly performative, jumping between times: the prehistoric “tumuli” as material signifiers summon a history of slavery (Horkheimer and Adorno’s metaphor for class domination), whereas the “future catastrophe” embeds the narrative present within natural history (236-237). The preceding union of economic and natural ruin, the present non-synchronicity of the ruin space, and the narration’s performativity, as argued earlier, prevent the passage from succumbing to an apocalyptic metahistory.

The photographic intervention, however, changes our understanding of this passage. The three photos follow the narrative chronology, from tarmac bridge to the bunkers in the distance to the pagoda-like buildings up close. Sebald is not playing any conspicuous tricks. Without the pictures, however, the reader would be fully exposed to the narrator’s fancy; even if s/he rejected his interpretation s/he would be without the alternative that the pictures offer. Here, the question that poses itself to Peter Goin as he embarks on photographing his “altered” landscapes also applies to Sebald’s wasteland: “what meaning would be communicated by a beautiful picture of a nuclear landscape?” (Glotfelty 222). Is the ambient, tranquil aesthetic of the black-and-white rendering a desired effect? The preceding photos are all singular particulars that fit with the contingent logic of the novel’s web: the old Quilter mansion, the row of houses along the once-popular shoreline, the trees that died in the storm, the cultivated marshes, and finally the cadastral map omitting the secret Orfordness site (Sebald marks it for us). But the final three photos, closing the chapter, change tune, repeating the motif of stillness, or, conversely, allowing for the stillness of repetition. The narrator’s repetition of “the island” in inverted commas and its likening to a penal colony (pace Kafka) give the photos a forbidden character, as if taken clandestinely or lifted from a military archive (233). In all three, the horizon is kept about halfway. The civilisation. This is our legacy. […] Because these are designed to withstand a nuclear blast; therefore, they withstand time. […] our descendants in the long-distant future will look at these and say, ‘These people were messed up.’ And people will go in there, and it will still be radioactive. And they’ll get exposed, and they’ll die and think it’s a curse of the tombs” (qtd. in Glotfelty 234).

Strathausen suggestively calls the characters’ melancholic “performance” throughout Sebald’s work a “hermeneutic prison” that remains desperately unavailable (488).

See Figures 12 and 13 Appendix (9).

Compare Austerlitz’s sequence of doors and urban Manchester in Emigrants.
question of scale is left unanswered. Though all include man-made structures, none are focused or framed as object lessons; they are landscape photos. The graininess flows seamlessly into sky and shingle, giving the impression of sheer, “worldless” materiality, the granular, geological character of inorganic matter. At no point do the frames contain the wasteland; the eye looks for something that is not there, and follows the sediment over the picture’s edge. We perceive the photo’s materiality on the page, its self-reflexive interruption—the ambient respite it offers from the narrative’s “inevitable calamity”—and sense a surplus, a performative space. The photographs are at once timeless—one easily imagines the scene to still be such—and a microscopic slice of a dynamic eco-system. The subsequent chapter ends with another apocalyptic tableau, the “formless scene that bordered on the underworld” revealed after the 1987 hurricane (266). The storm’s destruction of “fourteen million mature hard-leaf trees” is framed by reflections on forest dieback, Dutch elm disease, and the overall decline in the number of trees (265). The storm leaves an environment “turned upside down,” “[the] rays of the sun, with nothing left to impede them, destroyed all the shade-loving plants so that it seemed as if we were living on the edge of an infertile plain” (268). Where there was birdsong, there is now silence. The photograph of the storm, however, has already passed (228); it forms part of the Orfordness echo space, inscribing another place and time while connoting the same event. What are we to make of this interplay between chapters that end on natural tableaus of silence, emptiness, and destruction?

Narrative and photographs here speak of different catastrophes. The former is tied to Sebald’s brand of dialectical materialism and to the melancholic’s symptomatic performance of metaphysical catastrophe. The photograph, by comparison, fixes its catastrophe in an immediate present. Not because the narrator is describing a given catastrophe put in front of us by the photo, but because it is the immediate inscription of an absence, the literalisation of the gaps and limits that Sebald’s prose can only turn around. The photograph is the catastrophic thing with staying power. The screen, especially of a depopulated scene, translates into the frozen still of a catastrophe beyond the human scope, whose future time is nevertheless here. We occupy the position of Beckett’s Clov, surveying the wasteland with our telescope. If Sebald in his

Note: the visit to Orfordness, not least because of Sebald’s fame, has now become a well-curated tourist site.
critical writing emphasises death as the photographic medium’s obsession, then the photo also remains “radically open-ended” (Baer 24). Its survival, and that of its reality, transmits a responsibility to “[imagine] what could occur beyond [its] boundaries”—that is, the boundaries of the photographer and the photographic moment—in a way the progressive time of narration does not (ibid.). So while the narrative performance in this passage is fixed before it beckons interpretation, the “performance” of the photograph is an unfixed index from the beginning.

It offers, first, a possibility of multiple readings of the same image with or against different narrative moments (contiguous with the image or elsewhere in the text). Can we look at the specific angle and vantage point of the bridge photo and recall the railway tracks of Auschwitz-Birkenau? The novel certainly does not demand this. We remember the context of the military state secret, the rumours of an English regiment burned to death as research collateral, and the German threat of invasion explaining the existence of “the island” in the first place. We consider that the population of Orford “could only speculate about what went on at the Orfordness site, which, though perfectly visible from the town, was effectively no easier to reach than the Nevada desert” (233). Does this mirror Sebald’s “latecomer” question: how were the death camps kept from the German people? What and how much did locals know? Do the photos of Orfordness, in this light, take the character of an ethical resistance: “this must be seen?” If so, what “secrets” do these photos show? None, really. If we follow this path of interpretation, we arrive at the conclusion that the photos represent the very absence of such a reading. Auschwitz is not the novel’s master signifier. The material form of the Orfordness photos renders the scene’s belatedness, the act of trespassing on the abandoned site. A belated resistance against an atrocious secret. It also opens up, however, in narrative a chasm, a future time that gestures beyond the human, where another catastrophe is located. This, we can only sense amid the larger ecological thematic of the novel, is an indeterminate catastrophe distinct from the melancholic’s apocalyptic vision, a catastrophe tied much more to the sheer, mineral materiality that the Orfordness photos express. If the planet’s warming is Sebald’s final future catastrophe in the real, it is not spoken or determined in this passage; it is, if at all, perceived aslant at the blurred edges of the photographic images.
The material dynamic of fixing and unfixing, petrification and malleability, in relation to the text renders a negative space where our readings collapse, a process symptomatic for Sebald’s hybrid-text. The photo’s material condition is the walk through post-recession Suffolk, along eroding coastlines, destroyed forestland, failing tourist spots. Between documentation and interpretation, the photos push for a direct engagement with the landscape. Yet their resistance, their acts of erasure, makes this difficult. Instead, we enquire about the relation between mimetic art and environment: the paradoxical non-identity of the pictured landscape evokes the problems of representation and abstraction—relations of time and scale—that any thinking of “the environment” or ecology faces, gesturing, in O.O.O. parlance, towards its own hyperobjectivity. At the same time, there is a persistent return to representation and relationality: the mutually-constructed, social narratives mediating the political. The technology behind the vision is one indicator for our sense that this is not the realm of deep ecology, a radical biocentrism seeking to eradicate all thinking of the human, but still within the perimeter of the oikos, the human as part of the equation, the ecological disaster never quite separable from ongoing human catastrophes like the global refugee crisis.

Conclusion

Narrative performance, framing, and self-consciousness qualify Sebald’s rhetoric of natural history. However, it is the photograph and photographic event that problematize and splinter the calamitous text with the non-identity of the thing, accommodating a re-investment in ecological object-relations of the present, and energising the ethical encounter with the nonhuman. To make everything only about entanglement and co-constitution, where the social cannot be separated from “nature,” divests political agency from humanity—not a good idea in the age of global warming.430 And if the melancholic at times lacks the political tools to radically respond to the catastrophe of the present in its abstracted form in late capitalism, the hybrid, contingent, and finally irreconcilable image-text articulates that failure and begs us to reconsider how things make us understand the world and its crises. How looking at

430 For a recent, forceful argument against hybridity theories and new materialisms in relation to climate action, see Andreas Malm’s The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World (2018).
things can abstract as much as disrupt the social relations which they help construct. How our anthropocentric, normative categories of representation tend to keep us from locating ethical spaces of performance and engagement.
Conclusion: “What have you done with your material?”

“The dark collects our empties, empties our ashrays.”

Ben Lerner, *The Lichtenberg Figures* (1)

At the end of all this time spent in the company of Beckett and Sebald’s things, I am struck by how quickly they always make one turn towards an elsewhere. As if to echo Beckett’s narrator: “What have you done with your material? We have left it behind.” (U 80). Any initial object-oriented impulse, to really stick with discrete things, Molloy’s hat and bicycle, Austerlitz’s rucksack and column, their meaning and intervention, ultimately proves quite impossible, or at least insufficient. How is one to politicise a last possession like the sack of tins, cord around its neck, without overdetermining its meaning amid the mud’s evacuation of meaning? The material remnant, the isolated particular, remains stubborn in the face of any total, overarching system, and for this reason refuses to be theorised in a determinate way, as Beckett and Sebald continually draw attention to the material, inadequate mediation of language. More than anything, their object worlds prove that the “matters” of language, of abstraction, the “human” relation, the medium and the text, need to complicate a “politics of materiality” from the onset, so as to rattle at the historico-political intervention of things in literature. If the thesis, ultimately, did not adhere to one or two determined critical frameworks, this is not so much because immanent, affirmative “new materialisms” seek to push “scholarship into absolute deterritorialization” (Dolphijn and Tuin 101), but because I gave preference to Beckett and Sebald’s aesthetics of indetermination. Sebald’s work can seem to demand an unrevised dialectical materialism after Benjamin and Adorno; the fictionality of his material encounters, their reference to untruths and irresolution, and this “plagiarising” style, however, complicate the restrictive mantle of critique. Meanwhile, focusing chiefly on the ideal Real quality of Beckett’s object worlds would leave his wastelands politically and historically bereft. That Beckett and Sebald’s writings do not—or know they cannot—resolve the historico-philosophical and aesthetic problems they raise, does not result in political resignation and abandonment—I have always found arguments regarding Beckett’s quietism troublesome—quite the opposite; it leaves a historical form that remains faithful to the residual, ruinous particular as it crosses back and forth in place and time, marking relations pertinent to its context.
This relationship between material particular and historical recovery (that is to say its absence or failure) is a major affinity between Beckett and Sebald—even as Beckett’s “spoken” void, the tension between the “nothing” and expression, is more radical—while also making their works resonate with a significant problem object-oriented readings face: how to relate the singular (and local) to the general or ideal without leaving it behind. Post-Deleuzian and Foucauldian scholars among “new materialists” find it more useful to think in terms of networks and systems of power, to think of materiality in terms of becoming, shared or nomadic agency, and entanglement. Collective affective response forms the political equipment within this flat ontological network; as a result, and despite the theorists’ best efforts and emphasis on empowerment, accounting for limits, difference, and otherness becomes difficult. In the Sebald chapters, I showed that his historical webs at times gestured toward such a “new materialist” epistemology, immanence, and objectivity of post-critique somewhat at odds with his own critical scholarship. These echoes of nomadic entanglement and ontological hybridity in Sebald speak to the performative possibilities of his prose (especially Rings)—the relationship between fiction and contingency—the kind of deterritorialisation that he retained from Deleuze and Guattari’s Kafka. The limit-encounters (creaturely and ruinous) that structure his unresolved webs of connections ultimately break up fluid entanglement and conceptions of evenly distributed agency, instead insisting on leftover material traces and on the aesthetic and onto-theological frameworks at play. If “new materialisms” try to untie themselves from a history of philosophy that has a problem with removing the human subject from the centre of thought, both Sebald and Beckett tie their work to the problem of the human at the centre of things. In other words, their attention to object-relations underlies their problematisation of the historical-philosophical domain of the human. In the face of the complete thingification of the human in instrumentalised economic and political systems—driven to the extreme in the concentration camps—Beckett and Sebald turn to materiality as a state of exclusion: historical violence and expulsion, and the limits of expression.

The chapters in this thesis can in that regard be viewed as tests for material-oriented readings of post-war European prose that, while hyperconscious of its predecessors, does not look for a linear engagement with past aesthetic categories. The residual, sedimented survival of realist and modernist things in Beckett and Sebald’s writing is
not so much a reactionary condemnation of prior aesthetic failures to conceive the “reality” of things, or the reality of perceiving things, but an interrogation of the stability of aesthetic positions when it comes to things in the first place. While the first two chapters followed the material expulsion of language as it grounded Beckett and Sebald’s texts in relation to an overbearing, yet abject and ruinous historical archive, the following chapters turned their attention to the out-of-joint material conditions of their “worlds.” Here, matter and language were seen in their border-crossing functions, problematizing a determined history of things, and tracing the fragmented connections to the modern processes of reification and abstraction. Translation and multilingualism, inherent in the oeuvres of these two expatriates, challenge our conception of materiality and object representation in a way that is often overlooked by object-oriented scholarship. Their works repeatedly rehearse limit encounters, gesturing toward a kind of “thingness” that is never easily recuperated into meaning, let alone “truth,” but registers instead states of exclusion and unresolved object-relations in which we may continually reinvest.

In Sebald’s ruins and Beckett’s waste, the material remnant is not sublimated, symbolically, into a total aesthetic or philosophical system; instead it relates to time, in the manner Benjamin attributes to the allegorical fragment. Neither Sebald nor Beckett’s works follow through on the ahistorical timelessness that their protagonists, at their most melancholic or disembodied respectively, might contemplate. In Sebald, the melancholic position and the image of natural history are functions of the ruin, which inscribes historical belatedness, and in turn demands to be politicised. The collapse of meaning in the ruin’s residual, unregulated matter marks the space of testimony in relation to the limits of its legibility. The “radical” character of Beckett’s “residua,” meanwhile, is grounded in their refusal to eschew the proximity of human “culture” and “being” to waste and its inherent negation of value. In his late fragments, “waste” becomes the condition for expression itself, the bodily emission of worsening words, “ill-said ill-heard ill-recaptured ill-murmured” (*How It Is* 3). As his bodies are buried deeper in matter and his skulls fail to contain the farts and ooze of failed “expression,” the historical is not evacuated as such, but retained in all its expelled density: “abject abject ages each heroic seen from the next” (ibid. 6). The insuperable, non-symbolic presence of the material leftover indexes the belatedness that we ascribe to Beckett and Sebald’s aesthetics at the same time as it includes, however residually,
the futurity that is most evident in their continuation: “you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (U 134).

**Catastrophe and the Human**

Reading the material encounter with, or immersion in, ruins and waste in Sebald and Beckett has opened up an engagement with the temporality of catastrophe tied neither solely to the past nor solely to the future, because it sticks to an unsublimated present, carried along by the expulsion of language. The threat of annihilation—the grey room, the photographic ruin—becomes an untenable, necessary position from which to greet things, the creaturely, the other, in their impoverishment. One pervasive charge against “speculative realism” and O.O.O. is their projection of trauma into the future. It is, in Timothy Morton’s words, the future that “hollows out the present” (Hyperobjects 60). The speculative dedication to deep space and cosmic time is seen as a political failure by many, “symptomatic,” in Michael Newman’s words, “of the desire for relief from the burden of contemplating the present suffering of the global exploited, war victims and stateless, and an intolerable future with no prospect of collective human action to avoid it” (74). Echoing this sentiment, Stephen Shapiro writes,

> For just as the subjects of historic and ongoing social death are seeking recognition of the legacy of their coerced objectivity, these new philosophers discover the undelivered rights of the formerly objectified in objects, rather than people. Even in the time of Black Lives Matter, object-oriented ontology reinscribes the history of amnesia about slavery by focusing its attention elsewhere—on deep space, deep time, or the inorganic—anywhere but where racial minorities live and struggle. (258)

Sebald and Beckett force the attention to the nonhuman, but without divorcing it from a history of violence and power, Lucky’s hat being a case in point. The aim, certainly not in Beckett but neither ultimately in Sebald, is not to “do justice” to the object, the thing-in-itself, but to go on among the entangled, violent pressures of history and language in their material forms. The works of both are characterized, to quote David Lloyd, by “a refusal to offer easy consolations in the face of apparent catastrophe,” and by their “effort to think steadily through the implications of an era of increasing instrumentalisation and reification” (Beckett’s Thing 21).
The resistance to moral judgement and condemnation (at times their complete eschewal) is one of the challenges Beckett’s art can pose to the ethical assumptions of “new materialisms,” evacuating subject-oriented values from the equation. For instance, the encounters with authorities in Molloy and the nouvelles frame our understanding of “resistance” through “thingness” and abject complicity, echoing the sentiment that the thing’s “no” hits its target only in a roundabout way. The wider eschewal of “moral” value is a trait Beckett already saw in Proust, concomitant with the complete collapse of content into form: “For Proust the quality of language is more important than any system of ethics or aesthetics” (Proust 67). Beckett ascribes materiality to both language and the human, noting that with his botanical imagery, Proust assimilates “the human to the vegetable,” rather than the animal, a “preoccupation [that] accompanies very naturally his complete indifference to moral values and human justices. Flower and plant have no conscious will. They are shameless, exposing their genitals” (ibid. 68-69). In Proust’s chef-d’oeuvre, this “human vegetation” appeals to a “pure subject,” that is to say art—an ideal “Proust”—a “transcendental aperception that can capture the Model, the Idea, the Thing in itself” (69). By contrast, Beckett’s own a/non-moral characters and things remain squarely in the world, the materiality of language making transcendence impossible. At the end of Molloy, Moran feels close to his surviving hens, which he had deserted: “They were wild birds. And yet quite trusting. I recognized them and they seemed to recognize me. But one never knows. Some were missing and some were new. I tried to understand their language better. Without having recourse to mine” (184). As Moran leaves his pious, institutional observer life behind, Beckett chooses the idea of the species barrier to mark the shift in Moran’s “subjectivity” and language, as his “I” is joined by a voice that “did not use the words Moran had been taught when he was little” (ibid.). The image of Moran as he is “freed” from his ideological language is neither harmonious nor pure, but split, thingly: “I understood it, I understand it, all wrong perhaps” (ibid.).

431 Beckett’s reading shares much with Levinas’ Proust, and recalls Benjamin’s expressionless “pure language.” Writes Rabaté: “Levinas refuses to reduce Proust to psychology [ethics and morals]. […] For Levinas, the lesson of Proust is that no moral value survives unscathed once common sense has been pierced through […] Proust’s amorality goes beyond the amorality of Sade and Nietzsche. The key lies in the lesson brought home to the narrator by Albertine, in the ethical revelation of existence as otherness” (Think 73-74).
Sebald’s project, meanwhile, puts an ethics of historiography squarely at the centre, revisiting the past through material detail, thought, affect, and perception or encounter, intent on avoiding myth, or rather, exposing its ossification of the past through unchecked repetition and naturalisation. However, if Beckett’s “universal muck” is decidedly more comic than Sebald’s traumatic ruin-index, the latter’s playfulness among the remnants of literature and melancholia—his wry smile in the face of “the inevitable calamity”—does not permanently consign us to the tragedies of the pasts. To be sure, Sebald’s strolls are inflected by a critique of Enlightenment rationalism, of the externalisation-qua-instrumentalisation and domination of “nature,” and its governing aesthetic categories of representation. Criticisms of Sebald’s and Horkheimer and Adorno’s negative philosophy of history alike ignore, however, the emphasis on the (re-)generative, continual process of critical and artistic engagement with the “catastrophe.” Indeed, it can be argued that rather than describing a negative teleology leading to an inevitable catastrophe, Horkheimer and Adorno’s dialectics suggest a catastrophe tied to the dialectic process itself (not a future event) (Görg 61). In this sense, the melancholic catastrophism that overcomes Sebald’s narrator so regularly is precisely a call to engage with the present of politics. The question of the natural ruin in Sebald’s mid-90s, post-Thatcher novel Rings can enter current debates on the environmental crisis, in a way that somewhat departs from the well-documented green thought in late-twentieth-century German literature and politics. As Andrew Biro et al. have shown in Critical Ecologies (2011), Frankfurt School thought, when updated, offers a strong foothold for thinking about global warming, the environment, and the paradoxes of contemporary environmental discourse, not least the non-arrival of large-scale action to date—a “Nothing to be done”—shrug as we (have) pass(ed) the point-of-no-return (WFG 1). In the face of what seems to be a purely modern doing and crisis, Sebald’s longue durée novel Rings, tracing calamities in part predating industrial capitalism, with its melancholic mode and playful human-nonhuman networks, appears to miss its political opportunity. However, as Jason W. Moore has argued, green thought’s emphasis on the Industrial Revolution, and on the environmental consequences since, can obscure the fact that the capitalist world-ecology (what Moore calls the Capitalocene) goes back to the “long” sixteenth-century (or the second monetary wave, in David Hackett Fischer’s terms): “The modern world-system becomes, in this approach, a capitalist world-ecology: a

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432 See Riordan (editor), Green Thought in German Culture: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives (1997).
civilization that joins the accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the production of nature as an organic whole” (Moore 11). Within the contingent local and global trajectories of Sebald’s environment-novel, there emerges an ecological catastrophe tied not to metaphysical pessimism, but to the present catastrophe that is, in Görg’s words, the “reflective mastery of nature in post-Fordism,” or what W.F. Haug calls “biocapitalism” (Görg 60). Not least by interrogating our understanding of the “natural” ruin, and performing a kind of “ecocritical gleaning,” to borrow Catriona Sandilands’s phrase (30), Sebald’s work invigorates the challenge of an ur-catastrophe in the immediate present.

“New Materialism” and Contemporary Literary Production

To extract any relevance from “new materialist” perspectives for the present moment, as the speculative philosopher Armen Avanessian writes, language and politics, and the politics of language, need to be at the heart of things: “there will hopefully be a greater materialistic reliance upon thought or language, not as opposite terms of a simple dichotomy but as recursive aspects of world and matter together: of language best understood from its material dynamics” (9; emphasis original). Ecological and feminist materialisms have been more dedicated to this understanding than “speculative realists;” Susan Sheridan, for instance, insists on the pertinence of post-structuralism when considering “how inseparable are the symbolic and the material in examining the discursive construction of ‘objects’ of knowledge, and the material effects of that discursive power” (qtd. in Dolphijn and Tuin 104). The problem arises when literariness and ornate vocabulary in anti-rationalist and post-humanist philosophies become markers of a theoretical uneasiness or of an inability to move beyond the acknowledged, pre-conditional critical naivety (that Jane Bennett suggests [17]). The vitality and creativity attributed to matter is often compensated for by poetic, prosopopoic language, often without dialectical reflection of this “objectivity” as its own mode of cultural-political production (Timothy Morton is regularly found guilty of this).433 In its commitment to materiality, “nature,” and cultural and historical production alike, Sebald’s Rings is interested precisely in its own objectified status as world-literary production.

433 See Nathan Brown, “The Nadir of OOO.”
If literature can help us conceive of language in material terms—and vice versa—it is necessary to politicise this relationship itself, and here Beckett and Sebald have provided significant aesthetics, pushing for an engagement with the limits of value systems, and the production of cultural archives. Beckett’s “waste” drives the notion of non-value to its extreme, spelling not a universal signifier of decay, but a spectral condition, tied to different, non-synchronous times, that makes the ongoing expulsion of worsening words possible. Material vestiges become the dwelling that forces continual, thingly encounters with ideological structures of power and economic systems within a “world” that seeks to rid itself of “history” and “culture.” The aporetic logic of incorporation and expulsion of Beckett’s wastelands accommodated a comparison to Kristeva’s modernist canon of abjection, without being reduced to it (see Chapter Two). Indeed we should look beyond “modernism.” Novelists as diverse as Kafka, Djuna Barnes, Robert Walser, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, Ralph Ellison, later William S. Burroughs and Kathy Acker, Sarah Kane, Roberto Bolaño, or Karl Ove Knausgård, follow through on their own material aesthetics of abjection and failure (looking at film, with directors like Pier Paolo Pasolini or Béla Tarr, would open an equally rich field of inquiry). Kathy Acker’s novels, for instance, are marked by what she called “a kind of undeniable materiality which isn’t up for grabs” (93): sex, the body, the non-meaning of language—those materialities which cultural production cannot easily assimilate. Perhaps more radically than Beckett and Sebald, Acker sought to appropriate the materiality of the text (including the cultivation of her own body-persona) to intervene directly in cultural production. Avanessian suggests that such interventionism is crucial to “materialist” art: “An art truly informed by speculative materialism would […] strive not only for a transformation on the discursive level but also for an acceleration of the existing platforms of the art system: the material-economic forms of production of art and the paths for its distribution” (10). Its own vast success notwithstanding, can we see Sebald’s Austerlitz, with its radical contingency and erasure, its ruinous style and images, as a reaction against German Holocaust bestseller-fiction—1995, for instance, having seen both the publication of Bernhard Schlink’s Der Vorleser and Binjamin Wilkomirski’s fraudulent Holocaust memoir Bruchstücke? Or can we see the inflated critical interest in literary representations of solid objects in recent years as a symptom of unease in the face of the overwhelming

434 See J.J. Long, “Bernhard Schlink’s Der Vorleser and Binjamin Wilkomirski’s Bruchstücke: Two Best-Selling Responses to the Holocaust.”
speed and mass of literary and academic production and consumption in the increasingly virtual marketplace? Or of our uncanny sense that the material world, that “nature,” despite our critical consensus on its co-constitution, seems to be coming back with a vengeance? Andreas Malm recently wrote: “[Global warming] represents history and nature falling down on society; it clouds the horizon,” at the same time as contemporary theory “churns out books, articles, special issues, conferences, all sorts of scholarly conversations on some critical questions: whatever is this thing called nature?” (15). Turning to objects in literature are we too often seeking a comfort not unlike that of Molloy or Malone when they reach for their pebbles? “An answer is requested” (Beckett, LI 518).

Indeed, Sebald and Beckett offer no easy answers in this respect, and that is the point: their materials keep us on our toes, their object worlds fail to resolve themselves in an affirmative, homogenous way. Without entering a debate on radical “autonomy” in the cultural field of production, one may note that the “new materialist” intersection of politics, language, and materiality has probably been pushed furthest by experimental feminist and/or postcolonial poets and artists: M. NourbeSe Philip, Caroline Bergvall, Lisa Robertson, Nicole Brossard, Jenny Holzer, Kamau Brathwaite, to name some. The materiality of page, text, sound, and language has been a pervasive, insurmountable concern for poets in the twentieth century, much more so than for novelists and playwrights, and not least since Charles Olson’s projective verse and the language poets of the subsequent generation. A study on the post-war poetics of political materiality would have looked very different indeed. Still, it is notable that Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith’s anthology Against Expression (2011), a kind of manifesto for the post-language-school conceptual avant-garde, includes passages from both Watt and Molloy (specifically the syntactical permutations and sucking stones). The meaning—or evacuation thereof—that emerges through Beckett’s incorporation of such passages into a novel tied to its Irish and European contexts is bypassed in the anthology. The change in relations between objects, materiality, and his different media/forms is crucial for Beckett: he staunchly refused to call even his shortest prose works poems, revoking the line breaks that editors had inserted in the punctuation-free fragment

455 See, for instance, Christopher Schmidt’s The Poetics of Waste: Queer Excess in Stein, Ashbery, Schuyler, and Goldsmith (2014).
“neither.” The wasting away of narrative in the prose gives way to the destruction of spectacle in his theatre, what Lloyd called “Beckett’s anti-spectacle theatre” (Beckett’s Thing 233). This thesis could have foregrounded technology and the stage prop for Beckett (the latter attended to in Chapter Five); the reason for this omission are not the many good studies that exist (the prop, in fact, goes somewhat underappreciated), but that a major difficulty and challenge for literary “new materialism” lies on the page, where it is more difficult to hide behind virtual and technological agents that seem to establish connections for us, distancing somewhat the “terrifyingly arbitrary materiality of the word surface” (LI 518). Ultimately, the performativity of Sebald’s ruinous object-systems—the refracted perspectives they offer—and Beckett’s aporetic material void work within the specificity of their aesthetic form and historical context. We can learn from them, hope to benefit from their latent political activity, but we cannot simply transpose them into an affirmative system of relations. Neither Beckett nor Sebald offer blueprints or exemplariness; they make us rather more aware as to the possibilities of investigating aesthetics and politics together through the prism of materiality.

“People and things ask nothing better than to play, certain animals too. All went well at first, they all come to me, pleased that someone should want to play with them. […] But it was not long before I found myself alone, in the dark” (MD 4). As Malone knows, things play, but don’t necessarily play along. In the play of predictability, of ceaseless repetition, things prove to be quite beside themselves. As spectral remnants, they persist despite all. We mobilise external organising principles to contain them and find a broken mirror in the process. Play continues, words heaped upon words, taking a turn for the worse, and another one. In the heap, of dust, sand, mud, shit, we are tempted to make “a pillow of old words, for a head” (Watt 117), sit by the stone and

436 See Beckett, CSP 284 (Notes on the Texts).
437 Perhaps it is telling in this respect that “speculative realists” like Levi Bryant, Graham Harman and Timothy Morton have made blogs the principal platform for their theory: more openness and reach (in terms of intellectual production), but also the re-enactment of the independent relationality between objects that they champion. See larvalsubjects.wordpress.com (Bryant); doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com (Harman); ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com (Morton).
the dog, and rest our elbow. These things, too, in the end, fossilised, ask us what we want.
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Appendix

1.

Figure 2 Rick Moody’s map of The Rings of Saturn
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### Figure 3 Die Ringe des Saturn contents page

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Figure 4 Die Ringe des Saturn berring catch (71)

Figure 5 Die Ringe des Saturn mass grave (78-79)
Figure 6 Die Ringe des Saturn weaver and loom (282)
6.
A selection of critical essays on Sebald and photography. For full citations please see Bibliography.

who was a month or so older, spent that time at the Bereyter home, a fact which is glossed in the album with a double exclamation mark, while her mother put up at Pension Lutgold for the duration. Helen, so Mme Landau believed, came as a veritable revelation to Paul; for if these pictures can be trusted, she said, Helen Hollaender was an independent-spirited, clever woman, and furthermore her waters ran deep. And in those waters Paul liked to see his own reflection.

And now, continued Mme Landau, just think early that

Figure 7 Emigrants Nazi forgery (184)

Figure 8 Emigrants Paul and Helen (48)
Figure 9 Austerlitz, Agáta (361)

Figure 10 Austerlitz, still lifes (116)
er, durch dieses, weit über jede vernünftige Gründlichkeit hinausgehende Waschen eckkonnen zu können aus der falschen Welt, in die er gewissenermaßen ohne sein eigenes Zutun geraten war. Von den in dem Nocturama beschauten Tieren ist nur sonst nur in Erinnerung geblieben, daß einige von ihnen auffallend große Augen hatten und jenen unverwandt forschenden Blick, wie man ihn findet bei bestimmten Malern und Philosophen, die vermittels der reinen Anschauung und des reinen Denkens versuchen, den Damm zu durchbrechen, das uns umgibt. Im üb-

Figure 11 Austerlitz eyes (5)
to the former research establishment. Far behind me to the west,
scarcely to be discerned, were the gentle slopes of the inhabited

Figure 12 Rings Orfordness (235)

in which for most of my lifetime hundreds of boffins had been
at work devising new weapons systems, looked (probably because
of their odd conical shape) like the earthen mounds of the mighty
and powerful who were buried in prehistoric times with all their tools
and utensils, silver and gold. My sense of being on ground
intended for purposes transcending the profane was heightened
by a number of buildings that resembled temples or pagodas.

Figure 13 Rings Orfordness (236)