

WALKING AUSCHWITZ, WALKING WITHOUT ARRIVING

Nigel Rapport

Happy are the men who are able to tread transitional paths,
scarcely looking to left or right, and without distinguishing an
end.

Patrick White *Riders in the Chariot*

I

Dwight Macdonald described the Nazi death camps of the Second World War as ‘horrors beyond tragedy’ (cited in Wheatcroft 2000). He implied that tragedy was a traditional genre of thought and representation that dealt with the consequences of human action (and inaction) *in conventional terms*, while there was an inhumanity to Auschwitz, Birkenau, Belsen, which took them beyond the bounds of generic and normative discourse. ‘The victims were helpless before a catastrophe that had no more relation to their characters, motives or actions than an earthquake’ (ibid.). Auschwitz was not a ‘tragedy’ for those incarcerated and killed because of its intrinsic meaninglessness relative to their lives: a gratuitous or random event, a so-called ‘act of God’.¹

Notwithstanding such conclusions as Macdonald’s --recall, too, Theodore Adorno’s that after Auschwitz there can be no poetry, no celebration of human creativity, poeisis, and its capacity to overcome-- I shall examine one recent attempt to turn an experience of Nazi death camps

into a form of art: the novel, Fateless, by Nobel Prize winner Imre Kertesz. Like Primo Levi's work before him, Kertesz is scrupulous in conveying the ambiguities of camp life, the effort: if this was to be conceived of a tragedy, something meaningful in human, in individual, terms --in contrast to a natural or 'divine', impersonal, cataclysm-- then this was only as a result of enormous efforts of will on the parts of the inmates, fighting to connect up the happenstance of the camps with the continuing circumstances of their lives. For Levi, notwithstanding, the effect of the Nazis was always to conjure up the image of a kind of supernatural force beyond the human. Some thirty years after penning his classic testament to Auschwitz, If This is a Man, Levi returned to recount the stories of a few individuals who had found the strength to achieve some kind of meaning for their actions within the camp; but even Moments of Reprieve --reprieve, that is, from the fate that had been institutionally assigned these individuals-- Levi concludes by warning against our becoming too dazzled by power and money to forget our essential fragility. Do not forget, he writes:

that all of us are in the ghetto, that the ghetto is fenced in, that beyond the fence stand the lords of death, and not far away the train is waiting. [1994:172]

Levi published this just a year before committing suicide.

In Kertesz's (1992) autobiographical account --as a fifteen year old he was removed from Budapest to Zeitz and then Auschwitz-- he too reflects on the question of fate. Were the death camps a (tragic) arena of human action? Amid a form of life which was apparently random and murderous and would consign the individual to oblivion (first social and then physical), Kertesz

determines that human beings *must* yet be considered 'fateless': 'we ourselves are fate' (1992:189). In other words, if there is such a thing as fate then there is no freedom, while if there is freedom, there is no fate; and even in the most total of social institutions it is not true to say that there is no such thing as freedom, the space of a tragic will.

Kertesz describes three kinds of everyday 'escape' in Auschwitz. First, the imagination. Seemingly mired in the camp, 'he', Kertesz, frequently absented himself. The easiest was to imagine himself 'modestly' away, conducting a perfect day at home in Budapest; but even Florida was within reach. 'I can attest to its truth: narrow prison walls cannot set limits to the flight of our imagination': it was a human being's inalienable resource (1992:116). A second escape was stubbornness, which appeared in a variety of styles: a stubborn talk about the past, the future, about freedom; stubbornly indulging in aphorisms, jokes and teasing; a stubborn and tearful clinging to life when the rational thing was to wish for senselessness and death.²

Most important for my purposes here was the third kind of escape that Kertesz asserts: an escape born out of what might be described (borrowing a phrase from Foucault (1977), but reversing his views on cause, on fate) as 'disciplinary detail'. One parcels out time and space into idiosyncratic and fussy particulars. The more gradations there are to concentrate on, negotiate and overcome, the greater the sense of achievement: the more life becomes a matter of one's own symbolic classification and the more an encompassing capriciousness, meaninglessness, void, is eschewed. Concentrating physically, for instance, on taking one step after another, or concocting temporal mini-schedules, self-consciously making oneself cognisant of minutiae of life, however ephemeral, afforded the sanity of attending to life

in the present moment --achieving life-- rather than (the chasm of) possible death in the next: 'you live, you act, you move, you fulfil the new requirements of every new step of development' (Kertesz 1992:181).

Waiting in queues in Auschwitz, and roll-calls that condemned the selected to death, one took one step forward at a time: 'the point is in the steps.

Everyone stepped forward as long as they could' (Kertesz 1992:188, my emphasis). Fetichising one's own forward steps, the mini-gradations they traverse, one may never stop, never arrive at the point of fatal selection: at worst one arrives in one's own time and on one's own itinerary. In Kertesz's portrayal, disciplinary detail can be appreciated as a kind of imaginative, liberating, personalising fetish: walking without arriving --or not arriving at a 'fated' place. One disciplines oneself into seeing one's time and space in the camp as constituted by minute particulars of a personal stamp to which one wilfully attends.³

There was one thing that Kertesz could secure no escape from: his body, and the growing alterity of its needs. Hunger made Kertesz himself a voracious void which he tried everything (sand, grass) to fill. His thought, action and sight were dominated by attempts to quell this body. And still it was incomprehensible how it could alter so fast. From day to day Kertesz observed his body rotting away. No longer in harmony with 'him', each flaw, each atrocity of decay, made this body more an alien, ageing object: less an acquaintance, never mind a friend. Here was a progression that obeyed its own schedule, seemingly beyond individual will and the Nazis alike.

Kertesz does not remove the ambiguity from his text: what is the reader to conclude concerning the relationship between imagination and

body? Does hunger limit his capacity imaginatively to construe himself always walking forward?

II

Zeno's paradoxes were philosophical fragments, collected by Aristotle, which might be said to concern the appearance of control over time and space by means of logic. The 'Dichotomy' or 'Race Course' paradox is briefly stated as follows: 'That which is in locomotion must arrive at the half-way stage before it arrives at the goal' (Aristotle 1999:VI(9), 239b10). Let us suppose Imre Kertesz is considering the walk to a point of selection at Auschwitz. Before he reaches there, he knows he must get halfway there. But before he gets halfway there, he knows must get a quarter of the way there. Before travels a quarter way, he must travel an eighth; before an eighth, a sixteenth; and so on and so forth. Considered this way, his walk, although seemingly a finite distance, will comprise an infinitude of (increasingly small) portions. Covering finite distances, Zeno concluded, should logically be impossible and take an infinite time --which is to say, should never be completed. Indeed, not only could such a walk never be logically completed, it cannot ever be begun. For, any possible first distance Kertesz decides to step must first be divided in half (and hence would not really be first at all). Before he can step a foot he must step half a foot; and before half a foot, a quarter; and so on. The possibly fatal walk to selection for death cannot either begin or end.

The argument is called the Dichotomy because it concerns space repeatedly being split into two parts, with the paradoxical --yet seemingly logical-- conclusion that all motion across finite space must be illusionary.

Similar cognitive play through symbolic systems became a mainstay of structural anthropology. According to Levi-Strauss (1975:14-30), then, myths may be understood as machines to suppress a sense of passing of time and space, an argument Leach then extends to ritual acts in general (1976:44). A creation myth gives onto a fixed point from which the world *always* took and takes shape. A religious ceremony affords a constancy and normativity to human life in its conventional reiteration of form irrespective of time, place, situation, mood and the possibly infinite changes of these. For instance, we share space in Europe, still, with mediaeval religious architecture and places where mediaeval religious music was commissioned: both music and architecture were symbolic depictions of divine changelessness amid a changing human world. Cathedrals embodied a changelessness in stone, in stasis, while music embodied a changelessness in pattern, in melody and rhythm.

Furthermore in the grammatical structure of classical music and myth alike, there is a circularity. The end is known in the beginning, there is a playing out of themes and variations whose patterning is finite and accords to mathematical formulae. In the symbolic iteration which always amounts to a reiteration one seems to overcome the impersonal linearity of time and space.

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The 'wasteland' of T. S. Eliot's poetry is seen as according with the temporal rupture of high modernity in European culture. In its moral ambiguity, its diffidence and pessimism --its decentring of time and place by way of an allusiveness (coy, ostentatious, insecure) to a welter of others-- the poetry embodies a vision of Enlightenment progress which has run out of steam. His chosen brand of religiosity (Roman Catholicism) is also said to

Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time.

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Poetry, music and architecture, myth and ritual. logic. Here seem to be different attempts, by way of different symbolic languages, to control, even overcome, progression through time and space and the fateful changes this might wreak. What are the resonances between these academic models (of Eliot, Leach and Levi-Strauss, Zeno) and Kertesz's more experiential or existential one? In Auschwitz he would fetichise detail in order to produce a personal symbolic landscape, movement through which he controlled: movement, possibly, he alone was able to perceive and measure. Auschwitz became a time and space of minute, personal particulars. Achieving routine in terms of momentary and everyday movement through this disciplinary grid, Kertesz would gain leverage on the discipline to which the Nazis would otherwise subject him. His temporal and spatial grids undercut theirs. Momentarily he might forget theirs. Their time and space became his. Their depersonalisation of him was at least ameliorated by his imaginative transformation of their temporal and spatial designs; their moving of him to a point of possible selection for death was over-written and at least slowed. Maybe, concentrating, like Zeno, like the Structuralist and the poets, on the patterned forms of his own symbolic classification, he could convince himself that arriving at a point coinciding with Nazi plans became less likely, could be put off. The above resonances tell me that time and space can be symbolically played with, linearity becoming circularity (Eliot, Leach, Levi-Strauss), progression becoming impossible (Zeno), termination becoming diversion (Kertesz). Traversing time and space is risky,

threatening, entropic, finalising, hence one travels in circles or refrains from starting, or stopping. One continues down ‘transitional paths’, seeking not to ‘distinguish an end’ (White). ‘Man’s greatest strength’, Aldous Huxley adjudged (1960:151), ‘lies in his capacities for irrelevance’. In the midst of pestilence, wars and famines he builds cathedrals; faced by the cataclysm of a totalitarian deluge, the random foreshortening of the time and space of their lives, Kertesz and his fellow-inmates attended to moving, stepping forward, developing routines for their own sakes, as long as they could.

But what of ‘reality’, that which, in Huxley’s judgement, it might be more ‘relevant’ to treat? For Kertesz this is represented, perhaps, by his body in Auschwitz. He could escape from the culture of the Nazis but not from his body, its demands and career. Here was a radical otherness, a materiality, which symbolic classification --that of Kertesz and of the Nazis alike-- found it difficult to circumvent. (‘Theory is all well and fine’, as Jean-Martin Charcot quipped, ‘but it does not stop things from existing’). The resonances between Zeno, the Structuralists, Eliot on the one hand and Kertesz on the other break down at the point where the latter’s body is discovered to be a void that may neither be filled nor quelled. Kertesz’s body was both the vehicle of a capacity to fetichise time and space --to walk without arriving-- and that which stopped any such symbolic disciplining from becoming absolutely cognitively or emotionally effective, a world apart, a world in itself. Which is why Philip Larkin’s poetry will always be a truer companion than Eliot’s. The following extract is from ‘Ignorance’ (Larkin 1990:107):

Strange to know nothing, never to be sure
Of what is true or right or real,

But forced to qualify *or so I feel*,
 (...)

Even to wear such knowledge -- for our flesh
 Surrounds us with its own decisions --
 And yet spend all our life on imprecisions,
 That when we start to die
 Have no idea why.

How, then, to bring the symbolism of walking and the corporeality of walking better together? This article attempts to approach *an analytical appreciation of Kertesz walking in Auschwitz*, his body at once the site of an experience which is beyond comprehension and the vehicle of attempts at wilful (tragic) expression.

III

In July 2001 I tried walking Auschwitz myself. The occasion was provided by the 35th Congress of the International Institute of Sociology, held in Krakow under the title 'The Moral Fabric in Contemporary Societies', and my giving a paper. In her Preface to the eventual published proceedings (2003), Grazyna Skapska explains that conference title, location and timing were none of them accidental. The conference was held 'at the beginning of a new millenium in a country that had experienced in the twentieth century the most atrocious crimes against humanity [--'symbolized by nearby Auschwitz'--] and two totalitarianisms' (2003:vii). Surely the lessons to be learnt are that 'history is neither the accomplice of utopia, nor does it necessarily evolve in a liberal direction'. To make history 'go anywhere',

Skapska concludes, societies, which are the inexorable ‘agents of history’, must have moral goals or visions which they believe to be worth following; at the same time societies must avoid those ‘decadent’ fin de siècle, postmodern notions which would reduce human societalism and exchange to mere language games (2003:vii-viii).

In between conference sessions, I acted the tourist. There were enough of us in the famous Central Square; I bought a hand-crafted wooden toy for my daughter, a knitted antimacassar, some sausages for lunch. Anthropologist Grazyna Kubica invited me for dinner in her elegantly furnished apartment. I remember walking with her down a tree-lined avenue near my Intourist hotel --styled in rather brutal concrete still-- discussing the possibility of publishing work in Britain on Malinowski’s notebooks and letters. Through the Conference Administration I also booked myself a place on one of the areal day-tours they offered, to Auschwitz.

The tour was efficient; the blue-uniformed young, female Polish guides were serious and knowledgeable. But the task was an impossible one. No script was going to be able to contain that event. Even before we arrived at the iron gates of Auschwitz (‘Arbeit Macht Frei’), I was astounded at the normalcy of life seeming to progress outside the bus windows in the Polish town that still bore the name (‘Oswiecim’ --Auschwitz in Polish). Surely it was not possible for someone to (wish to) claim that they came from, worked in, lived in, Auschwitz (‘the anus of the world’, as the Nazis dubbed it)?

The impossibility of reconciling the historical event --its enormity, its terror, its singularity-- with any notion of everyday human life or routine made me a resentful tourist. The museum, the guides, were wishing to turn Auschwitz into a text: a physical itinerary, an encapsulated account. But it

was unencompassable. Inevitably one questioned the text's finite terms. Why *these* photographs on the walls? Why the word 'Polish' not 'Jewish', 'political' not 'ethnic' or 'religious', used in this or that explanation? Why the number of hours the visitor was led to spend in the careful showcase that Auschwitz, the reconstructed prison-camp, had become but the meagre minutes left at the end to wander unescorted the wasteland that Birkenau remained --the vast adjoining death-camp, the site of the demolished wooden shacks, gas-chambers, ovens and chimneys?

The tour was a failure, for me, because --I now see-- it was too scripted and wordy, or scripted in the wrong way. In his account of his experience of the Second World War, A Farewell to Arms, Ernest Hemingway (1955:144) admitted the 'obscenity' he came to find in any of the words used to memorialise awful events, barring the most concrete. '[T]he names of places had dignity. Certain numbers [of roads, of regiments] were the same and certain dates[; these] were all you could say and have them mean anything'. But not 'glory', 'honour', 'courage', 'hallow'; nothing abstract, pat, too rhetorical or rehearsed. 'Touring' Auschwitz was too reminiscent of being a voyeur, at a theme park, being titillated by an obscene event. What spoke to me at Auschwitz were mute testaments: the detritus of human lives ended in mid-step. The enormous glass casements full of suitcases, of shoes, of eye-glasses, of human hair, the children's toys. Surrounding the barbed-wire fences of Birkenau was a pine forest and an empty plain: how must it have been to turn up here, from Budapest, Bucharest, Berlin, Paris, Piraeus, Warsaw, in an early-1940s winter?

But I cannot imagine it. Any more than I can living in the 1940s tout court --before the age of jet travel or space travel, the Beatles, polio vaccine, colour television. When I photograph the gates of Auschwitz and the railway

tracks at Birkenau, as below, and have myself photographed inside Birkenau facing the row of reconstructed wooden dormitories, I am on a film-set -- Lanzmann's Shoah, Spielberg's Schindler's List. When I suspect the terms of my Polish tour-guides' scripts I am remembering Jonathan Webber's work on the controversy surrounding the contemporary symbolising of Auschwitz: borrowing his anger at the heavy-handedness of the Polish Government and the Catholic Church (2001). The emotions I conjure up and to which I lay claim are, at least partly, secondhand. Do I have a right to them?





Karl Marx (1985) tells me that ‘dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living’, their circumstances becoming part of the historical conditions under which I make my present, but Auschwitz is a history, a tragedy, I have only gradually learned to wear, with effort. It could be said to be quite remote from the terrain actually trod by me, even my family, in the United Kingdom and South Wales. One of the signs displayed on the Auschwitz tour quoted from George Santayana (1998): ‘Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it’. It had resonated with me at the time --part of a script somehow beyond my tour-guides’-- but now I would interrogate that claim of ownership --and the sentimental frisson that accompanied it. Do I not enjoy my grievances, my claims to historical pain that are impossible to put right, and that are so easy --leaving me with no present-day obligation except to feed a melancholic imagination? Is it, however, ‘my’ past? What right do I have to expect the Polish tourist industry to live up to the version of the past in whose terms I choose to emote?

I conclude that walking the site of Auschwitz in the present day, at least along the route and at the pace which the tourist is allocated, does not afford me an appreciation of Imre Kertesz walking in Auschwitz which I can construe as in any way authentic. I feel a privileged, British visitor. The sun shines and I dress casually; my consociates bear cameras, baseball caps, the accoutrements of holiday-makers touring ruins. I am in holiday mood trying to be appropriately sombre; but it is an act. The text recounted by the tour-guides is a job of work, like any holiday couriers’. My mood and their allocation of time and space to me as a tourist do not enable me to walk Auschwitz on its own terms. Indeed, I doubt these exist, not only because of the heavy overlay of the Holocaust ‘industry’ weighing on the site, but

because no site is walked without a meaning-giving intentionality. Human imagination and symbolic classification will always play significant roles in our experiencing of the apparently brute materiality of physical space and of physical activity alike.

According to contemporary German-British novelist W. G. Sebald, it is inappropriate, ethically as well as epistemologically, to seek to approach such experiences directly. The official culture of remembering and mourning the Holocaust that has grown up --the staged and sentimental portrayals of terrible events-- claim a false intimacy with the dead: it is a ‘compromis[ing] moral position’ (Sebald, cited in Homberger 2001). My walking Auschwitz was inevitably and only a presentist experience of my own.

IV

I remain committed, nevertheless, to the analytical project of understanding Kertész in Auschwitz, of ‘interrogating’ the symbolism and the corporeality of his project of walking. What was it like for him to live that tension between an alien, incomprehensible (decaying) body, and his body as the necessary (only) vehicle of wilful expression? My route will now be an oblique one, however, by way of another author’s ‘pedestrian’ performance: indeed, the above-mentioned W. G. Sebald, and a walking-tour he undertakes in Briatin. In Sebald I find an authorial identity also set in motion by the Second World War and endeavouring not to stop.

Sebald was born in the Bavarian alps, Wertach im Allgaeu, in 1944. He left Germany in order to study German language and literature at the universities of Freiburg and Manchester, taking up a position at the latter as assistant lecturer in 1966. He settled permanently in Britain in 1970, with a lectureship at the new University of East Anglia, finally becoming professor

of Modern German Literature there. He died in 2001 as a result of a car crash. A key insight into Sebald's work, his preoccupation, even fetish, is provided by a passage from the last work published in his lifetime, and best known, Austerlitz. The fallibility of memory (or the weakness of our constitution) is such that we can hold little in mind, Sebald observes (2002a:30-1); everything constantly lapses into oblivion. With every extinguished human life it is as if the world itself is drained of memory. The history of countless people, places and objects is never recalled, heard or passed on, and as the world ages so the lost histories multiply.⁴ To consider this void is to risk 'vertigo' --as Sebald titled an early work (1999).

Austerlitz tells the story of an eponymous protagonist who discovers that his name is not really Dafydd Elias and that he came to Britain in the kindertransport of 10,000 children for whom the British government arranged an escape from Nazi Germany in the late 1930s; he sets off on a vain search for conclusive evidence of his parents' ends in Nazi camps. In The Emigrants (2002c), Kertesz had previously traced the stories of four Jewish exiles from Nazi Germany, seeking new identities and belongings as doctor, painter, valet and teacher in New England. Contrastingly, On the Natural History of Destruction (2004a) finds Sebald revisiting the Allied Forces' air bombardment in the last years of World War Two, when a million bombs were dropped on 131 German cities, killing some 600,000 civilians and destroying the homes of more than seven and a half million people. After Nature (2004b) recounts the history, as poem, of three men: painter Mathias Grunewald, botanist G. W. Steller, and Sebald himself. It takes the form of a comparative exploration of the burden of past uncertainties on the present. '[O]ur history', Sebald concludes, 'is but a long account of calamities' (2002b:295).

Sebald wrote in German, first publishing in Germany and then working closely with English translators. But he saw himself, too, as a German exile. His father had returned from a prisoner-of-war camp in France in 1947 (Sebald was three), having joined the German army in 1929, during the poverty-stricken period following the First World War. He had stayed in the army after the Nazis came to power and the Sebalds prospered initially under the Third Reich. They were part of an intensely Catholic, anti-communist rural world, wedded to Bavarian traditions, wary of the alien. Sebald's father was to remain a detached figure during his boyhood, saying nothing about the war. In his father's photograph albums, however, Sebald later found pictures taken during the Wehrmacht's Polish campaign in 1939: grinning soldiers, a boy-scout atmosphere amid burning villages that were not unlike Bavarian ones. Sebald's self-imposed exile in Britain was in part a response to the silences and absences of memory he found around him in Germany, despite the evidence of psychological trauma and physical destruction. One had to break the silence. At the same time, how to approach horror without merely reproducing lapidary statistics or descending to sentimentality, or invention? One could not presume to appropriate others' suffering. One should not compromise oneself by describing experiences -- Auschwitz, Dachau, Theresienstadt-- one had not had.

Part of what makes memory so fragile, tragically impossible, for Sebald is a sense of the place of movement in human life. '[E]verything [is] decided in movement, not in a state of rest', he concludes in *Austerlitz* (2002a:20). He means both that everything decisive comes about as a result of movement, which is why the history of human fortifications, of attempts to defend particular fixed positions as facts on the ground or truths, is a history of folly ('Movement gives shape to all forms' (Leonardo Da Vinci));

and also that decisions concerning what is taken to be factual or true are reached while on the move ('One commits oneself and then one sees' (Napoleon)).

In The Rings of Saturn (2002b), Sebald describes a walking tour he undertakes along the coast of Suffolk in August 1992, from near Lowestoft south to Ditchingham. He dubbed it (in the German edition) 'an English pilgrimage'. It was a tour he needed to make, he explains (2002b:3), in the hope of dispelling the 'emptiness' that assailed him at the completion of a long stint of work. Walking for hours a day through a thinly populated Suffolk countryside he found himself 'carefree', allowing his mind to wander. His published account is a meditation on what he saw and heard, on places and people and the passage of time. His literary style is oblique and digressive, and his voice masked. 'Sebald's' walking mingles with conversing, conjuring with the voices of Thomas Browne, Chateaubriand, Joseph Conrad and Swinburne from the well-known past as well as that of William Hazel, gardener, Mr O'Hare, shopkeeper, Thomas Abrams, farmer and model-builder, and Michael Hamburger, poet and translator, from the provincial present. Although Sebald dates the beginning of his travelogue to August 2002 he does not write the conclusion of his 'notes' (page 294) until April 13th 1995. What appears initially to be a chronological account of a walking tour becomes, on closer investigation, a collection of images, observations, digressions and dream narratives whose connecting logic owes as much to imaginary association as to landscape.

In a posthumous essay, his friend Michael Hamburger writes how for Sebald memory amounted to 'a darkroom for the development of fictions' (2005:3); memory and imagination were indivisible, and the pictures Sebald drew up were aspects of a 'personal culture' deposited in head and heart

(2005:6).⁵ If memory was fragile and the void of the past vertiginous, then their overlaying by personal associations in the present was continual --and perhaps therapeutic.

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Chapter VII of The Rings of Saturn (21 pages out of 293) is signalled in the following fashion in the Table of Contents:

Dunwich Heath -- Marsh Acres, Middleton -- A Berlin childhood --
Exile in England -- Dreams, elective affinities, correspondences --
Two strange stories -- Through the rainforest

Let me give a somewhat fuller account of these episodes --and try to approach the experience of Sebald's walking body.

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Sebald is in the middle of his journey. Often his thoughts turn to mortality. 'There is no antidote against the opium of time', he has quoted from the seventeenth-century medic, Thomas Browne (2002b:24). It is a miracle that the disease-prone human body lasts so much as a day. But the shadow of annihilation is never absent. The history of every individual, every social order, every material world --time itself-- describes not a widening arc but a parabola descending, after its meridian, inexorably into the dark. '[A]n entire epoch' can pass as if in 'just one awful second', the title and social position of even the best of men 'never altogether secure'; legacies disappear without trace into the iniquity of oblivion, into the 'astonishing' night: 'the stranger to all that is human' (2002b:31,173).

Beyond the village of Dunwich Sebald finds himself on a blasted heath. He reflects that this land was once part of a vast forest: elm and oak

long since burned off and felled for agricultural land, charcoal and timber. Is not combustion a 'hidden principle behind every artefact' (2002b:170)? And has not human civilization spread over the earth by inexorably reducing to charcoal all higher species of vegetation? It amounts to a strange luminescence growing ever more intense. But its process is to reduce to embers its own planetary heart. Civilization, artefact, human desire and body are all fated alike to burn themselves out: pass a meridian, wane and fade.

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Dunwich Heath reveals itself to be a scrubland overgrown with stunted pine and birch. The rampant gorse grows so dense that it blocks Sebald's way. But suddenly it opens onto a white track that curves gently through the midst. Sebald walks, lost in thought. So much so that an hour later -- seemingly, an aeon later-- Sebald finds himself, to his astonishment and horror, back at the same tangled thicket from which he had previously emerged. It seems that he can no more free himself of the knee-deep heather than he can of a 'crazed flowering' of thought that is benumbing (2002b:171). He wishes he could walk 'straight ahead cross-country' (2002b:171), but the terrain denies him; he has no choice but to keep to the crooked sandy track, endeavouring to note the tiniest detail, the slightest shift in feature and perspective. Even so, the heath remains bewildering. He often retraces his steps, the sky lowers, the violet gorse beclouds him, the silence is sickly, the flies incessant. It is oppressive and unnerving. He is overcome by a feeling of panic. Until, as suddenly as the labyrinth of heath and thought came on, they are gone. An uncertain time later Sebald finds himself 'on a country lane, beneath a mighty oak, and the horizon spinning all around as if I had jumped of a merry-go-round' (2002b:172).

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The experience remains inexplicable to Sebald. But months later he walks the endlessly winding paths of Dunwich Heath again in a dream. The maze, he is now convinced, has been made for him personally. The maze, he is equally certain in his dream, represents a cross-section of his brain.

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Some two hours after his ‘fortuitous release’ by the heath Sebald reaches the village of Middleton. There is not a soul in sight but this is the place his friend, Michael Hamburger, has made his home for the past 20 years. Sebald considers the unwelcoming impression he himself must give. Foot-sore and travel-weary, hat in hand and rucksack on shoulder as if a journeyman from a past time. The blue-eyed girl in the village shop is suspicious, not to say overawed. She stares at him flabbergasted, mouth agape. Surely the foreigner is as alien as a space traveller? She cannot understand his request for mineral water but eventually she sells him a can of Cherry Coke. Sebald drains it at a draught as though it were a cup of hemlock: black and numbing. He walks the final few hundred yards to the Hamburger home.

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Michael Hamburger came to Britain with his mother, siblings and maternal grandparents in 1933. He was nine. His father, a professor of medicine, had fled Berlin and the Nazis some months before, preparing a new family home in Edinburgh while he hastily learnt English and prepared to re-qualify as a doctor. The ‘monstrosity of changing countries under such inauspicious circumstances’ (2002b:177), the fear and the unknown, were symbolised for young Michael by the impounding by Dover customs officials of his grandfather’s pet budgerigars. They disappeared as suddenly and finally as did Michael’s Berlin childhood. The latter left only a few artefacts in his memory as a new, British identity was assumed. Michael thought he

remembered a Prussian nanny, a game of marbles in a Charlottenburg park, the sound of car horns rising from the street to the Lietzenburgerstrasse apartment, the sound of the central-heating pipes, the smell of soap, forbidden raspberry sweets from (paternal) grandmother Antonina's silver bonbonniere. Or were these fragments merely phantasms? The fallen buildings and debris of memory is perhaps insuperable.

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Hamburger returned to Berlin for the first time in 1947. It was the same year that Sebald, the three-year-old, first knew his father, returning to Bavaria as a former prisoner-of-war. Searching for traces of the lost life, Hamburger wandered the black ruins like a sleepwalker. Somehow he found himself before the house on Lietzenburgerstrasse --absurdly untouched. Names, images, feelings returned. Surely, 'like pictures in a rebus' (2002b:178), all that needed to be done to reverse the monstrous course of history was for Hamburger to concentrate on puzzling out the correct ordering of sensations, thereby piecing together the syllables of the word concealed in the riddle... But he cannot. A nausea overtakes him and he walks, aimlessly and far, unable to think. He ends up at a place he does not know, desolate and deserted, where serried ranks of millions of bricks from Berlin's destroyed suburbs stretch out towards Wannsee. Is this a memory or an hallucination? In his dreams, Hamburger often espies distances, or returns from a long journey, his rucksack over his shoulder as he walks the last stretch towards his home.

*

Hamburger and Sebald sit in the garden of the house on the outskirts of Middleton village. In the peaceful setting Sebald recounts his unreal episode on the heath. There is a cruelty to August, they agree. It is deserted,

soundless, birdless: the meridian point before the decline. Weeds flourish, brown rot and greenfly. Paper turns to mildew. One goes on with one's writing but the struggle is a vain one: part habit, part craving, part desperation, part wonderment, part outrage, part despair. Does one's writing render one more perceptive or more insane? Perhaps:

We lose all sense of reality to the precise degree to which we are engrossed in our own work, and perhaps that is why we see in the increasing complexity of our mental constructs a means for greater understanding, even while intuitively we know that we shall never be able to fathom the imponderables that govern our course through life. [2002b:182]

Hamburger sometimes imagines that his course is to follow in the footsteps of the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843). After all, the latter's birthday fell just two days (and 153 years) before Hamburger's. Both were exiles who, as teenagers, began translating elegies. The water-pump here in Hamburger's garden bears the same date as the year of Hölderlin's birth. (Hölderlin went insane in 1802.)... Sebald is led to ponder the 'distances in time [across which] elective affinities and correspondences connect' (2002b:182). How is it that one perceives oneself in another human being? 33 years after Hamburger, Sebald himself passed through British customs from German-speaking Europe. Now, 26 years later, they find themselves in the same Suffolk house, both with an allergy to alcohol and both distrustful of their writing for which they would nevertheless give up their teaching. Indeed, upon first visiting the Hamburger home Sebald had had the inexplicable feeling that the life

Hamburger lived there was Sebald's own in an earlier time. Those were *his* notes, pens and glasses case in Hamburger's study; that was *his* kindling, preserves and shells in the porch and pantry. And, all the more astonishing, in 1944, the year Hamburger joined the British Army (and the year of Sebald's birth), his first outing on leave was to Burnley (on Easter Monday), to the home of one Stanley Kerry, a regimental friend: 22 years later, Sebald's own first outing as a language student at Manchester was to the Burnley moors (All Souls' Day), while one of *his* first acquaintances was the same extraordinarily shy and eccentric Stanley Kerry, a longstanding University lecturer in German. In 1944 and 1966, Hamburger and Sebald were both 22.

*

Sebald finds his rational mind increasingly unable to lay the ghosts of such haunting repetitions. Admittedly, these thoughts are usually 'dispelled as speedily as they appear' (2002b:185), for to pursue them is to risk one's sanity. And is it not the case that seemingly chance coincidences are actually likely, 'since we all move, one after another, along the same roads mapped out for us by our origins and our hopes' (2002b:187)? Nevertheless, scarcely is Sebald in public company than he imagines he has heard the same people somewhere expressing the same opinions in the same way. For several minutes Sebald is overwhelmed by a 'disconcerting feeling' of 'disengagement' (2002b:187-8). The feeling is reminiscent of the physical sensation of numbness when a limb goes to sleep through loss of blood. One cannot think, speak or move.

What does the sense of duplication in his life portend? A defect in one's programming which anticipates the end, the 'venture into the void'? Several times in Michael Hamburger's Suffolk house and garden that

August afternoon in 1992 Sebald feared he was ‘losing the ground from under [his] feet’.

*

Just before Sebald departed, Hamburger’s wife Anne appeared; she had been resting and had had a dream. A taxi-limousine was driving her home to Middleton through an immense forest, down a gently curving track, the ambient atmosphere denser than air...

Their talk turns to the wearing of black in mourning. Anne claims seldom to see it any more, the one exception being their Middleton neighbour, a Mr Squirrel, who is employed as a pallbearer and regarded as a simpleton: he has barely any memory. Ever since he was a boy he had wanted to be an actor, finally being given a role in an open-air production of King Lear that Middleton and surrounding villages put on on Westleton Heath. Squirrel played the part of A Gentleman (Act IV, Scene 7). Having laboured a year to learn his few lines he now repeats them, sonorously, all the time. Sebald recalls how Squirrel once replied to a greeting of his, from across the street, with: ‘They say Edgar, his banish’d son, is with the Earl of Kent in Germany’.

It is time to leave and Anne orders Sebald a taxi. Together they wait in the garden darkness, beside the Hoelderlin pump. In horror, Sebald espies a beetle rowing itself across the well’s black waters.

V

Sebald’s prose represents a meeting-ground, in a way, between the poetical concerns of Eliot and of Larkin. There is the luxuriant allusiveness of the former, the constant reference back (Shakespeare, Hoelderlin, Keats), and there is the enigmatic bodiliness of the latter: the body as a vehicle which

does not prove a coherent or constant point of reference. But how does Sebald afford us a better approach to comprehending the disciplinary detail Kertesz exerted on his time in the Nazi camps, his endeavours to keep walking without arriving?

While wishing not to have turned the dense lyricism of Sebald's prose into a caricature, mortality, the fallibility of memory, the death of the past, déjà vu, do recur as themes in ways that might be described as fetichistic. Against the world's entropy Sebald erects the buffer of pattern. Coincidences, repetitions, affinities across time and space reveal, perhaps, common pathways and identities that eternally return. Not only are boundaries in time and space thus broken down but also boundaries of phenomena. Is the labyrinthine heath a matter of physical geography or the written page or mental involution or the physiology of the brain, or all at once? Where is the unpeopled desolation that characterises the exilic wanderings through turgid space of Sebald and Michael and Anne Hamburger alike? There is a 'crazed flowering' which seems to characterise the month of August, and Sebald's walking thoughts and Hamburger's unceasing writing. In their common experiences all places and times come together. Pattern thus overcomes time. At worst, coincidences, repetitions and affinities afford punctuating devices on a supra-human scale: one has not inevitably lost the past, one is not moving forward inexorably to death, because pattern encompasses one, enfolds one, willy-nilly, often inexplicably, astonishingly, frighteningly.

Sebald's text could be seen as a seeking out, and listing, of ways in which mortality is obviated: by elective affinities, by déjà vu, by the juxtapositions of dreams, by being lost in labyrinths, by being transported

into a maze of mental associations, by having no memory to mourn, by becoming immured in the matrix of one's own calling to write one's life.

About writing, Sebald's text is particularly suggestive. I am reminded of Geertz's observations on the tendency of culture towards involution (1963), and Alfred Whitehead's claim that symbolism feeds on itself, in an increasing preciousness or rarefication (1985). The personal culture of one's writing, says Sebald, leads one to an engrossment and interior complexity which houses one in a complete world of symbolic understanding. But it is imponderable whether one is thereby led to a greater perceptiveness of a surrounding reality or to a potentially crazed distance from it. There are times when Sebald's and Hamburger's meditations lead them to lose sense of time and place: how long have they walked and what route have they traversed? Sebald can be tough-minded about this: as tough-minded as was Primo Levi ('do not become so dazzled by one's achievements as to forget the environment that fences one in, and the power of death to determine when one's end has come'). Sebald's fetishising of mortality and memory can sometimes lead him to fear for his sanity. He also recognises the distance between his symbolisations and that which *in reality* governs our course through life. And yet he, like Hamburger, is unable or unwilling to depart from his narratives, to stop his writing and his meditating on time. Why might this be?

I suggest the writing of such personal culture be understood as a technique of self-empowerment. Construing patterns in time, it is argued, affords a means of overwriting, at least punctuating and slowing, its passing and loss. Similarly, losing oneself in its mental involutions --only later and suddenly to return to real time and space-- is to supersede the experience of transition. The fateful and fatal progression of time and space is transformed

into a series of discrete moments, and events-in-places, whose connections owe at least as much to the logic of one's own symbolic classifications as to natural law. Thus, perhaps, does the exile gain some power over a war-torn past he can neither retrieve nor give up. By way of his narrative exertions there is at least the momentary possibility of treating the past on his own terms.

One very significant feature of Sebald's text is yet to be analysed, however. His apprehension of coincidence, repetition and affinity through time, he writes, is akin to a 'physical sensation' (2002b:187). In describing the feelings of déjà vu to which he often succumbs Sebald finds it appropriate to liken it to:

the peculiar numbness brought on by a heavy loss of blood, often resulting in a temporary inability to think, to speak or to move one's limbs, as though, without being aware of it, one had suffered a stroke. [2002b:187]

I find this one of the weirdest passages. Sebald endeavours to approach the 'as yet unexplained phenomenon of apparent duplication' (déjà vu), and does so by seeing it in terms of an exhausted physical body unable any longer to engage properly with the actual changes going on around it. The mental involutions have a physical counterpart: indeed, they are one. And 'numbness' is a very revealing substantive. The crazed flowering of his thoughts on Dunwich Heath was numbing, Sebald informed us; the draught of Cherry Cola was like hemlock (and we recall Keats's Ode to a Nightingale: 'My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk, / Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains /

One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk'). Now we hear of the numbness of limbs gone to sleep due to a lack of circulation of the blood. A benumbing inability to attend to one's environment or move reminds us of that dream-state, or nightmare, where one vainly attempts to flee while seeming to move not through air but mud. But then numbness is also a relief, a sought-after release, if it anaesthetises one against physical or emotional pain. Now one *wishes* the blood to stop circulating: it brings on unawareness or forgetfulness regarding the experience of time. For the inhabitant of a war-torn life, might not numbness be an empowering even while not happy state?

The achievement of numbness as a strategy that is at once mental *and* physical reminds me of (an admittedly oblique reading of) Freud's notions of hysteria. Like a child playing hide-and-seek who scatters clues so that he might be discovered, the hysteric creates his own apt symbology in the body for the idea that is being repressed. As with his work on the interpretation of dreams, Freud felt the psychoanalyst could endeavour to match up the unconscious pain and the physical symptoms or conscious phobia of the hysteric since it is the case that 'the unconscious is a precise and even pedantic symbolist' (Thomas 1981:99). One need not support Freudian definitions ('the hysteric', 'the unconscious') too far to find suggestive connections here with Sebald. *Numbness as physical symptom and numbness as 'hysterical' response to mental anguish and emotional turmoil*. One finds oneself surrounded by a reality of mortality, monstrous war and decay -- rural and urban, physical and mental. At the same time as one recognises the impossibility, the imponderability, of actual escape, one has recourse to a writing of one's life, a symbolic classification of one's time and space, which is characterised by a seemingly crazed determination of pattern: of

coincidence, repetition and affinity. One knows that one risks losing oneself in one's personal culture of involutions to the extent that one might lose track of actual time and space and go insane. But then such numbness, mental and physical, is also a relief, a power, an escape which 'the hysteric' and the writer have in common. In their sensitivity writer and hysteric are, perhaps, one. ('The lunatic, the lover, and the poet, / Are of imagination all compact' (Shakespeare).)

VI

Imre Kertesz recognised the 'prize' he had won in being able to survive the Nazi death camps. A readiness to continue his life soon collected inside him. He would continue his stepping forward: '[w]e can never start a new life. We can only continue the old one. I took my own steps. No one else did' (1992:188-9). Nor did Kertesz's temperament turn morbid. 'More than the terrors', he would try to remember 'the happiness of the camps' (1992:191). Indeed, in his inability, on returning to Budapest, to make others understand what he had experienced, he could even feel 'homesick' for them (1992:190). The passage of time helped, however, as it always had. '[Time] changes everything' (1992:181). The secret to his emotional survival, in Auschwitz and after, was the possibility of a schedule whereby one could take step after step gradually, understanding the present and then attending to the future. The tyranny of the Nazis felt itself when there was no time: when destruction came too randomly to make sense of, or when the passage of infernal events slowed down to nothing.

Their differences in temperament aside, Kertesz and Sebald both play with time symbolically and in so doing achieve physical, bodily effects towards their emotional survival. Death may be an ever-present reality for

both, yet Sebald's 'crazed' involutions numb him to the passage of time, while Kertesz's disciplined 'schedules' enable him to keep stepping forward, hopeful of a better future. Still for both there is the brute materiality of the body, 'clothing them in its own decisions' (Larkin): for Sebald the assault of inexplicable thoughts and sensations; for Kertesz the atrocity of hunger and decay. Notwithstanding, they erect a patterning of time and space that assists a survival that is physical as well as mental.

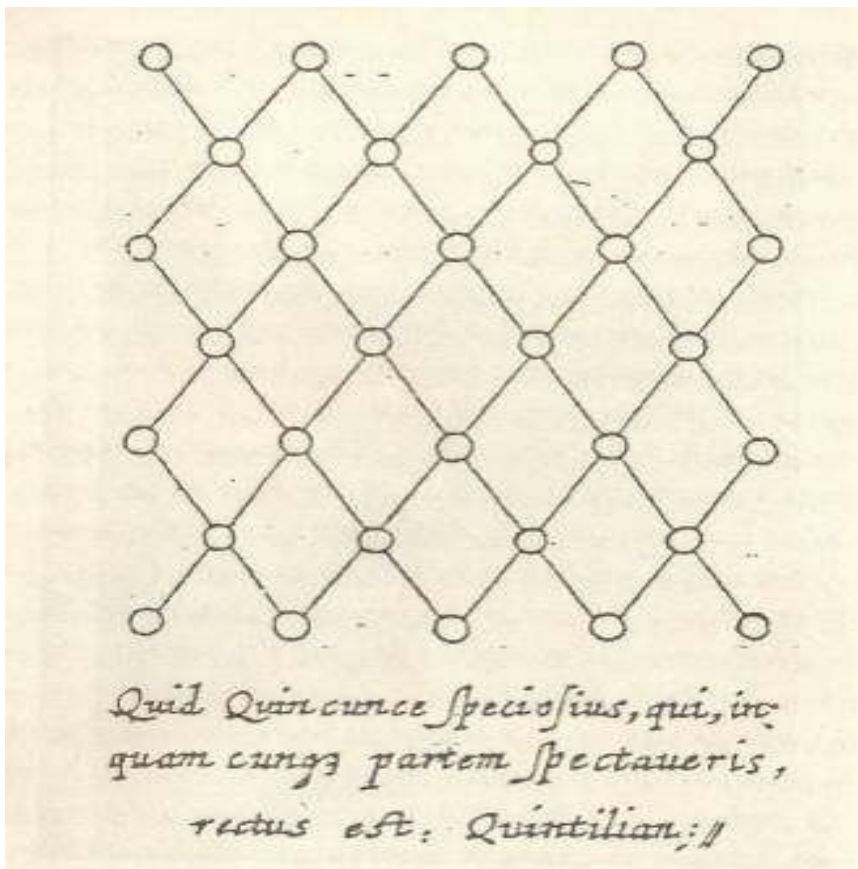
'Everything is in consciousness', Benjamin Lee Whorf advised, 'and everything in consciousness *is* together' (1941). I think I prefer this to Freudian divisions (whereby unconsciousness becomes a more powerful other). Also: '*Now* I think: *now* I am' (Paul Valery 1977). Emphasis is brought to the conscious present. Kertesz finds himself under Nazi sway; his body tyrannises him with its need for sustenance. To an extent he can use his imagination to escape the former; to an extent the needs of the latter, his body, offer an escape from the Nazis, from allowing their alien constructions to dominate his consciousness. And also, to an extent, since everything in consciousness *is* together, Kertesz's symbolic construction of time as a disciplined grid of mini-schedules and gradations --and his fetichistic concentration on this-- empowers him to cancel out his body. It is not him; it is another, totalitarian, alien other. Seeing pattern in time, and determining to step forward, Kertesz puts himself in a position to recognise change and to take advantage.

Sebald finds himself under the sway of the 'totalitarian' morbidity of time. Seeing pattern in the latter, however --coincidence, repetition and affinity-- he puts himself in a position to transcend time's seeming inexorable progression. And since everything in consciousness *is* together, insofar as he empowers himself to dwell in time's patterns, he escapes

awareness --physical as well as mental-- of time's passing. His body walks without stopping, his thoughts drift without ceasing, and both without direction: Sebald escapes, momentarily, time's arrow.

*

Thomas Browne appears as a character at particular sections of Sebald's The Rings of Saturn, but I find him to be an eminence grise underlying its whole life. Metaphysician as well as medic, Browne reflected on the darkness that enveloped the isolated lights of knowledge in seventeenth-century Europe. He sought out patterns behind the seemingly infinite diversity of forms of life. In The Garden of Cyrus he hit upon the 'quincunx' (the shape of a figure five on a die). Sebald reproduces Browne's diagram in his text (2002b:20), and I do below:



Browne identifies the pattern everywhere, in the animate and inanimate world around him. He sees it in crystals, sea urchins, starfish, vertebrae, snake skin, footprints, seed husks, silkworms, caterpillars, butterflies, the pyramids of Egypt and the Gardens of King Solomon. In multiplying examples of the quincunx without end, Browne concludes, one uncovers Nature's omnipresent, elegant design.

It is no great distance to travel between Thomas Browne and Gregory Bateson (whose life-spans, Sebald might observe, were both 76 years: 1605-1682; 1904-1980). In Browne's quincunx is an example of what for Bateson might be 'a pattern which connects' (1980:16), predominating over the entropy and seeming randomness of life. The human mind is just one elegant, complex, wise, intricate and beautiful aspect of the patterning of the natural world, Bateson found. And meta-patterns will surely connect up them all: mind and nature, the body-in-the-ecosystem. An 'anthropology' --a writing of the human-- should set itself the task of identifying connecting patterns, the exercise being an aesthetic one: a matter not of quantities but of appreciating shapes and forms, similar relations between parts.

'Consciousness and aesthetics are the great untouched questions' (Bateson 1980:226), but in their exploration one might accede to a theory of mind which connects with body and world in a true way. Perhaps the stories in whose terms minds work --construing patterns and sequences of experience-- thus connect us with the very nature of our being, Bateson pondered.

One should learn to see 'abductively' (Bateson 1980:157), laterally extending the abstract components of a description as in metaphor, dream, parable, allegory, poetry, totemism and comparative anatomy so as to encompass seemingly disparate aspects of human life and nature. From the Iatmul to the Balinese, to schizophrenics, alcoholics, dolphins, and the way

individuals and nations conflict and learning, there were abstract commonalities to apprehend beneath surface diversities: the formal similarities of growth and adaptation by which all are united in the biosphere in ultimate interdependence.

In her memoir of her father, Mary Bateson reflects that Bateson's life was full of loose ends. He would focus on a point of pattern --the way the hands of men watching a cockfight, say, moved in echo of the conflict-- but he would not see the surround of messiness (1984:27). Walking in Auschwitz, I feel, Imre Kertesz was not allowed that luxury. Reading his account by way of a walking tour of W.G. Sebald's *I have tried* in this article to balance the apprehension of pattern against the brute materiality of body and mortality. There is a personal and private disciplining of the world to be had from pattern and detail. It enabled Kertesz to feel he was keeping walking; it enabled Sebald to feel he, too, was walking without arriving -- since arrival was loss, and death. Keeping pattern in consciousness one does not escape messy reality but one cancels it out at least to the extent that a space for one's life-project, and one's empowerment to further it, might be better secured.

